

## Cooing Over the Golden Phallus

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In the documentary film *We Interrupt This Empire*, an anti-war demonstrator tosses a cream pie in the face of an argumentative reporter. The scene never fails to elicit uproarious laughter from the audience through the slow-mo playback of the event and subsequent footage of the indignant, then humiliated woman reporter crying, white goo dripping down her face. If the video were activist porn, this would be the money shot. While the environmental, feminist, and anti-capitalist activists of the loosely allied Biotic Baking Brigade have long been tossing pies in the faces of those directing the neoliberal economy, I hadn't before seen the action target one of their dutiful servants. Even though I laughed as readily as anyone else, the visual resonance with pornography was striking enough to make me uneasy. The pieing sequence occupied a central "climatic" moment within the film, an independent production geared toward the politically sympathetic. The dripping cream pie effectively upstaged the film's other scenes: interviews with activists, images of successful street closures direct actions before Bechtel. If a practical joke played on one lackey of empire assumes a central place in the histories we create for ourselves, then perhaps we had better reexamine our reliance on the prank—and the prankster figure—as a meaningful political tactic.

The prank's re-emergence on the stage of popular media promises renewed opportunities to hijack the spectacle, possibly for the sake of inserting alternate meanings, possibly just for the hijack itself. Most activist writing on the prank-as-tactic has been adulatory: pranks are accessible, funny, light-hearted, and photogenic—not dense, argumentative, pedantic, and visually bland. Some has been critical: pranks are snappy one-liners that run the risk of offending many of those who might

be persuaded to agree. While prankster tactics have long proliferated at the grassroots, they have recently achieved far broader visibility than they had back when Abbie Hoffman quipped, "It's embarrassing when you try to overthrow the government and you wind up on the bestseller's list." Popular pranksters are now less likely to express such embarrassment.

Today, the prank seems a fairly reliable way to make it to the top of the bestseller or box office list. While Michael Moore's stated (though unrealized) goal with *Fahrenheit 9/11* was to change, not overthrow, the government, the enormous commercial success of his film was often considered proportional to its political effectiveness. Morgan Spurlock's *Super Size Me*, with a box office take of \$11.5 million, crept up the list of all-time top grossing documentaries to number four. Less widely distributed and commercially successful, *The Yes Men* (\$255,000 gross) brought the infiltrative satiric stunts of Mike Bonanno and Andy Bichlbaum, already well known in art and activist circles, to a more general audience.

Why have prankster-activists found such popular and commercial success lately? Conceived as counter-spectacle by activists like the Yippies who understood the need to struggle on the level of representation, pranks are designed to be popular. Like the Situationists, politicized pranksters of today harness broad dissatisfaction with contemporary society and express it in visceral, anarchic, experiential forms. The success of MTV hijinks shows like *Punk'd* and *Jackass* (whose 2002 film version grossed almost \$80 million worldwide) may have helped to pave the way for the popular acceptance of political pranksters, despite these shows' corporatism, apathy, and sexism. In this view, the political prank seems like "an idea whose time has come"—a clever reworking of a politically complicit cultural form into a gesture an audience of non-activists may find subversive but sexy.

While I am broadly supportive of the prank as tactic, the popularization of the form warrants a more nuanced examination of the ways it operates culturally and politically. Any discussion of "the prank" is over-general. Part of the task here is to identify significant differences in different prankster practices that impact their popularity, relation to other forms of activism, and above all, the underlying social schema they subvert or reinscribe, regardless of their overt political content. Specifically, what gender and economic relations are engaged by pranksters as they temporarily turn the tables on their powerful targets? Does the popular reception of prankster politics represent a fulfillment of its promise to make dissent more 'fun'? If so, what kind of fun are we having and what kind of politics are we doing, or not doing, while we're having it?

#### LEFTIST COWBOYS

Perhaps an over-obvious starting point is the observation that the popular prankster is almost always male. Moreover, the male prankster's antics are dusted with a certain macho bravado that emphasizes heroic individuality. *Fahrenheit 9/11*, *Super Size Me*, and *The Yes Men* all feature charismatic, crusading male protagonists whose personalities are intimately linked to the film's narrative, production, and promotion. *Fahrenheit 9/11*'s poster portrays the solo figure of Moore against the sky, reaching out an envelope stamped "confidential." Despite the film's compelling interviews with a woman who lost her son in the war, the poster implies that Moore alone will lead the audience to the hidden truth. Similarly, the *Yes Men* are portrayed in their poster larger-than-life and atop the globe, "changing the world, one prank at a time". The *Super Size Me* website opens with a lone male silhouette confronting an apocalyptically glowing McDonald's, accompanied by a tongue-in-cheek heroic musical score. None of these activist pranksters are portrayed in relation to organizations doing the hard and boring work of organizing boycotts, attending meetings, and recruiting supporters. Indeed, their appeal is

predicated largely on their avoidance of the more mundane and feminized clerical and affective labor tasks of activism. Macho heroism is not confined to activists with respectable box office showings. Even the self-financed, little distributed, and prank-free *Weapons of Mass Deception* incorporated the crusading and quixotically macho figure of its producer Danny Schechter "The News Dissector." The Reverend Billy's riveting live performances are driven by his compelling persona as a charismatic, if vaguely sleazy, preacher, able to whip his faithful into an anti-consumerist frenzy as sexualized as the revivals he imitates.

