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Laughing with the Yes Men: the Politics of Affirmation

Maria Hynes, Scott Sharpe & Bob Fagan

It is symptomatic of a culture addicted to novelty that culture jamming has already been subject to pronouncements of its redundancy as a political strategy. For academic and artist Steve Mann, for example, the political and counter-cultural strategies of culture jammers have had their day. In a somewhat Baudrillardian analysis, Mann (2003) argues that culture and counter-culture are barely distinguishable in an all-pervasive, global culture too ready to incorporate the anti-gesture. Culture jamming, according to Mann, then, is rapidly losing political force and the capacity to generate new cultural images and values. The idea of the novelty of culture jamming might be rescued from the status of oxymoron if the specifically political character of culture jamming is reassessed. Yet it is not primarily a defence of ‘culture jamming’, understood as a category of action, which is pursued here. Rather, the paper seeks to demonstrate how the singularity of a particular event enacted under the trope of culture jamming forces us to reconsider the very meaning of political action. Taking a specific culture jamming event as an instance of something singular having taken place, we point to the capacity for novelty and initiation that is deserving of the name of politics. And we suggest that the event enables us to think something new—as opposed to merely fashionable—precisely because it is irreducible to a counter- or anti-gesture. As Christine Harold (2004, p. 194) suggests, the force of the media prankster’s comedy lies in the fact that it rises above the ascetic moment of critique

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and the seemingly noble aim of 'bringing the people to consciousness' and in so doing takes us onto another register. In making our argument we seek to outline new possibilities for anti-globalization activism in the media age. Most often understood in an instrumental sense, the significance of resistance is assessed in terms of its capacity to engage global media with a message able to survive its misrepresentations. We argue for the importance of activism that puts into operation a less instrumental view of politics, whilst temporarily bypassing representationalism and its determinations.

On Tuesday 21 May 2002 a representative announced the dissolution of the World Trade Organization (WTO), effective from 30 September 2002. The representative spoke of the replacement of the WTO by a new Trade Regulation Organization (TRO), which 'will have as its basis the United Nations Universal Declaration of Human Rights, with the aim of ensuring that the TRO will have human rather than business interests as its bottom line' (RTMark, 2002). The announcement of the WTO's replacement to prevent suffering at the hands of free trade was made at a meeting of CPA Australia in Sydney. Its effects were felt further afield, with MP John Duncan of the Canadian Parliament, for example, fretting over the impacts such a change might have on current 'appeals on lumber, agriculture and other ongoing trade disputes' (RTMark, 2002). Some of the audience at the CPA meeting in Sydney were, after their initial shock, more receptive to the proposed changes, offering suggestions on how to make the new organization benefit the poor. 'I'm as right wing as the next fellow', said one of the accountants, 'but its time we gave something back to the countries we've been doing so well from' (RTMark, 2002).

There was, of course, a degree of frivolity in this announcement of the dissolution of the WTO, since the 'representative' of the WTO was an activist from a culture jamming movement called the Yes Men. The representative was an impostor and without real authority, in a common-sense understanding of that term. Authenticity and authority, or more specifically their lack, are key to the operation of the hoax. Yet this impostor's exercise of a false authority indicates something about the character of political action as such. That is to say, this event, with its play on appearances, harbours an important political lesson: that action is always unauthorized by the actor, which is to say that the actor is never the author of his or her actions.

According to Yes Men spokesman Mike Bonnano, the CPA hoax was far more successful than anticipated. Bonnano stressed the fact that 'people reacted compassionately, and offered to help change the system' when they learnt some of the details about 'how terrible trade liberalisation has been for the poor and the environment' (Wright, 2002). While the accountants' new consciousness might signal that this is an event with political significance, the paper rejects the reduction of political action to the raising of consciousness. The enthusiastic contributions of the audience serve less as a guarantee that this can be judged a politically significant event than as an indication that something unpredictable has occurred. We suggest that the kind of practical joke that the Yes Men have made their *modus operandi* can be seen as political because it provides the conditions through which the new is able to emerge and initiation becomes possible.

