This is a transcript of The Conversation Weekly podcast ‘Brandalism: the environmental activists using spoof adverts to critique rampant consumerism,’ published on November 23, 2023.

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Gemma Ware: In most of the world’s big cities, huge adverts cover buildings, the sides of bus shelters, and billboards. But in the run up to Black Friday this, some of these advertising spaces have been morphing.

Producers: They've actually taken ferns and various leaves and put them inside of the backlit box where the ad goes, and there's this beautiful scribbling that looks like the inside of a tree staring at you. It definitely reminds me of a SpecSavers ad, but the text says, “make love, not ads”. “Don't buy stuff, enjoy your friends.” “Scare your boss, join a union.” “No vision, no future, should have gone to SpecSavers.”

Gemma Ware: I'm Gemma Ware, and this is The Conversation Weekly, the world explained by experts. In this episode we find out about a phenomenon called subvertising, and its links to a wider conversation about consumption and the environment.

The story in this episode was brought to us by Eloise Stevens, Welcome to The Conversation Weekly Eloise.

Eloise: Hi Gemma, how's it going?

Gemma: Good, thank you. Now Eloise, you are a regular on this show, but behind the scenes, because you do all of our sound design, and so it's really great to have you here in front of a microphone.

Eloise: Yeah I have this sort of 360 view now.

Gemma: Absolutely and today we're talking about subvertising so tell us what actually is subvertising.

Eloise: So the word subvertising is a mash-up of subvert and advertising and this is exactly what the people behind these campaigns are trying to do. Subvertising is also known as culture jamming or brandalism which as you may have guessed is a mixture of brand and vandalism, and is also the name of the UK branch of Subvertisers International, which is a global collective of organisations who are working on these kind of campaigns.

Gemma: And we actually found out, as we were doing research with this episode, that there's a big subvertising campaign going on right now in the lead up to Black Friday.
Eloise: Yes. So it's called the Zap games. And Zap, Z-A-P, stands for Zone Anti Publicitaire in French, which means anti-advertising zone. And the idea is to invite anyone who wants to to alter an ad in a creative way to protest against this unbridled consumerism that Black Friday promotes.

Gemma: OK. And that's what we were hearing at the top of this episode, some of the examples of people who've been taking part in the Zap games. And you've gone out and found an expert on this movement, on subvertising, on branding. On why people do this for me to talk to. Can you tell us about her?

Eloise: Yep, her name is Eleftheria Lekakis, and she's a senior lecturer in media and communications at the School of Media, Arts and Humanities at the University of Sussex in the UK. And her research focuses on exactly this, subverting, and most importantly, advertising's relationship with the climate crisis.

Gemma: Thank you very much, Eloise.

Eloise: Thank you, Gemma.

Gemma: Welcome to the podcast. It's great to have you on. Can you tell us how you first heard about the idea of subvertising?

Eleftheria: Sure. I was conducting research on the politics of consumption. So basically the relationship between consumer culture and politics and the different ways in which people engage politically in the marketplace. And then I came across news coverage of Brandalism during their COP21 action, and I immediately fell for it if you like.

Gemma: And so the COP 21, this was the Big UN Climate Conference that happened in 2015 in Paris. Tell us what actually caught your attention. What was it that you saw?

E: Yeah, So the thing that I saw was one image of an Air France ad. If you looked at it from afar, it looked like an airline advertisement.

Gemma: At this point, Eleftheria clicks on a link to get the image up in front of her.

Eleftheria: Sorry. I'm getting a lot of promotional popups.

Gemma: Yeah, I got that too. Which is funny in itself.

Eleftheria: So basically you can see here the stewardess, um, holding a finger up to her lips and she's sort of urging us to ‘Ssh hush’. the main title reads:
Tackling Climate Change? Of course not. We’re an airline. We’re sponsoring the UN Climate Conference so we look like we’re part of the solution and to make sure that our profits aren’t affected. Just keep it to yourself. Air France. Part of the Problem.

