

# ***THE YES MEN: ART and the CULTURE of CORPORATE CAPITAL***

by **John Byrne**

If taken at face value, the work of The Yes Men would appear to satisfy two of the main criteria for successful contemporary art. First, it is technically radical. The Yes Men exist as an informal network of global collaborators whose critical interventions are distributed to the public through the mechanisms of popular media such as film, newspaper, television, and the Internet.<sup>1</sup> Second, the critical intent of their interventions—to simultaneously reveal and disrupt the smooth flow of global corporate capitalism—places them firmly within a tradition of Western avant-garde practice that has sought to use art as a tool for social change. With the current economic crisis and recession, and a concomitant drop in the popularity of bling art (such as Damien Hirst's spectacular diamond-encrusted skull),<sup>2</sup> the interventions of The Yes Men appear to suit a new climate of cultural moralism to a tee. Take, for example, one of their most significant and well-publicised events. On the twentieth anniversary of the Bhopal chemical disaster, which left some

8,000 dead and 500,000 more with permanent disabilities, the BBC inadvertently interviewed a Yes Man, posing as a representative of Dow Chemical Company, who pledged a \$12 billion compensation and clean up package on behalf of the company. As a direct result of the interview, Dow Chemical lost \$2 billion on its market share within a half-hour. According to the online publicity for their film, *The Yes Men Fix the World*, the reality of the market reaction hit The Yes Men hard:

*[...] we have created a market system that makes doing the right thing impossible, and the people who appear to be leading are actually following its pathological dictates. If we keep putting the market in the driver's seat, it could happily drive the whole planet off a cliff.*<sup>3</sup>

However, if we simply accept that the work of The Yes Men represents a contemporary return to the role of the artist as moral, ethical, and cultural critic, we run the risk of missing one of the most

important facets of their work: its ability to cast a critical light on the production of the dominant corporate capitalist culture and the role that contemporary art plays therein.<sup>4</sup> To put it another way, if we take the work of The Yes Men at face value they are, at best, a contemporary rehash of the "artist-as-outsider" cliché—a kind of collective media shaman for the twenty-first century, hovering somewhere between informing clairvoyant and TV evangelist. At worst, they are a loose formation of didactic journalists. Alternatively, if we allow the work of The Yes Men to call into question the complicity of the production, distribution, and consumption of contemporary art, we find that their work illuminates the main challenge facing art today—the ability of corporate capitalist culture to recycle, absorb, and reproduce the most critical forms of artistic dissent into bland, palatable, and desensitised commodities. This is a problem that faces not only artists and artworks (in whatever form they may take today) but also increasingly faces critics, theorists, curators, and the whole panoply of contemporary cultural management. This problem is far from new, though stakes have risen as the absorption of critical dissent rapidly becomes one of corporate capital's most profitable and ideologically useful money-spinners.

If there is any solution to corporate capital's increasing ability to commercially repackage dissent, it is no longer to be found in the continual renegotiation of the emblematic and ever-more marketable relationship between art and society, or artist and power. In this context, the work of The Yes Men allows us to fundamentally reconsider the relationship between contemporary art and the culture of corporate capital (by which I mean the dominant forms of cultural production and reproduction, which currently dominate and propagate a primarily Western world view). Over the past two decades, while The Yes Men have been furthering their social, political, and economic interventions across the globe, the art world has faced a series of radical challenges—perhaps the most significant being the realisation that contemporary art had lost its self-proclaimed right to be ahead of the times. Let's face it, the idea that pop, rock, fashion, film, television, politics, morals and ethics can all learn from the most advanced and adventurous artists has always been part of the appeal of art. Equally, the practice of contemporary art is no longer a guarantee of progressive

radicalism; it has become as potentially conservative and reactionary a practice as any other. This is one of the prices to pay for art's secularisation.

The will to narrow the gap between art and everyday life has proven to be so successful that art can no longer assume to be special or different. These changes have taken place as the direct result of a globalising economy that has relied upon a sophisticated language of image and media representation for its growth and stability. Within this exponentially growing economy of images and signs, Western culture has begun to fragment and fissure from within. At the same time, a new kind of market has responded to the collapse of the dominant "art for art's sake" Modernism by embracing any number of new and marketable art forms. In the new economy, art has become valued for its investment potential while issues of quality—so long the battleground of the high/low cultural debate—have simply come to be viewed as old-fashioned. At the same time, the ability of corporate capital to profitably recycle dissent has now extended far beyond the artworks themselves and has, arguably, begun to exert its pressure on the discourses and debates that surround artistic radicalism and criticality. This is obvious in the way an increasingly commercialised art establishment has attempted to theorise a world beyond traditional art objects and conventional gallery spaces.

