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WIDE ANGLE

What Ever Happened to the Yes Men?

We need them now more than ever. But their tactics have to change.

BY SCAACHI KOUL

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Illustration by Slate. Photo by J. Vespa/Getty Images.

This is part of Revenge Week, a series about how vengeance runs America, from the White House to cheating spouses to that bad boss who totally deserved it.

In 1729, writer and clergyman Jonathan Swift published “A Modest Proposal,” an essay offering a solution to Ireland’s economic troubles. It was simple: To stave off famine and poverty, the poor should simply sell their children as food to Ireland’s rich. “A young healthy child well nursed, is, at a year old, a most delicious nourishing and wholesome food, whether stewed, roasted, baked, or broiled,” Swift wrote. “I grant this food will be somewhat dear,

and therefore very proper for landlords, who, as they have already devoured most of the parents, seem to have the best title to the children.”

In 2007, the Yes Men visited Calgary, Alberta, otherwise known as the Texas of Canada, with a modest proposal of their own. The Yes Men, a collective of culture-busting activists, showed up that summer to the Gas and Oil Exposition, the country’s largest oil conference, to get revenge on the industry’s most crooked players. Pretending to be ExxonMobil and National Petroleum Council representatives, the Yes Men rolled out Exxon’s latest product: Vivoleum, an oil product made from the melted flesh of people who have died due to climate disasters. Candles were handed out to the audience before they played a “tribute video” for a terminally ill Exxon janitor (played by Reggie Watts) whose body had been melted down into the candles being lit around the room. As a nice touch, the candles smelled like burning hair.

By the time the Yes Men came to Calgary, they had already established themselves as longtime hoaxsters, experts at getting back at massive conglomerates and government bodies by making them look stupid. They started organizing in the late ’90s, but gained national prominence in 2000 when they spoofed the World Trade Organization’s website. It was accurate in look and feel, but with statements denouncing human rights and celebrating corporate profit. It looked so real that they started receiving speech requests. At one conference in Finland, their fake WTO representative urged a return to slavery. They remain active today, though less productive than they once were—their most recent stunt was earlier this year, when their fake DOGE fan site “accidentally” sent thousands of emails asking for memes.

The Yes Men introduced Vivoleum the same year my English teacher taught us about “A Modest Proposal” in a suburban Calgary high school. I remember the coverage around these fake Exxon executives well—it was a rare case of the local nightly news talking about climate change as something worth protesting, namely in a city so consumed by the oil and gas industry. Now, 25 years after their pranks started taking hold, I’ve been thinking about them again. “A Modest Proposal” was effective during its time because it so expertly mocked Ireland’s anti-poor sentiment, and used coy language and the printing press to disseminate an absurdist idea to the masses. The Yes Men were effective in the early aughts because they used visual trickery and the internet to fool the establishment into exposing their own hypocrisies and bad deeds. At the time, their mischief felt like well-earned vengeance.

But these days, everything feels too absurd to satirize—and satire no longer feels like revenge. Our current political moment—filled with frauds, with statements of “fact” so

ludicrous that it's impossible to debate, with harebrained schemes so absurd they seem like parody—feels primed for the Yes Men. In 2021, the Yes Men pretended to be Starbucks executives and announced they would get rid of their upcharge on plant-based milks because people of color are more likely to drink nondairy milk. (This one kind of worked: Starbucks dropped their surcharge on plant-based milk after the hoax, at least in the U.K.) In 2023, a fake Adidas executive announced at a tech conference that the company would offer underpaid garment employees in their factories access to a “virtual world” to enjoy things they'd otherwise never have access to. The stunt included a “DJ Marshmello” showing up to play his newest song, “All Day I Dream (About Back Pay),” while wearing a big marshmallow head. Still, nothing has quite connected with their audience the way it once did when our biggest concerns were whether Bush was stupid for asking “Is our children learning?”

The Yes Men are engaged in the long-held American tradition of trickery, established and perfected by satirists like Swift or scammers like P.T. Barnum. But what role does irony or parody have in politics anymore? The purpose of public protest is, so often, to wring a little humiliation out of a much bigger opponent. It was the best revenge the little guy could get. What made the Yes Men successful was their ability to point out that which was hidden and ridiculous; these days, everything is farcical, and there are no medals given out for noticing just how sick it all feels. Besides, no one and nothing is funnier than Donald Trump, intentionally or otherwise. Parody has so often fallen flat during this second Trump term, even while people seem determined to find a way to laugh. “It's hard to make fun of Trump,” said Igor Vamos, one of the co-founders of the Yes Men. “Everything is meaningless in his world.”

