

## Recycling as Tactic and Strategy in Aesthetics and Protest: the Yes Men

Today I will be talking about the Yes Men, and some of the group's projects that have utilized "recycling" as both form and content. I will also be talking about the form and content of Yes Men projects through notions of tactic and strategy. But before placing this work before any analytical lens, I'd first like, briefly, to place the group within an historical context. Recognizing that to delve into the myriad ways in which artists in epochs past have "recycled" style or subject matter—the trope of the apprentice dutifully copying the work of his or her master comes to mind—is beyond the scope of this paper, I thus shall begin here with reference to those practitioners who, since the age of mechanical reproduction, have explicitly reused its mass-produced, at-hand materials. This recycling of sorts has been given many names over the years: the "readymade" and "montage" early in the twentieth century; "détournement" and "bricolage" in the post-war period; and later, "culture jamming," and then "remixing" in our early twenty-first century. These names are only a few. All of them could be further categorized under the larger umbrella of appropriation art, perhaps *the* modern artistic mode of expression. As the art historical record reflects, a common thread running through many of appropriation art's various narratives has been its critical tendencies, encompassing: [SLIDE 2] transgression against the institution of art itself; [SLIDE 3] contestation of fascist political opacity; [SLIDE 4] assimilation of low culture into high; [SLIDE 5] refutation of an administered mass consumerism; [SLIDE 6] and, more recently, infiltration through direct media subterfuge.<sup>1</sup> It is these last activities that will become my focus later on.

For now, I would like to posit this century-long history of appropriation in art as a type of recycling; its practice has consisted primarily of further extracting sign value from modernity's machine produced and, for the most part, disposable mass culture. Furthermore, beyond any intended critique, appropriation art has also been inherently political in gesture, for it has begged the questions *value for whom*, and *to whom*. Through recycling form and content, its practitioners have sought to challenge the roles assigned by the powerful to the powerless within the top-down power structures of modern society, ostensibly towards some sort of social transformation. Cue grand narrative music here.

For all of its endeavors, however sincere, appropriation art's political resonance has been ambiguous at best. By many accounts, critically engaged appropriation art has remained something of an "unrealized promise and unsettled debt."<sup>2</sup> For example, far from releasing the grip placed on art by its institutionalization, Duchamp's allowance for anything and everything to be potentially understood as art merely endowed its seemingly progressive powerbrokers with a more expansive vocabulary through which to resume regimes of inclusion and exclusion. And in one of the most sustained efforts at "making the invisible visible and integrally meshing the representation of politics with the politics of representation,"<sup>3</sup> John Heartfield and Berlin Dada were nevertheless unable to blunt the blitzkrieg of National Socialist propaganda. Pop Art, even in dethroning Abstract Expressionism as the premier American modern art form, swapped out the glorification of the transcendent for the celebration of the banal, echoing, rather than ameliorating, a full-blown case of post-war mass consumption. Let us not forget it was Pop Art that monetized the avant-garde, transforming the figure of the struggling

artist into that of the art star. Finally, the so-called “postmodern” avant-garde saw its appropriations recuperated as “just another style” less than a decade after their initial exhibition. Into the twenty-first century, as artist and scholar Lucy Soutter writes,

Appropriation has become the dominant trend in contemporary art practice...no longer [signifying] anything in particular; not the death of the author, not a critique of mass-media representations, not a comment on consumer capitalism. On the contrary, it seems that appropriation is a tool of the new subjectivism, with the artist’s choice of pre-existing images or references representing a bid for authenticity (my record collection, my childhood snaps, my favorite supermodel).<sup>4</sup>

