

21114 Lights off: France parkour collectives fight pollution one store sign at a time

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The Champs-Élysées may be empty, with a strict pandemic curfew in place across France, but the shops have been leaving their signs on all the same.

And so a few months ago a parkour collective decided to take matters into its own hands. With members using their gymnastic abilities to climb walls and scaffolding to turn off the illuminated signs, the Paris-based On The Spot collective is just one of a number of parkour collectives around France trying to raise awareness about light pollution and energy consumption as part of the Lights Off movement.

“Turning off the lights is a symbolic message about the basic efforts that businesses should be making,” said Kevin Ha, the 28-year-old leader of On the Spot.

Leaving commercial lights on at night wastes energy and the accompanying light pollution harms local ecosystems and our own circadian rhythms as well. This was why French legislators introduced a law in 2013 requiring stores and office buildings to turn off their signs an hour after their last employee leaves.

But enforcement is sporadic. While turning off the signs simply requires the flip of a small interrupter switch outside each storefront, finding a way to actually get to those switches is the difficult part. But the challenge of getting from point A to point B in creative ways is exactly what parkour is about.

Despite the fact that they are often out after curfew, police officers patrolling the avenue rarely bother them, the parkour runners say, and instead more often than not act as an audience. Not wanting anyone to feel unsafe, they make sure to avoid turning off signs in areas of the avenue not lit by public street lights, and take care to steer clear of damaging any storefronts.

None of the half dozen companies, including Sephora and Dyson, whose signs have been turned off by On the Spot replied to a request for comment. Anecdotally, however, several businesses along the street have begun turning off their signs over the past few months.

Ha, whose childhood obsession with Batman brought him to parkour at 15 years old, says the campaign is part of doing “parkour in context” – over time the sport is increasingly being used as a political form of artistic expression.

“This Lights Off movement is an example of this parkour in context,” Ha said. “It is not performance just for the sake of the performance, but rather performance and action for the sake of the planet.”

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