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Capitalism's Push for Consumerism: The Ninety Percent



Meriem Mahrez, 2019

Acrylic Paint on Illustration Board

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The Ninety Percent is inspired by a thorough analysis of crucial political theories of capitalism and consumerism, as well as political and social movements which these ideologies inspired. These theories question the capitalist system that various nations across the globe follow. My work intends to expose the capitalist society's idolization of materiality, and how labels and brands are used as tools to both distract and control the minds of the masses. Through figurative representation, my work explores the way in which capitalism has successfully marginalized and distracted societies around the world through its push for consumerism. Understanding the truth of capitalism requires us to unlearn what society has drilled into us since we were children. Furthermore, this piece touches on the dysfunctional and exploitative nature of capitalism.

My painting illustrates a group of people who embody the vast majority of society. They stand in an organized formation with their arms stretched out with empty bowls, begging to be fed. As I was painting, my mother watched over my shoulder and asked who these figures were, and I told her they were us. This work serves as a true reflection of our current social system. The dark tone of the work represents the darkness the working class lives in, as they obey to a capitalist system without hesitation. For such a system to successfully function, it requires people to be organized into economic classes and for populations to be exploited. With all the economic and physical exhaustion this system brings to people, it also implies a way for society to cope with their issues and fill their voids through materialism. We live in a vicious cycle of exploitation. Where it is nearly impossible to grow out of the economic class one was born into. The similarity in the facial expressions of the figures illustrates the similarity in our struggle. The higher entity of this piece is not physically illustrated yet it is the most significant part of the piece, while everything happening

in the piece is dependent on it. The ultimate purpose of this work is to visually remind people to create moments where they are active, and progressively work against how we are trained to think and act.

My work is heavily influenced by the imagery used by *Adbusters*, an anti-consumerist magazine which uses provocative and ironic imagery. They often create fake advertisements to challenge corporate businesses. By using humor, they keep the youth engaged and educated, while the magazine intends to remind the public to question what systems they financially support. They claim that artists and advertisers are responsible for what society sees. *Adbusters* made the original call to Occupy Wall Street, which spurred a protest movement that took up the New York Financial district to demand economic equality and spread globally (Graeber 2012).

In an article from *News Roots*, an online news page, Elizabeth Laville explains that overconsumption is a major taboo in today's societies. Dimitris Begioglou is a clinical psychologist who claims consumerism is a dangerous addiction, where a consumer will confuse simple pleasures for the illusion of omnipotence (Zonakis 2018). The article states, "The addiction to overconsumption has the same magnitude as that experienced by a drug user, a gambler or an alcoholic. A person, before the impulsive act of consumption, feels a tremendous euphoria, which, once the act is completed, will give place to relaxation and, later, to guilt and depression, until we start to seek euphoria through consumption again. This is the vicious circle of addiction" (Zonakis 2018).

It is important to note how advertisements distort the minds of children. The constant narrative of material objects bringing fulfillment and happiness is one that is detrimental to the formation of a child's thought processes. This epidemic has caused people to push for policy change. In 2016, for instance, France took action and banned advertisements during children television programs. (Zonakis 2018). Prior to this, in 2014 a city in France took action and banned advertising billboards, and in 2000 Sweden banned television advertisements from public and private channels (Zonakis 2018).

Karl Marx's *Das Kapital* explains the contradictions of capitalist societies and its mode of production, it also outlines the potential to overcome it. Marx describes the source capitalism is from class struggles. And so, that antagonism between classes began before industrial capitalism but was transformed into the current struggle through the dispossession of the means of production from the labouring classes. Marx explains that capitalism's antagonism is divided into two main classes; the bourgeoisie (capitalist) and the proletariat (worker). He analyzed this worker-capitalist relationship and how the exploitation of the worker is the most essential aspect of capitalist systems. Since workers do not own the means of production, they must sell their labor, which alienates them from their work. As a result, human beings become no more than machines. In *Das Kapital*, Karl Marx writes, "Capital is dead labor, that, vampire like, only lives by sucking living labor and lives the more, the more labor it sucks." (Marx 1887). Since the ultimate goal in the capitalist system is to maximize its profits, everything becomes a commodity that is bought and paid for. Even basic human needs, like education, health, and food. Marx argues that the capitalist system is unstable. Because it cannot endlessly increase profits. It is a system that does everything in its power to convince us we need more. It has trained us to never be satisfied materialistically. While it pushes the idea that physical possessions improve the way we appear to others.

The situationist international was a political art movement from Europe that existed from 1957 to 1972. Similar to my own vision, it was a youthful revolt and agitation against art being used for commercial use. It was inspired by avant-garde groups in Northern Italy. They were interested in the construction of moments of life and living and claimed that capitalism has made life a mere accumulation of spectacles. The artists and poets of the movement claimed they do not want to contribute to their own destruction and encouraged the public to revolt as well. *Society of the*

Spectacle, a book written in 1967 by Guy Debord, was crucial to the situationist movement. He explains a capitalist society is merely a representation of life, a fake reality where the media and advertising masks the reality of capitalism's true impact on our lives. Debord claims to get away from these spectacles, and to get away from these distractions we must create moments where we are active.

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