

ART / A gallery just three foot square?

Anna Douglas reports on an artistic invasion of the humble telephone box

Undercover operators

MOST ART curators like to stay within the law but when Virginia Namarkoh, an Arts Council trainee, dreamt up the exhibition *The Phone Box: Art in Telephone Boxes*, she knew she was on dodgy ground. "It is illegal to stick anything in phone boxes," said Namarkoh. "A barrister advised us that because it was private property it would be treated like flyposting." But the whole point of the project is to do it guerrilla style. Adamant that the first exhibition of its kind would go ahead in Liverpool and London throughout November, Namarkoh coolly set aside a portion of her Arts Council grant to cover any legal costs.

It is hard to imagine a more public place than a telephone box. But while it's encased only in thin glass walls, the illusion of security enables all manner of intimate things to happen. "I felt that the telephone box provided a rich venue for artists to examine the relationship between privacy, personal and public space and invisibility," says Namarkoh.

The phone box is to most users merely a point of convenient communication. But Namarkoh recognised that it exists for some as "an environment where the main function is to advertise sex. In London there is a real telephone culture. It's like the telephone box is the heterosexual equivalent of the public toilet." The artists recognised this, and while their brief did not identify sex as a theme, most of them have indeed chosen to focus on it.

BT are, of course, aware of the dual function of the phone box. But mindful of their new corporate image — logos, comedy actresses, colour coordinated brochures and customer charters — "calling cards" hardly fit their privatised ambition. "BT don't like 'calling cards'; they say they are illegal," says Rebecca Owen, the Liverpool co-ordinator. "They employ teams of people to remove the cards in London. It is not such a big problem here in Liverpool because prostitutes rely more on kerb trade." BT could be accused of double standards here. Despite the company's hostility to the cards, they market the Callstream service which is used by many clients for sex chat-lines. "They do it," claims Rebecca, "but they don't like to admit it."

The project organisers in both cities intended to locate *The Phone Box* exhibition in the red-light district. As Liverpool does not have such a distinct area it loosely functions around the streets where everyone knows the slow trawl of kerb crawlers. "The aim is that people living and working in the areas will come across the work rather than it being an informed event," Namarkoh said.

Most of the work in *The Phone Box* resembles what you might find in a phone booth normally, which makes recognising the art difficult. This is, of course, what the artists intend. Stephen Forde's calling cards mimic the crudely-produced sex adverts found in telephone boxes and regional newspapers. Exploring the ambiguity of the language of

these adverts he collages found imagery — for example, a baby with eyes suckling a mother's breast — with slogans such as "Sucking Sounds". On phoning the accompanying telephone number, the unsuspecting caller finds himself connected not to a dominatrix nanny, but Dyno Drainage cleaning services.

Damien Robinson and Kate Smith's work stands in sharp contrast to the crude photocopied or handwritten postcards (sometimes with real lipstick kisses) favoured by most prostitutes. Robinson's stickers parody the origins of the "calling card", used by wealthy visitors in the last century. Exquisitely printed on quality card, they advance highly moralistic advice taken from *The London Journal* of 1855 and 1862. Ringing the number at the bottom of each card your call is answered not by soft-porn panting but by a pre-recorded message advocating the virtues of social etiquette.

The over-simplification of sexual gratification is further explored in the cut-out animals of Sher Rhajah. Stuck on to the individual panes of glass in red phone boxes, his nursery school aesthetic turns sinister on closer inspection. The ducks, horses and lambs cut out of soft-porn magazines and Mills & Boon novels (the artist makes no distinction) refer to the lost innocence of both sexual pleasure and childhood.

So what do BT think of all of this subversive art? "Well, actually, they do not know about it officially," Namarkoh told me. "They would only have stopped the project going ahead, so I thought it best not to tell them." Pat O'Keefe, press relations manager for the North-west, confirms her fears. "We did take it as a bit of a joke at first, but it's gone

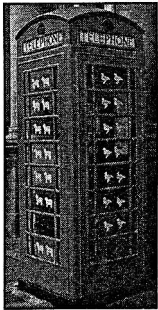
on now. It is artistic vandalism. At the end of the day, we are concerned to keep our boxes neat, tidy and customer-friendly. Any cleaning-up costs incurred will only have to be passed on to the customers."

And the callers, are they aware that they are part of an art project? Jonathan Beech, an unsuspecting student, was confronted with David Fryer's installation, a curtained telephone box outside the Roman Catholic Cathedral. "Me and my girlfriend went to make a phone call. We closed the curtains and had a snog. I thought it must have been BT who put them up because they were colour co-ordinated with the stripes around the box. I think there should be more of it."

It is hard to determine the success of public art, but Namarkoh believes it has been worth it. "We have been stuck right in the middle of a conflict between BT, who wish to remain unsullied by sex, and the sex industry itself. In Liverpool, people seem to have taken it lightly. The biggest shock was being chased in London by pimps who thought we were stealing their business. There has often been a real threat of confrontation. I know we have stepped out and made contact..."

□ *The Phone Box: Art in Telephone Boxes*. For further information phone 071-237 8674.

JEREMY AKERMAN



Sher Rhajah's nursery school aesthetic of ducks, horses and lambs turns sinister on closer inspection