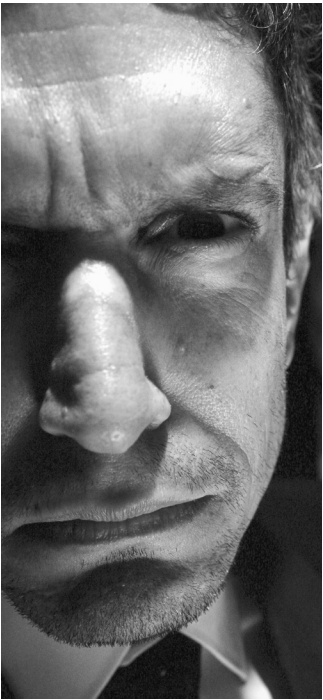


Using Wit, Tomfoolery and Shenanigans



An Interview with Yes Men Prankster Andy Bichlbaum

BY TURTLE

If you ask members of the Yes Men about the world today, they'll tell you that we live in dark times. But they'll take one step further and remind you that laughing is important too. So often, we are surrounded by such serious, overwhelming and utterly heart-wrenching tales of the planet's destruction that it can be easy to forget that people want to laugh also.

After Andy Bichlbaum, one of the original Yes Men, visited his hometown of Tucson, Arizona, earlier this year, I realized that the Yes Men are all about making people laugh.

The Yes Men leapt onto the anti-globalization stage six years ago, when they set up a phony World Trade Organization (WTO) website and impersonated the WTO at a conference in Salzburg, Austria. Yet their antics span more than a decade, with actions ranging from creating a spoof website poking fun at George W. Bush's first presidential campaign to appearing on BBC World News as a representative of Dow Chemical taking full responsibility for the 1984 chemical disaster in Bhopal, India.

Rather than "identity theft," where small-time criminals impersonate honest people, the Yes Men say they engage in "identity correction." They are honest people impersonating big-time criminals in order to publicly humiliate them. They target world leaders and big corporations that put profits ahead of everything else.

Earth First! Journal: You first impersonated the WTO at a conference that would prove to be a launching point for future Yes Men pranks, speaking to a room full of lawyers who specialized in free trade issues. What do you remember about that event?

Andy Bichlbaum: I remember we got this email invitation, and it was kind of surprising. We didn't really believe it, and we didn't know what to do with it exactly. We knew somebody should go, but we didn't think of going ourselves. We thought it would be a funny, wild thing if somebody actually did, but that's about as far as we went with it.

Eventually, we decided just to go for it and see what happened. It was always in the spirit that we'll do a satire on them, we'll provoke them, and we'll see what happens. When we got there, we delivered this crazy lecture, and nobody reacted. We had intended it as a goofy provocation, but there was no reaction, so it turned out to be more complicated... and more interesting.

EF!J: Did you have an emergency escape route planned?

AB: Each time we do these things, it feels terrifying. We definitely talked about what would happen if it got weird. In case we had to run out separately, we set up a meeting place. But, of course, it never got to that.

EF!J: What has been your favorite Yes Men action so far?

AB: I think the London banking conference we did last year posing as Dow Chemical was really fun because we pursued the people at the conference. This was maybe our fifth or sixth thing like this, and we really pursued the bankers in the audience and talked to them. We taped all of the conversations we were having on a little hidden camera, and it was really fun to be spying on them. It was also fun to be actually figuring out whether they were just being polite. They not only congratulated us on the talk, but they actually opened up about their own weird practices and were really interested in what we had to offer.

EF!J: How do the Yes Men pick the subjects you focus your attention on?

AB: They're just symbolic and convenient. They're also big evildoers. The WTO doesn't really have power in itself; it is given power by member nations and the corporations that influence those nations. So it's just a body that is kind of without enforcement power; it's all just an agreement that everybody has. But it is a nexus of that power, so it's symbolic.

The WTO meetings in Seattle were actually what made us choose it accidentally as a target. We couldn't go to the protests, so we set up this website as a kind of second-best thing, thinking, "Oh well, it would be much better to be there and throw things or whatever, but we can't. So we're going to set up this satirical website and make fun of their policies."

