

Signal Driver: From bus stops to bus shelters — the new art of appropriating space

CHRISTINE SABINA MENDES*

“Soon ya not even gonna be able to pick ya nose at a bus shelter.”

— Interview with Martin, graffiti artist.

The driving force of social action and the basis of social order in the postmodern metropolis is consumerism.¹ At the heart of this urban landscape are market forces commodifying desire. Alleged to be absent in this metropolis is the state, in particular the traditional agents of order, the police. The role of the police as the promoters of public order is being undermined, as former expanses of public space are being reconstituted into the private domain.

The bus shelter, formerly an icon of the public sphere, is an example of a site where the convergence of the private and the public has occurred. The privatisation of this public space has not however resulted in the disappearance of the police but has rather redefined their role. The state maintains a presence in the regulation of bus shelters as the ultimate protector of certain increasingly complex rights. These rights are intricate property rights, most importantly the publicity rights of advertisers. When someone is prosecuted for damaging or defacing a shelter, what is at stake is the reputation of the advertiser, not the perspex or aluminium that has incurred the actual damage. In order to promote these property based rights the bus shelter has had to be redefined to take on an entirely new function. Previously prohibited behaviour has not only been legalised but has become the most profitable reason for the very existence of bus shelters, as distinct from bus stops. “Bill posters will be prosecuted” signs have been removed and replaced with semi-naked posters of Warners women protected by private contractors equipped with high-pressure hoses and graffiti removal sprays. The effect of this market-driven private policing strategy has been to remove the sanction role of the public sector. It has been replaced with private contractors whose object is to maintain private property in its optimum condition. The state endorses the advertising by authorising its presence on public property and intervenes to perpetuate proprietorial rights by prosecuting those caught in the act of defacing or damaging bus shelters. Simultaneously, the state ignores the rights of other users of bus shelters, such as the publicity rights of graffiti artists, the rights of the homeless to shelter and the rights of women to feel safe while travelling at night.

Implicit in this concept of policing is a division of the public into those who identify with the police as protectors and those who believe them to be agents of repression. The effect of this division is to separate *us* a classless, genderless, raceless citizen, from *them*

* University of Sydney Law Graduate.

1 Reiner, R, “Policing a Postmodern Society” (1992) 55 *The Mod LR* at 776.

the louts, larrikins, no-hopers, gang members, dole bludgers and hooligans. The mythical "average citizen" is by definition policed by consent, whereas the "hoodlum" is not.² Policing the "hoodlum" is the "job" of the police or the private security company; a job which is often defined as "cleaning up the streets", "keeping young people in line", and "managing" the homeless and the unemployed. Along the dividing line, separating *us* from *them*, are some murky grey areas, the kinds of spaces where women are often located.

The aim of this paper is to examine the issue of public order in the context of the regulation of bus shelters. Factors such as who you are, what you know your place to be, how you look and speak, will be discussed in light of how they influence whether you will be deemed a legitimate or an illegitimate user of a bus shelter, the latter categorisation being associated with exclusion from the consumption of that urban community space. I will also discuss the various mechanisms adopted, such as architectural design, the employment of private cleaning contractors, and the role of the police, to stop some people from using a space while at the same time encouraging others.

Us

Interview with Patrick

Patrick has been a private contractor with *Australian Posters 3M* for the past five years, and has been in the business of cleaning and maintaining bus shelters for the last 12 years.

... I go about cleaning all the Metrolyte bus shelters in the Sydney Metropolitan area, as well as in Randwick, Leichhardt and South Sydney. We work seven nights a week. We start at about seven in the evening and work through to six in the morning, and we sleep virtually all day. We are contracted to high pressure water clean all the shelters. In the city we do it twice a week, at the beginning of the week and at the end so that the shelters are clean after the weekend and before the weekend. That's important. Areas such as Randwick and Leichhardt where the traffic flows a bit lighter and where there's not as many people using the shelters, we clean them once a week. But graffiti removal can happen at any time of the week, as well as other maintenance, such as repairing smashed glass and lights that have gone out.