Granted, this encapsulated history certainly deserves a treatment less reductive than the one I have just submitted. Yet I contend that what has restrained appropriation artists from consequentially breaching the political has been their engagement with it at the level of the sign. Modern artists have by and large concerned themselves with the interpretation of culture’s signification; appropriation art practically demands this—its dependence on previously existing signs has been its very condition of existence. However, given today the ubiquity of communication technologies and our media supersaturated moment, the struggle is no longer one over representational meaning, but has instead become one over the very production of information.<sup>5</sup> Preoccupation with the sign has come at the cost of recognizing the transformative potential of appropriating, to use an orthodox term, the “productive apparatus” (or, borrowing McKenzie Wark’s more contemporary digital-centric term, the “vector”) itself, whose stocks and flows of data have never been more available for reconfiguration.<sup>6</sup> Here we might do well to remember Walter Benjamin’s inquiry into the status of the critically

engaged work of art. “What is the attitude of a work to the relations of production of its time?” he writes. “Does it accept them, is it reactionary? Or does it aim at overthrowing them, is it revolutionary?...Rather than asking, “What is the attitude of a work *to* the relations of production of its time?” I would ask, “What is its position *in* them?”<sup>7</sup>

Now, I’m reticent to advocate for an outright revolution here, at least not the one Benjamin necessarily had in mind. Taking into account the difficulties of socialism in practice since his time and, in the post-’68 period, the fragmentation of Leftist pursuits and the later ascent of neoliberalism, the question becomes, as UCSB’s own Rita Raley asks it, “How does one express dissent and conceive of revolutionary transformation while distancing oneself from one’s forebears, whose lingering nostalgia for...visible and permanent social change, seems quaint, if even a trifle embarrassing?”<sup>8</sup> While sympathizing with Raley, I do believe that re-situating appropriation art in terms of its potential to alter relations of production is important, given that so much production in general today hinges increasingly on the abstraction—the virtualization through electronic means—of resources into information. The hacking by appropriation artists of aesthetics and politics at intersections along the vector then can point towards both a new chapter in appropriation’s own ongoing history and, much more importantly, new possibilities for social transformation amidst hegemony premised on proprietary information. It is also my belief that recent tactical media practices, such as those of the Yes Men, exhibit potential in this regard. [SLIDE 7]

I imagine some of you here are aware of the Yes Men, especially given their recently released film, “The Yes Men Fix the World.”<sup>9</sup> Their recycling symbols of corporate and state power [SLIDE 8] appear to qualify them as keepers of a critically

engaged appropriation art and activism tradition. Yes Men pranks often initiate from stealthily designed counterfeit web sites that dupe the unsuspecting into further inviting the group to conference presentations or television interviews, where the Yes Men perform the roles of the “talking heads” whose ideologies they aim to criticize. But their relocating the critique from a hermetic art world, from the terminals of Marcusian “affirmative culture,” to within the social fields of global information production itself (e.g., the TV studio, the trade show hall) intertwines the Yes Men within the very productive apparatuses that service Empire, thus perhaps providing them a politically reverberating response to Benjamin’s inquiry. The Yes Men’s engagement “behind enemy lines” entails a recycling of form, a “secondary production hidden in the process of [the original production’s] utilization,” as Michel de Certeau might have put it, whose effects have the potential to ripple across to other nodes within the vector.<sup>10</sup>

So far I have mainly dealt in broad terms with the recycling of form—in the Yes Men’s case usually corporate and governmental logos and brands, and concerning the group’s performances, its reuse of stereotypical corporate personae. But there have been at least two instances of Yes Men projects in which the recycling of form has been complimented by concepts of recycling as actual content. In both the projects *reBurger* (2002) and *Vivoleum* (2007), the Yes Men hijacked not just logos and brands but also neoliberal-styled managerial speak (e.g., “thinking outside the box;” “innovations through creative solutions”), a discourse itself hijacked from residual post-1968 anti-establishment spirit, and with it introduced to industry audiences a veneer of progressive thinking by way of “experimental” recycling initiatives. [SLIDE 9]

*ReBurger* came about after the Yes Men, believed to be legitimate representatives of the World Trade Organization because of its bogus web site *www.gatt.org*, were invited to speak on the subject of “Agribusiness Globalization” for the Certified Practicing Accountants Association in Sydney, Australia.<sup>11</sup> With the Yes Men having already spent the year prior impersonating members of the WTO, they decided to up the ante by presenting a joint WTO-McDonald’s venture that addressed world hunger problems. [SLIDE 10] The plan consisted of recycling human waste generated by eating McDonald’s hamburgers in the First World in order to produce “reBurgers” for Third World consumption. ReBurgers would be cheaper than “conventional” hamburgers because of their recycled content, with prices determined by the number of times each hamburger had been recycled “through the system.” A pseudo industrial training video replete with amateur computer animation depicting Arab reBurger customers accompanied the Yes Men’s introduction. The audience gleaned the presentation’s information even as it chewed on actual McDonald’s hamburgers, which the Yes Men had handed out at the outset of the faux-lecture. Let’s all be thankful my paper is not the one being presented right before lunch!

