**THE YES MEN AND ACTIVISM IN THE INFORMATION AGE**

A Thesis

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By
Lani Boyd
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# ABSTRACT

Western history is filled with pranks and trickery intent on enlightening audiences by blending fiction with reality. The Yes Men, an Internet-based activist group, did just that, forging new ground and establishing themselves as political pranksters in a media-dominant global society. With an arsenal of parody, satire, interventions, and tactical obfuscation, the Yes Men attack those who they feel abuse their positions of power. They have impersonated public persons and infamous entities, including President George W. Bush, the World Trade Organization, and Dow Chemical. Their mimicry is so convincing, that the audience cannot decipher between satire and the real thing. This thesis considers why the confusion happens, and to what extent the nature of simulation has hindered the Yes Men's message.

Igor Vamos and Jacques Servin, the creators of the Yes Men, are a pair of activist artists who have attempted to bridge the gap between art, activism and commerce. Vamos and Servin's works as the Yes Men are analyzed within the context of the corporate realm, where they enact their performances. This analysis puts forth the argument that, as Vamos and Servin evolved into the Yes Men, they have been successful in terms of publicity and self-promotion. The Yes Men, however, have been assimilated by the very corporate and societal structure they fight against, thus nullifying their intent.

# INTRODUCTION

"The Master's tools will be used to take apart the Master's house"[1]

Anonymous

Artists and authors are no strangers to the art of parody, from the pamphlets of Jonathan

Swift, to Rob Reiner's *This Is Spinal Tap* "mockumentary," to performance artists Coco Fusco

and Guillermo Gomez-Peña's *Two Undiscovered Amer-Indians Visit the West* (1992), in which

the artists presented themselves in museums as unspoiled natives from the Caribbean. Western

history has been filled with pranks and trickery intent on enlightening audiences by blending

fiction with reality.[2] The Yes Men, an Internet-based activist group, have done just that. The Yes

Men have forged new ground and established themselves as political pranksters in an ever

increasingly media-dominant global society. With an arsenal consisting of parody, satire,

interventions, and tactical obfuscation, the Yes Men attack those who they feel abuse their

positions of power. Always with a dose of humor, the Yes Men have impersonated very public

persons and entities, including President George W. Bush, the World Trade Organization, and

Dow Chemical. Yet their mimicry is so convincing, their audience cannot decipher between satire

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[1] Adage taken from Anthony Sebok, "The Strange Paradox of RTMark: Can Corporate Status Protect An Anti-Corporate Site From Liability For Sabotage?" *FindLaw's Legal Commentary*, Nov. 19, 2001, http://writ.findlaw.com/sebok/20011119.html, accessed November 11, 2003.

[2] Caroline Vercoe, "Agency and Ambivalence: A Reading of Works by Coco Fusco," in *The Bodies That Were Not Ours And Other Writings*, by Coco Fusco (New York: Routledge, 2001), 231.

and the real thing. This paper considers why this happens, and to what extent the nature of simulation has hindered the Yes Men's message.

Igor Vamos and Jacques Servin, the creators of the Yes Men, are a pair of activist artists who have attempted to bridge the gap between art, activism and commerce. Vamos and Servin's works as the Yes Men will be analyzed within the context of the corporate realm, where they enact their performances. The pair first collaborated in 1996, when both were living in California and functioning in the periphery of the art world. Servin received his master's in creative writing from Louisiana State University in 1992, after which he moved to San Francisco to work as a computer programmer while continuing to write. Vamos earned his M.F.A. from the University of California, San Diego, and has taught at the California Institute for the Arts in LaJolla. Currently, Vamos is an assistant professor of integrated electronic arts at Rensselear Technological Institute in New York, while Servin is an author and computer programmer who lives in Paris. Both are now well established within intellectual and artistic circles. Servin has received much praise as a fiction writer, including a review from Hakim Bey.[3] Vamos received a fellowship from the John Simon Guggenheim Foundation in 2003 for his multimedia documentary entitled *Grounded*, about Wendover, Utah, and the abandoned army base located there.[4] This essay follows Vamos and Servin's works from previous solo efforts to the creation

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[3] Jacques Servin, *Aviary Slag* (Normal, IL: Fiction Collective Two, 1996).

[4] Dennis Roddy, "Liar's Poker," *Pittsburgh Post-Gazette* (December 12, 2004);
"Igor Vamos Wins Prestigious Guggenheim Fellowship," *Campus.News* (May 5, 2003), Rensselaer Polytechnic Institute, http://www.rpi.edu/web/Campus.News/may_03/may_5/vamos.htm, accessed April 11, 2005.

of RTMark (pronounced "artmark"), the forerunner of the Yes Men, through the pair's latest works as the Yes Men.[5]

Researching this topic proved rather difficult. Though there is an abundance of written information about the group, mostly available through the World Wide Web, there has been very little academic documentation (as of this writing) about the Yes Men. The substance of the source material referenced in this essay comes from the Yes Men themselves: through their book, *The Yes Men* (Disinformation, 2004), their feature film, *The Yes Men*, directed by Dan Ollman, Sarah Price, and Chris Smith (MGM, 2004), published interviews, and personal email conversations. The largest general pool of information on the group is from journalistic sources, usually only a few paragraphs in length and varying little from article to article. Most of the sources offer only a brief mention of the group and an abbreviated version of their hoaxes, and almost all of the available sources are more anecdotal than analytical, focusing more on the actions of the Yes Men than the reasons behind their behavior. Their feature film also spotlights the group's actions rather than their intentions, following the pair's charade posing as the World Trade Organization (WTO), but not going below surface value with the stunts. The nature of the sources is important to point out since part of the aim of the Yes Men is to garner media exposure about their schemes, and hopefully to foster dialogue about the issues their schemes address. Yet, with mostly concise journalistic articles of less than five hundred words being written, and with these articles focusing not on the issues, but on the moral implications of their works, the Yes Men may not yet be getting the coverage their works warrant.

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[5] RTMark is usually written as "®™ark," but for the purpose of this paper, it is written as "RTMark."

A cohesive timeline of the history and evolution of the artwork of Vamos and Servin into those of the Yes Men does not exist; one of the aims of this thesis is to provide such documentation. There is purposeful confusion by Vamos and Servin about their identities and group involvements, as well as discrepancies found between various sources documenting the dates and circumstances behind the creation of the Yes Men. A history of the group compared to their precedents within the media is also needed to bring into perspective the dynamic of the Yes Men's relationships with its targets and the mass media. This analysis puts forth the argument that, as Vamos and Servin evolved into the Yes Men, they have been successful in terms of publicity and self-promotion. Yet, like Coco Fusco laments about responses to her Amer-Indians, the Yes Men have been assimilated by the very corporate and societal structure they fight against, thus nullifying their intent.[6]

This paper puts forth three reasons for the Yes Men's inability to effectively communicate their message: first, there is the paradox of artists (Vamos and Servin) practicing within the corporate world. Without the buffer of enacting their schemes within the art world, like the Yes Men's predecessor RTMark has done, the Yes Men have had trouble gaining acceptance from their target audience. Second, because of the nature of simulation, the act of copying their targets too closely, the Yes Men's pranks have fallen on mostly deaf, or prejudiced, ears. And third, because of what Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri have dubbed the

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[6] Coco Fusco, *English Is Broken Here: Notes on Cultural Fusion In the Americas* (New York: The New Press, Ltd., 1995), 37-38.

"paradox of incommunicability," a situation in which, because of the current state of

globalization, communication is no longer effective because of an overload of communication.

Within this system, the Yes Men are not heard, and thus, cannot convey their message.
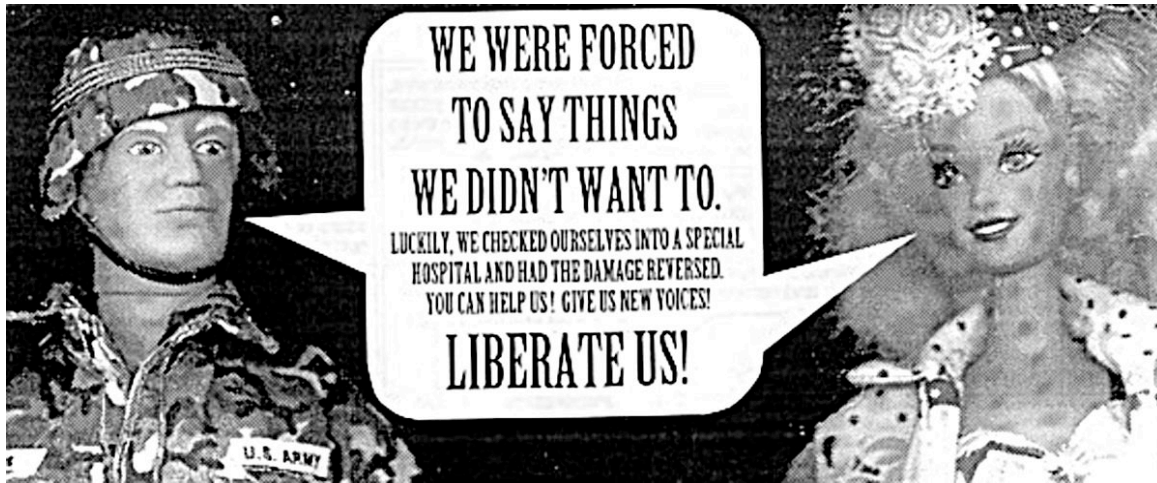
Fig. 1. Illustration for the Barbie Liberation Organization. c.1993. Public Domain.

This section will trace the histories of Igor Vamos and Jacques Servin's works that involve the evolution of the pair from the creation of RTMark (pronounced "artmark") into the Yes Men. This is not meant to be a complete documentation of the pair's artistic output. Rather, this paper focuses on those works which lead up to and exemplify the actions of the Yes men, in order to provide a framework from which to show how the group's works have been impacted by capitalist society and what impact the Yes Men may have had on such a society in return. This paper will also trace the transformation of Vamos and Servin into Mike Bonanno and Andy Bichlbaum, Yes Men, signaling their departure from the art world into the commercial sector, where they are met not just with resistance, but, what is more destructive to their message, with indifference.

**The BLO, SimCopter, and the Emergence of RTMark**

In 1993, Igor Vamos founded the Barbie Liberation Organization (BLO), made up of anti-commercial activists intent on exposing gender stereotypes. The BLO purchased talking Barbie and G.I. Joe dolls from California retail stores and switched the voice boxes so that Barbie growled, "Dead men tell no lies," while G.I. Joe whined, "Math is hard." Once the voice boxes were switched, the dolls were placed back into their boxes and returned to store shelves. The project strategically coincided with the Christmas buying season, and was meant to call into question the role of big business and the quest for profit in the propagation of stereotypes in shaping the way we, as consumers, are taught to act and think from an early age.[7] In order to inform the public and claim responsibility for the stunt, Vamos and other BLO members sent out press releases and videos to reporters explaining their actions, which led to press coverage across the United States as well as in several foreign countries.[8]

Jacques Servin was working for Maxis, a software firm based out of Walnut Creek, California, in 1996. While programming a flight simulation game called SimCopter, Servin altered the game so that an army of male "bimbos" clad only in tiny swimsuits ran around kissing each other and the player's avatar.[9] The game's alteration was not discovered until it was already on store shelves, at which time Servin was immediately fired. The incident, like the BLO stunt,

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[7] Barbie Liberation Organization, *"Operation Newspeak" Script*, Barbie Liberation Organization video news release, RTMark, http://www.rtmark.com/bloscript.html, accessed February 28, 2005.

[8] Mike Bonanno, Andy Bichlbaum and Bob Spunkmeyer, *The Yes Men:The True Story of the End of the World Trade Organization*, (New York: Disinformation Company, Ltd., 2004), 12.

[9] Steve Silberman, "Boy 'Bimbos' Too Much For Game-Maker Maxis," *Wired News* (December 3, 1996), http://wired.com/news/culture/0,1284,775,00.html, accessed February 19, 2005.

earned worldwide exposure which Servin capitalized on by creating the anonymous activist website RTMark in late 1996.

This site mimics the structure of a corporation, featuring a "sabotage stock market" where pranks against the government, businesses, or anything at all can be "listed, discussed and (allegedly) funded."[10] RTMark is based on a system of Mutual Funds, set up much like their financial counterparts, complete with investors and dividends. The big difference is that, instead of financial rewards, investors reap what RTMark calls "cultural profits." RTMark's web page, rtmark.com, is a standard Internet bulletin board, with links to various project offerings and a grid, similar to that found on the stock exchange, explaining what each project needs.[11] Like a portfolio, each project is grouped within one of sixteen different "funds": War Fund, Frontier Fund, Corporate Law Fund, Alternative Markets Fund, Environment Fund, Labor Fund, France Fund, Education Fund, Health Fund, Media Fund, Intellectual Property Fund, Biological Property Fund, Communications Fund, Net Fund, Magic Christian Fund, and the High Risk Fund.[12] Depending on the character and aim of each project, it is grouped into as many funds as will apply. The grid also gives a brief description of the project as well as how much money is needed to fund it, whether it needs workers, and any other special needs the project might have. Investors can choose which fund or individual project to give to and workers can pick a job for which to volunteer their services, thus providing the means for workers to wreak havoc upon, or

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[10] Bonanno, 12-13.