With the reliance of some prankster politics on a crusading if comic male figure, the apparent differences from de-politicized sexist prank forms like *Jackass* should be reconsidered. The humor of the prank often hinges on a play on traditional gender relations. Like the sexualized image of the pied reporter, this play can be anything but progressive, reinscribing rather than subverting sexist imagery. Not surprisingly, such comic moments are enormously successful; few reviewers of *The Yes Men* could resist breathlessly cooing over the golden phallus that Bichlbaum exposes to unsuspecting textile industry executives. "Please see the movie just for this," begged the *Chicago Tribune*.<sup>3</sup> The irreverent bad-boy prankster earns laughs by successfully manipulating macho images like the erection of a gold lame appendage or the eruption of creamy pie in the face while doing little to deepen the level of analysis or to question the gender politics that make their pranks so funny in the first place.

Of course, not all pranksters who manipulate gender stereotypes for comic effect do so without attending to social consequences. The Pink Bloque, which has received some criticism for its advocacy of "tactical flirting" in tense demonstration situations, has combined a girls just want to have fun image with feminist performances on issues such as date rape and gendered income disparities. Ange Taggart successfully parlays

her position as a middle-aged white female consumer (and ex-kindergarten teacher) into an opportunity to cleverly criticize corporate practices while undermining the stereotype of docility in her demographic group. Significantly, both these examples are of pranksters who sidestep the macho individualism of many other prankster-activists and engage in the tradition of feminist collectivity.

### CELEBRITY PRODUCTION

Just as obvious as the machismo of many pranksters is the observation that working on the scale of mass culture demands an infrastructure for funding production, distribution, and promotion— an infrastructure highly developed and tightly controlled by capital. While Moore encountered difficulties distributing his film an unprecedented number of theaters, regardless of their owners' ideologies, were willing to screen the documentary because of the huge profit it generated. While it is unclear if the outcome of last November's elections will reduce the number of political documentaries screened widely, studios and theaters now recognize a huge market for prankster films. And when there is a market, the entertainment industry will do its best to enlarge it, massaging the production of irreverent heroic personas to sell prankster politics to a new marketing niche. The failure of *Fahrenheit 9/11* to effect electoral change may actually make prankster activists more attractive products, as their promise of political engagement through spectatorship is fundamentally unchallenging to the mechanisms by which the studios and theaters turn a profit.

Foundations like Creative Capital and the artists' project <sup>®</sup>IMark have been responsible for funding a number of smart, critical art projects, especially those with large price tags. Though the establishment of an infrastructure to support and raise the visibility of interventive work is without doubt necessary, the funding and promotion of high-cost, tech-heavy pranks run the risk of primarily benefiting those whose

skill-sets are already highly valued in the dominant economy. Support for a particular project can quickly become a "career maker" for the artist. Creative Capital, whose name and activities mimic corporate grantors' "capacity-building" programs, offers initial financial support for projects and longer-term career development "in strategic planning, fundraising, public relations, and marketing" through workshops and retreats to which, as CC's website notes, "many concrete opportunities for the artists, such as gallery representation and collaboration invitations, can be attributed."<sup>3</sup> Despite the sometimes oppositional content of many of these artists' work and the small amounts of money available to them (especially in comparison to the R&D budgets of military contractors), prankster projects can, as Miwon Kwon has noted of other forms of institutional critique, "become extensions of the museum's own self-promotional apparatus, while the artist becomes a commodity with a special purchase on *criticality*."<sup>4</sup> The ways and reasons institutions circulate resources and brand their activities easily recede into the background, overshadowed by the timeliness of the artist-commodity's work.

Significantly, @TMark deals with the naturalization of capitalist funding priorities by turning fundraising itself into a project. On their website project ideas are grouped into "mutual funds" in which donors might invest—enabling anonymous artists production. The ironic tension between a project's content and terms like "fund families" underscore the distance between @TMark's work and the priorities of capital. Similarly, the distribution of independent documentaries via free downloads and house-party screenings structurally critiques the art/entertainment industry while exploring political content on any number of different subjects. These examples illustrate how artists might deploy their work in ways that prefigure a democratic media system without making "the art world" or "Hollywood" the sole or overt subject of their projects.

### CONSUMING DISSENT

When an artist develops a "persona" in order to seduce a larger audience, it becomes difficult to question the operation of image in politics, even if the specific content of the image is contested. The Yes Men describe their activism as "identity correction", a twist of the advertising term "identity development" that recalls *Adbusters'* "demarketing" spoof ad campaigns. Both *Adbusters* and the Yes Men use corporate forms (convention addresses, websites, news releases, print ads, commercials) to tarnish images that the multibillion-dollar PR industry works so effectively to polish. This is vitally important work because so much of politics, especially in the US, does happen on the level of representation. However, an acceptance of image as the primary site of political contest runs the risk of further occluding very real spatial and material dimensions of politics.