The paper argues that the significance of the CPA hoax lies in its novelty, and in this respect it tells us something about political action as such; namely, that politics is the harbinger of unpredictability and the new. But the significance of the event goes beyond this. For it is not just a matter of apprehending the newness of an empirical event by grabbing 15 minutes of media attention. Rather, the task is to enable something genuinely new to be *thought*, in a time in which global capitalism has such a monopoly on what we can think. To some extent, then, an act of resistance that is politically significant in the current epoch will be one that draws us beyond the merely empirical status of the event, in order to give rise to an event in thought.

In seeking to think differently (as opposed to merely thinking about something differently) the media can play a special role. It is worth recalling Marshall McLuhan's (1967) canonical claim that media technologies are less important for their content than for their effect on our mechanisms of perception. This is not meant in the technologically determinist sense in which McLuhan himself makes that claim (Murphie & Potts, 2003) but as a reminder of the opportunities open to resistance. And this is not intended as the naive claim it might first appear to be; clearly, global media technologies are vehicles of power as much as they are of resistance. But the temptation is to bemoan the capacity of the media to negate resistance and thus to overlook the ways in which they might also provide a way out of sorts. In making this argument the paper begins by giving some context to the event in question before going on to consider how it can tell us something about the nature of political action, understood in its non-instrumental sense. We indicate how this involves giving a new role to appearances. Finally, we discuss how it is that a politically significant action in the media age will be able to create something remarkable, something which rises above the threshold of ordinary perceptions to become notable.

The Yea Sayers

The connotations of the term culture jamming are now familiar. One of the early popularizers of the notion of culture jamming, Mark Dery (n.d.), groups the activities of 'media hacking, information warfare, terror-art, and guerrilla semiotics, all in one'. Dery (n.d.) further elaborates:

Billboard bandits, pirate TV and radio broadcasters, media hoaxers, and other vernacular media wrenchers who intrude on the intruders, investing ads, newscasts and other media artifacts with subversive meanings are all culture-jammers.

Perhaps more famously, Dery notes that to jam is, following CB slang, to interrupt and disrupt. Through its musical connections, jamming also implies a kind of playful experimentation and improvisation. But this idea of creative play should not be taken to imply the innocence of culture jamming practices which are, as Dery notes, intended to 'intrude on the intruders'.

The best response to 'an ever more intrusive, instrumental technoculture' (Dery, 1993, p. 7) is, according to the loosely affiliated body known as the Yes Men, an

affirmative one. Where much resistance to globalization has been based on the attempt to say no to corporate power, the Yes Men believe the most effective strategy to be a kind of yea-saying. This, they insist, is the point of their name, which refers to both men and women who turn affirmation into a political strategy. The Yes Men (2001) claim that they:

use any means necessary to agree their way into the fortified compounds of commerce, ask questions, and then smuggle out the stories of their undercover escapades to provide a public glimpse at the behind-the-scenes world of business.

At the CPA meeting, as on previous occasions, the Yes Men managed to ‘agree’ their way into a corporate stronghold because their website, www.gatt.org, was taken to be an official WTO site. Responding to invitations to speak at official occasions as representatives of the WTO, the Yes Men send their own representative and wreak havoc before unsuspecting audiences. Thanks to global media, their actions are carried out in full public glare.

In previous stunts the Yes Men’s aim had been to shock audiences by carrying the principles of free trade to their logical conclusions. Among other things, the Yes Men put forward an argument for ‘selling votes to the highest corporate bidder, making the poor “recycle” hamburgers to cure endemic hunger and allowing countries to commit human rights abuses with a system of “justice vouchers” modeled after pollution vouchers’ (www.rtmart.com). Yet the Yes Men received the greatest shock when the audience showed little difficulty in accepting the legitimacy of such ideas when delivered under the guise of WTO authority, or were at least unsurprised that they might issue from that organization. At the CPA meeting the Yes Men exploited the credulity of their audiences by recruiting them into the elaborate fiction of a trade organization governed by human rather than corporate principles.