Eleftheria: So that really captured me. But it also captured like, I think everyone, because it was the most circulated image at the time.

Gemma: Ok so that’s a really powerful way of trying to subvert a company’s brand in order to make a kind of environmental point, a political point.

Eleftheria: Exactly. I hate to be trite and kind of like reiterate on the obvious, but the point of advertising is to sell. The point of subvertising is to open up that message and the power of that message and attach a whole range of meanings to it, meanings that are more akin to social and environmental justice.

Gemma: It’s this advocating for social and environmental justice that is at the heart of what the brandalism movement does. The collective’s first co-ordinated action was for the 2012 Olympics Games in London. They replaced 48 large advertising billboards with artworks by more than 28 international artists. Weary of the increased amount of advertising that would surround the Olympics, the artworks criticised the way advertising can influence body image, consumerism, and our impact on the environment.

Collaborations between activists, artists and graphic designers are central to the way the brandalism collective work. They want their artworks to look professional but they want them to look as if the subverts are actually made by the brand they’re targeting, like the Air France ad we were hearing about earlier.

Gemma: And what drew you to this movement to doing actual research on it?

Eleftheria: When I became introduced to their work I was really interested in seeing what kind of environmental messages they were putting forward. So obviously their main aim during the COP 21 action was to critique the corporate sponsorship of the climate talks.

Gemma: Many of the corporations who sponsored COP21 were either heavy carbon emitters or had direct links to fossil fuel companies. Unfortunately, nearly a decade on, this is still the case. At the 2022 COP27 climate conference in Egypt, it was estimated that 90% of sponsors had ties to the fossil fuel industry.

Eleftheria: It has been written about by many academics, but as my students often tell me nobody has time to read academic work. We just need to see something fast. We need the message to get to us fast. So I’m like, OK, maybe, you know, you see some subvertisements and they work for you. So I was really interested to see what else was there and how they were trying to approach this question of the environment and climate crisis, which is for many people,
a very heavy and very and very not so interesting, topic, in a number of different innovative ways. So I was really impressed and I looked at all of their artwork and I selected a purposeful sample, which I felt demonstrated the variety of different environmental messages they were putting across.

Gemma: When Eleftheria studied the subverts put up during COP21 in Paris she identified five different kinds of environmental narrative.

Eleftheria: So the first one was about corporate greed. The second one was about the complicity of politicians. In fact, the inadequacy of politicians to challenge the status quo.

Gemma: The third was a critique of consumer culture, based on the idea that the planet cannot sustain our current levels of production and consumption. The message here is that advertising can serve to prop up an excessive consumer culture, encouraging people to want things the Earth cannot afford.

Eleftheria: I really like that they brought in smartphones and what smartphones do to us, but also what smartphones do to the environment. So thinking about what I call obsolescence injustice, the way that these technologies are designed to become obsolete within a couple of years and that's it. And it's really hard to escape that.

Gemma: These are common criticisms of the failures of our current society – and its politics – to fight the climate crisis. But Eleftheria also identified other, more artistic messages in the subverting actions.

Eleftheria: I also came across different kinds of environmental narratives, which were more about the poetics of the environment rather than the politics of it. So there was this theme, which I found really powerful, which was about earth in mourning. So they were featuring, a small planet earth withering away in our hand. Some of them were just poems, you know, very short poems about, you know the grief felt by the climate crisis. And somebody had done research on how grief when shared publicly can actually mobilize people. Which I thought is, is powerful.

There was another theme, a final theme, which was about declaring commitment to the environment and environmentalism. So again, there were sort of poetic declarations about, you know, let's do this, let's stop buying things. Let's start like spending more time together. Let's be more connected rather than, you know, disparate.

Gemma: They use a lot of humor in what they're doing, don't they? Is that really part of their tool kit?

