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Anarchists in the Aisles? Stores Provide a Stage



Kike Arnal for The New York Times

Karl Marx, the anarchist Mikhail Bakunin and Che Guevara adorn a shirt slipped onto a rack at a Target store in California.

By IAN URBINA
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This is the season of frenetic shopping, but for a devious few people it's also the season of spirited shopdropping.

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Shopdropping in New York

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Otherwise known as reverse shoplifting, shopdropping involves surreptitiously putting things in stores, rather than illegally taking them out, and the motivations vary.

Anti-consumerist artists slip replica products packaged with political messages onto shelves while religious proselytizers insert pamphlets between the pages of gay-and-lesbian readings at book stores.

Self-published authors sneak their works into the "new releases" section, while personal trainers put their business cards into weight-loss books, and aspiring professional photographers make homemade cards — their Web site address included, of course — and covertly plant them into stationery-store racks.

"Everyone else is pushing their product, so why shouldn't we?" said Jeff Eyrich, a producer for several independent bands, who puts stacks of his bands' CDs — marked "free" — on music racks at Starbucks whenever the cashiers look away.

Though not new, shopdropping has grown in

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Your holiday movie guide

James Estrin/The New York Times

At a Whole Foods in New York, Ryan Watkins-Hughes stocked a shelf with cans carrying art-infused labels.

popularity in recent years, especially as artists have gathered to swap tactics at Web sites like Shopdropping.net, and groups like the Anti-Advertising Agency, a political art collective, do

training workshops open to the public.

Retailers fear the practice may annoy shoppers and raise legal or safety concerns, particularly when it involves children's toys or trademarked products.

"Our goal at all times is to provide comfortable and distraction-free shopping," said Bethany Zucco, a spokeswoman for Target. "We think this type of activity would certainly not contribute to that goal." She said she did not know of any shopdropping at Target stores.

But [Packard Jennings](#) does. An artist who lives in Oakland, Calif., he said that for the last seven months he had been working on a new batch of his Anarchist action figure that he began shopdropping this week at Target and Wal-Mart stores in the San Francisco Bay Area.

"When better than Christmas to make a point about hyper-consumerism?" asked Mr. Jennings, 37, whose action figure comes with tiny accessories including a gas mask, bolt cutter, and two Molotov cocktails, and looks convincingly like any other doll on most toy-store shelves. Putting it in stores and filming people as they try to buy it as they interact with store clerks, Mr. Jennings said he hoped to show that even radical ideology gets commercialized. He said for safety reasons he retrieves the figures before customers take them home.

Jason Brody, lead singer for an independent pop-rock band in the East Village, said his group recently altered its shopdropping tactics to cater to the holiday rush.

Normally the band, the [Death of Jason Brody](#), slips promotional CD singles between the pages of The Village Voice newspaper and into the racks at large music stores. But lately, band members have been slipping into department stores and putting stickers with logos for trendy designers like Diesel, John Varvatos and 7 for All Mankind on their CDs, which they then slip into the pockets of designer jeans or place on counters.

"Bloomingdale's and 7 for All Mankind present the Death of Jason Brody, our pick for New York band to watch in 2008," read a sticker on one of the CDs placed near a register at Bloomingdales. "As thanks for trying us on, we're giving you this special holiday gift." Bloomingdales and 7 for All Mankind declined to comment.

For pet store owners, the holidays usher in a form of shopdropping with a touch of buyer's remorse. What seemed like a cute gift idea at the time can end up being dumped back at a store, left discretely to roam the aisles.

"After Easter, there's a wave of bunnies; after Halloween, it's black cats; after Christmas, it's puppies," said Don Cowan, a spokesman for the store chain Petco, which in the month after each of those holidays sees 100 to 150 pets abandoned in its aisles or left after hours in cages in front of stores. Snakes have been left in crates, mice and hamsters surreptitiously dropped in dry aquariums, even a donkey left behind after a store's annual pet talent show, Mr. Cowan said.

Bookstores are especially popular for self-promotion and religious types of shopdropping.

At BookPeople in Austin, Tex., local authors have been putting bookmarks advertising their own works in books on similar topics. At Mac's Backs Paperbacks, a used bookstore in Cleveland Heights, Ohio, employees are dealing with the influx of shopdropped works by local poets and playwrights by putting a price tag on them and leaving them on the shelves.

At Powell's Books in Portland, Ore., religious groups have been hitting the

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magazines in the science section with fliers featuring Christian cartoons, while their adversaries have been moving Bibles from the religion section to the fantasy/science-fiction section.

This week an arts group in Oakland, the Center for Tactical Magic, began shopdropping neatly folded stacks of homemade T-shirts into Wal-Mart and Target stores in the San Francisco Bay Area. The shirts feature radical images and slogans like one with the faces of [Karl Marx](#), [Che Guevara](#) and Mikhail Bakunin, a Russian anarchist. It says, "Peace on Earth. After we overthrow capitalism."

"Our point is to put a message, not a price tag, on them," said Aaron Gach, 33, a spokesman for the group.

Mr. Jennings's anarchist action figure met with a befuddled reaction from a Target store manager on Wednesday in El Cerrito, Calif.

"I don't think this is a product that we sell," the manager said as Mr. Jennings pretended to be a customer trying to buy it. "It's definitely antifamily, which is not what Target is about."

One of the first reports of shopdropping was in 1989, when a group called the Barbie Liberation Organization sought to make a point about sexism in children's toys by swapping the voice hardware of Barbie dolls with those in GI Joe figures before putting the dolls back on store shelves.

Scott Wolfson, a spokesman for the federal [Consumer Product Safety Commission](#), said he was not sure if shopdropping was illegal but that some forms of it could raise safety concerns because the items left on store shelves might not abide by labeling requirements and federal safety standards.

Ryan Watkins-Hughes, 28, a photographer from Brooklyn, teamed up with four other artists to shopdrop canned goods with altered labels at Whole Foods stores in New York City this week. "In the holidays, people get into this head-down, plow-through-the-shopping autopilot mode," Mr. Watkins-Hughes said "I got to get a dress for Cindy, get a stereo for Uncle John, go buy canned goods for the charity drive and get back home."

"Warhol took the can into the gallery. We bring the art to the can," he said, adding that the labels consisted of photographs of places he had traveled combined with the can's original bar code so that people could still buy them.

"What we do is try to inject a brief moment of wonder that helps wake them up from that rushed stupor," he said, pausing to add, "That's the true holiday spirit, isn't it?"

Christopher Maag contributed reporting.

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