These strategies for resisting global power are refreshing at a time in which more conventional collectivist struggles against global forces appear to have reached something of an impasse. Throughout older industrialized countries trade unions have experienced declining membership, not simply reflecting disappearance of jobs in the historically high-union sectors of the economy (Sadler & Fagan, 2004). Much of the labour movement’s response has been predicated on the idea that super size is needed to meet globalized capital on its own terms. There is a sense that resistance to globalization must be grand, serious and urgent or be doomed to failure. Yet it could be argued that the discourse of globalization evoked by both capital and labour indicates less about the state of political economy than it does about political strategy. On the side of capital, global forces are evoked to rationalize the restructuring of industry and the subsequent loss of jobs, as well as the winning of incentives from governments. On the side of labour, the seemingly inexorable march of globalizing forces justifies both ready acceptance of capital’s globalization discourse and the call for more global strategies, through the formation of internationalized unions supported by national amalgamations to create super-unions.

While many of these national super-unions have begun to develop websites to mount web-based campaigns targeting particular transnational corporations, they

have struggled within their conventional framework of a battle between capital and labour. While lacking the labour movement's history and organizational structure, groups such as the Yes Men have emerged in the cyberspace era both more media savvy and less bound by some of the conventional notions of serious class struggle. The Yes Men's strategies also avoid some of the problems of media misrepresentation and incorporation faced by large-style protests against the prevailing institutions of global capital (see Aronwitz & Gautney, 2003; Cox, 2001).¹ As Debord (1994) recognized nearly half a century ago, the media are both too ready and too able to incorporate the 'anti-'gesture. Perhaps the Yes Men's partiality for affirmation is a recognition of the limits of directly oppositional political strategies or, as Mann (2003, p. 2) puts it, of the 'impotency of inverse culture'. It is not merely that 'the perception of multinationals in both the public and academic imagination as omnipotent and monolithic appears to be a myth' (de Jong, 2005, p. 111). It is also that the gesture of overturning remains too bound to the structures it attempts to oppose (Heidegger, 1977). 'Agreeing' a way into strategic situations and alliances may thus be a refusal to affirm the reality of the global as a monolithic power. The trick, as the Yes Men's stunt attests, is to bypass some of the representational structures in which much of the battle between globalization and its resisters remains embedded.

Jamming Open Politics

As Ruth Barcan (1995, p. 83) suggests, cultural analysis has sustained something of a preoccupation with 'charting points of resistance rather than complicity with dominant ideologies'. Moreover, as Barcan also notes, these instances of resistance have frequently been seen as coterminous with pleasure and transgression. Within such a context the use of humorous and playful political strategies is certainly familiar, if not *de rigueur*. But at a broader scale of analysis humour has tended to be confined to a 'postmodern cultural politics that—at its most banal—had the potential to be defeatist, liberal or naively sanguine' (Barcan, 1995, p. 85) and opposed to the rather more serious and disciplined politics of the traditional left. How might it be possible to understand the significance of a gesture such as that of the Yes Men beyond the options that Barcan (1995, p. 91) herself reproduces: 'implicitly defeatist' politics of the everyday on the one hand or a more radical and 'self-consciously oppositional form of resistance' on the other? Perhaps more importantly, how might the attempt to theorize the event beyond these terms say something about the character of political action as such?

Of course an assessment of the Yes Men's action is tied up with the problematic of the character of political action in a mass-media age. Their stunt is certainly inspired by a sense of the need to grab the media's attention, and indeed that of the public at large. As the Yes Men (<http://theyesmen.org/> 19 Sep. 2004) themselves suggest, it is not the few people at the event (the CPA accountants) that are important so much as the publicity their action receives when the joke is discovered. Yet how are we to understand the

relationship between a playful event's political significance and its capacity to gain publicity? Is it the case that a light-hearted gesture has political significance to the extent that it 'can influence the international media and hence the international debate' (Gaber & Willson, 2005, p. 95)?