[11] See the RTMark website for grid layout, http://www.rtmark.com.

[12] See the RTMark website, http://www.rtmark.com/funds.html.

at least embarrass, large corporations abusing their position of power. Such projects range in

intent and detail. The following project proposals from the Corporate, Media, and Magic

Christian Funds exemplify the range of projects possible:

> If corporations are full persons under the law (as the Supreme Court declared in 1886)
> then anybody who owns stock is a slaveholder, in violation of the Thirteenth
> Amendment. This should be an exploitable notion: (a) Attempt to close down the NYSE
> as a slave auction. (b) Formally ask one's employer to divest its retirement fund of illegal
> holdings of slaves. (c) Choose a highly visible mutual fund and attempt to have it
> prosecuted as a slaveholder. (d) Choose a highly visible stockbroking [sic] firm and
> attempt to have it prosecuted as a slave merchant.[13]

> Make and place sound playback devices in newspaper dispensers. When the door is
> opened, the machine can deliver commentary you may only find between the lines in
> the print.[14]

> Funding [is] needed to launch a campaign to encourage the sons and daughters of the
> employees of the American Tobacco Industry to take up the habit of smoking so as to
> save their parents' jobs. Funds would be used to print materials, mail materials, and
> compile a list of addresses. To see a prototype of this material, visit freetheseed.com.[15]

Though these projects, like most posted on the site, do not make it past the idea stage, a few

have been brought to fruition, at which point RTMark begins a public relations campaign to

promote the project, much like the practices of a public relations firm.

Both the SimCopter hack and the BLO stunt, RTMark's first two major success stories,

became associated with RTMark after the fact. Servin donated $5000 to himself, which he

reported to the media as an anonymous pairing of donor and activist made possible because of

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[13] RTMark Featured Funds, http://www.rtmark.com/featured.html, accessed March 2, 2005.

[14] RTMark Media Fund, managed by Andrei Condrescu, http://www.rtmark.com/fundmedia.html, accessed March 2, 2005.

[15] RTMark Magic Christian Fund, http://www.rtmark.com/fundmagx.html, accessed March 2, 2005.

RTMark's system of Mutual Funds. In actuality, the SimCopter hack was completed well before

Servin created the RTMark website, but was still touted by Servin as RTMark's first Mutual

Fund success.[16] Just like any corporation, RTMark needed to establish itself as representing a

valuable commodity to potential shareholders, so in order to gain another success story, Servin

contacted Vamos about his work with the BLO. Servin inquired if "maybe, just maybe, this

RTMark thing had funded the Barbie Liberation Organization." [17] Vamos replied that RTMark

had indeed helped to fund the BLO project (though it was three years after the fact) in the

amount of $10,000. From this point Vamos became an active partner in future projects, and his

involvement would eventually lead to the creation of the Yes Men.

RTMark's ultimate goal, as defined on their website, is to thwart the monopolies on

culture held by large corporations by using the very same kinds of public relations practices

employed by these big businesses, particularly press releases announcing their actions (and the

actions of the targeted corporations against them), written in eloquent corporate jargon.[18] Along

with such standard modes of bureaucratic operation, subversive tactics are also used, meant to

undermine the very corporate policy RTMark's tactics are often based upon. RTMark mimics

corporate structure, but does not try to pass as a business platform based solely on monetary

profit like the organizations they target. Though possibly a corporation itself, RTMark takes

steps to clearly distance itself from the big business establishments and ideologies it attempts to

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[16] Bonanno, 13.

[17] Ibid.

[18] RTMark, "Sabotage and the New World Order," RTMark, Nov. 26, 2000, http://www.rtmark.com/arse.html, accessed March 27, 2005.

undermine, focusing on channeling cultural profit away from the large corporations it targeted. [19]

Corporate mimesis is a form of "intelligent sabotage," a satirical performance meant to, in Tim Jordan and Paul Taylor's words, "work against the invasion of spectacular commodity values throughout society."[20] If, in fact, RTMark is a legitimate corporation as they contend, then their legal status as such helps the organization to better protect its members. Since it often does not create the projects it sponsors, but rather focuses on publicizing them, RTMark acts as a corporate middle man. Because of this emphasis on publicity and
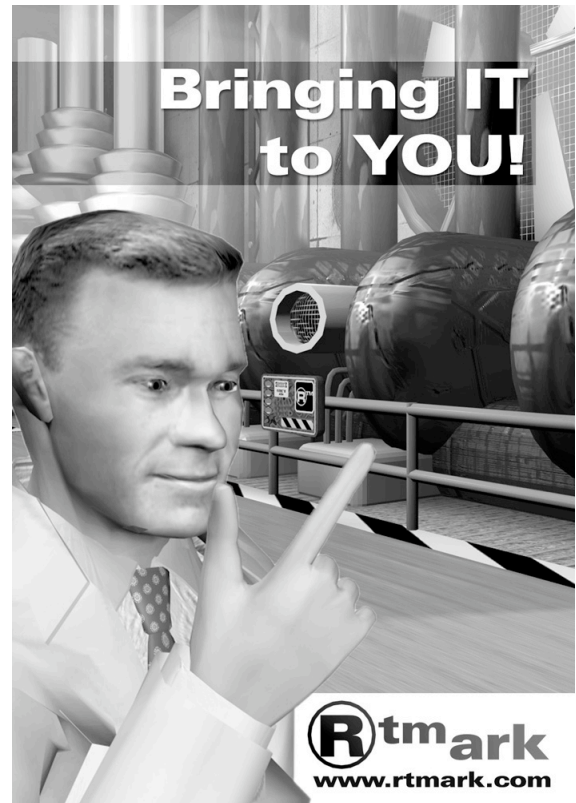


Fig. 2. Promotional ad for RTMark. Public domain.

appearance, RTMark adopted a farcical version of the sleek, corporate look, as seen in its publicity poster in Fig. 2. Its adopted visual style, like the layout and structure of the website, is a parody of corporate culture, emphasized by the use of the purposely vague slogan "Bringing IT to YOU!" and the use of generic, clip art-style imagery. The group also has PowerPoint presentations linked to its website, complete with Musak-inspired soundtracks, which describe

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[19] Sebok, 1. The author questioned RTMark's actual incorporation. Though RTMark was possibly incorporated in New Jersey around 1996-98, this could neither be confirmed nor disproved.

[20] Tim Jordan and Paul A. Taylor, *Hacktivism and Cyberwars: Rebels with a Cause?* (New York: Routledge, 2004), 86.

the rise and current state of corporate abuse and how RTMark proposes to fight it by "turning

knee-jerk responses to corporate power into effective solutions with lasting results."[21] One of its

standard tactics is to anger a specific company,

like Dow Chemical, and get the company to issue

a cease and desist letter, which RTMark then

releases to the media in a press release about the

"bullying" corporation. The widely circulated

press release leads to media coverage about the

battle between RTMark and its chosen target,

often causing embarrassment for the corporation.

Basically, RTMark attempts to capture its target

at a vulnerable moment, acting in a way that

contradicts its official image. RTMark then

exposes that behavior to the public in the hopes



Fig. 3 Tactical Embarrassment Poster, RTMark. Public Domain.

of alerting consumers to (what RTMark feels is) the real nature of such businesses.[22] In this way,

the group attempts to use the same public relations tactics, involving image campaigns and press

releases, that large corporations do, in order to tarnish the public image such corporations

carefully construct.

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[21] RTMark, "The Y2K Bug," PowerPoint Presentation, RTMark, http://www.rtmark.com/pptbug.html, accessed March 27, 2004.

[22] Lani Boyd, "Making Your RTMark: The Yes Men on their methods," *Jetbunny Magazine* (March 2004): 45-47. Background information on RTMark for this article came from various interviews and information found on or through the RTMark website at http://www.rtmark.com and the Yes Men website at http://www.theyesmen.org.

Another tactic employed by RTMark, which was later partially abandoned upon creation

of the Yes Men, is the use of anonymity. Not only are the "company's" creators anonymous,

but also its workers and investors, which allows the group more freedom and scope with which

to mount a freer critique of the capitalist system. Since visitors are allowed to post ideas

anonymously or with a pseudonym, they can be as revolutionary as they like without fear of

legal repercussions. RTMark's alleged status as a corporation also acts as a buffer against legal

ramification for some of the group's actions that may be construed as illegal. Vamos and Servin

sheltered themselves from possible prosecution as well by adopting the pseudonyms Frank

Guerrero and Ray Thomas, respectively. This transmogrification of identity also marks a trend

that leads up to and extends into their work as the Yes Men, that of the spawning of humorous

and seemingly nonsensical alter-egos. As the Yes Men, their identities evolve into Mike Bonanno

and Andy Bichlbaum. Some other titles Vamos and Servin also claim to have operated under,

which illustrate the ridiculous nature of their pranks, include "Dr. Andreas Bichlbauer, Granwyth

Hulatberri-Hulatberri Smith, Guy MaCabre, Hortense Ashaires, Bigguns Carmichael, Louper

Garoux, Felix Bitwinder III, Dorris Malbector, Lance Mastercar, Bill Butts, Hope Hopps, Henk

Hunk Hamfirster, Man Mandingo, Burt Bactaderth, Fillius Bilaterus, Monk Hoarfeather, [and]

HRH Prince Chalsotkovitch Belarovitch-Haskell Price Beckingham III."[23]

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[23] Quote taken from email correspondence of March 1, 2005, in which Bonanno (Vamos) also added that "you can call us 'Mom.'"

**RTMark and GWBush.com versus George W. Bush**

In the midst of the rocky 2000 Presidential election campaign, Vamos and Servin (as

RTMark, the former working under the pseudonym Frank Guerrero and the latter as Ray

Thomas) were contacted by Zack Exley, a Boston computer consultant who had purchased the

domain name GWBush.com several months before the 1999 Republican Convention.[24] According

to Vamos and Servin, Exley offered the domain to RTMark in April 1999 as a cultural

investment, and a parody site was born. The website, which mimicked George W. Bush's official

campaign website for the 2000 election, cracked jokes about the would-be president and showed

him in an unflattering light, mentioning the then-governor's alleged history of drug use, and

claimed that "as an unsuccessful Texas businessman, he was bailed out with millions of dollars

from friends of his Vice-President father."[25] A cease and desist letter was issued by the Governor

George W. Bush For President Exploratory Committee, Inc. (the owner of the official website) to

Exley, who still owned GWBush.com. RTMark sent this news out to the press, which made

minor headlines in publications from the *San Francisco Bay Guardian* to the magazine *High

Times*.[26] The story was not widely covered until Bush became so enraged by the forged website

that, at a press conference, when asked about it, he announced, "there should be limits to

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[24] Bonanno, 14.

[25] Quote taken from the archived GWBush.com site (the original material is no longer on GWBush.com) at http://www.rtmark.com/gwbush/.

[26] RTMark, "GWBush.com Press," RTMark, http://www.rtmark.com/pressgwb.html, accessed March 27, 2004.

freedom."[27] This remark was widely reported by the national press in publications, ranging from *PC Computing* to the cover of *Newsweek*, and is now infamous among leftist circles, in large part because of RTMark's tactical use of press releases and publicity stunts to promote the parody website and the ensuing legal drama surrounding it.[28] RTMark issued a press release before Bush's quote on limiting freedom on May 20, 1999 and then another press release on May 26, 1999 about the gaffe entitled "Bush Requests 'Limits To Freedom,'" in which they tout the Internet as a major reason for their media success, stating that "the Internet has amplified the voice of the ordinary citizen."[29]

Vamos and Servin described the purpose of the parody site as a correction of Bush's identity.[30] The success of GWBush.com for RTMark spawned the creation of a special mutual fund known as the Yes Men, whose sole purpose was, from the beginning, that of "identity correction." As that which happens when "honest people impersonate big-time criminals in order to publicly humiliate them," identity correction has become something of a jihad for the Yes Men, spawning a series of parody websites aimed at correcting the identities of those the group deems as abusing power. Their strategy of identity correction has its roots within the history of

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[27] RTMark, "Bush Requests 'Limits To Freedom'," Press Release issued May 26, http://www.rtmark.com/bushpr2.html, accessed February 20, 2005. When asked about the parody site, Bush replied that "there ought to be limits-to, uh, to freedom. But, uh. And we're aware of the site, and this guy's just a garbage man, that's all he is." Audio footage of Bush's response can be found at http://www.rtmark.com/bush.html.

[28] Jamais Cascio, "Smile, Your Company's Under Attack," *PC Computing* Vol.13 No.3 (2000): 42; Martha Brant, "The Mouse that Roars," *Newsweek*, Vol.134 No.2 (1999): 53.

[29] RTMark, "Bush Requests 'Limits To Freedom'".