For example, with the publication of the English translation of Nicolas Bourriaud's collection of essays, *Relational Aesthetics*, in 2002,<sup>5</sup> a new blanket catchphrase quickly entered into common usage. Relational aesthetics refers to the growing number of art practices that foreground the inter-human relationships resulting from an artist's activity above and around the event or object that was their progenitor. Rirkrit Tiravanija's social use of cooking as a means of bringing together different audiences from different walks of life is often cited as an example of this type of work. In fairness to Bourriaud, the original thrust of his book is a clear attempt to shift the parameters of existing aesthetic theory rather than to identify, in particular, a new type of artistic production. Bourriaud simply wished to infer, from a growing amount of evidence, that art practice is continuing to make a decisive shift away from object-based production. In the globalised era of digital communication and commodity saturation, he suggests that it is increasingly important for artists to go against the

grain by proposing "micro utopias," or new ways of living, that buck the trend of corporate capitalism. In view of this, it is perhaps only logical that he suggest an overhaul of current aesthetic theory that would allow this kind of work to be considered within a different set of critical frameworks from those applied to more traditional (and therefore commodifiable) objects. However, as many detractors of relational aesthetics have been keen to point out, it was not long before "relational" events became a mainstay of more adventurous commercial galleries, and the "inter-human" relationships became limited to chance meetings between members of a particular art elite.

Similarly, in her 2004 book *One Place after Another: Site-Specific Art and Locational Identity*,<sup>6</sup> Miwon Kwon attempts to identify the trajectory that has led critical art practice away from the production of gallery-based objects toward more peripatetic interventions in the production and distribution of knowledge. From minimalism to the contemporary co-option of websites and media relay, Kwon seeks to open up and renegotiate the complex relationships between artworks and their increasingly diverse sites of publication, presentation and intervention. In doing so, her intention is to shed a much-needed critical light on the overused term "site-specificity." On one hand, she attempts to rescue the impetus of a shift from object-based to more process-based art forms, and on the other hand, she considers the impact that new sites make upon the developing art forms that now occupy them. This leads Kwon to theorise about the "wrong place" for art. She argues that new models of migratory and nomadic practice, new forms of temporal and ephemeral artwork, and the ever-increasing fluidity and uncertainty of contemporary existence all contribute to the formation of new sites and identities. She claims that these new sites are more subject to the experience of chance encounters than they are to the traditional fixity of place-bound dogma. In reality, the availability of such "wrong places" has long been exploited by an international circuit of Biennial art organisations. Such spaces are continually filled with a cyclical rotation of bland and ubiquitous artworks that are accompanied by a well-rehearsed rhetoric of economic redevelopment and cultural enhancement. The essentially ephemeral nature of such works has only made it easier for corporate capital to invest in the continual

re-branding that bolsters its own interests.

For Grant Kester, whose book *Conversation Pieces*<sup>7</sup> marks the third major contribution to recent theories of discursive and de-materialised art practice, Kwon's arguments for the increased fluidity and mobility of site-specific art simply don't add up. Kester argues that Kwon privileges a particular kind of artist who is presumably capable of parachuting into shifting locations—usually areas of economic decline—which are perceived to need the magic wand of art to cure their ills. As an alternative, Kester argues for discursive art practices and artists who are willing to surrender a large degree of their project's control to the organisations or communities with which they work. In Kester's model the artist learns rather than teaches. However, in his attempt to avoid representing the clichéd and highly marketable image of the artist as shaman, Kester does little more than restate its dominance as a form of understanding the contemporary function of artists and artworks.

Under these circumstances, contemporary art practice has been forced to distinguish itself from other forms of globalised culture. More often than not, in the past two decades, this has been achieved through the use of shock, horror, bling, the artist's cult of personality, and other tried, tested, and sanitised media techniques. This has allowed the developing contemporary art business to secure a place for its new brand in an evermore competitive marketplace. Most attempts to shore up art's position as art have come at the expense of replicating traditional categories of practice that allow an audience to recognise it as such—painting, sculpture, installation, gallery-based video projection, etc.—even if this has meant endlessly repeating the once outrageous manoeuvres of earlier avant-gardes with the politics taken out. Alternatively, a willingness to experiment with new methods of producing, distributing, experiencing, and evaluating contemporary culture has become negatively identified with more churlish calls for the dissolution of art.