This is certainly the position taken by Ivor Gaber and Alice Wynne Willson (2005) in their analysis of ActionAid's 'Dying for Diamonds' campaign. Gaber and Willson's focus is on the protest held outside a diamond industry representatives' meeting in which a Marilyn Monroe look-alike sang 'Diamonds are a Girl's Best Friend' whilst she and other protestors held placards with statistics on the human cost of illicit trade in diamonds. Gaber and Willson's (2005, p. 106) argument is that this action 'enabled campaigners to intervene in the international public sphere by engaging the media and thus influencing diamond industry decision makers'. They go on to suggest that 'the Monroe stunt worked because, held up to close scrutiny, it had depth and credibility' (Gaber & Willson, 2005, p. 106). This is because the campaigners 'set short-term objectives aimed at helping achieve the goal of ending the trade in conflict diamonds and the poverty and suffering it caused' but also because they gained 'in-depth knowledge' that would enable them to pursue these objectives as effectively as possible (Gaber & Willson, 2005, p. 106).

Gaber and Willson's evaluation of this playful critique of the global diamond trade is instructive not because of its uniqueness but because of its familiarity. The action is evaluated positively in light of its capacity to engage the media and to do so in a way that can stand up to public scrutiny, thanks to its 'depth and credibility'. It is, moreover, afforded political value because of its success in meeting its objectives. But this essentially instrumental view of politics is, of course, a thoroughly historical one. According to Hannah Arendt (1958), this instrumental view of politics has its roots in Plato's application of the fabrication model to the political domain. In the fabrication activity of the craftsman, Plato finds a model capable of ordering a potentially chaotic aspect of the city-state. The key feature of this model is that the craftsman begins with an idea of the final product and then organizes his material in order to realize that idea.

Such a model is at once idealist and instrumentalist and has as a crucial consequence the movement of the truth of politics below the surface of things; henceforth, the being of genuine action is to be found beneath the realm of 'mere' appearances. It entails, too, the separation of conceptual and executive functions, more familiar to us in the delineation of theoretical and practical concerns (Arendt, 1958). As far as the evaluation of action is concerned, its designation as political is now bound to a calculation of objectives and a measurement of intention and effect.

In its modern incarnation this idealist and instrumentalist view of political action is tied up with the problem of political consciousness and a particular image of the political collective. According to the specifically modern characterization, political action derives its reason from the being of the collective united by an instrumental consciousness and orientation to shared goals, towards which the political collective must strive in as co-ordinated a fashion as possible. The demand for freedom of

determination—instrumentality in the hands of human beings—is crucial to the modern articulation of the serious demands of political consciousness and its realization as collective action.² The unity of the properly political collective is not a merely apparent unity but has a certain depth, since it consists in the very being of the collective. Accordingly, the judge of action requires a penetrative vision; not to be fooled by the mere appearance of unity, he/she seeks to discern the real unity that is at once the principle of the whole and is embodied in each of the parts. If there is a moral message in this understanding of properly political action, it is that a certain discipline is required if instrumental reasoning is to be mastered in the name of political action. As Metcalfe (1988) notes in his study of the relationship between formalized trade unionism and larrikin modes of resistance to capitalism, there is a question of respectability to be attended to.³