The Yes Men feel almost too innocent to bring into the dark ages of the 2020s. For a little while, they were the David we needed to get in a righteous laugh at the expense of Goliath. Through absurdity, they cohered a community of activists and optimists. But the face of the American establishment has changed: more nakedly hostile, more brazenly cruel, far less invested in obfuscating their crimes. The purpose of the jester is to point out whatever the king wants to hide; if he doesn't give a shit who can see him, what's the punch line?

* * *

The Yes Men is a broad network of activists around the world, but it was all started by Jacques Servin and Igor Vamos. Or, at least, that's a couple of their names: Servin and Vamos also go by Andy Bichlbaum and Mike Bonanno, respectively, as they did in the three documentaries they've directed about their work. They're also the co-creators of RTMark,

an anti-consumerist collective that also performed pranks and internet stunts. In 1999, RTMark made a fake website for George W. Bush's presidential run that looked real enough to get them a cease and desist. "At the beginning of the internet, there was a lot of possibility for mischief, and a lot of optimism for what it could do," Vamos (or Bonanno) told me over the phone from upstate New York, where he works as a media arts professor at Rensselaer Polytechnic Institute. "We were combining that with good old-fashioned media manipulation. That approach was super powerful because you didn't need to be an entity with a lot of power or money."

The Yes Men's best work is often around climate change, like the Calgary Exxon hoax. One of their most famous stunts was around the 1984 Bhopal disaster, wherein thousands of people who lived near a Union Carbide pesticide plant in Bhopal, India, were exposed to toxic gas. It was one of the world's worst industrial disasters, and Union Carbide initially took little concrete responsibility. In 2004, on the 20th anniversary of the disaster, Servin faked his way onto the BBC as a representative of Dow Chemical (Union Carbide's parent company), took full responsibility, and announced they'd be fully compensating their victims. It tanked the European stock and brought broader media attention to the tens upon tens of thousands of people who died from the disaster.

These are, admittedly, Web 1.0 stunts. They're the kinds of hoaxes that worked in the early aughts, when it was tough to spoof a website but a lot easier to get a bunch of eyeballs to pay attention to your link or your story. "When we first started doing it, we were engaging in communication media in ways that hadn't been fully played out yet," Vamos said.

But that virality has changed drastically: The internet is far less wieldy, and everyone is much more on edge about what's real and what isn't online. Now, the gamification of clicks and the content farming on even establishment media websites have killed some of what made the hoaxes so famous. The Adidas stunt was clever, but there are a million tech conferences around the world these days, and so a hoax happening at one of them doesn't mean you'll garner attention for it. "Now it's like that tree that fell in the woods, alone. Does it make a sound? You're hoping there's somebody there listening," Vamos said.

The Yes Men's stunts tend to fit within two themes: either absurdist cruelty pushed to its limit, or utopian improbability. Pranks like the one in Calgary were part of their larger theme of showing just how evil a company could be. But the Union Carbide hoax was about showing that a company *could* do the right thing, that there's always the possibility of taking ownership over harm done to the working class. They did something similar in 2006 when they arrived in New Orleans as fake Housing and Urban Development representatives to announce that they would not destroy thousands of units of affordable housing. "Going

through the steps of that [hoax] is more like opening a portal into another world that's possible," Vamos said. "It changes people's minds and announces that something you thought was impossible is possible. Sometimes it has a magical effect."

In 2020, the Yes Men made DoctorsForOpeningAmerica.com, pretending to be a collective of doctors effectively advocating for more people to die during the pandemic. They even tried spreading a country song called "Don't Plug Me In," encouraging everyone to "go World War III on this virus, America." But even in real time, it was clear to the organizers that it wasn't taking hold. "We did get some emails about the website from Trump supporters, mainly critiquing the execution," they wrote about the stunt after it was revealed. "But that was about it: Neither the website [nor] the song really seemed to surprise anyone." The vengeance used to come in the form of much-needed shame. That was back when shame mattered.

* * *

"There's so much shit flooding the zone," Servin told me over the phone from the West Coast. He's still working with the Yes Men, but he's also writing a memoir about caring for his mother through her Alzheimer's. "We're living in a rank miasma of bullshit."

It's just harder to be a jester these days. The proliferation of A.I. makes it harder and harder to know what's real and what's not—especially when governments and brands alike are using it online alongside your average shitposter. Conspiracy theories spread more wildly and faster than they did 25 years ago, and while climate change remains a pressing threat (and the Yes Men's main focus), there are about a million new pressing threats for the average American to consider. Meanwhile, the ruling class in government and in business are less anxious about appearing craven or cruel or capitalistic: Immigration and Customs Enforcement is, after all, kidnapping people off the street in broad daylight. To shame them through public theater is to assume they experience shame in the first place.