In their escapade *Vivoleum*, [SLIDE 11] the Yes Men headed to the 2007 Gas and Oil Exposition (GO-EXPO) in Calgary, Alberta, Canada posing as assistants to Lee Raymond, ex-Exxon Mobil CEO and member of the U.S National Petroleum Council. “Shepard Wolff” of the NPC and “Florian Osenberg” of Exxon Mobil attempted to excite GO-EXPO’s audience by “announcing Vivoleum, Exxon’s new biofuel to be made from victims of climate change.”<sup>12</sup> The representatives explained the necessity of products such as Vivoleum, given the continued exploitation of fossil fuels and resulting large-

scale environmental harm. With the loss of human life due to climate change increasing dramatically, dead people could themselves be used as an energy source “for those of us left.”<sup>13</sup> As with their *reBurger* stunt, the Yes Men included stage props and visual aids to increase the impact of their presentation; while handing out candle figurines to the audience, who subsequently lit them, Shepard and Florian proclaimed the candles were in fact samples of Vivoleum. They had been produced in part, as an accompanying “tribute” video soon revealed, by “recycling” the body of Reggie Watts, a “terminally ill Exxon janitor who had volunteered to be turned into fuel.”<sup>14</sup> At the climax of the video, Reggie went on to exclaim he would like to be turned into a candle, because “there are just so many uses for a candle,” at which point the GO-EXPO audience made the connection between what they were seeing and hearing, and what they were holding in their hands.

These types of shenanigans are par for the course for the Yes Men. In both the *reBurger* and *Vivoleum* projects, seeming enlightened reasoning and a little common sense, the altruism behind recycling initiatives (I imagine we here could all agree that recycling as a general practice is a good thing) are turned on their heads and distorted into instrumentalist, bottom-line rationalities taken to absurdly unethical if not immoral conclusions. And ultimately, a little chaos ensues. *ReBurger’s* audience eventually booed the Yes Men, and started throwing uneaten hamburgers at them until eventually they were “let in on the joke.” (*I should make clear the audience was not Australian accountants but actually astute college students at SUNY Plattsburgh, as the original Sydney conference was cancelled and thus the Yes Men changed the final location of the talk*). At GO-EXPO, the fake Exxon and NPC spokespeople were forcibly removed

from the stage just as Reggie's tribute video was ending, and finally handed over to Canadian authorities (who released them after they paid a fine). Now as much these episodes are, as scholar Carrie Lambert-Beatty remarks, "delicious to read about or watch for those who share the Yes Men's politics,"<sup>15</sup> one can't help but wonder what they really produce other than a very local, in the moment amusement, bewilderment, outrage, or even passive acceptance. The Yes Men themselves have at times bemoaned this last reaction, stating that their mischief often produces not audience critical self-reflection or consciousness-raising but more handshakes, business cards and invitations to future events.<sup>16</sup> [SLIDE 12] And since subsequent accounts of these incidents most often spread across local TV news, newspapers and blogs already framed as parody, their potential as vehicles for any continued action is diffused. Consequently, their capacity to travel any further along other vectors of information production is cut short, confining the potential for counter-hegemonic messages to within specific spaces and places.