[30] The Yes Men, "GWBush.com," The Yes Men, http://www.theyesmen.org/hijinks/bush/gwbushcom.shtml, accessed February 13, 2005. George W. Bush's official website was http://www.GeorgeWBush.com.

political parody and satire. The pair's approach began with BLO and SimCopter stunts the pair spearheaded separately: Vamos and the BLO addressed perceptions of gender roles while Servin's SimCopter hack became a critique of the sexual bias created by the heterosexual male-dominated computer gaming industry.[31] Thus, the BLO Stunt and SimCopter hack corrected previously abstruse preconceptions of how men and women are supposed to act. GWBush.com, the RTMark project of identity correction that spawned the Yes Men, in turn became a more centralized, dedicated entity than RTMark, with which to approach the problem of skewed image perception of the world's elite.

**The Yes Men and Its Parody Websites**

As mentioned above, Vamos and Servin underwent another identity metamorphosis in 1999 with the creation of the Yes Men, this time as Mike Bonanno and Andy Bichlbaum, respectively. The Yes Men website describes the group's possible and chosen targets as "leaders and big corporations who put profits ahead of everything else."[32] This is not to be confused with identity theft, or "when Small-time criminals impersonate honest people in order to steal their money."[33] So, according to their line of thinking, when the Yes Men have impersonated or imitated people in positions of power, it is with the intent to improve rather than harm. Vamos and Servin (referred to as Bonanno and Bichlbaum when in the context of the Yes Men) write, "The Yes Men have impersonated some of the world's most powerful criminals at conferences,

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[31] The Yes Men, "Identity Correction," The Yes Men, http://www.theyesmen.org, accessed April 7, 2005.

[32] Ibid.

[33] Ibid.

on the web, and on television, in order to correct their identities."[34] The group's name stems from their tactics, an exaggerated manipulation of ideas of their targets. "We [the Yes Men] agree with people—turning up the volume on their ideas as we talk, until they can see their ideas distorted in our funhouse mirror."[35] This philosophy of exaggerated accordance was in place as the Yes Men (still in association with RTMark at the time) were presented with their next opportunity for identity correction: Jonathan Prince, a blogger from Washington, DC, heard of the GWBush.com website and contacted Vamos and Servin about creating a similar site for the World Trade Organization.
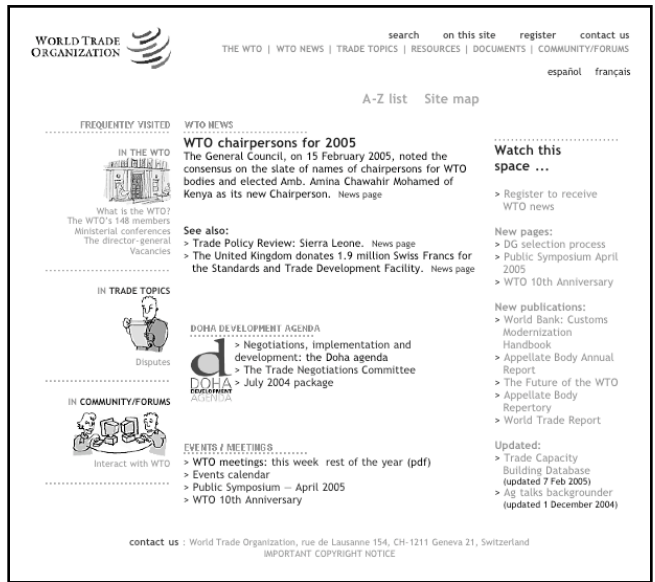


Fig. 3 World Trade Organization Homepage.



Fig. 4 The Yes Men's Gatt.org.

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[34] Ibid. This references the Yes Men's impersonation of the World Trade Organization, which is discussed below.

[35] Ibid.

This offer, along with the domain name Gatt.org, was presented two weeks before the WTO's

infamous, protest-riddled Seattle Ministerial during November 30 and December 3, 1999.[36]

Gatt.org – its name taken from the General Agreement on Trade and Tariffs, the treaty that led to

the formation of the World Trade Organization – mirrored the WTO's official website, only with

altered, Yes Men-corrected content. The WTO, of course, disapproved of Gatt.org, "deploring"

the Yes Men and their actions in a press release dated November 23, 1999.[37] Nearly two years

later, Jonathan Prince, as the owner of the Gatt.org domain name, was sent an email on November

12, 2001, stating that all WTO copyrighted material on Gatt.org must be removed or Verio, the

upstream provider for the site, would be forced to shut it down at the request of the WTO.[38]

Three days later, RTMark issued a press release about the Yes Men-run site, describing the

correspondence over the legality of Gatt.org. The press release also announced that Verio had

decided not to shut the site down, because it was not the site's host, but rather just its upstream

provider and therefore had no legal obligation to honor the WTO's request to do so.[39]

 Another parody website similar to Gatt.org in its level of mimesis has created the same sort

of scenario the Yes Men capitalized on with press releases from RTMark concerning the legal

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[36] Bonanno, 15.

[37] World Trade Organization, "WTO DG Moore deplores fake WTO websites: They 'undermine WTO transparency'," press release issued November 23, 1999, World Trade Organization, http://www.wto.org/english/news_e/ press99_e/pr151_e.htm, accessed through http://www.rtmark.com/gatt.html, accessed on April 5, 2004.

[38] RTMark, "A Letter From Verio," RTMark, http://www.rtmark.com/verio.html, accessed March 27, 2005.

[39] RTMark, "Gatt.org Press Release (Doha)," RTMark, http://www.rtmark.com/gattverio1.html, accessed March 27, 2005.

battle with the WTO, this one mimicking the Dow Chemical Corporation.[40] The Yes Men

created DowEthics.com in 2002 primarily to raise awareness about the Bhopal disaster in India

and give information about what Dow was not willing to do about it.[41] The "Bhopal disaster"

refers to a massive leak of 27 tons of methyl isocyanate gas that occurred on December 4, 1984 at

the Union Carbide plant in Bhopal, India, which killed, according to Union Carbide, about 3,800

victims within the first week. Survivor accounts, however, estimate around 8,000 deaths the first

week, with around 20,000 deaths to date and many thousands more afflicted with various medical

conditions as a result of the leak and subsequent pollution. The site has never been cleaned up.

Union Carbide settled with the Indian government to give the victims the equivalent of US $470

each (about five years' worth of medical expenses), though many require life-long medical

assistance as a result of complications induced by the disaster and the pollution left unattended in

its wake. Dow purchased Union Carbide in 2001.[42]

In December 2002, to coincide with the eighteenth anniversary of the Bhopal disaster, the

Yes Men posted DowEthics.com through the server Thing.net and circulated a press release

reaffirming Dow's reluctance to take responsibility for Bhopal. Once Dow learned of the parody

website and press release, it immediately filed a Digital Millennium Copyright Act (DMCA)

notice to Verio, Thing.net's network (upstream) provider. Verio, in turn, shut down the entire

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[40] http://www.dowethics.com.

[41] See http://www.bhopal.com for Union Carbide's (and Dow's) stance on the tragedy and http://www.bhopal.net for an in-depth look from the perspective of the victims.

[42] The Bhopal Medical Appeal &Sambhavna Trust, "What Happened In Bhopal?" The Bhopal Medical Appeal &Sambhavna Trust, http://www.bhopal.org/whathappened.html, accessed April 5, 2005.

Thing.net network, which housed sites dedicated to art, political, and cultural issues, not just the

Yes Men site.[43] In retaliation, the Yes Men issued a bogus press release as Dow, stating,

> We applaud the courage of Verio in taking this act, as it sends a strong signal to the "artists, activists," and other blatantly non-commercial users of Thing.net. That message can be stated simply: Corporate America will defend its right to Free Speech on the Internet rigorously. Verio ensured that this message was understood by giving Thing.net a 60-day eviction notice following the network's restoration to the Internet. This is the kind of justice which Dow can afford, and which we hope will become a model for the future of the Internet. [44]

This began a further volley of press releases and threats between all involved parties, which

culminated in the termination of Thing.net's contract with Verio and extensive press coverage.[45]

**The Yes Men as the World Trade Organization**

As of this writing, the Yes Men are promoting the British and French release of their

feature film, *The Yes Men*, directed by Dan Ollman, Sarah Price, and Chris Smith (MGM), which

documents the group's experiences impersonating the WTO. Their stint from October 2000 to

May 2002 pretending to represent the WTO at trade conferences around the world was made

possible because of their Gatt.org website. The events described in this section are those depicted

in the film, beginning with how the group was first offered a chance to speak as the WTO, when

some government officials and trade authorities took the Yes Men's WTO parody site for the

real thing, sending emails about trade matters and requesting their presence at conferences.

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[43] Alexander Galloway, *Protocol: How Control Exists After Decentralization* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2004), xvii.

[44] The Yes Men, "Free Speech," press release issued by DowEthics.com, http://www.dowethics.com/r/environment/freedom.html, accessed on March 16, 2005.

[45] See http://www.rtmark.com/pressthing.html for links to articles about Thing.net's plight and the resultant press.

In 2000, the Yes Men received an email invitation through Gatt.org addressed to Michael

Moore (Director General of the WTO, not the filmmaker and creator of *Fahrenheit 9/11*) to

speak at an international trade law conference in Salzburg, Austria. They replied, stating that Mr.

Moore would be unable to attend but a WTO representative would be sent in his place, "Dr.

Andreas Bichlbauer," played by Servin. The conference accepted Mr. Moore's replacement, and

on October 27, 2000 in Salzburg, "Dr. Bichlbauer" presented a lecture on hindrances to free trade.

In his lecture, he proposed a solution to the current "staleness" of democracy in the form of a

website that would auction votes to the highest bidder, and announced that the siesta in Italy

prevented a KLM/Alitalia merger because Italians were lazy. They had even brought along a

friend to tape the events for posterity, which proved fruitful later on for their feature film. But to

their shock, Bichlbauer was greeted with polite applause at the close of his lecture, and afterward

was commended by members of the audience.[46] On his way out of the conference, a protester

assaulted Dr. Bichlbauer with a pie to the face. Witnesses expressed their condolences on the

unfortunate pie flinging, but no one took issue with the contents of his lecture.[47] Vamos and

Servin were dumbfounded that their speech did not seem to offend the sensibilities of

international trade lawyers.[48] On November 21, 2000 an email was sent out to the conference

delegates relating the tragic pie episode that happened after the lecture. The pie incident, they

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[46] VoteAuction.com was shut down before the 2000 presidential election. See http://www.VoteAuction.net for a copy of the original site.

[47] Linda Dzuverovic-Russell, "The artist and the Internet: a breeding ground for deception," *Digital Creativity* Vol. 14, No.3 (2003): 152, 152-158.

[48] Bonanno, 39.

announced, had caused a serious infection. In another follow-up email on November 27, 2000, the

Yes Men/WTO announced that Dr. Bichlbauer had sadly succumbed to the "infection thought to

have been caught from the rotten pie which was hurled in his face after his Oct. 27 lecture."[49]

After some time, the incident was discovered to be a hoax by the press, and was widely reported

by mainstream media channels. Because of the extensive press, Vamos and Servin (under the

names Bonanno and Bichlbaum) thought that was the end of their days impersonating members

of the WTO. Their recent exposure, however, did not stop the invitations from coming in.

Rather, the public exposure marked a large shift in the pair's modus operandi: they no longer

attempted to keep their physical representations hidden, as they spoke in public and on

television when impersonating the WTO.

On July 19, 2001, following the Salzburg incident, Bichlbaum made an appearance as

"Granwyth Hulatberi" on the TV program CNBC Marketwrap Europe as a guest expert WTO

representative on a debate panel alongside Barry Coates, Director of the World Development

Movement, an organization devoted to ending world poverty by working with impoverished

countries against government policies that promote global trade to benefit the rich and not the

poor.[50] Hulatberi attempted to correct the WTO's stance on protesters by announcing that might

equaled right, and that the protesters "are simply too focused on reality, and on fact and figures,"

to an exasperated Barry Coates, who by the end of the segment was livid.[51]  The third panelist,

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[49] Ibid, 49.

[50] See http://www.wdm.org.uk for information about the World Development Movement and
http://www.theyesmen.org/hijinks/cnbc/index.html for CNBC appearance.

[51] Bonanno, 59. The transcript of the Marketwrap segment is included in its entirety on pages 52-62.

Vernon Ellis, the International Chairman of Andersen Consulting, and the moderator, Nigel

Roberts, though puzzled by Hulatberi's unusual statements, were complacent about the

"WTO's" stance on the matter of global trade. The appearance of the Yes Men on CNBC did not

make international headlines, and was only reported after the Yes Men told the press it was a

hoax.  So the only people who were aware of the incident were those already on the side of the

Yes Men or WTO supporters who saw the group as a nuisance, but not a threat.