... We come across all kinds of graffiti from kids writing on their way home from school to anti-sexist graffiti against Warners or Lisa HO ads, ... anything that's got girls showing bare breasts gets graffitied with either spray paint or lipstick or texta or fly posters. Depending on the type of paint, they make our job relatively easy or bloody difficult. Sometimes they spray the whole shelter, now that's really hard to get off. ... I think they create more interest in the ad by smearing it. More people tend to look at an ad that's been written on than when its not. And they've got double standards. They wouldn't write on a guy whose wearing just a pair of Levi 501 jeans, but they would write all over a Warners ad. What's good for one should be good for another! Anyway they're not creating a job for someone they're just creating more work for someone whose already got a job.

... Graffiti artists usually strike at the same place for a certain amount of time, I'm not sure how much time. If there's a bus shelter outside a school, it will definitely get graffitied at some time. I can't really work out the pattern of political campaigners who graffiti sexist stuff, ... the posters will go up and they may get hit the next night, the night after that, the night after that, and then they won't be hit for a month. Also they won't just do one

2 Cunneen, C, "Policing of Public Order: Some Thoughts on Culture, Space and Political Economy" (1988) in Findlay, M and Hogg, R (eds), *Understanding Crime and Criminal Justice*.

shelter, normally they'll hit 20–25, a high percentage like 75 per cent, and they'll do them everywhere, from Leichhardt to South Sydney to Broadway. If a bus shelter is being written on because its outside a school, that's nothing, but we'll let Australian Posters know if an advertiser is getting a smear campaign. We take a few photographs before we clean the graffiti and they'll use these if they catch anyone to try to prosecute them. In the 12 years that I've cleaned these bus shelters I've never caught anyone damaging a bus shelter in any way. ... If I was to see someone I probably wouldn't do anything, that's for the police to do. I would wait for them to finish and then I'd clean it. I'm not paid to do that and what if they had a knife or something else with them

... The design of shelters has nothing to do with comfort. The new design of seating was introduced because it doesn't sag as much as the old type, especially when you jump up and down on them, and the paint doesn't come off as easily.

... When you pull up to water blast a shelter most people are fairly happy to move because they can see that at least tomorrow night there won't be rubbish here, there won't be McDonalds papers, there won't be graffiti everywhere. ... There was this homeless women up in Oxford Street, who got angry when one of the blokes asked her to move on so that he could clean the shelter, which is like I said, unusual. So for the next month, virtually every night, she would shit on the bus shelter, but not only would she just shit on the ground or on the seat, she would pick it up and wipe it all over the back of the shelter. ... she's probably irrational and she might even be a little retarded in some way.

... I think that there are basically two motivations for regulating bus shelters in this way, and they are firstly, from the point of view of the advertising company, they want to keep bus shelters clean so that they get more advertising in and to satisfy the councils, and secondly, from the perspective of the councils, they want to keep the streets clean and well lit up so that they're safer and so that people don't complain and they use the shelters.

Traditionally, the bus shelter was socially constructed as a site for transportation, for the movement of people from place to place in modern industrial societies. More recently, through the growth and expansion of advertising and the move towards privatisation, it has become a commercial space, or a place for consumption. The private justice administered by private contractors like Patrick, at the behest of corporations like *Australian Posters 3M*, is state endorsed and fuelled by the consumerism of late capitalist society. Further, it is imbued with notions of postmodern pluralism and the desire for community controlled policing. This involves a double-sided view of the "law and order" crisis: on one side, moves the aimless, wandering, alienated city dweller removed from any kind of supportive homogenous structure, and on the other side, lurks the criminal underclass, always on the brink of urban destruction and violence. In an effort to appear to address this "law and order" crisis and to meet the demands of the "public" for a sense of community-based involvement, stickers have been attached to each Metrolyte bus shelter asking for public participation against this war on the streets. They read: "Please report any damage or graffiti to this shelter by phoning 008 805 881 & quote shelter No." This type of citizen surveillance, similar in ideology to the "public" initiated Neighbourhood Watch scheme, offers the "public" an identification with the dominant groups in society and their views on crime, criminality, and who should and should not be on the streets and when.