E: Yes. It's very much present, usually in the form of irony, right? Like the, Air France ad that we just discussed.
I came across all this research that said that culture jamming, all that like, uses irony, humor, but what it does is just sort of like wink to the people who get it and just exclude anyone else. So it doesn't really, it doesn't really allow people to be drawn into the main cause.

Gemma: It was when teaching a paper by John Cameron, a professor of international development at Dalhousie University in Canada, that Eleftheria fully understood the power of humour in driving home a message.

Eleftheria: He wrote a paper called Can Poverty Be Funny? I mean, the the answer, you know, at everyone's mouth is like, no.

Gemma: No, yeah.

Eleftheria: And then he talks about incongruity theory, which is basically when you are expecting to see one thing, but you're actually seeing another. And that throws you a little bit.

Gemma: This incongruity theory of humour has been used directly in some subvertising. One recent subvert, aiming to expose British Airways when it comes to limiting their carbon emissions, showed a cross-section of a plane, with a golf course right in the middle of the cabin. The caption read:

We’re turning Business Class green with the world’s first on-board golf course.

Eleftheria: And once you see that, that stays with you. So it's that kind of humor that I think can be transformative.

Gemma: Cognitive dissonance can really make a message stand out, and it might even persuade people to change their behaviour… from taking fewer flights to joining a local environmental campaign group. However, as the climate crisis worsens, Eleftheria told me that she feels increasingly ambivalent about whether these kinds of subverts are actually even funny anymore.

Eleftheria: I was actually going through the different images from the COP 21 campaign last night, and I was really struggling to find something humorous in there.

Gemma: Oh, ok.

Eleftheria: I don't know if it's to do with the sort of like crisis that we find ourselves in at the moment when you. We have already been told that, told that you know, something needs to change, but this change seems to be coming extremely slowly and doesn't seem like change at all when it comes to the climate talks at least.

Gemma: Humour aside, Eleftheria thinks subverts are powerful in other ways.
Eleftheria: They're effective because they're starting a conversation primarily. But sometimes it can feed into a larger conversation which exists around the role of advertising in society today and the limits that we should think about collectively, when it comes to advertising. But it's also about building a movement that was disparate before.

Gemma: Building of a movement can happen in two ways, first with the people behind the scenes who produce the subverts, and second among the people who might see them.

The fact that the Subvertising International collective exists as a movement, already sets it apart from what went before. Eleftheria refers to a phenomenon described by the Canadian journalist Naomi Klein.

Eleftheria: She wrote about the lone rangers, the people that go and deface like advertisements by themselves like in the middle of the night. It's changed now. It's a lot more complicated and it often involves grassroots groups, like advocacy organizations who are doing very thorough research and advocating for policy change at the local level. And here I'm thinking about a grassroots organization called Ad Free Cities in the UK who are doing really impressive work, in terms of furthering our understanding of the impact of advertising in societies.

Gemma: Since her early research on Brandalism, Eleftheria's work has now expanded to identify common themes and concerns among members of the wider Subvertising International collectives, and the different ways they take action against advertising. Their criticism of advertising doesn't just target the promotion of unsustainable consumerism, but also the way that advertising can elevate a narrow portrayal of gender, or racial identities.

Eleftheria: A number of different individuals, like artists I interviewed, in the US mostly, talked about the significance of the environment as a key driver in their activism, but they also never really divorced it from gendered and racialized contentions. So this is really important. The way in which, subvertising sort of like weaves together these concerns. It's not about one specific issue at the time. Sometimes it is. Sometimes we've seen campaigns who are only concerned with the whiteness of popular culture, for instance. But most of the times, especially in the conversations and definitely in the sort of like actions that coalesce, such as the Zap games, you see a lot more interconnectedness when it comes to environmentalism and race and gender politics.

Gemma: In their online posts, the Brandalism collective also criticise how a narrow portrayal of certain body types and consumer ideals can also influence our cultural rights on a subconscious level. I asked Eleftheria what cultural rights are and why they're so important.