Part of this has to do with the Yes Men's tactical approach, of which there are several. I believe their projects have further-reaching political effect when the group abandons absurdist theatricality in favor of a more surreptitious ideological reprogramming, or what Lambert-Beatty has described as "*positive* identity correction,"<sup>17</sup> wherein the targets are treated and performed according to how the Yes Men envision the world *as it could and should be*, which is to say not as a preposterous dystopia, but as a plausible utopia. Moreover, it is a combination of this positive correction with its implementation at the level of the vector—beginning with the ersatz web site and transmitting through to television, the internet, the electronic press release,

etc.—that has been the most productive in terms of grabbing attention, raising awareness, and producing discourse. Examples here include [SLIDE 13] Kinnithrung Sprat, WTO representative, announcing the organization’s dissolution because of all the havoc it has wreaked upon the world’s developing economies and peoples (2002)<sup>18</sup>; [SLIDE 14] Jude Finsiterra, spokesperson for Dow Chemical, announcing on live BBC TV the liquidation of subsidiary Union Carbide and the \$12 billion from its sale going to compensate the victims of the 1984 Bhopal, India chemical plant disaster for which Union Carbide was responsible (2004)<sup>19</sup>; [SLIDE 15] Rene Oswin, Deputy Assistant to the head of the Department of Housing and Urban Development, proclaiming that HUD would reverse course and give back the New Orleans public housing it, following the Katrina disaster, had intended to demolish and replace with higher-income homes (2006)<sup>20</sup>; [SLIDE 16] the New York Times, in a “special edition,” declaring the War in Iraq over (2008)<sup>21</sup>; [SLIDE 17] and last but not least, Hingo Sembra, of the U.S. Chamber of Commerce, retracting the CoC’s position that global warming doesn’t exist, and instead embracing upcoming climate change legislation.<sup>22</sup>

In all these cases, doubts about veracity were raised only after the messages circulated widely and enjoyed a brief but productive “vectoral” life of production and reproduction—of recycling. [SLIDE 18] In probably their biggest coup, *Dow Does the Right Thing*, the Yes Men’s televised reversal of Dow’s stance sent the company’s stock into free-fall, with it losing more the \$2 billion in 23 minutes.<sup>23</sup> And even as we speak here, the Yes Men are now in the midst of a copyright infringement lawsuit with the Chamber of Commerce, who is suing for the misuse of the lobbying group’s intellectual property and the supposed irreparable harm of its reputation.<sup>24</sup> So it seems that when

the Yes Men perform corporate roles using ludicrous (if honest) stagecraft, people might get a little laugh, or perhaps a little miffed, or confused, but when employing sensible (if dishonest) rhetoric, people pay attention. Relations of production, if even temporarily, are transformed.

My concerns here have centered mostly around interrogating the Yes Men's tactical methods, but I'd like to transition here to some thoughts on strategy. Over the past fifteen years tactical media theorists and practitioners have tended to ground what they do within the framework of the "practice of everyday life," as espoused by the patron saint of tactical media, Michel de Certeau.<sup>25</sup> Written in the aftermath of May '68 and the intellectual Left's disavowal of collective agency and party politics across ideological lines, de Certeau's work later found favor among a burgeoning group of media-savvy producers, the Yes Men among them, resisting a new world order predicated on the assimilation of all difference. Against the insidious strategies of Empire, de Certeau theorized the tactic, a decentralized operation that "insinuates itself into the other's place, fragmentarily, without taking it over entirely...it is always on the watch for opportunities that must be seized...it must constantly manipulate events in order to turn them into opportunities."<sup>26</sup>

However, in a post-9/11 world and with the renewed long-range strategic maneuvering by right-wing forces in the names of neoconservative policy and neoliberal economy, a pressing question has arisen: how might tactical media continue counter-hegemony, beyond the ephemeral, without embracing the very structural (i.e., hierarchical, institutional, bureaucratic) characteristics of power that tactical media seeks to dismantle? Is it time media activists replaced tactics with strategy?<sup>27</sup> And if so,