The WTO reacted, and then we publicized their reaction. They wrote this press release about the website and called it "deplorable." Nobody noticed their press release, and we felt bad for them. So we sent the press release to 10,000 journalists—and then it got noticed.

The reaction, all of the articles and all of the people linking to it, is what got us high rankings in Google search engines. After that, when people would search for World Trade Organization, they would sometimes stumble on our site. And so, it was the WTO which did that.

Then some environmentalist friends contacted us about Dow. They were involved in the Bhopal issue, and they contacted us after 2001 when Dow bought Union Carbide and said, "Hey, here's a target for you. This is some really concrete on-the-ground stuff rather than the fast-track world trade stuff."

We set up a website and sent out a press release on behalf of Dow saying why the company couldn't do anything about Bhopal because Bhopalis will never be shareholders.

To Find Inspiration and Impersonate Those in Power

Dow reacted really heavy-handedly, and it got our entire Internet Service Provider shut down for 24 hours. A bunch of articles happened because of that, and our website got ranked high in Google. Two years later, the BBC stumbled on it and invited us to speak.

EF!J: Do you feel like you're reaching many people?

AB: Insofar as we can publicize our actions. Sometimes we forget to publicize them, and then we don't reach people. We did a nanotechnology conference in San Francisco, and we didn't publicize it because we couldn't figure out what it meant when the audience actually took issue with what we had to say. So it was a little more complicated. We did film it though, and it is going to come out in the new film we're making.

We reach people mostly through press releases, but also through film now. I guess press releases probably reach more people, but the most that they get out of it is an article then a visit to our website. With a film, we can sit them down and make them listen for an hour and a half.

EF!J: Do the reactions you get influence how far you take it?

AB: Well, how far it works. The more they react, the better... to a point. There is a negative feedback mechanism, as a climate change scientist might say. If they react really heavily, it will be really bad for them, thus they are not going to react that badly. So they react a little bit, then they'll pull back.

Meanwhile, they will have given us what we need, which is attention. I mean we *crave* attention; we're emotionally bankrupt people. We need attention to publicize it. Like if the WTO reacts or George Bush reacts, like when he reacted to a website we set up and said, "There ought to be limits to freedom." When that sort of thing happens, then journalists notice. Otherwise, we're just criticizing them.

By the way, there are actually lots of ways to get invited to these conferences. You don't have to just set up a website. There are other ways to get in. You can visit the conference websites and usually they have a page for speaking opportunities which you can just fill out and ask to speak. Sometimes you have to pay to speak, but they don't do any ID checks yet. Another way is to do some social engineering, as the nerds call it. Pretend to be from one organization, recommend somebody from another organization, and then adopt that persona. There are all kinds of ways.

EF!J: What's new with the Yes Men these days? Are there any future plans you wish to divulge?

AB: Well, we're *very* interested in climate change right now just because it is the most enormous disaster there is. We've been trying to figure out where we are going these days, and it seems like we've been steering toward disaster more and more.

With Bhopal, it's a massive disaster, but then immediately there was this even bigger disaster that appeared behind Bhopal, which was the Green Revolution. The Bhopal plant was actually put there as part of the modernization of agriculture in India. And the people who died were farmers who had been uprooted from their farms by the Green Revolution that had necessitated the Bhopal plant.

There is an enormous number of farmers who are committing suicide in India right now; I think there have been 10,000 in the last decade. It's generally accepted that this is because they get into debt over these new modern products, which don't actually perform better than the traditional products. And so, they go into debt; they lose their farms. There are 700 million Indian farmers, and when times are tough, it's a huge number of people who lose their farms. So that's kind of the bigger disaster behind the smaller disaster, which was Bhopal.

And the bigger disaster behind everything is climate change right now and where it could go. It's still something that people are just not looking straight in the face. People talk about how the sea levels could rise or how there might be a few more hurricanes. But the film *The Day After Tomorrow* was taken as science fiction, I think, by a lot of people, whereas a variation of that sort of sudden climate change scenario is entirely possible.

EF!J: Do you think that's one of the greatest problems facing our world right now?

AB: Oh yeah. Definitely.

EF!J: Why the name the Yes Men?