Eleftheria: It's about the right to self-definition. It's about everyone's rights to construct themselves as they like, and to construct themselves in relation to their cultural heritage.
So when it comes to thinking about how we construct ourselves, especially about how very young people construct themselves you know, we really need to put the power of advertising in question.

Gemma: We've all looked at an ad, and wanted to be thinner, or thought the latest pair of trainers would make us cooler, right? The Brandalism collective resists this influence, saying we should be able to define our own identities free from coercion and persuasion.

Eleftheria: I can point to, you know, a number of different scholars in psychology who talk about the deleterious effects of advertising in young people, their mental and physical wellbeing when it comes to, when it comes to actually trying to reach those aspirational role models. And there is some change, yes. I mean, definitely there are more real bodies out there. There's a more sort of like willingness to be inclusive in the world of advertising. But still, there is like so much power when it comes to influencing the project of ourselves.

Gemma: In her research, Eleftheria has spoken to a host of different people and organisations working to resist the hold advertising has over us, and some of them under the Subvertising International umbrella.

Eleftheria: I found different kinds of agencies from a Paris-based citizen who was really interested in documenting the lives of people who are paid very little money to go and like paste advertising on public spaces. Basically trying to reveal, the hidden life of, you know, these very glamorous advertising that we come across, but also advocate for less advertising in public spaces, which is something that a lot of the, the sort of French counterparts of Brandism, let's say groups like Résistance à l'Agression Publicitaire, excuse me, for the, uh, very little French, but Resistance Against Advertising Aggression is a group that has existed since the early nineties. And they are doing incredible lobbying work, trying to restrict the presence of advertising in public space specifically, but also providing schools with pedagogical kits for getting students to actually think about advertising critically themselves.

Gemma: This is something that Eleftheria also does with her media and communications students. In class, she gets them to create their own subverted ads to understand the power of messaging, both from the mainstream and the counterculture.

Eleftheria: There's a group in Spain called Consume Hasta Morir, Buy Till you Die or Consume Till You Drop, who basically came out of Ecologistas en Acción, which is the largest environmental NGO in Spain. So they formed a small collective in the early 2000s and they have been producing like documentary, communication manuals for organized citizenship, doing like, exhibitions of subvertising work. There's Democratic Media Please who is an Australian member of Subvertisers International who is more interested in actually damaging, destroying outdoors advertising in Melbourne and he's really identifying a very important issue, which is the fact that advertising is not just problematic because it exists out there and promotes problematic values, but it's also the main source of funding for the majority of our media. Uh,
and it's very hard to come across, you know, journalism that is independent, that is not often swayed by its sponsors. Like the climate talks.

Gemma: Apart from The Conversation, which doesn't carry any advertising.

Eleftheria: Of course.

Gemma: And that's such a really interesting point, isn't it, that the entire media industry relies upon advertising.

Eleftheria: Exactly.

Gemma: What are the limits? You could say subvertising is using the structure of advertising to publish its own message? So are there limits to that in what it's trying to achieve?

Eleftheria: That's a really good question. That was part of the original critique. You know, you can't really criticize consumer capitalism because you're living, breathing it. I mean, fish cannot criticize water kind of thing. So what if you like subvert a few ads, you know, what's the big idea? Some people see something, maybe they change, maybe they don't, maybe they start a conversation, whatever.

But I don't think that's fair in terms of thinking about the coming together of people. So when it comes to resisting mass consumerism, there is not a lot you can do apart from getting together and doing things together with people, making things rather than buying things.

So the fact that you know, this movement is coming together who are really keen to promote sort of like open ways of engaging people rather than tell them that, oh my God, you're wrong, you have a smartphone and you're going around buying things and you're to blame for like the climate crisis. It's not like that. It's about giving people the chance to work with each other together.

Gemma: The Zap games, this competition happening in lead up to Black Friday, blurs this boundary between behind and in front of the scenes.