Bonanno and Bichlbaum's next WTO appearance was at a "Textiles of the Future"

conference in Tampere, Finland, on August 16, 2001. Here, "Hank Hardy Unruh" (Bichlbaum)

introduced a revolutionary business suit design for managers and overseers, called the

"Management Leisure Suit" that included a three-foot phallus capable of administering electric

shocks to slacking employees. This, they thought, would definitely get the Yes Men – and

hopefully the WTO – into hot water. Due to labor force issues, the textile industry plays an

important part in the new global economy, Unruh explained in his lecture. Managing lazy

workers in Taiwan when you are in Tucson becomes a problem. The solution he proposed was

the Management Leisure Suit, which Bichlbaum was wearing under a breakaway business suit. At

the appropriate moment in the lecture, Unruh stepped from behind the podium, and with the

help of his assistant Bonanno, ripped away the business suit to unveil the Leisure suit.[52] The

audience gasped and clapped. When strategic strings were pulled, the phallus inflated to display a

screen upon which to watch workers implanted with "humane" chips that would allow the

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[52] Footage from the feature film, *The Yes Men*, DVD, directed by Dan Ollman, Sarah Price, and Chris Smith (Los Angeles: MGM, 2004).

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transmittal of electric shocks to those not working efficiently. As if the suit itself were not enough, the lecture also proposed that the American Civil War was pointless, since given time, slavery would have evolved into remote labor anyway.[53] Again, the Yes Men were met with acceptance. Their film, *The Yes Men*, depicts the pair being greeted after the lecture by handshakes and words of praise. It seemed to Bonanno and Bichlbaum that those who support the tenets of the WTO were willing to support anything it said, no matter how outlandish. By October of 2001, the WTO had placed a warning on their website and the Yes Men were receiving regular publicity across the United States and Europe, yet the invitations kept coming in.[54]

In the spring of 2002, the Yes Men accepted an offer to present at a lecture in Sidney, Australia. Because this was planned to be the most outlandish stunt so far, Bonanno and Bichlbaum arranged to hold a practice run of the lecture for college students at the State University of New York in Plattsburgh in March of that year. In the lecture, "Dr. Kinnithrung Sprat" (again, Bichlbaum) proposed an efficient way to end starvation. As a prop, the Yes Men served the students 100 McDonald's hamburgers, claiming that recycling the hamburgers through special filters would extend "the life span of a typical hamburger *up to ten times*. In answer to one student's outrage, [Bonanno, as a McDonald's representative] explained that McDonald's, in partnership with the WTO, is already experimenting with this technology in its products and has

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[53] Bonanno, 81-109.

[54] Ibid, 115.

been including 20% 'post-consumer waste' in many of its hamburgers."[55] This statement further

enraged the students, who began to pelt Bonanno and Bichlbaum with their half-eaten

hamburgers. In the meantime, the Sidney conference had been canceled due to low enrollment, and

a special lecture given by Dr. Kinnithrung Sprat to the Certified Practicing Accountants

Association of Australia was scheduled in its place through email correspondence between

Bonanno and Bichlbaum and the conference organizers. The Yes Men decided to present a new

lecture instead of recycling the presentation given in Plattsburg. In Sidney, on May 21, 2002,

they announced the forthcoming disbanding of the World Trade Organization. Its "planned"

reformation as the Trade Regulation Organization was also announced, with over an hour's worth

of statistics about the injustices and abuses of the WTO. Kinnithrung Sprat explained in his

presentation that the organization had realized the error of its ways and now wanted to see to the

welfare of people rather than businesses. The audience's reaction was one of disbelief and hope.

In *The Yes Men* film, there was one audience member who expressed doubt that the new group

would be successful, but most were optimistic about the World Trade Organization's admittance

that it had failed in its current state and its attempt to better the situation. The news of the

disbanding made international headlines, and Canadian Parliament Member John Duncan even

addressed concern about what it meant for Canada when he had the Parliament speaking floor.

Upon later realizing his mistake, he said it was a "brilliant master stroke."[56] In part because of

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[55] The Yes Men, "WTO," The Yes Men, http://www.theyesmen.org/hijinks/plattsburgh/index.shtml, accessed April 7, 2005.

[56] *The Yes Men*, MGM, 2004.

the press releases of RTMark, the Yes Men were able to make an impact through the media

about the policies of the WTO. However, they did not achieve what they had originally intended:

to convert their pro-WTO audiences by "turning up the volume on their ideas as we talk, until

they can see their ideas distorted in our funhouse mirror." Or that is what the Yes Men

attempted to do, yet, "as it turns out, the image always seems to look normal to them [their pro-

WTO audiences]."[57] By 2003, the Yes Men were preparing the release of the film as well as a

book published by Disinformation Press, also entitled *The Yes Men* (2004). The group

maintained a low profile until December 2004, when they again resurfaced in the media spotlight,

this time once again attacking Dow Chemical.

**The Yes Men and Dow**

DowEthics.com received an invitation from the BBC in November 2004 to make a

statement concerning Dow's stance on the highly debated Bhopal situation on December 3, 2004,

the day before the twentieth anniversary of the disaster. The Yes Men agreed, sending Bichlbaum

once again as a representative, this time calling himself "Jude Finisterra." Finisterra gave a live

announcement, giving a complete reversal of Dow's previous position on the matter, and stating

that the company now took full responsibility for its actions and would award the victims of

Bhopal twelve billion dollars by dissolving Union Carbide to foot the bill. Less than two hours

later, Dow retracted this statement claiming that Jude Finisterra was not affiliated in any way

with the company and that the original statement was an elaborate hoax at the BBC's expense.

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[57] The Yes Men, "Identity Correction."

Furthermore, Jude Finisterra (whose name comes from a melding of the patron saint [Jude] of impossible causes and the end [finis] of the earth [terra]) was discovered by the press to be a concoction by the Yes Men. The news of the false Dow statement became the top story on News.Google.com, along with Dow's formal retraction.[58] Later that day, the Yes Men made news again by issuing their version of Dow's retraction, which stated that, "Dow will NOT commit ANY funds to compensate and treat 120,000 Bhopal residents who require lifelong care . . . Dow will NOT remediate (clean up) the Bhopal plant site . . . Dow's sole and unique responsibility is to its shareholders, and Dow CANNOT do anything that goes against its bottom line unless forced to by law."[59] The Yes Men made Dow acknowledge the Bhopal tragedy, and they also succeeded in making the situation visible to many who might not have otherwise known about it. But Dow has not wavered, nor have the citizens of Bhopal been compensated as the Yes Men would like.[60] In fact, much of the press generated from the hoax paints the Yes Men in a negative light, not only for fooling the relatively innocent BBC, but for also toying with the hopes of the Bhopal victims. Senior journalists at the BBC were disheartened by the effect of the hoax on the citizens of Bhopal, describing a scene where "initial admiration for the elaborate hoax was rapidly dispelled after reports of how the euphoria in Bhopal's ravaged community when the fictitious

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[58] Tom Vanderbilt, "Affirmative Action: Tom Vanderbilt on the Yes Men," *Artforum* (February 2005) http://www.artforum.com/inprint/id=8261, accessed February 18, 2005.

[59] The Yes Men, "Dow," The Yes Men, http://www.theyesmen.org/hijinks/dow.html, accessed on February 20, 2005.

[60] Ibid.

report broke had turned to tears and fury within hours."[61] Much press was also devoted to the

fact that a media source as the BBC could be duped in such a way, rather than focusing on what

Yes Men had intended—the tragedy of the Bhopal accident and Dow's lack of responsibility in

the matter. Headlines pointed to the BBC, not Dow, as the Yes Men's target, declaring "BBC

'hoaxed' by report that Dow takes blame for Bhopal Tragedy," and "Hoax site reels in BBC

Producer."[62] Though the incident earned the pair international press time, and was considered

humorous by many journalists who covered the story, it did not impact or change Dow's stance

on the tragedy. In some ways, the hoax reinforced Dow's stance by embarrassing the BBC,

angering the victims in Bhopal, and vilifying the work of the Yes Men in the public's eye, who

read articles calling the hoax a cruel, elaborate, idiotic deception.

**Public Estimation of the Yes Men**

The Yes Men, like their "parent company" RTMark, use humorous obfuscation as a main

tactic in their attempts to raise awareness on the abuses of large corporations and global

commerce. Even though confusion is a powerful weapon in their arsenal, their stated intent is to

clean up any misinterpreted or slippery messages given by entities like the Office of the

President of the United States, the World Trade Organization, or Dow Chemical. Yet their film,

*The Yes Men*, shows the struggle of the duo in attempting to relate their message as it falls on deaf

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[61] Robin Gedye, "Bhopal Compensation A Hoax," *The Sun-Herald* (December 5, 2004) http://www.smh.com.au/news/World/Bhopal-compensation-a-hoax/2004/12/04/1101923388299.html?oneclick=true, accessed  March 27, 2005. A variety of articles found on google.com when searching for "Bhopal hoax" focused on the negative reations of citizens of Bhopal when they learned they were not recieveing compensation.

[62] Headlines taken from hits on Google search for "dow bbc hoax Bhopal", at http://www.google.com/. Headlines from http://www.outlookindia.com//pti_news.asp?id=265284, and from www.journalism.co.uk/news/story1173.shtm, accessed March 27, 2005.

ears. No violent or strong audience reactions were recorded until the group lectured to students in Plattsburgh and "disbanded" the WTO at the lecture in Sydney. In fact, the only reactions received from the lectures as seen in the film, other than those in Plattsburgh, are of mild amusement or unquestioning praise for the WTO. As evident in their most recent work against Dow, the group is not seen as a savior of the downtrodden that it claims to support. One might conclude from such press as discussed above that the Yes Men have done more harm than good, angering the victims of their targets rather than helping them.

One reason for their lack of success is the Yes Men's apparent lack of interaction with the art world. RTMark, on the other hand, has always operated within the realm of art, and has collaborated with other artist groups on a regular basis. In 2000, they participated in the Whitney Biennial in New York, in which, the group commented on the exclusivity of such juried exhibitions. Their work, created specifically for the Biennial, consisted of the RTMark website, which the group allowed to be hijacked during the duration of the show. In this way, anyone who had the means could submit their URL, which would replace the RTMark site. Anyone with a website could then become an exhibiting artist in the Biennial. Depending on the frequency and number of outside submissions, an artist could participate in the show for anywhere from a few minutes to a couple of days.[63] The group also auctioned off their tickets to the Biennial party to the highest bidder, who would, in RTMark's words, "become official Whitney Biennial artists."[64] By framing their actions as RTMark within the art world, Vamos and Servin created a

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[63] Galloway, 235.

[64] Ibid.

cocoon in which their works were able to critique their subjects more straightforwardly than the pair have done as the Yes Men. RTMark's more overt criticisms were possible because of this art frame, which prepares the audience to expect a message. As the Yes Men, Vamos and Servin did not have the luxury of a clued-in audience, and though that was their intention, their audience's ignorance of a message being conveyed made such a conveyance nearly impossible. Another example of the difference in framing between RTMark and the Yes Men is RTMark's promotional video, *Bringing IT to YOU!* In it, RTMark presents a parodied version of the corporate aesthetic in order to promote their past projects. The video, which was produced as a video press release in 1999 and sent to media outlets, mimics a corporate mission statement: "The RTMark mutual funds, like their financial counterparts, enable laypeople with minimum time and knowledge to invest strategically by leveraging the wisdom and skill of specialized experts . . . RTMark offers subject based and risk assessed funds for every investment need."[65] The video was produced by the group as a public relations tactic, and parodied the same modes of distribution RTMark employed. From their press releases and bureaucratic paper trails to the Biennial's auction for profit, RTMark has clearly adapted the model of business practices to question such practices' underlying intent and elevated them to the status of art. The Yes Men, though, usually carry out their stunts without any declaration of artistic intent. They steer clear of any artistic associations, instead choosing to work directly within the corporate realm that the group attacks. This position makes it more difficult to view the Yes Men through an artistic lens,

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[65] RTMark, "*Bringing IT to YOU!* Script," RTMark, http://www.rtmark.com/bityscript.html, accessed April 10, 2005.

and therefore may make their actions harder to justify in the public mind. Their frame is the corporate world of accounting symposia, not museum exhibitions. The Yes Men, however, have operated so exclusively within the corporate and financial realm that their actions have been rendered impotent by the organizations the group has attacked. Vamos and Servin as the Yes Men have not produced the obvious parodies and critiques as they did with the works of RTMark. They instead chose more subtle means of criticism by pretending to be their targets, and have opted for a feature film from MGM as their mode of promotion. By employing the same overtly corporate modes of distribution that they attack, the Yes Men's choice of a major motion picture as publicity seems closer to a quest for personal celebrity than RTMark's homemade video. Because the Yes Men are so deeply involved in the capitalist process (they star in a film whose purpose is to earn a profit), Vamos and Servin's roles as activists become somewhat blurred by questions about their motives for creating such a purely commercial endeavor. So because of their chosen context – RTMark within the art world and the Yes Men within a corporate framework – the Yes Men's works have not been met by as receptive an audience as RTMark's have.