Patrick's words encapsulate the notion of "public order" as a simple and self-evident reality by balancing the concept against what it is not, that is what constitutes "public disorder". McDonalds papers, graffiti, dirt, broken glass, faulty lights and old homeless women are all examples of this societal disorder. Connected to this is the notion that to remove objects of disorder, necessarily involves re-establishing order. Fundamental to this concept of order/disorder is the construction of a depoliticised and dehistoricised "social consensus" of what constitutes order.³ In the context of the bus shelter, order is synonymous with

consumerism. Consent towards this order is achieved by virtue of the presence of the advertising, the fact that it has been approved by the State Transit Authority. Patrick, represents and reproduces the views of the silent majority, the "law-abiding general public" who consent to order based on consumerism because of its context, the reality of it being there, which is crucial to the legitimacy of the state.

What is occurring in the postmodern city is a relocation of the power to define, categorise and enforce, from the regular police patrol beat, to private contractor employed by advertising companies. In this environment where powerful private corporations are fulfilling a role formerly carried out by the state, notions of what constitutes representative democracy must necessarily be questioned. The bus shelter, being a public utility, suggests that decisions affecting it should be made openly and with general public comment. Yet it seems that executives of advertising companies control this process, monitoring smear campaigns and gathering photographic evidence of graffiti. Private boardrooms, rather than public town halls, have become the new sites for decision-making concerning our social and political environment. Contests, struggles and protests over the use of space whether they be in the form of school-aged children vandalising shelters, youth forging an identity for themselves by tagging the perspex panels of shelters, old homeless women using the seating in shelters as a bed to sleep on, or groups campaigning against exploitative and unhealthy advertising go by unheard as if non-existent, unless of course the police succeed in prosecuting someone for not using the space in the "right" way. This occurred in the case of the three women prosecuted with the defacement of the Warners' billboard in Sydney in 1993. The determining factor in this battle over space is profit, all other publicity rights, such as those of youth and campaigning groups, are devalued and ignored.

Patrick highlights the efficiency and multi-purposed nature of the private contractors' cleaning strategy. He states that it is very important to have shelters clean just before and straight after the weekend and that graffiti must be cleaned as soon as it is sighted. The importance of having shelters clean during the weekend suggests that the focus is on the aesthetic value of this consumer space, rather than the utilitarian function. More importantly, these private contractors must operate with perfect efficiency, removing all real or potential threats to business, from the defacement of an ad to rubbish located in close proximity to the shelter. The effect of this process is that crimes of damaging and defacing property are sanitised or completely removed from their context and relocated to boardrooms in photographic form. The whole system in which they operate is highly secretive: phantom people install copy at night, the same phantom people clean all markings from shelters. The whole process is very surreal, representing a surreal struggle over property rights. The idea of cleaning before morning so no-one ever sees the markings is the ultimate in neutrality, annihilating the criminal act at its source, as if it never happened.

The architectural design of bus shelters is also crucial to the way this visible component of the urban landscape is policed. For example, there is a move towards subdividing the seating in bus shelters with arm rests, which compartmentalises the space, and restricts access to those perceived as "non-respectable". The "non-respectable" people Patrick refers to are the homeless, those who could undermine the consuming space by appropriating it for the purpose of sleeping. The lighting of the shelters during the night is another mechanism employed to regulate those who use the shelter. A well lit shelter can operate to make the space apparently safe for those sectors of society who feel threatened by night

life in the metropolis, especially the elderly and women; but it can also have the reverse effect, particularly if the aspect of the shelter which is alight is an image of a bare-breasted woman, half-wearing a pair of jeans and in a state of apparent sexual arousal. This is a transparent form of protection which only perpetuates and strengthens the economic interests of advertising conglomerates, who have profit making as their *raison d'être*.

Them

Interview with Martin

Martin is a graffiti artist who identifies as a writer. He is 22 years of age and started graffitiing at the age of 14.

... I chose my tag because of the letters, because of the way it looked. My art isn't political, not at all. Its just for me and for all other graffiti dudes, we don't care about the public, we don't care about what they think, we don't care about what you think, or what anyone thinks.... I don't care what the public that use those spaces thinks. I'm not out to offend anyone, although I probably offend most people. ... As for the people that clean the shelters, we throw rocks at them people.

... Man, I've graffitied plenty of bus shelters. What it means to me to tag or do pieces which is short for masterpieces, is that its gonna be seen by so many people all over the city. I really like the public seeing my coloured stuff, but the tags aren't for the public at all, they're just for all the other writers. You'll also earn a lot of respect from all the graffiti dudes if your name is everywhere. We do it for pure fame, we swap photos of pieces outside of Hoyts in the city and the dudes say things like: "Shit man your pieces are so big, I thought you'd be taller, I thought you'd be black" and I'm none of that. I'm little, I'm not tough and I don't carry knives.