In an email to The Conversation, the co-founder of the Brandalism movement, Tona Merriman, told us that 'the idea is for everyday residents to take action against outdoor advertising infrastructure, in whatever [way] they wish. Participants are invited to submit action reports on a central website and there are 8 'action categories' including 'Most Family Friendly Intervention', 'Most Beautiful / Artistic intervention' and 'Greatest Number of Ad Panels Hacked'. There will even be awards ceremonies in Brussels and London to celebrate each intervention.

Eleftheria: So it can involve again, anyone, and again, it's really important because it's a movement building exercise.
Gemma: And some of these actions are, let's be honest, against the law, wherever they may take place in, in the countries, obviously laws are different in different places. Can you tell us where you think the boundaries lie and what you make of the fact that the people who do this are sometimes breaking the law in trying to make their point.

E: So this is, again a blurry area when it comes to subvertisements, we're thinking about legal issues in relation to the spaces themselves that are being altered. I mean, is it illegal to put like, an A4 sheet of paper and cover like an advertisement with tape? Is that illegal?

Gemma: Good question. Mm-Hmm

Gemma: Eleftheria is also keen to mention that the grey areas of the law are not just used to the subvertisers' advantage, but to the advertisers' too.

Eleftheria: Sometimes, for instance, an advertisement will rent space for let's say two weeks, and then two weeks will pass and that advertisement won't be taken down. There won't be a new one. put in its place. So is that advertisement legally there? I'm playing devil's advocate now.

Gemma: No, no, no. It's a good point.

Eleftheria: But also another way in which there's a thin red line between subvertising and legality is to do with copyright.

Gemma: Interesting.

Eleftheria: So what happens when Air France sees that subvertisement? Is the reaction, 'You're defacing my brands? You know, I'm gonna take you on." Sometimes solicitors will also advise, brands to not take any action against subvertisements because they tend to generate more positive publicity for the subverting campaign rather than the brand.

Gemma: Sometimes brands respond with the 'if you can't beat them, join them' approach.

Eleftheria: When subvertising is successful, it's sort of like taken and brought back into the advertising sort machine, however you wanna call it.

Gemma: This is also known as incorporation, or brands incorporating countercultural resistance back into their own messaging.

Eleftheria: An obvious example is the Che Guevara T-shirt. Or the, This is what a feminist looks like, t-shirts for that matter. It's been called femvertising. It's been criticized as woke washing, but it's happening. It's all around us. One of the future trends that was identified I think about ten years ago now is the rebellious consumer. Consumers don't wanna justbuy things like
everyone else. They wanna buy things with an edge. So, you know, the incorporation of these campaigns and this messages speaks to those kinds of rebellious consumers. Maybe I'm a rebellious consumer myself.

Gemma: I guess we all want to think we are. Whether or not these incorporated subverts sincerely address the same concerns as the brandalists, all these images form part of the push and pull between climate justice and corporate motives. Which led Eleftheria onto her current research question: what is the role of mainstream advertising in limiting climate change?

Eleftheria: I'm noticing a number of critical voices coming out from the advertising world and talking about doing things differently. I am keeping copies, notes of these developments, and I'm hoping to actually look at the way he advertising industry imagines limits for itself, and then see if those limits can translate into policy.

Gemma: Okay, well, we'll keep a watch on that space. Thank you so much for your insights and talking to us about your research, it was fascinating. Thank you.

Eleftheria: A pleasure.

Gemma: That's it for this week's episode of The Conversation Weekly. Thank you to Eleftheria Lekakis, and to Tona Merriman, co-founder of brandalism. This episode was written and produced by Eloise Stevens with production assistance from Katie Flood and Mend Mariwany. Our theme music is by Neeta Sarl. Stephen Khan is our global executive editor, Alice Mason runs our social media and Soraya Nandy does our transcripts. I'm Gemma Ware the show's executive producer.

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