



Fashion Dilemma

Emily Doyle* discusses the relationship between art and consumption, and how fashion may benefit the environment.

The cultural establishment is experiencing a unique paradox.

Fashionable consumerism was a concept created in the 1920s as a way to distract the masses from becoming politically informed. But now fashion has the power to change people's behaviour. If art is fashionable and can turn political issues into mainstream concerns that alter people's behaviour, do artists have a duty to get involved in the political debate about climate change? Or, if artists are ostensibly anti-establishment and left wing, and climate change is the new establishment, should they be behaving in an anti-establishment way? How do they reconcile this with the fact that art is sold as a commodity, with artists leading the capitalist system?

Art and science have a long-standing connection, going back to when artists helped scientists illustrate their new discoveries in flora and fauna. The fact that artist Cornelia Parker, scientist Professor Stephen Hopper and politician Ed Vaizey shared a stage at the RSA's recent Arts & Ecology Exchange to examine how the cultural sector is implicated in climate change shows that some are ready to take this relationship further.

Chomskian Abstract, a strange one-sided

dialogue between Cornelia Parker and Noam Chomsky, provides a beacon of clarity.

Chomsky defines consumption as a consciously-manufactured goal stemming from 1920s business literature that encouraged industry to make people focus on the superficial things of life. In the freest countries, such as Britain and America, it was becoming impossible for the state to control the people by force. They would not tolerate the vulgar masses becoming engaged politically and so created uninformed consumers that made irrational decisions. Encouragingly though, Chomsky also believes that as consumerism is an artificial construct, its very nature is fragile and so can be changed.

Shadow Minister for the Arts, Ed Vaizey MP, believes that it is the artist's duty to show us how:

'The one thing we know about the twenty-first century is that if something is fashionable, people are far more likely to be engaged and interested in it. Look at people like Leonardo Di Caprio and Al Gore who have used creative mediums and forums to take climate change out of the ghetto of political discourse. The point of art is to express a view in a way that talks to all of us. Artists can use their creative medias to

move issues away from narrow political dialogue and into mainstream conversations. This includes designers and architects, as well as cultural institutions such as the Tate and the National Gallery which can lead by example.'

Parker's work bears witness to these possibilities. She says: 'Artists are free radicals in a way that scientists can never be. They can't express their fear or emotions without losing their credibility. As an artist I feel desperately inadequate, but climate change is a many headed beast which we need to see in all its dimensions. I could no longer remain just a concerned citizen, so my Chomsky piece is me putting my head above the parapet.'

Interestingly though, she had no answer to Ed's probing question as to why she chose to fly to meet Chomsky, rather than conduct the interview via a virtual meeting space.

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Note: RSA lectures and podcast downloads are available at www.rsa.org.uk/audio/index.asp.