"We used to exist in a fairly simple ethical environment where some things were true, some were false. There were rules that might have been unspoken, but there were rules," Servin said. "There is a way to be nice, and a correct way to run a society. Democracy was obvious." Back then, the Yes Men's modus operandi was to find little-known information about behemoth organizations and expose that information to sunlight. But these days, almost anything can be *known*; whether it's *believed* is another matter entirely. "A finger-scratch of digging will show you their bigger feelings about the world," Servin said about the GOP. "It's a lot harder to shock people because everything is fake."

For Vamos, the pleasure that once came with setting off and accomplishing an act of absurdist protest has started to wear off now that pretty much everything is absurd. “We can’t ridicule him because it’s already ridiculous,” he said of Trump. “It’s very hard to find humor in things now. It’s strange because there are some things that have flipped politically. The right wing in particular see themselves as the funny ones.” And, hey, maybe they are: Is there anything funnier than an unintentional Trump malapropism? In the last 15 years, the right has co-opted trolling, hoaxes, conspiracies, and internet trickery. “Our whole thing is you have to punch up. If you’re punching down, you’re not funny,” Vamos said. “But MAGA had this idea they were punching up because they were out of power for four years.”

It’s a different game, and the rules have changed. Even our ideas of who *has* a sense of humor has shifted—today’s activists and progressives are viewed as shrill and unrelentingly serious. “That’s a very fucking weird reversal of perceptions, that groups of activists are so self-serious,” Vamos said. “In the ’90s activists’ movements, there was a lot of joy that was in there. People really lived and breathed when they were acting in opposition. There was a seriousness, but it was paired with joy.” That, maybe, is what’s missing from our collective resistance. “People now are feeling so broken, it’s harder to access that humor.”

* * *

If I’m honest with myself—which I’m loath to be, namely on the topic of grandiose hoaxes—accessing that humor has felt nearly impossible this year. The last time I thought about the Yes Men this much, I was graduating high school into what was supposed to be a once-in-a-lifetime recession. There was a war in the Middle East. The president was talked about as being very stupid. Everyone was afraid and all events felt unprecedented and no one knew what to do. Watching the Yes Men through the news and their documentaries was a looking-glass into a uniquely powerful form of resistance at a time when I felt like I had no real power. Now, I’m looking for them to again give me the answers for my political malaise: *How do I get my lick back if even the Yes Men have to restrategize?*

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“I’m not worried about what we do becoming totally irrelevant, but I am wondering what happens next,” Vamos said. “My father is a Holocaust survivor. It’s not like humor stopped existing. People in the concentration camps talked about how they got through it with humor. Trickery is a means of survival and humiliating the powerful.”

Maybe being a clown is still valuable, then—even in a political climate that seems lousy with them. “What’s needed is not Yes Men exposure of things that aren’t known,” Servin said. “What’s needed is humor and clowning. Get in some fun.”

Vamos and Servin couldn’t tell me about any forthcoming actions they have planned, other than that they’re about “overarching political issues like colonialism and neocolonialism and capitalism”—divulging any more would ruin the fun. Their focus is less on specific political candidates these days, and more on institutions and organizations.

What I wanted to hear from them, though, is what I wanted 20 years ago as a teenager, hopeful and petrified. I want certainty that the future will be calmer than the present, and I want proof that activism works. I want the Yes Men to tell me they have an answer.

But certainty is impossible, and the point of their trickery was never to change policy. “Changing people is less important than mobilizing and engaging people who are like-minded about a dream,” Vamos said. “Get people excited about a possible future instead of depressed about the end of the world.” The clowns haven’t saved the world just yet, but then again, neither have the Democrats. What does it hurt to laugh? 🍷

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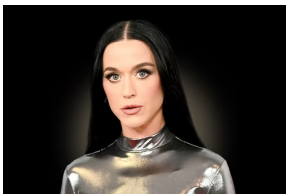
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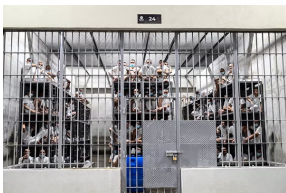
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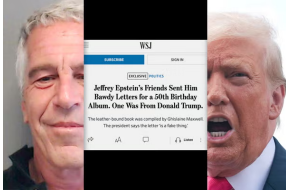


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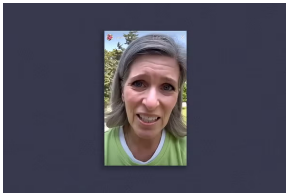
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