**THE YES MEN AND THEIR PRECEDENTS**

The first section documented the works of Vamos and Servin (as Frank Guerrero and Ray Thomas in RTMark and Mike Bonanno and Andy Bichlbaum as the Yes Men) and the audience's reactions to their work. In this section, the social and artistic precedents of the Yes Men, and how these influenced the group, are considered. Both the audiences' reactions and their works' historical precedents are important to understanding their role in our contemporary information society, which will be discussed in the third section.

When asked about their sources of inspiration, the Yes Men claim to take cues from history and civilization in its entirety. "Both the methods and the goals of the Yes Men are as hoarily ancient as, say, lemonade. Criticizing those in power with a smile and a middle finger happens in literature from Aristophanes to Shakespeare, in mythologies from the Volga to the Mississippi, in movements from the Diggers to the Situationists…."[66] This antagonistic approach has been the focus of the Yes Men's ongoing battle with the World Trade Organization and can be viewed within a long-standing tradition of activists employing satirical critique. This section compares the Yes Men and RTMark to other activists, of both the past and those contemporary with the groups. RTMark remains closer to its activist roots, while the Yes Men, though borrowing from their predecessors and in some ways building upon the groundwork laid by RTMark, have ventured into the corporate arena to a much greater extent, and have not only attempted to assimilate the corporate world, but may have been assimilated by it as well.

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[66] The Yes Men, "FAQ," The Yes Men, http://www.theyesmen.org/faq, accessed February 20, 2005.

**The Art of Parody**

From Jonathan Swift to the Situationists and beyond, purposeful confusion and blurring

of boundaries have long been part of the arsenal of political and cultural critique. Many artists

before the Yes Men have employed purposeful confusion to fight for their cause. An early

example, often cited by the Yes Men, is Jonathan Swift's infamous *Modest Proposal* published

in 1729, which suggested the Irish eat the children of the poor to counteract the harsh conditions

created there by English interference and Irish impotence. His proposal mocked the fad for

political pamphleteering in the eighteenth century while making a very scathing statement about

the ineffectiveness of government leaders. This parody was not originally seen as such and

created uproar amongst its readers, even those today who, though confused and outraged, do not

quickly forget Swift's message.[67] Not alone in his tactical approach, Swift realized that his

message might not be as potent if he stated his position in a straightforward way. Rather, he

relied on satire to expose injustice and abuse in a more circuitous but effective way. Similarly, the

Yes Men attempt to make their point penetrate more deeply by allowing their audience to realize

by itself that it has been duped. In Plattsburgh, for example, the students listening to the lecture

became enraged that the WTO would be behind such a plan as recycling "post-consumer waste."

Upon realization that this was a hoax, perhaps some of the students who went into the lecture as

pro-WTO had a different point of view after the lecture. This "tactical obfuscation," or

purposeful confusion, as seen in the Yes Men's parody websites, is an important weapon in

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[67] "Johnathan Swift," *Books and Writers*, http://www.kirjasto.sci.fi/jswift.htm, accessed March 2, 2005.

their battle against apathy brought on by the consumer culture rampant throughout the world. The embarrassment felt by their victims was thought to be enough to drive their point home, but unfortunately, their audiences (except for Plattsburgh) never realized they were being fooled.

**Tactical Obfuscation Versus Parody: DowEthics.com and Mad-Dow-Disease.com**

With DowEthics.com, the Yes Men have taken a slightly different path than their parody predecessors and contemporaries.[68] When compared to another satirical site like Mad-Dow-Disease.com, run by Greenpeace, the Yes Men's Dowethics.com is much closer in overall appearance to the official Dow website.[69] The Yes Men's site is almost a mirror image of the corporate site, containing the same layout, fonts and images. The only notable difference between the two is the way in which the information is worded. Dow's homepage at the time



Fig.5: Dow-Chemical.com

of this writing displays a whimsical-looking photograph of an elderly doctor treating a young child. The linked caption beside the image reads "Dowpharma: Supporting A World Of Modern Medicine," while on the DowEthics.com parody site the same linked caption reads, "Dowkarma:

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[68] http://www.dowethics.com

[69] http://www.mad-dow-disease.com is maintained by Greenpeace: http://www.greenpeace.org

Treating Others As We Would Like To Be Treated," and leads the viewer to a page describing the Yes Men's "corrected" version of Dow's position on its responsibility toward Bhopal.

By comparison, Greenpeace's www.mad-dow-disease.com is more obviously an attack on Dow. Though similar in layout and taking cues from the official Dow site, it is not a mirror copy. Mad-Dow-Disease.com displays an image of a chemical spray bottle emitting toxic green fumes with the Dow logo altered so that the "O" is an ominous-looking scull. Instead of the official phrase, "Living. Improved Daily," below the logo, as it is found on both the official Dow site and DowEthics.com, on Mad-Dow-Disease.com



Fig. 6: DowEthics.com



Fig. 7: Mad-Dow-Disease.com

the phrase is changed to, "Living. Poisoned Daily." Even the names of these sites reflect the goals of their creators: while Greenpeace wants to alert its already sympathetic audience of the perceived evils of the corporation, the Yes Men are looking to "correct" Dow's information in such a way that the aims of the company are still apparent, just shown in a different light. But

the Yes Men's corrected information often goes unnoticed, as is evident through the BBC's

invitation to speak about Bhopal in December 2004. In a similar manner, Gatt.org is perhaps too

close to the original WTO site. Despite all of the press, the Yes Men received numerous speaking

invitations from organizations still under the belief that the site was official. They are receiving

publicity, but for their actions and not their ideals. With satire and parody, the impact lies in the

moment of realization, the instant the audience realizes it has been tricked. For the Yes Men, that

moment has only come once, with the audience of college students in Plattsburgh. Their intended

audience, practicing members of global commerce, have not caught on to even the most blatant of

Yes Men pranks.

**Situationism and Détournment**

The Yes Men use a roundabout approach to make their point, only instead of carrying the

message to its extreme, the group shifts the medium to alter the message. This approach to

criticism was embraced by a political group, the Situationists, in the early 1960s, determined to

thwart the contemporary power system of mid-twentieth century Europe. The group called

themselves Situationists because "they believed that all individuals should construct the

situations of their lives and release their own potential."[70] At the helm were artist Asger Jørn and

writer Guy Debord. The Situationists, who disbanded in 1972, RTMark, and the Yes Men all

have at their core a distaste for the abuses of government and capitalism over the proletariat,

every-man. Debord proposed a "Society of the Spectacle," one in which mankind is formed by

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[70] Peter Marshall, "Guy Debord and The Situationists," *A History of Anarchism* (London: Fontana Press, 1992), 151-153.

the images surrounding it. In the words of Debord, "The spectacle is not a collection of images, but a social relation among people, mediated by images."[71] The Situationists practiced the tactic of *détournement*, the rerouting of ideas and images, to subvert the Spectacle. Images produced by the Spectacle of mass media would then be reappropriated, "altered and subverted so that rather than supporting the status quo, their meaning becomes changed in order to put across a more radical or oppositionist message."[72] Like the Situationists and Debord, RTMark and the Yes Men see that capitalism has created a state of pure desire, in which consumers want certain products because they are new, or, as in the case of the WTO, organizations because they are presented as benevolent.[73] Yet while the Yes Men push the agenda of the WTO beyond its limits and attempt to make it seem ridiculous, RTMark remains truer to the philosophy of the Situationists and *détournement*. Here, comparison with the Canadian magazine *AdBusters* is useful. *AdBusters* appropriates well-known ad campaigns and changes the imagery into anti-advertising works of art. In a similar manner, RTMark diverts the corporate goals and tools to build anti-corporate sentiment. *AdBusters*, for example, will take a Nike ad and alter it so that "rather than supporting the status quo, [the] meaning becomes changed in order to put across a more radical or oppositionist message."[74] Both *AdBusters* and RTMark fight against what many consider to be the corporate takeover of our Western collective consciousness. For Alexander Galloway,

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[71] Guy Debord, *The Society of the Spectacle* (New York : Zone Books, 1994), §4.

[72] Marshall, 151-153.

[73] Ibid.

[74] "Key Ideas in Situationist Theory," *Wikipedia,* http://www.wikipedia.com, accessed November 2, 2004.

"corporate organizations have long aestheticized their moneymaking practices in the realm of culture – in everything from Nike advertisements to Giorgio Armani's 2000 exhibition at the Guggenheim Museum – it is only recently that artists have reversed this process and started to aestheticize moneymaking practices in the corporate realm."[75] Though incorporating moneymaking practices into art is not new – Hogarth and Wedgwood were pioneers of artistic profit and mass production in the mid-eighteenth century – the tactics now employed and the extent to which art and commerce have merged are new. The eighteenth century did not have the commercial firepower available today. The Deutsche Guggenheim Berlin, for example, recently offered chocolate "night watchmen" in conjunction with an exhibit from the Rijksmuseum, while RTMark has offered the corporate aesthetic as a work of art.[76]

**Video Guerrillas and Institutional Critique**

At stake in the war fought by the Yes Men against global corporate take-over are our most prominent means of communication: television and the Internet. Because these modes of information distribution have been co-opted and commercialized, activist artists have turned back to these tools, employing versions of institutional critique to raise awareness among those living within our consumer culture. Early video activist artists attempted to undermine, as Laurie Ouellette writes, "the credibility of the dominant media by exposing what they feel to be the

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[75] Galloway, 227.

[76] Hilmar Kopper, "1+1=3," 1999, *Deutsche Guggenheim*, http://www.deutsche-bank-kunst.com/guggenheim/e, accessed February 20, 2005.

constructed nature of media representations."[77] In a similar way the Yes Men, through the

Internet, are attempting to expose the true nature of those who hold power by manipulating their

self-representations. Like an *AdBusters* manipulation of a Nike ad, the parody sites of the WTO

and Dow are an attempt to show the power of corporate branding in a new light. Though

television has preceded the Internet by many years, both are now important tools for

institutional critique as well as for outright guerrilla fighting against the commercialization of

media that started off as tools of democracy and dialogue. Both television and the Internet had

the potential to be two-way information systems, to not only disseminate information, but also

to receive it. Now, though, television has become a completely commercial medium with one-way

information flow, from corporations to their consuming audience.

In 1972, Michael Shamberg founded Top Value Television (TVTV) to cover the 1972

presidential nominating conventions. Other artists recruited for the project were Megan Williams

and Allen Rucker as well as members of other video artists' collectives like Ant Farm, Videofreex,

and Raindance. TVTV first covered the Democratic convention, producing a one-hour video

entitled "The World's Largest TV Studio," which received an ebullient review from *New York*

*Times* critic John O'Connor, who deemed the video "distinctive and valuable."[78] This validation

allowed the group to raise enough money to produce a second tape, this time of the Republican

Convention, entitled "Four More Years." Instead of the usual press coverage, the TVTV crew

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[77] Laurie Ouellette, "Will the Revolution Be Televised? Camcorders, Activism, and Alternative Television in the 1990s," in *Transmission: Toward a Post-Television Culture,* ed. Peter d'Agostino and David Tafler (Thousand Oaks, California: Sage Publications, Inc., 1995), 171.

[78] Deirdre Boyle, "Guerrilla Television," in *Transmission: Toward a Post-Television Culture,* ed. byPeter d'Agostino and David Tafler (Thousand Oaks, California: Sage Publications, Inc., 1995), 155.

focused on the convention floor, capturing the action and true essence of what the convention was like. Rather than paint an unflattering portrait of their subject, TVTV allowed their interviewees to speak freely, though they often put themselves in a position to be scrutinized more heavily. The group allowed the absurdness of the situation to speak for them, with images of the Republican Party organizers saying things like, "the balloons alone will give us the fun we need."[79] Likewise, RTMark and the Yes Men rely on the words of their targets to aid in their identity corrections. When GWBush.com was first produced (the Yes Men were still just a Mutual Fund of RTMark), it was President Bush himself who caused a media flurry by angrily addressing the site and announcing that there ought to be limits to freedom. RTMark capitalized on the public outburst, issuing a series of press releases about the incident in an attempt to harness the potential of the media.

Other artist groups have addressed the potential of the media in distribution and promotion of their works. The conceptual artists of the late 1960s and early 1970s employed mass media outlets in their works. Publicity and dissemination of the artworks became an integral part of the piece, and blurred the line between commercialism and fine art. According to Jack Burnham, the conceptualists "objectified the dissemination of art information," and presented the viewer "with a superspatial grasp of the environment, one that deals with time, processes, and interrelated systems as we experience them in everyday life, forcing involvement with non-art

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[79] Ibid.

habits of perception."[80] Joseph Kosuth's *Second Investigation, I. Existence (Art as Idea as Idea)*

of 1968, incorporated such distribution channels as publications like the *New York Times* and

*Artforum* to disseminate his works by renting advertising space in which he placed a series of

pieces, thus making the mass media an integral and inseparable part of them.[81] To promote and

document works by Robert Barry, specifically his *Inert Gas* series of 1969, publicist Seth

Siegelaub published a series of posters and sent out advertisements, which became the sole visual

elements of the piece, aside from photographs taken by Barry of invisible gases escaping into the

atmosphere in a desert landscape.[82] Hans Haacke's Real Time Systems employed bureaucracy as

a major aspect of the works; his aestheticization of administration is echoed in the work of

RTMark and their mimesis of the corporate model. As well as being politically charged, both

Haacke and RTMark employ technology and mass media in the production of their art.[83]

A blending of art and media as distribution is also found in later works of the 1970s video

artists who in turn had a great impact upon Vamos and Servin and their works as RTMark and

the Yes Men. Ant Farm was one such video activist/artist group interested in presenting an

institutional critique of the media. *Media Burn* unfolded at San Francisco's Cow Palace in 1975.

