

Help us celebrate our **500th episode** of The New Social Environment! Join today's event  
»

« MARCH 2022 Issue



Donate

**ArtSeen**

## The Yes Men

MARCH 2022

By *Cassie Packard*

Yes Men, *Dow Does the Right Thing*, Hallway window, still from BBC World News appearance, 2004. Clear vinyl, 51.5 x 97 inches.

**On View**

### **Carriage Trade**

December 9, 2021–March 27, 2022

New York

As anyone who has taken an introductory improv course knows, invariably responding to every proposition with “Yes, and...”—accepting and augmenting whatever preposterous version of reality is thrown your way—tends to be a fast track to absurdity. No one plays this game quite like the Yes Men, a counterneoliberalism artist-activist group founded by American-born Jacques Servin (using the alias Andy Bichlbaum) and Igor Vamos (pseudonymously Mike Bonanno) in the late 1990s. In response to the socio-ideological landscape that late capitalism presents as *donnée*, the Yes Men pose as corporate or governmental bodies in mass media “hijinks” that either take consensus reality to its ludicrous extremes or demonstrate that consensus reality has already reached said extremes, highlighting our entrenchment in its naturalized frameworks.

Installation View, Left Vitrine (left side): *The Yes Men*, carriage trade. Photo: Nicholas Knight.

Featuring ample archival ephemera in vitrines and upwards of five hours of video, *The Yes Men* at Carriage Trade traces the two-decade arc of the organization’s mass-media-hijinks-cum-political-performances. (The Yes Men, it should be noted, emphatically identify as activists rather than artists. Of their decision to be featured in an art context, they wrote: “Maybe putting ourselves in the art world can help send out a message: if more creative young people thought of their talents as tools for changing the world, and stopped caring about the art world’s opinions, we’d all be much better off.”) The documentation-heavy show is historicizing in feel, without much reference to the Yes Men’s increasing focus on creating a broader network of resistance by aiding other individuals in hoaxing; since 2007, the Yes Men have offered workshops for activists, even briefly formalizing the effort in partnership with the New School and NYU.

The present—in which fake news, tailored to corroborate personal biases, is endlessly perpetuated by social media at heretofore unthinkable velocities—lurks in the backdrop of the show. The Yes Men's tactics are certainly historic: culture jamming, or the art of appropriating and intervening in mass media to critique hegemonic practices, can be traced back to at least the Lettrist International (1952–57). In the 1990s, artist-activists were galvanized by the advent of the World Wide Web to weaponize this “mass political jujitsu” against corporate America. Prior to forming a duo, Servin and Vamos had each done some culture jamming of their own, time-based hijinks that unfolded through media reportage. Newspaper clippings on view breathlessly report on Servin programming men kissing into *SimCopter*, and Vamos swapping the voice boxes of Barbies and GI Joes.

Together, they became more pointed in their critiques. In 1999, as anti-globalization activists protested the World Trade Organization (WTO) in Seattle, the Yes Men created a spoof website that mimicked the WTO's official site with blunter language, performing what they termed “identity correction.” Unwitting website visitors, believing the Yes Men to be the real WTO, invited them to speak at conferences; naturally, the duo said yes. Snaking the gallery walls are framed printouts of a clip art-laden PowerPoint presentation—the sober art-world staging is itself parodic—that Bichelbaum delivered woodenly as a WTO representative at a Finland textile conference in 2001 (A reminder of the degree of access and credibility conferred upon any white, cisgender man in a bad suit). Footage captures Bichlbaum ripping off his business suit to reveal a golden bodysuit with a screen-embedded phallic prosthesis, a solution for modern managers seeking a corporeal connection with an invisible labor force. “Visualizing employee performance” is a massive hard-on; the corporation is a corpus; the conference-goers appear unperturbed, even encouraging. Some clap.

Installation view: *The Yes Men, Chevron Campaign Derailed, Chevron ads*, 2010. Matte vinyl, 105 x 212 inches. *The Yes Men*, carriage trade. Photo: Nicholas Knight.

A smattering of sculptural props, metonyms of past hijinks, gleefully punctuate the show. Nodding to a 2007 stunt that got Bichlbaum and Bonnano kicked out of an oil conference, a niche of fleshy, hairy candles memorializes an ExxonMobil janitor who, having contracted cancer, donated his body to become a new kind of fossil fuel. Suspended from a ceiling corner is a spherical, tardigrade-like contraption with a dummy nestled inside it: the Halliburton SurvivaBall debuted in 2006 as a pricey “self-contained living system—truly, a gated community for one” for those concerned about the effects of climate change. These humorous extensions of capitalist logic not only helped secure the hijinks—and the issues referenced therein—media coverage; they also gave corporate absurdity a material, and thus potentially assailable, form.

While there is power in the barbed humor and consciousness-raising tied up with this transgressive, trickster game of “Yes, and...”, the Yes Men’s most compelling and complicated work declares “No, *instead...*,” proposing what a different—better—reality might look like. On the 20th anniversary of the 1984 Bhopal industrial gas leak catastrophe, Bichlbaum, posing as Dow Chemical spokesperson “Jude Finisterra” (recalling the patron saint of impossible causes) declared on the BBC that the company would funnel 12 billion dollars into victim compensation and environmental remediation, “the first time in history that a publicly owned company of anything near the size of Dow has performed an action which is significantly against its bottom line simply because it is the right thing to do.” When the lie was revealed, the press accused the Yes Men of giving

Bhopal disaster victims false hope—a charge somewhat undercut by the media’s equally adamant assertion that the BBC, which appeared unprofessional for reporting fake news, and Dow, which temporarily saw a drop in its stock price and had to shell out money for a public relations campaign, were similarly “victims” of a “cruel hoax.” The media’s response demonstrated how the aligned interests of businesses and legacy media uphold existing power relations—yet, with these critical matters de-emphasized, and the video playing on loop, we had the pleasure of reliving the Yes Men’s lie, watching another world become possible again and again.

## **Contributor**

### **Cassie Packard**

**Cassie Packard** is a Brooklyn-based art writer.