AB: Because we agree. We basically figured out that what we were doing after that first lecture in Salzburg was agreeing with our audience, following what we perceive their ideology to be and taking it to its logical extension. It was so much their ideology that they didn't even notice. We agree with our audience very forcefully. You know, we're also talking about the problem of agreeing with the dominant ideology, which is completely absurd these days. And people who back it, I would say, are by and large just yes men.

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In one of their better-known actions, the Yes Men represented the WTO and introduced the "Management Leisure Suit" at a textiles conference in August 2001.



The Yes Men Target Disaster

McDonald's Interactive Aims for Revolution

At the International Serious Games Event in Birmingham, England, on June 5, the Yes Men posed as representatives of McDonald's Interactive, a non-existent division of McDonald's, announcing that it was through working for a corporation that cares more about fattening up its chattel than long-term survival.

"We can no longer stand by while McDonald's corporate policies help lead the planet to ruin," said Andrew Shimery-Wolf, co-director of the former Interactive Division, which was formed to help the company adapt to new market conditions.

"We began developing a simulation of the fast-food industry, for use by managers in developing market strategies," said Division Chief Technology Officer Sam Grossman. "When we added a climate simulation module, it showed those strategies helping lead to global calamity. And management doesn't seem to care."

Grossman characterized ordinary corporate social responsibility efforts as "trivial improvements to a sinking ship, serving only to reassure passengers" and singled out British Petroleum's campaign in particular as just a "slightly more polite form of world annihilation."

The audience was clearly energized by the speech. According to a McDon-

ald's Interactive representative, "As soon as McDonald's was saying to the audience, 'We are ready for revolution,' they were saying, 'OK. Let's go.'"

Halliburton Solves Global Warming Scenarios

Speaking at a catastrophic loss conference held at the Ritz-Carlton hotel in Amelia Island, Florida, the Yes Men represented one of the world's biggest, nastiest corporations on May 9.

Fred Wolf, posing as a representative of Halliburton, introduced an advanced new technology that will keep corporate managers safe, even when climate change makes life as we know it impossible.

"The SurvivaBall is designed to protect the corporate manager no matter what Mother Nature throws his or her way," said Wolf. "This technology is the only rational response to abrupt climate change."

In order to head off catastrophic climate change scenarios, scientists agree that we must reduce our carbon emissions by 70 percent within the next few years. But according to Halliburton, doing so would seriously undermine corporate profits, and thus a more forward-thinking solution is needed.

At the conference, Wolf and Dr. Northrop Goody, head of Halliburton's Emergency Products Development Unit, demonstrated how three SurvivaBall mockups would protect managers from natural or cultural disturbances of any intensity or duration. The SurvivaBalls would include sophisticated communications systems, nutrient gathering capacities, medical facilities and a defense infrastructure to ensure that the corporate mission is not compromised—even when human life is rendered impossible by catastrophes or the consequent epidemics and armed conflicts.

"It's essentially a gated community for one," said Wolf.

Conference attendees peppered the Halliburton representatives with questions. One asked how the device would fare against terrorism, another whether the array of embedded technologies would make the unit too cumbersome, and a third raised the issue of cost feasibility. Wolf and Goody assured the audience that these questions and others were being addressed.

Oil Solves Global Warming

In early April, the Yes Men posed as investigative reporters at a journalism conference in Norway and revealed their "discovery" that the country, far from being enviro-friendly as everyone believes, is probably the world's largest agent of climate change per capita.

This is because (a) Norway is the world's third largest petroleum exporter, and (b) Norway invests the billions it makes from petroleum in a wide range of oil, automobile, airplane, shipping and defense companies, via its massive "Petroleum Fund." (While Norway's aid to Pakistan, investments in ecological measures and support of the Nobel Peace Prize are much better known, these are much smaller than its aid to Shell, Chevron, Exxon, Halliburton, etc.)