"Two of America's most potent cultural symbols: the automobile and television" were forced

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[80] Jack Burnham, "Alice's Head: Reflections on Conceptual Art," in *Conceptual Art: A Critical Anthology*, ed. by Alexander Alberro and Blake Stimpson (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2000), 216.

[81] Alexander Alberro, *Conceptual Art and The Politics of Publicity* (Cambridge, Mass: MIT Press, 2003), 50.

[82] Ibid, 118.

[83] Edward A. Shanken, "Art In the Information Age: Technology and Conceptual Art," in *Conceptual Art: Theory, Myth, and Practice*, ed. by Michael Corris (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2004), 239.

together in a literal blaze of media spectacle.[84] On Independence Day, a modified 1959 Cadillac El

Dorado Biarritz, transformed into the "Phantom Dream Car," and its drivers, the "artist

dummies," were preparing to hurtle themselves, at full speed, into a pyramid-shaped wall of

stacked television sets doused with gasoline and set aflame. A Lincoln limousine arrived carrying

the "Artist-President" John F. Kennedy (performed by Doug Hall of T.R. Uthco) who gave a

speech about *Media Burn*, which asked, "What has gone wrong with America?"[85] "It is the result

of forces which have assumed control of the American system," he answers, those forces being

Militarism, Monopoly, and Mass Media.[86] After the speech, the Artist-President exited, "The

Star-Spangled Banner" was played, and the main event commenced. Doug Michels and Curtis

Schreier, the artist-dummies, were sealed in the Phantom Dream Car with no outside visual access

save a video monitor in the dashboard, connected to the car's custom tailfin.[87] In the final

videotape of the event – which included press coverage by local reporters and was sent out to

circulate again within media channels – the crash is slowed to a standstill, emphasizing the

literality of *Media Burn*. Thus, the purpose behind *Media Burn*, like the actions of RTMark and

the Yes Men, is to unmask the myths propagated by corporate greed (monopoly) and the mass

media. The patterns between *Media Burn* and RTMark are similar: there are press releases,

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[84] Tom Weinberg, "Media Burn," *Electronic Arts Intermix*, 2004, http://www.eai.org/eai/tape.jsp?itemID=1823, accessed November 4, 2004.

[85] Constance M. Lewallen and Steve Seid, *Ant Farm:1968-1978* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2004), 31, 34. T.R. Uthco is a San Francisco-based artist group (Doug Hall, Diane Andrews Hall, and Jody Procter) that also collaborated with Ant Farm on 1975's *The Eternal Frame*.

[86] Ibid.

[87] Ibid, 32.

public spectacles, and press coverage afterward. In the works of both, the spectator and the media become just as vital to the piece as the actions of the group. The Yes Men likewise employed similar tactics with their Bhopal hoax, in which the media coverage became integral and inseparable from the work. In all (including the works of the Yes Men), commercial and televisual modes of distribution are employed. As San Francisco Museum of Modern Art curator Christine Hill notes, "a fundamental idea held by the first generation of video artists [and later, RTMark and the Yes Men] was that in order to have a critical relationship with a televisual society, you must primarily participate televisually."[88]

The Yes Men have also culled their strategies from the vast pool of political theater of the 1980s. This particular brand of social commentary is embodied in the works of Gran Fury, an offshoot of the AIDS Coalition to Unleash Power (ACT-UP), an artist activist group that spread awareness of the AIDS epidemic. In 1989 Gran Fury produced their *Kissing Doesn't Kill* poster. According to Nina Felshin, this poster "exemplifies the spectacular strategies often exploited by the collective: it mimics the codes of capitalist pleasure and visual seduction to capture the viewer's attention and direct it to the AIDS crisis."[89] Like TVTV, Ant Farm, RTMark and the Yes Men, Gran Fury adopted an already established – and loaded – language to lure the unsuspecting audience into absorbing their previously ignored information. Similar to RTMark's adoption of the mutual fund system and their use of corporate double speak (as well as the Yes

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[88] Quoted in Michael Rush, *New Media in Late Twentieth Century Art* (New York: Thames and Hudson, Inc., 1999), 78.

[89] Nina Felshin, *But Is It Art? The Spirit of Art As Activism* (Seattle: Bay Press, Inc., 1995), 52.

Men's parody web sites), Gran Fury mimicked the appearance of an established commercial entity in order to confuse the viewer into consideration of information he or she might have otherwise overlooked. In their case, the *Kissing Doesn't Kill* poster was a parody of the United Colors of Benetton advertisements, which hawked the company as a promoter of racial and ethnic equality. Gran Fury's version promoted gender and sexual equality alongside facts about the then little known AIDS virus. RTMark's strategies against corporate strongholds, like the Barbie Liberation Organization, are attempts to create awareness and open dialogue between parties otherwise blind to the system at work around them. Likewise, the Gran Fury poster caused an uproar within the communities of New York who would have preferred to ignore the AIDS epidemic. The Yes Men, on the other hand, instead of taking direct opposition, attempt to affirm the tenets of entities like Dow Chemical or the WTO to the point of absurdity. So far, as in the case of the WTO impersonations, they have not had the desired effect of fostering dialogue among their targets' proponents, because as stated above, "the image always seems to look normal to them [the Yes Men's pro-WTO audience]."[90] Instead, the Yes Men's victims (aside from the college students at Plattsburg) all agreed with what Bonanno and Bichlbaum concocted, even when they proposed to disband the Organization. Such fostered dialogue was vital to the works of Gran Fury, as became evident with the "Scandalo alla Biennale," the scandalous events surrounding Gran Fury's inclusion in the 1990 Venice Biennale. The group created a site-specific piece for the Biennale, entitled *The Pope and The Penis*, which featured two billboards, one with criticism of the Pope's (and the Church's) position on the AIDS virus juxtaposed with a version

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[90] Bonanno, "Identity Correction."

of their earlier *Sexism Rears Its Unprotected Head* billboard.[91] The graphic and critical nature of the billboards caused the Biennale director, Giovanni Carandente, to declare "that the group's contribution was not considered art and vowed to resign if it were exhibited. Simultaneously, Italian officials at the Venice airport were refusing to release Gran Fury's billboards from customs."[92] In retaliation, Gran Fury held a press conference in its empty exhibition stall. Written on the walls was an account of what had happened and why there was no art to hang. Immediately, the story appeared in several Italian newspapers, and, within forty-eight hours, Gran Fury had its billboards returned and hung in their allotted space. Carandente did not resign. His behavior fueled the press and public disapproval about what happened to Gran Fury, but most importantly, according to Nina Felshin, amongst all the press about the "Scandalo" was information included as side stories or supplements about the spread of the HIV virus in Italy. Because of the scandal, a dialogue was created about the facts the artists were attempting to spread. As one Gran Fury member noted, the incident allowed them to "break outside the cloistered territory of the Biennale" and distribute information about the AIDS epidemic to the Italian public.[93] RTMark's parody site GWBush.com, which led to the formation of the Yes Men, is another example of an unforeseen scandal creating social dialogue. In that example, the examination of Bush as a viable candidate was Vamos and Servin's ultimate goal, achieved in large part because of the scandal attached to the work.

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[91] Felshin, 74.

[92] Ibid, 76.

[93] Ibid, 77.

> Tactical Media are what happens when the cheap "do it yourself" media, made possible by the revolution in consumer electronics and expanded forms of distribution (from public access cable to the Internet) are exploited by groups and individuals who feel aggrieved by or excluded from the wider culture. Tactical media are media of crisis, criticism and opposition.[94]
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> > David Garcia and Geert Lovink
> > "The ABC of Tactical Media"
> > *Nettime*, May 16, 1997

Tactical media means the bottom-up struggle of activist networks against a centralized power center. In this section I will consider forms of digital activism that fall under the aegis of tactical media, employing subversive, "under-the-radar" forms of distribution similar to those used by Vamos and Servin in RTMark and the Yes Men. Culture jamming, hacktivism, and tactical obfuscation are all tactics that share similar traits: all employ elements of grassroots protest, all make use of (but are not limited to) the anonymous nature of the Internet, and all attempt to give a voice to the "everyman," to those without the power to speak up for themselves. Tactical media fight the imbalance of power in Western culture by manipulating commercial and political distributive modes against themselves and against the monopoly held by corporate ideology that extends into the commercial and political spheres.

**Culture Jamming and Hacktivism**

Brooklyn artist Rodriguez de Gerada rips, tears, glues and paints existing billboards in New York City. He makes a cigarette ad into a commentary on the effects of such advertising on

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[94] Quoted in Galloway, 175.

the children who see the ads every day, to create a dialogue not only between himself, as artist, and the billboard, but also between marketing campaigns and their targets. De Gerada wishes to thwart the one-way distributive mode of advertising. He wants to instigate community discussion about what corporations are selling: do the people want to buy it? De Gerada feels there are options to be considered that most people never knew they had. His works are ways of opening peoples' eyes to something they might not have realized before, namely that they have a choice.[95]

Culture jamming is defined by Naomi Klein, author of *No Logo* (a book considered by many to be the manifesto of the anti-globalization movement), as "the practice of parodying advertisements and hijacking billboards in order to drastically alter their images."[96] Klein's definition, while limited, addresses the goal of culture jamming, which rejects the idea that marketing and all propaganda "must be passively accepted as a one-way information flow."[97] In order to create the needed dialogue about what advertising actually means to communities, De Gerada alters the billboards in his neighborhood in New York. Klein's definition, however, does not emphasize the use of satire, a very important part of culture jamming and its acceptance by its target audiences. Tim Jordan and Paul A. Taylor propose instead that "culture jamming engages directly with media noise and combines . . . direct action and satire" to frustrate the codes

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[95] Naomi Klein, *No Logo* (London: Flamingo, 2001), 279-80.

[96] Ibid, 280.

[97] Ibid, 281.

of mass advertising and propaganda.[98] In this way, the most successful and sophisticated culture jams are not simply parodies or advertisement manipulations. They are "interceptions – counter-messages that hack into a corporation's own method of communication to send a message starkly at odds with the one that was intended."[99] Thus, according to the definition of culture jamming established here, the Yes Men are not as fruitful at jamming as their contemporaries. Though the group certainly "hacks into a corporation's method of communication," the Yes Men do not often (as in the case of Gatt.org and their WTO impersonations) "send a message starkly at odds" with the one they are trying to debunk. RTMark, on the other hand, makes its anti-corporate message clear by acting as corporations do to show their abuses in a critical light. In this way, Vamos and Servin, as the two principal figures behind RTMark (as well as the Yes Men), claim closer ties with fellow culture jammers who are often underdogs using such tactics to fight a much more powerful enemy.

In the 1980s, a feminist artists' group calling themselves Guerilla Girls (and donning gorilla masks) emerged, using tongue-in-cheek humor to raise awareness of women's position within a male-dominant art world as well as society as a whole. The Girls, much like eighteenth century pamphleteers, canvassed New York with posters asking, "Do women have to be naked to get into the Met. Museum?" to expose the injustice they encountered within the art world, of which most non-artists (both female and male) were unaware. Their posters were biting and sarcastic, and even their most humorous images seethed with a malicious undertone. Their signs,

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[98] Jordan and Taylor, 82.

[99] Klein, 281.

along with the works of Rodriguez de Gerada, are examples of street-level culture jamming – a trend in activist art intent on winning back culture from corporations by taking the message to the proverbial–and literal–street.

