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Tart Cards: London's Illicit Advertising Art



Synopsis

In London, more money is spent on sex than going to the cinema. Tart cards are the means by which prostitutes advertise, and they have become as ubiquitous a symbol of that city as the red telephone booths in which they are found. Since the early 1980s these advertising cards, posted in public phone booths around London, have evolved with printing technology into a sophisticated graphic and sociological form. While illegal, about 13 million cards are distributed each year. More than 350 contemporary and historic tart cards are illustrated in color in this book. In addition, every page of text, including the wittily-designed chapter openers, contains a riot of colorful detail from the cards. The book also contains an eye-opening, comprehensive glossary of the suggestive and coded language they use. Some people find the cards offensive, other amusing; but for the prostitutes and their customers they are a commercial necessity. For anyone interested in graphic design the cards form a microcosm of evolving style, taste and technique in design. Tart cards are now a recognized art form and are collected by institutions and individuals worldwide. Love them or loath them, tart cards are an intriguing slice of the social and commercial history of sex.

Book Information

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Customer Reviews

Marshall McLuhan wrote that advertising was the cave art of the twentieth century. He wasn't around to see a particularly interesting manifestation of the cave art in London starting in 1984. At that time, because of a loophole in the law, London prostitutes started advertising in phone boxes. The practice became so prominent that now a book reproducing hundreds of the cards, along with a

brief documentation of the history and sociology of the practice, has been produced: *Tart Cards: London's Illicit Advertising Art* (Mark Batty Publisher), by Caroline Archer, is a surprising and good-looking examination of the legal, social, commercial, and advertising issues involved in the cards, as well as an amusing collection of cards offering many different sexual practices. If you can't spend time in a London phone box, this book will take you there. Advertising in phone boxes, which belonged to the Post Office and thus the government, was illegal until 1984, when British Telecom was privatized. Enterprising prostitutes saw the loophole and moved their cards from news agents to phone boxes; after all, each card sported a telephone number, and it made sense to advertise where potential clients could use it immediately. Sometimes the women place their own cards, but they more often subcontract this work to "carders," often students or unemployed. Placing 600 cards a day might get a carder 200 pounds; thus mere card distribution is a trade of millions of pounds per year. Catherine Archer has her doctorate in typography, and is especially interested in the typefaces of the cards. A historic typeface from the nineteenth century tends to be used for cards offering mock schoolgirl services or flagellation. Massage services often have whimsical and feminine scripts.

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