It is precisely at this point, between the dominance of art as spectacular commodity and the dissolution of art per se, that we find the work of The Yes Men. They are as capable of using and manipulating the media to their own ends as any highly paid publicity agency. That they are able to do this on a shoestring budget, using guerrilla techniques, and exploiting networks of viral

distribution, clearly evidences their ability to clone the mechanisms of the corporate disinformation that they seek to critique. That The Yes Men do this for a radical purpose and not simply for self-publicity sets them apart from many other artistic groups who are far more willing to compromise their work, depoliticise their message, or pander to the whims of target audiences. Yet, by emulating the languages of the media-based vehicles through which they distribute their work, The Yes Men are able to communicate to a global audience without the need to adopt the hackneyed position of artist as outsider. Theirs is an invitation to coaction, inviting audiences to join them as they deploy and utilise radical techniques of media intervention as a means of purposeful critique.

The work of The Yes Men allows us all to become temporarily unhinged from the instrumentalised

demands of a spectacular neo-liberal economy—an economy which codes us to our roots and places us all firmly within a free-flowing circuit of commodity exchange. They act as a virus, like a corrosive within (rather than a corrective to) the increasingly affirmative systems of technocratic capitalism. And, if the systems of technocratic capitalism now count contemporary art amongst their most valuable means of dominance, the work of The Yes Men offers us a glimpse of autonomy in an allegedly post-autonomous world.<sup>8</sup> This form of autonomy is no longer to be the mythical safe haven of an art that is capable of separating itself from the morass of everyday life; it is a new form of autonomy, continually negotiated across shifting lines of resistance and through ever changing networks of alternative production, distribution, exchange, and consumption.

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1 For further information, see The Yes Men website at [www.theyesmen.org](http://www.theyesmen.org).

2 In 2007, the British artist Damien Hirst produced a platinum cast, diamond-encrusted skull titled *For the Love of God*. The skull was reportedly covered with 8,601 diamonds and was estimated to have cost about £14 million to produce. When first displayed at London's White Cube gallery, it had an asking price of £50 million. If sold at that price, it would have been the highest amount ever paid for a single work by a living artist. The skull was allegedly bought by a group of investors for £75 million (more or less its asking price). Damien Hirst was rumored to be amongst the investors.

3 Information for this film can be found at [www.theyesmenfixtheworld.com/story](http://www.theyesmenfixtheworld.com/story). More in-depth information about this intervention, including interesting material on the considerations that went with it (such as the problem of raising hope with the Bhopal victims and the possibility of discrediting the BBC World News etc.), can be found at [www.theyesmen.org/hijinks/bbcbhopal](http://www.theyesmen.org/hijinks/bbcbhopal).

4 For a decisive critique on the complex and symbiotic interrelationships that now exist between art and private/public capital, see George Yúdice's *The Expediency of Culture: Uses of Culture in the Global Era* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2003). Through a catalogue of examples, Yúdice challenges the traditional/reductivist Marxist assumption that culture is primarily

driven by an economic base (with art, politics, morals, ethics, etc. forming a separate ideological superstructure). Due to the impact of the new "cultural industries" on the gross national product of many Western economies, Yúdice argues that culture can now be seen as one of the key economic factors behind the driving forces of globalisation. (A bad example of this would be the relationship the Guggenheim built with local government before building their Bilbao franchise). Although distasteful to many who work within the culture industries (and especially those who work at the art end of the business), I would argue that the alternative to this point of view—that art somehow manages to escape, and is therefore ideally placed to reflect upon the economically driven morass of everyday life—not only seems to be naïve, it arguably leads to the production of art commodities *par excellence*.

5 Nicolas Bourriaud. *Relational Aesthetics* (Dijon: Les presses du reel, 2002).

6 Miwon Kwon. *One Place After Another: Site-Specific Art and Locational Identity* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2004).

7 Grant Kester, *Conversation Pieces: Community and Communication in Modern Art* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2004).

8 For another equally media-biased view on the difficulty with autonomy and contemporary art, see Boris Groys' recent article, "Self-Design and Aesthetic Responsibility," published on *e-flux* at [www.e-flux.com/journal/view/68](http://www.e-flux.com/journal/view/68).