Clearly, the anti-globalization movement, as the media have persistently labelled it, effects something of a break with this model of action, which in many ways remained a defining feature of the new social movements. In particular, the movement has a pluralistic character that stands at odds with organic and prescriptive accounts of action and defines its famously capricious and carnivalesque gestures.⁴ Yet the tendency of many commentators is to reduce the political significance of the movement's actions to the instrumental problem of consciousness raising and the media's role to a representational one (after Plato, the instrumental view of politics is also a representational one). Analysing the World Development Movement's use of media stunts, Dave Timms (2005, p. 127), for example, registers the political significance of media technologies but stresses the importance of the 'ideological content' of images, which are said to serve as a 'visual metaphor for a campaigning message'. Alternatively, the media are assumed to be little else than the bedfellows of global power. The mass media are seen as misrepresenting the real concerns and methods of the movement (Chomsky, 2004; McFarlane & Hay, 2003; McMurtry, 2002), and resistance to global power is deemed, at worst, ineffective and, at best, a relentless struggle rewarded occasionally by partial successes. How might the media assist in making visible an alternative mode of political action, one that is able to 'expand the universe of thinkable thoughts' (DeLuca & Peeples, 2002, p. 146)?

Creating a Disjunctive Series

We have noted the significance of the Yes Men's recognition that affirmation, rather than mere refusal, is a novel political strategy. For our purposes it is significant that the Yes Men's predilection for affirmation is expressed through a play on appearances: the Yes Men 'agree' their way into a situation by appearing to be on the side of corporate power. The argument in the remainder of the paper is that the Yes Men's practical joke enables us to think something which is both new and politically significant because theirs is not so much a play on identity as the production of a difference, which is to say that its concern with what is (the given state of affairs) does not subsume its concern to generate something new and politically significant. Put another way, this

kind of practical joke has a capacity to produce unexpected effects and a new direction in thinking because of the way that it synthesizes disparate elements.

A representational and instrumental reading of the event would have its own take on the prank. First, it would assume that the Yes Men make use of the Internet to disguise themselves, with the aim of pulling off a hoax (or, if the difference between gatt.org and the WTO site is noticed, with the aim of delivering a critique). Having been invited to the CPA event the Yes Men conceal their real identity to pass off a lie about the WTO, draw the audience in and attract media attention, with the idea that those present and the broader public will gain greater awareness of the evils of the WTO. The event, then, could be seen in terms of hidden truths and concealed identities, and thus with a primary interest in the real action taking place beneath appearances. The Yes Men's play would be, deeply and essentially, a serious one.

But the play on appearances engaged in by the Yes Men signals that there is another economy underway, one that serves as an alternative to this representational distribution of being and appearances. In this alternative view there is, too, another mode of political action operative. For the play on appearances that the Yes Men undertake has a pressing reality at the level of appearances, which cease to be 'mere' with respect to the idea. And this level of appearances, it can be argued, is precisely where politics happens. We can recall, following Arendt (1958), that, in its origins, political action was concerned with the phenomena of birth and beginning (hence the link between action and natality) and with the appearances in the public sphere that allowed one to distinguish oneself through word and deed. Action is thus linked with novelty but also with distinction, evoking that which is different as well as excellent (Arendt, 1958). To speak of excellence in this context is to refer to something that is remarkable or notable not because it is good, in an ideal or moral sense, but in a much more superficial manner.

The point is certainly not to hark back to a more originary idea of politics but to consider the way in which the present might offer the conditions under which an alternative to the dominant, idealist and instrumentalist, notion of politics is possible. The mass media age no doubt threatens a politics in which new thought is at the fore, if only because of its preoccupation with the merely fashionable. Yet, at the same time, it may provide its conditions of possibility. DeLuca and Peebles (2002, p. 138) recognize that a political use of the media requires the achievement of a certain noticeability but also claim that making news out of one's protests is easy, since 'by definition, the news is about what is new, what is out of the ordinary'. They offer the use of violence in the Seattle protests as an example of the way that 'aside from bloodshed' nothing suits the media's interest in 'disturbers of order . . . more precisely than symbolic protest violence'. But, of course, the news can equally be the purveyor of cliché and, we would argue, reproduces common sense more often than it enables genuinely new directions in thinking. Certainly, the violence associated with protest may produce a qualitative change of sorts and, in the case of Seattle, it served as a performative intervention that produced a necessary shock. Yet where DeLuca and Peebles see violence as a means of catching media attention and making of it a vehicle for

