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**Caption:** Activists may sabotage brand ads to support their causes.

**Advertising Can Be A Visual Battlefield**

The shopping extravaganza after Thanksgiving Day in the U.S. known as Black Friday is also celebrated in France as “Vendredi Noir.” In 2015, it coincided with the United Nations Climate Change Conference (COP21) in Paris, attended by world leaders from 196 different countries.

Throughout the night, small groups of climate change activists in Paris employed creative disruption tactics due to a state-of-emergency ban on protests. The activists replaced more than 600 ad panels at bus stops around the city with original artwork posters that mocked corporate sponsors of the talks.

The action was a project sponsored by Brandalism, a UK organization that uses culture jamming to connect corporations’ complicity with critical societal issues. Culture jamming uses consumer culture as a viable path to social change. Using the posters as a strategy of creative activism to subvert public advertising, Brandalism sought to connect corporate culture, the dominance of advertising in public spaces, and its promotion of everyday consumption to environmental sustainability.

Brandalism, a cross between "brand" and "vandalism," positions itself as "a revolt against corporate control of the visual realm", wrote Adweek. It launched in 2012 with the goal of seizing public space back from advertisers. Advertisements, when seen as narratives about consuming commodities, have traditionally provoked concern from critics. The arguments are that ads discursively construct the world, subdue inequality, promote a normative vision, and reflect the logic of capitalism and the society of the spectacle—a society that values appearances over the genuine. Culture jamming turns them into a “field of contestation”.

The visual rhetoric of the Brandalism posters mimicked, or appropriated, the look and feel of the targeted advertisements with the goal of directly linking the advertising industry to climate change.

The action attacked many of the corporate sponsors of COP21, including BMW, the Coca-Cola Company, Air France, Moody’s Corporation, and Dow Chemicals. Eighty-two artists from 19 countries helped to create the posters. Brandalism activists placed the artworks in advertising spaces owned by JC Decaux, reportedly one of the world’s largest outdoor advertising firms and an official sponsor to the COP21 climate talks.

The posters, through visual subversion, appropriation, and augmentation of imagery in the sponsors’ traditional advertising, resulted in messages of corporate greed, inadequate politicians, consumer saturation, Earth in mourning, and public commitment to the environment.

In a Mobil “subvertisement,” rhetorical interventions featured an image of offshore oil drilling and the statement (translated from French) “we know about the impact of fossil fuels but publicly denied it”.The Mobil corporate logo was juxtaposed with hashtags of protest events, e.g. #ClimateGames.

In another poster, Apple’s iPhone is crowned but bleeding from the top, with accompanying text, “the king is dead” and “designed to become obsolete within two years”. The street art also appeared on Brandalism’s website, social media channels, and was reproduced extensively through global media coverage.

Note: You can see more “subvertisements” at:

<https://www.cbc.ca/news/trending/paris-climate-talks-fake-ads-corporate-sponsors-brandalism-1.3345916>

<https://edition.cnn.com/style/article/subvertising-ads-posters-billboards/index.html>

<http://brandalism.ch/press/>