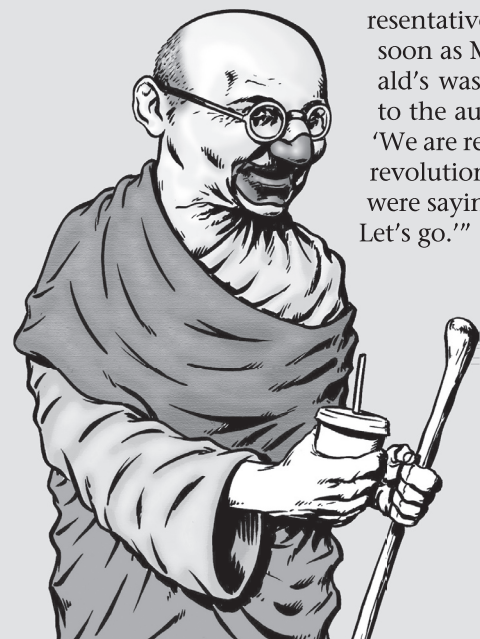
The journalists were dumbfounded at the April Fools' talk. When the truth came out that the "investigators" were phony, many of the journalists did express surprise that the hypocrisy of a supposedly "green" country being so heavily invested in oil, pollution and war had not received more attention.

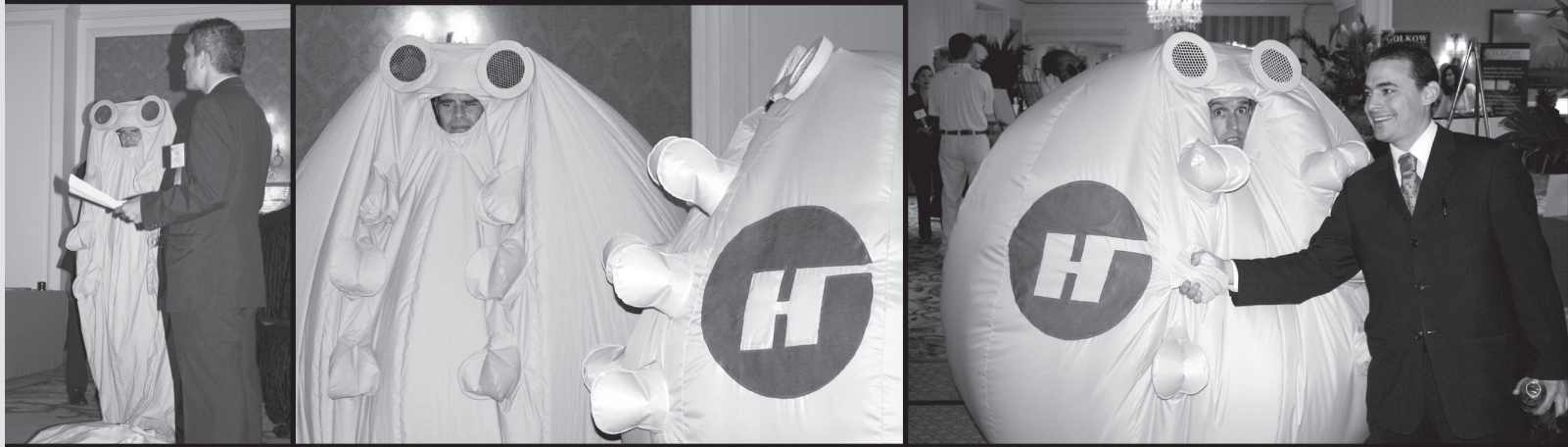
Indian Hijinks

The pesticide Dursban was banned from the US in 2001; that very year, Dow opened a Dursban plant in Chiplun, India, where the chemical is still legal. Last December, the Yes Men, dressed as Dow managers, dropped in on the factory for an inspection. These "managers" had been told of the plant by Bhopal survivors, who are angry that Dow is able to launch new, harmful ventures in India even as it continues to get away with murder in Bhopal.

Also in December, the Yes Men visited India's largest agricultural fair and learned how companies like Monsanto sell their expensive seeds to farmers, who are often ruined when the crop doesn't perform as well as expected. Thousands of farmers have committed suicide by drinking the pesticide that is sold with Monsanto's seeds.

After speaking to Monsanto representatives to learn their sales tricks, the





Today, the Yes Men can be found impersonating the likes of Halliburton, Dow, Monsanto and McDonald's. Shown here demonstrating their new "SurvivaBall."