what might this new operational mode look like? Well, at least in the case of the Yes Men, not that different from the tactical version. On the one hand, the “tactical” Yes Men build spoof web sites and dupe TV anchors into announcing anti-corporate policy, causing momentary hiccups within the vectorization of information. On the other hand, [SLIDE 19] the “strategic” Yes Men build very real web sites of their own, which they use to publicize their activities in order to cultivate anti-globalization sentiment. The Yes Men distribute thousands of fake New York Times newspapers in a consciousness raising mission, but later entice “enlightened” donors by offering the papers (which they advertise as collector’s items because, after all, they sell on eBay for high prices) for free with purchases of their DVD movies. In the final analysis, regardless of their performative origin, and no matter their degree of what I have termed “political resonance,” all Yes Men projects, in some form or another, produce, circulate through, and are recycled within the vector. There is no aspect of the Yes Men’s work that is not eventually mediatized, and then vectorized towards the accumulation of cultural capital. Corporations and government agencies are pranked, but also sympathetic movie-goers are recycled into protestors, [SLIDE 20] who are captured on video, which is then posted online “for the cause.” All of these efforts are at once tactical interventions as well as maneuvers that “build a base from which [to] capitalize on...advantages, prepare...expansions, and secure independence with respect to circumstances;” in other words, they are strategies.<sup>28</sup>

Backlash against the Yes Men’s media strategy is illustrated in two examples that, despite their opposing political orientations, point to a similar condition. The first, the legal complaint filed by the Chamber of Commerce against the Yes Men this past

Fall, accuses them of capitalizing on their stunts, which are only pseudo-activism masking “a scheme to promote their commercial movie venture and online merchandise business...Their commercial identity theft enterprise [has generated] a substantial cash flow...they[‘ve] received at least \$500,000 to finance and distribute their recent movie.”<sup>29</sup>

The second example comes from the left-wing blogosphere, where, in a review of the Yes Men’s 2003 film, “RustyR1” writes:

I would...like to know how their fake WTO lectures shed any light on the real evil being done by the WTO to the global community...This movie is a thinly disguised vehicle for these guys to collect donation money to travel the world doing nothing and rid[ing] out their 15 minutes of fame for a horrible hour and a half...After watching the film and reading the reviews it looks to me like the lecture audiences in the film are not the only ones being faked out by The Yes Men.<sup>30</sup>

Both examples seem to suggest that in the struggle over the productive apparatus, indeed over the management of information in a vectoral age, it may be becoming increasingly difficult to distinguish between the tactical and strategic uses of media. The vector itself demands this in its quest for the continued abstraction of resources into new stocks and flows of data. Nevertheless, I for one am in support of the Yes Men, and look forward to the ways in which they continue, through recycling media form and content, to demonstrate, as the anti-globalization mantra goes, that *another world is possible*. Yet I will finish here with a quote from McKenzie Wark, whose words describing one of the original practitioners of tactical media, the Situationist International, might provide a cautionary tale for the practice as it moves forward. “By

[1972] the Situationist International,” Wark states, “had become custodian not of its own...activity but merely of its image. It had become...a collective celebrity, part of the spectacular consumption of “radical chic”...Having invaded the spectacle, the spectacle invaded it in return. It was no longer a secret enemy of spectacular society, but a known one.”<sup>31</sup>

#### Notes

1. I am sketching this list of “critical tendencies” in roughly chronological terms, referring to Picasso and Braque’s transgression of the codes of fine art painting through the incorporation of everyday materials into their works; Duchamp’s further critique of the institution of art through the readymade; John Heartfield’s unveiling of National Socialist fascism through his photomontage; Pop Art’s rebuttal to high modernism through the incorporation of mass media detritus; the Pictures Movement’s critique of spectacle through its wholesale pilfering of media of all types; and finally, tactical media’s ongoing confrontation with neoliberal ideology as it “vectorizes,” to use McKenzie Wark’s term, the globe. On this last point see McKenzie Wark, *A Hacker Manifesto* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2004).
2. Gene Ray, “Avant-Gardes as Anti-Capitalist Vector,” *Third Text* Vol. 21, Issue 3 (2007): 255.
3. Abigail Solomon-Godeau, “Living with Contradictions: Critical Practices in the Age of Supply-Side Aesthetics,” in *Photography at the Dock: Essays on Photographic History, Institutions, and Practices* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1997), 145.
4. Lucy Soutter, “The Collapsed Archive: Idris Khan,” in David Evans, *Appropriation* (London; Cambridge, Mass.: Whitechapel; MIT Press, 2009), 166.
5. As McKenzie Wark writes, “The vectoral state encourages diversity in the content of representations as a cover while abolishing diversity in the form of representations. All information is to be subordinated to the private property form.” Wark, *A Hacker Manifesto*, 269.