The actions of such artists vary from de Gerada's billboard manipulations to Belgian artist Noel Godin's pie attacks, whose targets include Microsoft CEO Bill Gates, WTO Director Renato Ruggiero, and Milton Friedman.[100] All are members of global commerce, something that Godin and his Biotic Baking Brigade (BBB) are attempting to thwart and ridicule. The BBB are a worldwide, anonymous group, with names like Agent Apple and Agent Blueberry. Similar to Vamos and Servin as the Yes Men—which, like the BBB, also relies on anonymous members—Godin is the face of the BBB. As the sole identifiable member of the BBB and its spokesman, Godin takes the burden of responsibility for the organization's actions, as do Vamos and Servin as the Yes Men. The burden of responsibility has caught up with the pair more than once. Servin was fired from Maxis in 1996 as a result of his SimCopter hack, and Vamos is facing a similar situation. After the 2004 BBC Bhopal hoax, Vamos came under investigation by Rensselaer Polytechnic Institute, where he is an assistant professor of design, and might

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[100] Bill Gates, pied February 4, 1998; WTO Director Renato Ruggiero was attacked in 1997 and Milton Friedman on October 9, 1998. Margie Wylie. "Gates Gets Creamed." February 4, 1998 at http://www.jaybabcock.com/gates.html, accessed March 2, 2005; Barbara Metzler, "Mission Possible New Jersey." At http://www.aspartame.com/mpnj/, accessed March 2, 2005; Paul Kingsnorth. "If the People Pie, the Leaders Will Swallow." *The Economist*, April 2000, at http://www.findarticles.com/y/articles/mi_m2465/is_2_30/ai_62053050, accessed March 2, 2005.

potentially face prosecution by Dow Chemical, whose spokeswoman Terri MacNeill claims is "considering possible actions."[101]

The BBB attacks on figures within the global economy are curiously similar to the pie incident concocted by the Yes Men in Salzburg, and probably provided the inspiration for the Yes Men stunt. Such satirical performances coincide with Baudrillard's claim that "The symbolic consists precisely in breaching the univocality of the 'message,' in restoring the ambivalence of meaning and in demolishing in the same stroke the agency of code."[102] Thus, by interrupting the messages sent by the corporate mass media, they can shock consumers into awareness. By disrupting the normal order of things and evoking sheer absurdity both the BBB and the Yes Men hope to breach the wall of monotonous commercial routines. These two groups share more in common with each other than with the other collaborative activist groups discussed earlier, in large part because of the irrationally comical actions of the BBB and the Yes Men.

The Internet is awash with commercial offerings, so therefore it is also teeming with culture jammers subverting the messages brought by the mass media. The magazine *AdBusters* also runs a culture jamming, message board-style website along with its subscription service.[103] This site not only highlights some of the "corrected" campaigns of the past, but also provides an arena for activists or those interested in learning more to share, spread, and receive information about calls to action and other activist endeavors. The parody newspaper *The Onion*, also

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[101] Kenneth Aaron, "The Yes Men's latest hoax draws RPI Inquiry," *The Times Union* (December 10, 2004), Lexis-Nexis, via LSU Library, http://www.lib.lsu.edu, accessed March 27, 2005.

[102] Baudrillard quoted in Jordan, 85.

[103] http://www.adbusters.com/.

available in print form but widely accessed online, mimics headlines from journalistic papers while poking fun at the inherent absurdity and sensationalism of the banal that is rampant in local paper headlines.[104] With the rise of the world wide web as a source of mass communication, RTMark and the Yes Men now share the stage with hoards of other activists, each with their own agenda, message, marked prey, and target audience.

Among the ranks of activists using the Internet as their soapbox are those labeled "hacktivists," a certain breed of activists who use computers and the Internet as tools for civil disobedience or cultural critique. The Yes Men fall under this classification. Hacktivism is defined by the group Cult of the Dead Cow, who coined the phrase, as "a policy of hacking, phreaking or creating technology to achieve a political or social goal."[105] In clearer terms, hacktivism is a specific social and cultural phenomenon which emerged at the turn of the 21st century based on popular political action carried out in cyberspace.[106] Hacking is a form of decentralized, networked resistance against a modernist, centralized power source. What makes hacking a viable form of resistance is its decentralized nature.[107] If one part goes down, there are still many other viable parts left up and running. Their targets, however, are usually centralized, with one base of power. By taking out that single source of power, hacking can take down the entire power system. Though they use current technology within their distributive mode of operation,

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[104] http://www.theonion.com/.

[105] Quote taken from http://www.thehacktivist.com/hacktivism.php.

[106] Jordan and Taylor, 1.

[107] Galloway, 159-60.

hacktivists and culture jammers are akin to activist or avant-garde art of the past, in that they share similar targets: hacktivism attacks passivity, the "culture of spectatorship as well as the anti-pleasure ethos of mainstream capitalist society."[108] Hacktivists target weak spots in the corporate machine in an attempt to shake culture from its passive, accepting role.

Often mentioned in hacking vocabulary or hacker manifestos, like that of The Mentor (1986) and McKenzie Wark, is the comparison of hacktivism to Jujitsu.[109] Like the martial art, hacktivism, or, as Saul Alinsky describes it, "mass political jujitsu," utilizes "the power of one part of the power structure against another part . . . the superior strength of the Haves become their own undoing."[110] This theme of political jujitsu is mentioned in the writings of RTMark and the Yes Men as well. In a 1998 interview, Igor Vamos, speaking as Frank Guerrero, explains that RTMark (and later, the Yes Men) use corporate trappings to attack corporations. "It is kind of jujitsu or a judo move. We are using the effects and strengths of corporations . . . to unseat them and to attack them."[111] For hackers and digitally inclined artist/activist groups, the Internet becomes the means by which they disrupt the power relations currently dictated by the establishment. The common denominator between hackers, culture jammers, and activist artists seems to be "the use of networked space as an enabler in challenging established 'real world'

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[108] Klein, 282-83.

[109] Galloway, 162.

[110] Klein, 281.

[111] Josephine Bosma, "RTMark Interview," *Nettime* (September 13, 1998) http://www.nettime.org/Lists-Archives/nettime-1-9809/msg00034.html, accessed November 11, 2003.

hierarchies and the rigid structures set in place by global capitalism."[112] The use of tactical

obfuscation also plays a large role in many of the actions discussed here. The Yes Men employ

tactical obfuscation heavily to attempt to confuse their targets into submission.

Many hacktivists parody existing websites, as RTMark and the Yes Men did with

GWBush.com and Gatt.org, or jam certain sites by bombarding servers with more requests than

they can handle, causing Denial of Service (DoS) and temporary failure of the attacked site.[113] A

massive call to action was issued by the Black Hat Hackers Bloc and the Electronic Disturbance

Theater, encouraging hacktivists to band together and disrupt certain Republican sites like

www.GeorgeWBush.com (Bush's official site) and www.GOP.com prior to and during the 2004

Republican National Convention in New York City.[114] Their manifesto proclaimed, "This

disruption tactic is part of a larger coordinated electronic civil disobedience campaign against the

Republican National Convention. We are calling on all to contribute to this project by

autonomously launching their own attacks on the Republican Party. Hacktivists of the world,

unite!"[115] This tactic was to be, in spirit and organization, very much like the "classic civil

disobedience" of the early and mid 1900s, only now instead of blockage caused by a gathering of

bodies, civil disobedience in the digital realm focuses on many different nodes (individual

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[112] Dzuverovic-Russell, 154.

[113] Martha McCaughey and Michael D. Ayers, eds, *Cyberactivism: Online Activism in Theory and Practice* (New York: Routledge, 2003), 77. Denial of Service is when all of a server's allotted memory is occupied and users attempting to open the site cannot access it.

[114] Electronic Disturbance Theater, "Stop Wars," http://www.thing.net/~rdom/NoBUSH/Start.html, accessed February 20, 2005.

[115] Black Hat Hacker's Bloc, "Open Call for Electronic Sit-In Against the Republican National Convention," The Hacktivist, July 27, 2004, http://www.thehacktivist.com/modules.php, accessed Tuesday, July 27, 2004.

computers) creating a blockage of information flow.[116] The attempt made on the Republican

Convention was ultimately ineffective, however, despite reports by the Electronic Disturbance

Theater (EDT) that over 300,000 protesters participated in the virtual sit-in.[117]

The Critical Arts Ensemble (CAE), an artist/activist group that straddles the line between

traditional and digital protest, has placed classic civil disobedience within the digital realm. As

with the EDT's call to action against the 2004 Republican Convention, the protest retains the

original notion of "blockage," which in the physical world pertains to bodies, but in the virtual

world pertains to information. Whereas in the physical realm blockage is obtained by sheer mass

and numbers, in the digital arena, bulk is often rendered useless by the sheer separation between

participants.[118] So, EDT's virtual sit-in of the Republican Convention, even though there were

over 300,000 protesters at their computers, did not have the intended impact. In that case, the

network worked against the activists. With the Yes Men, however, the smaller numbers work in

their favor. Only a handful of people (skilled in certain areas) are required to run the websites and

provide the anti-corporate, anti-globalization propaganda.

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[116] Jordan and Taylor, 71.

[117] Electronic Disturbance Theater, "Stop Wars."

[118] Jordan and Taylor, 71. The Critical Arts Ensemble is an artist group dedicated to hacktivism, social, and political awareness. Recently, Steven Kurtz of the CAE has been under investigation by the FBI for possible bioterrorism concerning petrie dishes and test tubes used in his artwork, which were found by EMS perssonnel in his home when Kurtz's wife Hope died overnight on May11, 2004. The charges of bioterrorism were dropped and replaced by charges of mail and wire fraud, which are still pending. More information may be obtained at http://www.caedefensefund.org/.

**The Instant Information Age**

What makes such Denial of Service attacks successful (or not) is our fairly recent reliance

on instant information. Before the Internet, one had to wait for information to arrive, either in the

form of the ten o'clock news or a letter transmitted the old fashioned way, through the US Postal

Service. For an activist group of the late 1980s to get national or international coverage was

unusual. Even though Gran Fury made press in Italy because of the 1990 Venice Biennale, the

scandal was not heavily covered in the United States. Yet now, in part because of the Internet,

widespread, immediate gratification has become a way of life in the United States as well as most

of the world. From instant mail to instant grits, we have become an impatient culture. This

phenomenon is, however, not accidental. The Yes Men and other hacktivists are often fighting

against what is felt to be the corporatization of American culture, which many believe is

responsible for our current state of global impetuosity. Every bit of mass communication

—including corporate advertising, even the Yes Men's preferred method of information

dissemination, press releases—is manipulated in order to be manipulative; mass communication

and its calculated appropriation intends to tell its audience what to think and how to respond.[119]

Specifically, mass media and corporations manipulate the audience into believing what

corporations want them to believe.

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[119] Lani Boyd, "The New Original: RayGun Magazine and the Death of Avant-Garde," working paper, Louisiana State University, Baton Rouge, LA, 2005.

This new trend came to fruition in the early 1990s with the birth of the digital revolution and an increase in America's already fragmented ideologies and attention span.[120] In McLuhan's Global Media Networking Diagram, proposed in 1989, he maps out the stages of global networking and its effects: first comes the instantaneous information on a global scale, which then erodes the audience's ability to process the information in real time. Then, because of our inability to process the information as fast as it arrives, the global network creates another "Tower of Babel," a sea of incongruent voices in the ether. This results in a loss of specialism, creating a sense of worldwide synesthesia.[121] Thus, like a corporation's blitz of information to subdue the consumer into buying into what it is selling, global media stuns humanity into acceptance. The "razzle-dazzle" approaches of corporate public relations teams echo Debord's Society of the Spectacle. As Greil Marcus has characterized it:

> It [capitalism as spectacle] turned upon individual men and women, seized their subjective emotions and experiences, changed those once evanescent phenomena into objective, replicable commodities, placed them on the market, set their prices, and sold them back to those who had, once, brought emotions and experiences out of themselves – to people who, as prisoners of the spectacle, could now find such things only on the market . . . What was, once, yourself, was now presented as an unreachable but irresistibly alluring image of what, in this best of all possible worlds, you could be.[122]

The Situationist practice of détournement was influential on the Yes Men, as seen in their projects, which attempted to divert the intended message of their targets. The corporate world,

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[120] Lewis Blackwell and David Carson, *The End of Print: The Grafik Design of David Carson* (San Francisco: Chronicle Books, 2000), unpaginated.

[121] Marshall McLuhan and Bruce R. Powers, *The Global Village: Transformation in World Life and Media in the Twenty-First Century* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1989), 120.

[122] Greil Marcus, *Lipstick Traces: A Secret History of the Twentieth Century* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1989), 101.

according to Debord, has stripped us of our individuality and given the illusion of choice, and, in

the process has made us believe that this is what we want and how we want it. "The pseudo-

need imposed by modern consumption clearly cannot be opposed by any genuine need or desire

which is not itself shaped by society and its history."[123] The illusion of choice is further instilled

by commercialism's concern with contrived and manipulated image. Corporate America, in effect,

has pulled the wool over the eyes of consumers by portraying itself as avant-garde genius by

assimilating the works of cutting-edge artists and designers into their public image, and claiming

that such images originated with the company. In actuality, the corporation has only manipulated

what already existed and claimed it as theirs. In fact, according to the Yes Men, corporations have

been manipulating consumers into thinking what the corporations want them to think. More

importantly, according to the Yes Men, corporations are manipulating government processes that

were intended to protect us from capitalist abuses.

> We feel very strongly that corporations have been slowly but surely supplanting and
> subverting the processes of government that were put into place so that the people could
> have some sort of say in their political and social destiny. It seems like this is an
> important moment in globalization—with all these international borders coming down—at
> least for capital, though not necessarily for people. We see it as a real problem that's
> boiling over.[124]

These companies want consumers to believe blindly that somehow buying their products

will change lives (for the better). And there is always something new to buy, some new cutting-

edge product that makes yesterday's purchase obsolete. In this way, consumer commodity

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[123] Debord, § 68.