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EF!J: How does someone become a part of the Yes Men?

AB: Honestly, we're a really small group, and we basically just encourage people to do their own things. There is nothing special about what we're doing; it doesn't take rocket scientists to do this. Anybody with actual acting talent, for example, would find speaking in front of audiences much easier and would probably be able to do it more convincingly. Some people are much better at worming their way into places. So we encourage people that if they have an idea for something to go out and do it.

EF!J: Does using satire help instead of always being serious?

AB: Using humor helps because it's fun. I think it's important to have fun regardless of what you are doing. What we do is a blast. It's also nerve-wracking and terrifying, but we do it in large part because it's fun.

Behind all that, we feel it has got some usefulness. We don't necessarily feel that this is going to change the world any better than anything else we could be doing. It might be that if we really devoted ourselves to politics or something, we could change the world more. Or becoming lawyers and figuring out how to defend the right issues, maybe we could make more of a concrete difference. But this is what we found we can do, and we enjoy it.

EF!J: What are some of the most inspiring forms of resistance that you've encountered as you've traveled the world?

AB: I've realized that this isn't a time for half measures and socially responsible investing, or getting a Prius and feeling okay about yourself. I mean, that's all fine, but a lot more needs to happen for things to be better.

In India, I recently met a lot of activists who were very inspiring. In Bhopal, they set up this health clinic; there are a couple of people who have been at this clinic for 21 years. At first, it was a guerrilla clinic, and they were arrested several times. They were arrested because they were treating people the wrong way; they were treating them as if they had toxic symptoms, and the treatment was working. But the implication was that there were toxic things

going on, and Union Carbide wanted to convince everybody that the effect of the plant leak on people was basically like that of teargas.

The clinic was going against that, and it kept getting shut down. Finally, this latest version of the clinic has been there for many years now. They're not only treating hundreds of people each day, they're also fighting to make sure that Dow Chemical itself cleans up the site. They want Dow to come and clean it up because they want to set an example to corporations and make sure that this kind of thing can never happen again. And that's pretty amazing.

And then there are the farmers in Karnataka who probably have been, at times, the most powerful indigenous protest movement in the world. The farmers in India have shut down governments and have changed all kinds of things. The ones that we visited use some really funny tactics in what they do. They've done these huge laughing protests where they surround government buildings or whatever and laugh for hours or even days. Once, they caused the government of Karnataka to resign, or they helped anyway.

EF!J: If the Yes Men could do one thing that you haven't done yet, what might that be?

AB: We would probably find ourselves accidentally mistaken for... George Bush. Yeah. And we would change everything. We would find ourselves mistaken for George Bush for a good long period of time. Like at least a week, and that would be enough, I think. But I'm not sure how we'd go about doing that.

There's this amazing scene in *The Great Dictator* by Charlie Chaplin, at the end, where the Hitler look-a-like is mistaken for Hitler himself. He ends up addressing all of the Nazi troops, while he's just this Jewish barber. And everybody thinks he's Hitler. He gives this impassioned speech to the troops and says something like: "Stop it. We mustn't do this; we must live for... love." I forget his speech exactly, though it's really nice. And the troops just cheer, drop their arms and run away. Of course... the counterpart would be finding oneself in the Oval Office and being able to speak as Bush.

Yes Men successfully sold seeds armed against "amoebas and houseflies" and demonstrated a pesticide that doesn't kill but simply lobotomizes the drinker, making him or her happier with whatever happens.

Dow Promotes Its New "Post-Cautionary Principle"

At a nanotechnology conference

in San Francisco last November, a "Dow representative" urged the scientists, engineers and entrepreneurs in the audience to hurry potentially dangerous nanotech products to market before they could be tested.

Citing Dow's record profits despite a history of releasing dangerous and often lethal products, the representative

asserted that caution is best deferred until after a product is released and that testing ought to be performed not by the corporation but by the population at large. The audience, to their credit, found these ideas disturbing.

For more information on these and other hijinks, visit www.theyesmen.org; www.halliburtoncontracts.com; and www.mcdonaldsinteractive.com.