... I worry about getting caught I don't do it much any more. ... If someone gave me, legally, a bunch of cans and a wall and asked me to paint, sure I'd do it, that's what I'm hanging out for! Sure its a thrill to do the illegal stuff. I used to steal all the cans that I used but I don't do that any more because I work now. Well I usually buy a couple and take another couple. By the way that's got nothing to do with the image of the graffiti artist, I steal cans just to get more paint. When I was younger it was important for me to steal but its not so important any more, well I'm twenty-two now. I worry more about what my parents will think if I get caught than what the police will do, it would be really embarrassing to get caught doing something like that now.

... Yeah, I've been caught. It was out at North Strathfield Station and I was sixteen when it happened. We didn't just tag the train, we did full colour pieces and got charged with malicious damage. They just chucked us into the back of a paddy wagon. Later I went to court and the judge laughed at me and said, "So you think you're an artist" and gave me a fine and a two year good behaviour bond.

... Yeah. there are lots of crimes associated with graffitiing like break and enters, break and enters, break and enters. I don't think that the majority of graffiti artists are involved in other crimes. ... Oh yeah, we smoke dope, lots of dope. If you do graffiti you have to smoke dope. We have lots of nights when we don't go out at all and we just sit around and plan designs. Everyone does their own piece, I mean everyone designs their own stuff. What happens is someone will draw something and then someone else will add something to it, like they'll say, "Let's draw snow, or a tree over there", and the other dude will say "What a cool idea. Now let's have another cone."

... I'd say that all of my mates have been caught. We just lay low for a while, for a few months then we start up again. When I was in year ten my best mate went to a juvenile detention centre for three months. He got charged with doing so many different trains, they linked them all up because they had photos, they take photos, the pricks. The police

like hassling us all the time, they always come up to us in the streets and ask us what we're doing. We get them back by graffitiing, I suppose because they've got to catch us in the act to be able to charge us. I suppose every piece I do is like sticking my finger up at authority.

... A safe bus shelter would be one that is open all around and one that's clean. But that's what other people would think. I think that there is nothing wrong with a graffitied bus shelter, its safe to me, I don't think that you can judge its safety by the way it looks.

... I don't really know how police should regulate bus shelters. If crimes in shelters are mega-bad, police should patrol them, but if they're not, well I think that police should be going after big crime. You're always watching for the police when you're graffitiing, and if you spot them you just wait until they go and then you do ya shit. I think that if they put cameras in shelters people wouldn't graffiti them, but that would be a real bastard thing to do, you wouldn't even be able to pick ya nose in public. Even people in suits do little things, like put their feet up on seats and they don't get busted for that.

In the historical ordering and reordering of people, which involves questions of power, some people become subjects, while others are subjected. The ordering pushes individuals through a social grid of race, ethnicity, gender, sexuality, class and age difference. It leaves marks on the body, notions of place; which are obscured by the appearance of the apparently neutral concept of "public" in phrases such as "public space", "public streets", "public transport" and "public order". It is the "public" in these notions that gives structural meaning to the ordering process. The "public" represents a powerful, silent, collective will. Once joined to "order" it elides any contradictions between on the one hand, democracy and equality which are encapsulated in the image of the "public", and on the other hand, structures of domination, power and difference evoked by "order".⁴ The agents of repression operate within this elided space, segregating *us* from *them*; privately employed contractors remove homeless women from bus shelters and scrape graffiti from shelter walls. The police provide supportive assistance to the high pressured hoses, prosecuting those who are caught in the act of damaging property. The graffiti artist, like the advertiser, is to some extent a publicist. In the words of Martin, the greatest benefit derived from tagging and doing pieces is that "they're gonna be seen by so many people all over the city". They colonise space to further their own interests in the same way that advertising companies encroach economically viable spaces. The conflict between the graffiti artist and the corporate advertiser is over rights of publicity, the traditional utilitarian purpose of the bus shelter becomes irrelevant in the pursuit of different intentions but only one intention is given the protection of state endorsement and a legitimate place in society.

