

## ART AGAINST CONSUMPTION

Dilek Alkan Özdemir

### SHOPPING BAGS



Figure 1. Dilek Alkan Ozdemir; *Consumer*, 2014, glazed and fired ceramics, 70 x 14 x 35 cm.

Shopping bags are a means of visualising consumption rates. We use up to one trillion plastic shopping bags per year, according to the Environmental Protection and Packaging Waste Assessment Foundation. In the work shown below (Figure 1), I created a durable shopping bag on wheels (representing the rush of the shopper). Everywhere, life is being consumed in a rush. The need for speed is also epitomised in our caffeine-fueled, disposable sip-a-cup lifestyle. Thus in another work (Figure 12), I have shown how we are evolving into 'coffee people.'

Technology has become an integral part of life. As a society, we should be steering the fast-developing technology around us to protect the environment and the world we live in. Everyone can become a part of the solution to this problem within the framework of their workspace, which can lead to change which enhances people's lives.

The invention of the steam engine in England was one of the most important developments in human history, ushering in the Industrial Revolution. Production boomed, mechanical power was engineered on a massive scale and huge quantities of raw materials were needed. More and more manufacturers emerged, bigger companies with large numbers of employees were formed, and a consumer class emerged to buy the products they were making.



Figure 2. Dilek Alkan Özdemir; *Coffee Fast*, 2014.

In this frenzy of production, which has only increased over time, thousands of new products enter the market each day, ostensibly to offer consumer choice and quench demand. Control of markets by multinationals is making the world into an homogenised place where children play with the same toys, everybody eats the same hamburgers and pizzas, wears the same clothes and listens to the same music. Instead of enjoying a global world full of local diversity, the consumer has become part of an object-oriented system based on high profits driven by a must-own, high-turnover property industry. The living standards of the masses have been downgraded in order to enrich an élite minority.

## ARTISTS QUESTIONING CONSUMERISM

We are besieged by objects. Glittering shop windows are full of prêt-à-porter clothing and exotic groceries from far-away places. Shopping malls, the centres of contemporary consumerism, are a kaleidoscope of colour and movement. As rampant consumption engulfs us, how does art question the consumer-driven cultural storm of the twenty-first century?

Some of the first movements to challenge over-consumption appeared in the late 1980s. In 1989, an anti-consumerist organisation called Ad Busters started a campaign in Canada known as Buy Nothing Day. It was epitomised in the posters of Canadian graphic artist Ted Dave. While working for an advertising firm, Dave started to question the aims of advertising as a form of persuasion and sowed the seeds for Buy Nothing Day.<sup>1</sup> His aim was to inspire people to stop and think about what we really need and the things that we are persuaded to buy. First held in Vancouver on 24 September 1992, Buy Nothing Day has morphed onto today's Black Friday – the last Friday of November after Thanksgiving Day in America. Ironically, in the new tradition of consumerism, Black Friday has become a day when people shop more frantically than ever.<sup>2</sup>

One of the most prolific artists working in this area is street artist Banksy. His 2005 stenciled work, *Jesus Christ with Shopping Bags*, depicts Jesus crucified, his outstretched arms holding shopping bags, as a critique of mass consumption at Christmastime, traditionally one of the holiest seasons of the Christian year. The artist reportedly said: "We cannot do anything to change the world until capitalism is destroyed. In the meantime, we buy for consolation."<sup>3</sup> In *Destroy Capitalism*, Banksy depicts the hypocrisy of people enacting a form of T-shirt rebellion against capitalism. The painting shows a 'bunch of lefty-looking' people queuing to buy a mass-produced garment bearing the legend "Destroy Capitalism."

Banksy's works have inspired an international arts collective called Brandalism (a conjoining of the words vandalism and brand).<sup>4</sup> Their first project featured 36 large-format billboards containing artworks by 28 artists from eight countries. The project was launched just before the 2012 London Olympics, using a large-scale advertising format to grab consumer attention in public spaces usually occupied by commercial messages. Brandalism was back on the streets in 2014 with its campaign "Round 2 // 2014 – The Six Sheet." This time, 40 street artists furnished English bus-stop advertisement spaces with anti-consumerist statements. The Brandalists moved their attention to Paris in 2015, during the United Nations climate talks (COP21); they called this campaign "Round 3 // 2015 – COP21 climate talks."

## CONCLUSION

Many artists around the world are now joining anti-consumerism collectives and making creative statements as a way of lobbying governments to change direction in terms of the current consumer model, a major driver of the throwaway society. This economic model is having very damaging effects on the planet and its people – unless you happen to belong to the 0.001% of the world's population who are enriching themselves from the labour of others, and at a severe cost to the environment in terms of the depletion of material resources and growing pollution levels.

Born in Eskişehir, Turkey, in 1970, **Dilek Alkan Özdemir** has a Bachelor's degree in ceramics from Anadolu University's Faculty of Fine Arts, a Master of Arts degree (1998), and was awarded a PhD in art in 2006. In 2013 she became an associate professor at Anadolu University. She exhibits nationally and internationally and has won awards in the field of ceramics. Her latest work is concerned with issues related to over-consumption in society.

- 1 "Buy Nothing Day", *The Leap Manifesto*, 2016, <https://leapmanifesto.org/event/buy-nothing-day/>.
- 2 *Buy Nothing Day 2016*, 24 November 2016, <https://www.adbusters.org/?s=buy+nothing+day>.
- 3 *Exit Through The Gift Shop*, <https://documentary-movie.com/exit-through-the-gift-shop/>.
- 4 See <http://brandalism.ch/>.