critique, Massumi (2002) sees an altogether different potential in such violence; namely, the expression of affect. Arguing that late-capitalist power is only secondarily ideological and primarily affective, Massumi (1996, 2002) stresses that it is at an affective level that resistance can operate most effectively. As recent re-readings of Spinoza have indicated, affect refers to the capacity to act, to affect and be affected and is a necessary ingredient in the creation of the new (Spinoza, 1975; Deleuze, 1988; Massumi, 2002). It is significant, then, that violent protest can equally be negated by the mass media's binary representations (pro- or anti-globalization) and its affective powers ultimately annulled.

Yet violence is not the only affective means available to resistance. For their part, the Yes Men (www.abc.net) 'haven't worked on fooling the media' because they recognize that it is the media that provide them with the publicity essential to the hoax: 'the media loves it, it's a funny story, they enjoy it very much and so it gets out there as a story'. The affect that accompanies the joke is important not simply, or even primarily, because of the publicity it affords the message (the critique of the WTO) but because of the affect it generates. As vehicles of ridicule, the Yes Men's pranks produce shame that alters their target's capacity to act:

the WTO has tried to shut down our website by contacting our provider of bandwidth and telling them what we were up to. Our provider of bandwidth however thought it was funny and didn't see any legal problem with what we were doing that would endanger them, and so they let us continue. We're very lucky that way, but I think that in general our defence against any really hard, heavy-handed tactics by the WTO is just that we can shame them, you know, when they do these things, like when they tried to interrupt our bandwidth we issued a press release immediately alerting everybody to this behaviour on their part, this rather heavy-handed behaviour, and they were laughed at in the press. (www.abc.net)

On its own, shame may merely be a disabling affect, causing an overall decrease in the capacity to act.⁵ What is important about the Yes Men's prank is the sense it gives of an as-yet-unactualized potential, which may lead to an increase in the capacity to act and, again, this is largely because of the way that humour is mobilized to create new possibilities. For many analysts of humour, its key function is a revelatory one. The joke is said to reveal and affirm the existence of a certain common sense, since our laughter verifies the existence of shared (if background) presuppositions (see Wolf, 2002; Carroll, 2000). But clearly humour also relies on the fact of surprise; it works, and has political significance, because it gives rise to something unexpected (Critchley, 2002). As Michael Mulkay (1988, p. 1) notes, 'humorous and serious discourse operate according to fundamentally different principles'. And what sets humour apart from a more serious mode is that the former works on a principle of disjunction.

The 'disjunction', according to Simon Critchley (2002, p. 1), exists 'between the way things are and the way things are represented in the joke'. But this analysis of the joke remains too representational for a mass-media society. An economy that gives appearances their due displaces this structure of the real and its representation. In doing so, it makes way for a mode of thinking that has a particular aptitude for the new. Where representational thought remains content to reflect on, diagnose and react

to the empirical world, the understanding of politics we have outlined in this paper—a play of appearances that gives rise to the new—demands something more of thought. It requires that reality be given to the potential that inheres in, but goes beyond, the empirical world. Our information- and image-based society signals a new autonomy for virtual images and singular elements (appearances and affects) that gain a degree of independence from the hard reality of the empirical world. They are, of course, tied to an empirical world as well, and we clearly follow the news with this belief intact. Nonetheless, appearances come to possess a reality of their own beyond and before, as it were, the empirical.

No doubt the CPA event has a diagnostic element. In the lecture delivered by ‘Kinnithrung Sprat’, the Yes Men’s WTO representative, up to an hour is given over to providing statistics on the deleterious consequences of the WTO, which, while ‘founded with the poor of the earth in mind’ (<http://theyesmen.org/tro>) have had a ‘bottom-line goal’ of allowing ‘corporate commerce free reign regardless of immediate consequence’ (p. 3). Were the Yes Men’s action to remain at the level of the transmission of facts about the empirical world its political significance would for us be lessened. But the action also has an affective dimension, in so far as it actualizes a potential that the description of an empirical state of affairs covers over. Momentarily, at least, the event of the disbanding of the WTO and the establishment of the TRO indicates the existence of a potential that the calcified polarity of the globalization debate conceals, and makes a space for other possibilities. Globalization proponents—in this case, members of the CPA—and anti-globalization activists, the Yes Men, found themselves momentarily working together on the problem of making world trade answerable to human rights principles.