Not only does the spatial construction of a public place define the particular activities which can legitimately occur within the space, but it also serves to reinforce and continually reproduce relations of domination and subordination which bolster the legitimacy of state-endorsed surveillance of the underclasses. In the context of the bus shelter, this symbol of city life becomes the site of a battle zone for the control of space. Groups in conflict around issues of power and space the young, the homeless, the poor, the working class act out a struggle by graffitiing, smashing glass, and using the space as a refuge for the night, which challenges the process of domination, while simultaneously "justifying" the need for continuing subordination and more stringent "law and order" policies.

4 Neumark, N, "The Protection Racket: Ordering the Public on the Streets" (1989) in Wilson, H (ed), *Australian Communications and the Public Sphere* at 251.

Martin's life experiences are representative of this contest over the legitimate uses of social spaces. This struggle takes on a new dimension as public territories on the urban landscape diminish, and young people, like Martin, are dispossessed of their traditional environment, becoming increasingly visible on the streets. This process of privatising public places, dislocates the traditional users of those spaces, makes them more vulnerable and leaves them in a cultural vacuum. Rob White argues that young people who do not have a secure economic base and a range of opportunities, have an increased need to forge "a connection with, and contribution to, the wider cultural environment through the use of whatever material means are available to them".⁵ This connection is achieved through the "youth generated culture" of graffitiing the practice of tagging and creating pieces is a form of advertising which is both an exercise in conquering space, marking out physical territory with individual artistic style, as well as an assertion of identity and cultural autonomy, an expression of an individual's very existence and a demonstration that they belong to a particular group.

These images of "being" are trivialised by the dominant classes and transformed by the media into images of dangerous "gangs", who pose a threat to the established order. These visible non-consumers are identifiable through their behaviour on the streets "hanging around", through the "Streetwise gear" they wear, which have already been consumerised, and through their language. They are penalised for being "bad": their graffiti is cleaned up, they are charged with "maliciously destroying or damaging property"⁶ and even for carrying cans of spray paint.⁷ Crime prevention strategies aimed at policing graffiti and vandalism on public transport⁸ are essentially about stopping the young from using public space and maximising profit. Claims that "law and order" have broken down, that the police are losing control of the streets, and that we must "get tough" with criminals, are made so that certain societal groups are excluded from the essentially commercialised zones of the postmodern metropolis. The cultural practices of the young are criminalised and destroyed through situational crime prevention strategies which rely upon environmental design and management procedures to increase the difficulties and risks of committing crimes.⁹ Until these anti-social tendencies of the dominant spatiality are reduced and the cultural practices of disempowered young people are positively valued, the notion of a truly safe community will remain illusory.

Me

Self-interview

I am a twenty-four year old full-time student, working part time in a pub and tutoring. I live in the inner city.

I think that there's a false premise operating here, that you can only get sexist advertising to fill those spots in bus shelters. We've banned cigarette advertising but things that

5 White, R, "Young People and the Policing of Community Space" (1993) 26 *ANZ J Crim* at 213.

6 Section 195, *Crimes Act* 1900 (NSW). This is one of the more common charges brought against youths who graffiti property. See also s9 of the *Summary Offences Act* 1988 (NSW): "Defacing walls".

7 See s10 of the *Summary Offences Act* 1988 (NSW): "Custody of offensive implement".

8 See Wilson, P and Healy, P, "Research Brief: Graffiti and Vandalism on Public Transport"(1987) No. 6 *Trends and Issues*, and Easta, P and Wilson, P, *Preventing Crime on Transport* (1991).

9 *Ibid.*

encourage oppressive and patriarchal attitudes to women haven't changed. It's ironic that we as a community collectively own these shelters yet they are the means by which soft porn is displayed. The government is acting as the gross perpetrator of this type of image of the female body. How you determine what is and is not sexist is obviously a very difficult and sensitive area, fought between advocates of "free speech" and advocates of "censorship", who ironically often end up being the same advocate. I think that the community should definitely have some control over what forms of advertising is adopted.

... A well lit shelter is a surface form of protection which is actually inversely related to safety, especially when the aspect of the shelter which is alight is an image of a scrawny woman with bare breasts in Lisa Ho jeans and apparently turned on by what must be her jeans, which she is only half-wearing.