6. Ibid.
7. "Walter Benjamin, "The Author as Producer," in *Walter Benjamin: Selected Writings Volume 2, Part 2* (Cambridge, Mass.: Belknap Press, 1996), 770. Emphasis in original.
8. Rita Raley, *Tactical Media* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2009), 1.
9. See *The Yes Men Fix the World*, 2009.
10. Michel de Certeau, *The Practice of Everyday Life* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1984), xiii.
11. Andy Bichlbaum, Mike Bonanno, and Bob Spunkmeyer, *The Yes Men: The True Story of the End of the World Trade Organization* (New York: Disinformation, 2004), 115-149.
12. Mike Bonanno, *The Yes Men Fix the World*.
13. "Exxon's Climate-Victim Candles," <http://theyesmen.org/hijinks/vivoleum> (accessed February 6, 2009).
14. Mike Bonanno, *The Yes Men Fix the World*. Reggie Watts is an actual person, but not a janitor for Exxon Mobil; he is a comedian/performer who helped the Yes Men with their prank. See <http://www.reggiewatts.com/> (accessed February 24, 2010).
15. Carrie Lambert-Beatty, "Make-Believe: Parafiction and Plausibility," *October* 129, Summer (2009): 62.
16. As Andy Bichelbaum, Yes Men member states, "You can say the most atrocious things, and nobody will really react, nobody will really care, it's like, what can't corporations get away with?" See the film *The Yes Men*, 2003.
17. The Yes Men have described their antics as "identity corrections," which attempt to portray their targets in a "true light," if exaggerated for comic effect. It is Lambert-Beatty who is making the distinction here between this type of correction and its "positive" variant, which presents the target not as an evil-doer but as facilitator of good will. See Lambert-Beatty, "Make-Believe," 62-3. My Emphasis.
18. *The Yes Men*.
19. *The Yes Men Fix the World*.
20. Ibid.
21. Ibid.
22. Kate Shepard, "The Yes Men Punk the Chamber," *Mother Jones*, <http://motherjones.com/mojo/2009/10/yes-men-punk-chamber> (accessed February 9, 2010).

23. *The Yes Men Fix the World*.
24. Legal documents pertaining to the case can be found on the web site for the Electronic Frontier Foundation, whose lawyers are representing the Yes Men. See <http://www.eff.org/cases/chamber-commerce-v-servin> (accessed February 9, 2010).
25. de Certeau, *The Practice of Everyday Life*.
26. *Ibid.*, xix.
27. For an overview of the rethinking of Tactical Media, see Gene Ray and Gregory Sholette, "Introduction: Whither Tactical Media?", *Third Text* Vol. 22, Issue 5 (2008): 519-524.
28. de Certeau, *The Practice of Everyday Life*, xix.
29. *Chamber of Commerce of the United States of America v. Jacques Servin; Igor Vamos*, [http://www.eff.org/files/filenode/yesmen/chamber-opposition-brief\\_0.pdf](http://www.eff.org/files/filenode/yesmen/chamber-opposition-brief_0.pdf) (accessed February 9, 2010).
30. [http://www.netflix.com/WiMovie/The\\_Yes\\_Men/70000103?strackid=4808499adbc23792\\_0\\_srl&strkid=1768122723\\_0\\_0&trkid=438381](http://www.netflix.com/WiMovie/The_Yes_Men/70000103?strackid=4808499adbc23792_0_srl&strkid=1768122723_0_0&trkid=438381) (accessed February 9, 2010).
31. McKenzie Wark, *50 Years of Recuperation of the Situationist International* (New York: Temple Hoyne Buell Center for the Study of American Architecture: Princeton Architectural Press, 2008), 10.