That this was a temporary state of affairs makes it no less important. Harold (2004, p. 9) criticizes the nay-saying gesture of more rhetorical culture jamming strategies, claiming that ‘saying no is itself an often satisfying alternative, but it is hardly one on which to build a lasting political movement’. While we have highlighted the political significance of affirmation, the point is not that the CPA event is important because it affirms the Yes Men as a movement. Nor is it the sense of community between the proponents and critics of corporate globalization that is crucial here. The crucial political moment lies not in the discovery of points of commonality or the possibility of shared common sense; the duration of this community would be unlikely to last beyond the uncovering of the hoax.

What is important is that something unpredictable happens and that we are able to think new possibilities as a result. For the duration of the hoax and the period of its becoming public, appearances and ideas are placed together, side by side, with equal flatness. The unusual co-existence of these virtual elements actualizes something new, as disjunction becomes a positive synthetic principle. Deleuze (1991) describes these virtual singularities as things that, following the mathematical definition, are extended close to one another, so as to forge a connection. When they are brought into an unpredictable relation something new is created, which rises above the threshold of ordinary perceptions to become noticeable, thanks to the very ‘commercial mediascape’ (Harold, 2004, p. 207) that is in many ways a threat to new thought.

Conclusion

We are now in a position to reconsider the political significance of the Yes Men's announcement of the dissolution of the WTO, and to see the sense in which their gesture could be said to offer a hyperbolic instance of the play of appearances that is political action. Clearly, the Yes Men are not who they appear to be and it is this play that defies and gently ridicules the integrity and seriousness of an 'authentic' politics. It is this that humour does so well: it confronts us, through 'a laughable inauthenticity', with the limitedness of the human condition and of our attempts to take ourselves too seriously (Critchley, 2002, p. 102).

The Yes Men's action signals a refusal to take the demands of authenticity too seriously, by refuting the myth of authority, which claims that one is author of one's own actions. Where a cause-oriented politics requires that the actor have authority over his/her actions, an appearance-oriented one gives the surface effects of action a degree of autonomy from the intentions of the actor. The Yes Men are invariably subject to this fact about political action, with the joke going in directions other than those anticipated. As Wolf (2002) notes, the practical joke is inseparable from a certain cruelty. The Yes Men indicate their awareness of this when they claim that their action is meant as a kind of correction of identity, through which 'honest people impersonate big time criminals in order to publicly humiliate them' (<http://theyesmen.org/> 19 Sep. 2004). Yet the Yes Men also had egg on their faces because—having borrowed the authority of the WTO—they found that they do not have authority over their own action and the proliferation of effects it brings about.

The capacity to generate unpredictable effects is inseparable from the kind of action that the Yes Men's gesture represents: playful, disruptive and without 'history-making intent' (Metcalf, 1988, p. 83). For their part, the Yes Men claim that the dissolution and reconstitution of the WTO is no less feasible than its creation: 'the WTO, after all, was put together from a bunch of wishful thinking and previous agreements one day in 1994' and this means that it 'can just as quickly and easily be replaced by something much better, based on other agreements—the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, for example' (www.rtmark.com). The objection that this is a pseudo or failed action—because, after all, the WTO remains intact—is premised on too narrow a view of political effect. For action loses its distinctly political character when it privileges endurance over creation and product over process. Action that preserves this character may further no immediately identifiable cause, achieve no immediate, or durable, end and may indeed appear to laugh in the face of these very values. No doubt a view of action that attempts to unsettle the historical monopoly of instrumental reasoning in politics has its own instrumentalism; a strictly pointless 'politics' would indeed be pointless. But the task is less to realize an ideal than to make the most of the conditions of the day.