... I think that there are a lot of myths being circulated about the safety of streets at night. A whole criminal class of youth have been constructed by proponents of law and order agendas to suggest that we live in a dangerous society. I think that generally the streets are safe but because there is such a hype about their lack of safety, people begin to fear and conceptualise these imaginary dangers.

In the process of constructing a public space and creating the social divisions which are to operate within that space, the dividing line often becomes a cloudy grey space and one in which women are regularly located. However, if they pay the price for protection, women may bridge the division and step across to the dominant *us* side. The price to be paid for the privilege of access to the streets at night and the use of bus shelters, for example, is heterosexuality.¹⁰ The protection afforded by a husband or a boyfriend holding a woman's hand and sitting beside her, can buy her "free" passage to a nightly bus ride, without harassment and humiliation.

The reconstitution of public space into private property operates in such a way as to exclude the participation of women as autonomous individuals. Women are valued and given a valuable existence only if they "belong" to a male, such as a father, boyfriend or husband. A relationship with a male guarantees women amongst other things, access to the streets at night; because while alone they are the targets of victimisation and at the threat of dangers over which they have no control.

Those who cannot or will not buy protection, those of the "wrong" sexuality or socio-economic bracket, must keep on the move "they must side-step both the Protectors and the Threat".¹¹ Single women without cars, or men, but who want to get public transport at night, are an example. These women must calculate their movements, develop strategies of dressing, walking, listening, looking in particular ways and plans of escape.

Simultaneously bus shelters are endowing women's bodies with a dual identity, a moment both public, as a commodified product; and private, as a vulnerable, disempowered individual. They look at "their" bodies brightly lit on Metrolyte shelters. If they are too fat, too short, too tall, too hairy, too blemished, too small-breasted, the wrong colour neither white, nor sufficiently exotic, they will never appear on a shelter but they will spend every last cent attempting to reach the unattainable. The flip side of this quest to be the aroused and arousing semi-naked woman, is the perpetuation of a sexuality of women, which sees them huddling under the embrace of their boyfriend or attempting to ignore

10 Above n4 at 252.

11 Id at 259.

the sexual obscenities of the loud hoons, brought up on the mass consumption of this commodified sex.

It is a problematic context in which women find themselves when located at bus shelters displaying posters of women, scantily clad in lingerie. The context in which they find themselves has a symbolic significance different to that which occurs when they interact with a similar image of a woman in a magazine. Women's consumption of lingerie products and their advertisements suggests that there is a large contingent of women who are not offended by magazine or bus shelter advertising of lingerie. However, the context of advertising on bus shelters, facilitates the projection of an image of women's human and sexual identity, which is profoundly vulnerable. Bus shelters act as public containers for the illumination of these endlessly reproducible images, punctuating every corner of our postmodern streetscape.

The role of the state in this context is as the authorising agent for the display of pornographic material. The state sets itself up as the proponent of free speech, which is dichotomised with advocates of censorship. The practical effect of this dichotomy, however, is that corporate advertisers defend their sexist advertisements through notions of free speech, at the same time as their private cleaning contractors are employed with the purpose of censoring information, removing all markings of protest which could have a negative impact on the profit-making purpose of bus shelters.

The convergence of the public with the private in the space occupied by a bus shelter is about the perpetuation of complex proprietary rights. It is about cleaning and removing at night all other claims to authentic public existence, allowing only private rights of advertisers, often manifested as semi-naked posters of women, to always and continuously be on display. All attacks on these rights, from tags to pieces to smear campaigns, are denied. But which bus shelter clients have the greater claim to space? If the solution is to take back control from advertising executives and their contractors, into the hands of which community do we hand over control? Do the women in the bulbar-equipped van running down the illuminated Warners' barbie doll, which continues to undermine their sexual identity and attempts at empowerment, have a legitimate claim? Should the brigade of youth be given spray cans and space to freely express their cultural identity? Should the homeless be able to appropriate shelters as make-shift beds? Perhaps we have lost sight of the original purpose of the bus shelter. The right to what are we struggling over? Is it a right to usage? And what kind of usage? To sleep, to sit, to wait, to express, to protest or to publicise and by whom and when? Or is it about a right to safety and whose safety are we addressing? Who should signal the bus driver?