[124] Sylvie Myerson, "The Art of Confusion: An Interview with RTMark's Frank Guerrero," *In These Times* 26, (March 1, 2002) http://www.inthesetimes.com/issue/26/09/culture3.shtml, accessed March 26, 2005.

economics, or the constant barrage of "new!, exciting!, better!" proliferates the fragmentation of

our consumer society's already shortened attention span, what David Antin refers to as living in

"television time," the condition of a fragmented attention span brought on by consumer

culture.[125] Though Antin's theory is almost thirty years old, the fragmentation of attention spans

in the United States and worldwide remains a problem. Today, instead of "television time," we

have what might be called "net time." A scenario built out of the Internet and instant information

era, net time refers to that condition of "allatonceness" described by McLuhan in *The Medium is*

*the Massage*.[126] "'Time' has ceased, 'space' has vanished. We now live in a global village. . .a

simultaneous happening."[127] The consumer is not so much a participant in his daily affairs as he

is a receptacle of constant, instant, one-way information flow, on the Internet, the radio, even

billboards on the Interstate as well as on television. The idealistic notion of television as a

utopian instrument of *two*-way information flow has been pondered by Marshall McLuhan. In

1989, McLuhan opined that "In the one-way distributive mode, television – if it remains in the

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[125] Simon Penny, "Consumer Culture and the Technological Imperative: The Artist in Dataspace,"in *Critical Issues in Electronic Media*, ed. by Simon Penny (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1995), 47-74. Penny defines "consumer commodity economics.";  David Antin, "Video: The Distinctive Features of the Medium,"in *Video Culture: A Critical Investigation*, ed. by John G. Hanhardt (Rochester, NY: Visual Studies Workshop Press, distributed by Gibbs M. Smith, Inc., Layton, Utah, 1986), 147-166. Antin defines "Television time:" Television programs are built up from 30-second intervals, so that during the course of a half-an-hour program, the viewer is bombarded by several non-related presentations.

[126] Nettime, located on the web at http://www.nettime.org, was founded in 1995 and is not just a mailing list, but "an effort to formulate an international, networked discourse that neither promotes a dominant euphoria (to sell products) nor continues the cynical pessimism, spread by journalists and intellectuals in the 'old' media who generalize about 'new' media with no clear understanding of their communication aspects." Nettime is available in seven languages.

[127] McLuhan and Fiore, 63.

hands of the white, Anglo-Saxon establishment – could become a buttress blunting the disruptive effects of ethnic diversity."[128] Similarly, Vamos and Servin feel that television started life as a democratic medium, but because of "subsequent corporate use," it has been hijacked from its original intention.[129] This same logic can also be applied to the Internet. Originally a government endeavor created to protect the military infrastructure during the Cold War, now the Internet is awash with commercialism, with the consumer losing the great "information war" being fought by "subtle electric informational media – under cold conditions, and constantly."[130] A Marxist analysis of the Internet user's experience and accompanying condition of "allatonceness" would highlight the alienation of the user not only from tangible results of his labor — as the Internet is a huge (and very real) abstraction — but from other users as well. So Internet activism is not always successful, in large part because there is no psychological impact on the target the way there is in actual space: "Some of the qualities of a symbolic demonstration are lost when there is no public to view it."[131] Without the visualization of thousands of demonstrators banding together, such as the footage of the Seattle riots in 1999 against the WTO, the emotional impact of the Yes Men in their attack against the WTO struggles to take effect.

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[128] McLuhan and Powers, 88.

[129] RTMark, "Globalization and Global Resistance," http://ww.rtmark.com/globalization.html, accessed on February 20, 2005.

[130] McLuhan and Fiore, 138.

[131] Jordan and Taylor, 70-71, 80.

The breakdown in consumer concentration time as reflected in Antin's "television time" is also discussed in the writing of Victor Burgin, in which he proposes that the viewer cannot sustain a gaze for much longer than he has been programmed to look, because, if confronted by an image for too long, he begins to lose control over the image.[132] Debord's spectacle makes the viewer only *think* he ever had control over the image. But the spectacle, not the viewer, controls the image as well as how the viewer perceives it. As Baudrillard's America, we have no sense of past and are therefore displaced in the present. We are taught to fear or mistrust the new and creative.

The Internet, according to Vamos and Servin, has become a breeding ground for the corporate machine. They feel that the Internet is just "another example of a giant system co-opted by greed-based giant interests, who then attempt to turn it entirely to their own end . . . recent attacks on [its] volunteerist nature in the name of corporate profits have already damaged the sense of free speech and communal development . . . ."[133] Among the benefits of online protest, besides reaching a wider, previously untapped audience is the opportunity for anonymity not available in other forms of protest. One runs the risk of being seen or stopped by police when on the streets. But "the Internet user, unlike the pamphleteer, may be literally impossible to track down; there are no witnesses in cyberspace."[134] The Yes Men have regularly

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[132] Victor Burgin, "Looking at Photographs," in *Theories and Documents of Contemporary Art: A Sourcebook of Artists' Writing*, ed. By Kristine Stiles and Peter Selz (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1996), 856.

[133] RTMark, "Globalization and Global Resistance," http://www.rtmark.com/globalization.html, accessed April 7, 2005.

[134] Julie Hilden, "Anonymity Versus Law Enforcement: The Fight Over Subpoenaing Alleged Downloaders' Names from Internet Service Providers," *FindLaw's Legal Commentary,* October 1, 2003, http://writ.news.findlaw.com/hilden/20031001.html, accessed November 11, 2003.

appeared in public, as well as in corporate settings. Now that they have a feature film, the faces of the Yes Men are becoming much more recognizable, potentially making their work more difficult. If recognized, their impersonations become futile. And because of their feature film, like media celebrities, they join the spectacle. According to Debord, "the agent of the spectacle placed on stage as a star is the opposite of the individual, the enemy of the individual in himself as well as in others . . . the agent renounces all autonomous qualities in order to identify himself with the general law of obedience to the course of things."[135] The Yes Men, by participating in commercialism with their feature film, have in effect separated themselves from their message and become merely an image within the spectacle, feeding the system rather than attacking it.

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[135] Debord, § 61.

# CONCLUSION

> Consider the most radical and powerful struggles of the final years of the twentieth century: the Tiananmen Square events in 1989 . . . the May 1992 revolt in Los Angeles, the uprising in Chiapas that began in 1994 . . . None of these events inspired a cycle of struggles, because the desires and needs they expressed could not be translated into different contexts . . . revolutionaries in other parts of the world did not hear of the events . . . and immediately recognize them as their own struggles. Furthermore, these struggles not only fail to communicate to other contexts but also lack even a local communication, and thus often have a very brief duration where they are born, burning out in a flash. This is certainly one of the central and most urgent political paradoxes of our time: in our much celebrated age of communication, *struggles have become all but incommunicable.*[136]
>
> <div align="right">Antonio Hardt and Michel Negri<br>*Empire*</div>

Hardt and Negri's "paradox of incommunicability" is described by Jordan and Taylor as "the fact that, despite the rhetoric of the information age, effective communicating about local struggles is made more difficult by the tendency for such events to jump vertically into the global media's attention."[137] Such a statement rings true for the Yes Men, whose works as the WTO seem ultimately to be impotent as far as communicating their anti-globalization message. Though the group has gotten a lot of press, even internationally, it fails to make an impact at the most grassroots level because of this paradoxical struggle for attention. The more press they get, the more the group is glossed over, or even worse, the more the group is co-opted and rendered harmless. "The paradoxical element of this situation stems from the fact that greater media coverage of an event may actually diminish the ability to communicate about political action in more local or horizontal terms."[138] As Debord's Society of the Spectacle, our senses are dulled

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[136] Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri, *Empire* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2000), 271.

[137] Jordan and Taylor, 36.

[138] Jordan and Taylor, 53.

into submission by a barrage of media overload. Due to this, the actions of the Yes Men, though widely reported, end up ultimately futile. Hardt and Negri address the problem of effective communication within the spectacle, saying that the "massness" of the spectacle "makes political action difficult – communications networks turn individuals into audiences . . . Instead of individuals linked to one another, each is linked to the spectacle via the screen."[139]

According to the Cult of the Dead Cow, saying something louder than your opponent doesn't work. "Hacktivism is about using more eloquent arguements – whether code or words – to construct a more perfect system."[140] The Yes Men share this utopian view of creating a "more perfect system," but their methods seem to be closer to shouting than eloquence, thus they find themselves unable to maintain their visibility in the media. Or perhaps, as seems to be the case with Dow Chemical, the Yes Men may now be biding their time, waiting for the most opportune and fruitful time to strike.

Instead of using the master's tools to bring down the master's house, the master's tools have overpowered their user. The Yes Men have copied and parodied their targets' actions and appearances to the extent that now they are in danger of becoming co-opted in the media frenzy of their own production. Though they may be creating a disturbance, the Yes Men obey the rules of the corporate game and do so wearing (secondhand) Brooks Brothers suits. In essence, they are still operating under the aegis of corporate ideology, reinforcing such dogmas by working within the system. Nino Rodriguez asks, "is it possible for art to effectively critique something

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[139] Hardt and Negri, 271.

[140] Jordan and Taylor, 98.

[in this case, corporate culture] when the form of the artwork and the persona of the artist is effectively another expression of that very thing?"[141] While RTMark was able to find a happy medium between their message and the ideas they were subverting, as the Yes Men, Vamos and Servin have appropriated too much of their target's messages.

The Yes Men affirm the tenets of their targets to the point of ridicule, yet they also rely on public disapproval of their work by the entities they attack. Vamos and Servin have noted that opposition is the key to their success. If their target does not complain loudly in the public eye, their work is impotent since it is only when the target disapproves and gets angry that their message succeeds. In this way, GWBush.com was the only stunt that was successful, because it caused George W. Bush public embarrassment when he impetuously announced that there should be limits to freedom. The Yes Men explain this need for disapproval themselves: GWBush.com worked so well because Bush retaliated in a very angry, vocal way. When the group attempted to do the same with then-New York mayor Rudy Giuliani, the website fizzled away without making an impact, because Giuliani ignored it and never acknowledged the website publicly.[142] The WTO at first retaliated to Gatt.org with cease and desist letters and harsh words. When this only fueled the Yes Men's fire, the WTO quickly learned to back off, making the Yes Men's tactics impotent.

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[141] Nino Rodriguez, "Subject: net.art," *Rhizome*, December 23, 1999, http://rhizome.org/print.rhiz?1610, accessed November 11, 2003.

[142] Bonanno, 15.

Their feature film, *The Yes Men*, is reaching audiences who are not previously invested in the actions of the WTO, and who therefore might exit the theater thinking about globalism for the first time. Yet the fact that they have a feature film is another example of the group being co-opted by the system it attacks. The Yes Men's December 2004 appearance on the BBC as Dow made international headlines and spawned scores of news articles, making the prank a bona fide success in terms of exposure. After all, their goal is to "destabilize the system in such a way that people might get a little entertainment and at the same time have those projects ask a few questions of them."[143] Yet, even though they caused Dow's stock to drop temporarily, no change has been made concerning Dow's stance on Bhopal, and the Bhopali victims were fed with a false hope, albeit just for two hours as opposed to the twenty years endured since the tragedy.

Though they attempt to attack and subvert the complacency of late capitalist culture, the Yes Men are ultimately absorbed by the society they fight against, because they are artists who have chosen to work within the corporate realm, rather than academia or the art world. And, because of the nature of simulation, the Yes Men often copy their targets too closely for their audiences to discern a difference, making their message unattainable. The drawbacks of such simulation have impacted those within the art world as well, as Coco Fusco discovered. She lamented that her Amer-Indians were taken for the real thing when she and Gomz-Peña were placed on display in museums around the country.[144] She met with the same problems as the Yes Men: her work was either taken for the real thing, not as a parody, or those who got the joke

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[143] Myerson, "The Art of Confusion."

[144] Fusco, 37-38.

accused her of "misinforming the public," deflecting attention away from the substance of their performances to the "moral implications" of their actions.[145] Similarly, the Yes Men convinced their audiences that they were actually the WTO, and in the case of the December 2004 Dow hoax, there was a public outcry against the Yes Men for fooling the BBC. Even though the Yes Men attempt to make a very strong point about the abuses of capitalism and large corporations, their point often goes unnoticed because of their self-induced placement within society. Their target audience may never fully appreciate the Yes Men's anti-corporate message because of the group's corporate veneer, so though they receive a constant barrage of outlandish commercial messages, the audience is not able to discern a difference between satire and reality.

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[145] Ibid.

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**VITA**

Lani Boyd was raised in Baton Rouge, Louisiana. She received a Bachelor of Fine Arts degree in graphic design from Louisiana State University in 2002. While completing her master's degree in art history at LSU, she presented a paper on graphic design and its appropriation by corporate culture at the 2004 Interactive Media Forum held at Miami University in Oxford Ohio. She currently teaches art history at Southern University, and will begin law school at the Paul M. Hebert Law Center at LSU in the fall.