In evaluating the Yes Men's gesture, the point has not been to seek to capture it through reflection: here action and authorship would effectively merge in the correspondence (identity) to which reflection aspires. Nor is it a question of looking beneath the surface in order to judge. Rather, it is a matter of grasping the profundity

of appearances (Nietzsche, 1974) and their capacity to produce something more singular than the common and newer than mere fashion. While there is a degree of cruelty involved in the joke—for the CPA accountants, the humiliation of being had—the Yes Men’s media stunt is best evaluated in functional rather than moral terms. Jokes which could be said to be bad (racist, sexist, and so on) are so not because they are immoral but because they are clichéd, calling upon us to recognize and identify with common sense (cf. Billig, 2001a, b).

A more functional criterion would test the capacity of the joke to take us outside of common sense as such and thus produce something which is neither common nor ordinary but ‘singular’ and ‘remarkable’ (Deleuze, 1993). Such a politics would shift its criteria to the relationship between the ordinary and the remarkable: how are singular elements put into a series that gives rise to the new? By refusing the subjugation of appearances and their superficial play to the depth of a more serious idea, a capacity for producing distinction is restored to political action. We have argued that the notion of distinction invokes that which is different and is also suggestive of excellence, or that which is notable. To suggest that political action produces distinction is thus to evoke a process of making a difference, as well as the manner by which something becomes remarkable, no longer ordinary but notable. An evaluation of the Yes Men’s action would, accordingly, seek its criteria purely at the level of appearances. The specifically political value of the Yes Men’s action need not be measured in relation to the ideals it pursues in the name of the project of resisting globalization. Nor is the raising of consciousness to be the defining feature of the political value of the event. Rather, the determining criterion of political value would be bound to the problem of distinction: does the event rise above the ordinary to become remarkable and thus create a difference in thought?

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Notes

- [1] This is perhaps most evident in the misleading designation of resistance to corporate or neo-liberal globalization as ‘anti-globalization’, which many activists see as the media’s refusal to represent the complexity of their position (Graeber, 2004; Ayres, 2004; Klein, 1999; Smith, 2001; Panayotakis, 2001). Many in the movement reject this label, preferring others such as the ‘anti-capitalist/global justice movement’ (Bramble & Minns, 2005, p. 119), the ‘global solidarity movement’ or the ‘globalisation protest movement’ (Podobnik & Reifer, 2004, p. 3).
- [2] In a somewhat paradigmatic formulation, Jean Paul Sartre (1976, p. 265) suggests that the individual ‘helps to create an active group by freely determining, with other individuals, the end, the means and the division of tasks’. But this freedom of determination goes hand in hand with the subordination of the individual to the collective as a whole, who bears ‘the practical local presence of the whole, in his own particular action’ (Sartre, 1976, p. 267).

- [3] While Metcalfe seeks to redeem larrikin activities, against their dismissal as apolitical and even injurious to the serious political struggles of the day (see Engels, 1973; Ross, 1982), Metcalfe is ultimately reluctant to attribute to larrikinism the status of a political collective. Interestingly, he does so because larrikins fail to demonstrate the political consciousness that would constitute the basis of their unity as a group.
- [4] Certainly, many evaluations of the movement assume that increasing convergence of values and goals is essential to the movement's continuing success (see Costello & Smith, 2002) or may even decry its inability to subordinate its actors to the unity of the movement (see especially Ayres, 2004, who calls for greater discipline in order that the movement might pursue its ends in a more sustained and effective manner). Yet many others have seen in the movement a new mode of political resistance, irreducible to the kinds of images of collective consciousness suited to an earlier politic (see McDonald, 2004; Escobar, 2000).
- [5] John Hartley (1996) outlines well the manner in which this worked during the French Revolution, where the sexualization of powerful figures served as a potent form of ridicule.

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