Pranks, culture-jamming and "identity correction" hope for equivalence between the manipulation of images and the manipulation of the power relations operating within the system they represent. Even when a project has generated some appreciable response, the link between perturbations of image and power remains very difficult to establish. As evidence of his film's effectiveness, Morgan Spurlock (whose reputation as an activist should be considered alongside authorship of an award-winning "corporate image piece" for Sony) pointed to McDonald's discontinuation of the super-size campaign just before *Super-Size Me* reached general release. While encouraging measures from a public health standpoint, the gesture also helped to update McDonald's corporate image for the ultimate purpose of selling more food to more customers. In their film, the Yes Men express surprise that the outrageous and inhumane proposals they made before assemblies of businessmen received not the least murmur of dissent. They attribute acceptance of their offensive speech to the businessmen's passivity in the face of presumed expertise or basic acceptance of the brutality of globalization, but perhaps everyone understands it matters very little what is said in meetings as long as

business goes on elsewhere as usual.

The attention of prankster activism to the superstructure, to use an old fashioned term, underscores the upper-middle-classness of its politics. The arena of consumption, the terrain engaged by pranksters, is where most middle-class people develop their identities, form their allegiances and live their politics. It's a key site for engagement, and pranks can be seen as contemporary popular education for those who already have a voice in consumer society. The Reverend Billy's Starbucks exorcisms and Ange Taggart's disruptive purchase and return loops work so well because they speak to middle class consumers in their own language and have actors whose appearance is reassuringly familiar, even if their actions are not.

However, in privileging the position of consumer as a location of resistance, prankster activism runs the risk of presenting opposition as yet another lifestyle or (anti)consumer choice. *Adbusters* has incorporated product development and marketing into its anti-media/media: the creation of the Blackspot sneaker, an anti-brand brand of trendy labor and environment friendly shoes. Anticorporate consumers now needn't sacrifice style or comfort for their principles; we can have our cake and guiltlessly eat it too. Crimethink's neo-Situationist exhortations to disentangle ourselves from commodity dependence read like lifestyle advice columns for the voluntarily poor and anticapitalist. What gets lost in the shuffle is the fact that radical social change is not merely the adoption of a different set of consumer habits and the reality that attaining global economic and environmental justice will entail a high degree of sacrifice for those of us in the world's top income brackets (where almost every Euro-American Anglophone resides). We may admire the MST, be inspired by the piqueteros, and think nuns who die organizing Brazilian indentured workers are really cool, but very few of us (myself included) are willing to abandon the comparatively comfortable and glamorous work of creatively tarnishing capital's image.

We who use prankster tactics readily discuss cooptation, and it's just as important to talk about how much we have opted in. In shifting the focus of activism to the terrain of image manipulation, in insisting that successful actions must also be fun, how much have we internalized capital's emphasis on consumption and externalized the necessity of re-forming the relations of material production? How much might we be responsible for our own cooptation because macho, celebrity, consumerist agency is not so fundamentally oppositional after all?

#### THE CONSCIENTIOUS PRANKSTER

In criticizing the masculine, individualist, middle-class, and consumer-oriented elements of prankster politics, I risk appearing to advocate for nose-to-the-grindstone community organizing, appealing to some notion of proletarian authenticity, or expressing sour grapes over the popularity and commercial success of certain high-profile pranksters. As someone who has been periodically criticized as humorless, whose background is relentlessly upper-middle class and whose own work usually ducks issues of effectiveness, I may not be the best person either to ask or answer these questions. Rather than be dishonestly prescriptive, I hope to participate in a process of individual and collective self-evaluation that will bring about, over time, a collective, engaged, feminist politics that shapes equally the realms of representation, discourse and political practice.

In *Contestational Biology*, the Critical Art Ensemble (which has received support from Creative Capital) advocates for the tactical use of pranks in raising questions about applied genetic research. Their example—the release of hundreds of mutant flies—is more “funny weird” than “funny ha-ha,” and it targets both the spaces of the production of genetic research and its consumption. By foregoing the belly laugh and opting for the uncanny, CAE's tactic opens a terrain for open-ended but visceral questioning.

While still offering a damn good time, the Pink Bloque's public performances and appearances at demonstrations offer cues as to how actions might be politically effective without having a specific "target" whose image must be "corrected". Their dancing street parties transform the (often highly macho) "cops vs. protestors" dynamic and proclaim the right of people, especially women, to inhabit public space as political agents. Their actions implicitly, and with good spirit, challenge the still-too-often sensually deadening mass demonstration. Their original adoption of these tactics was situated in a particular constellation of politics and police practices. Their decision to stop performing reflected a recognition that after three years of the "war on terror" and the second inauguration of Bush, the constellation had changed. The Pink Bloque was willing to forego becoming a branded fixture at protests in favor of continuing to respond creatively to a shifting political landscape.

Outside of the world of political artists, the 85% Coalition, an Illinois civil rights group, effectively used a prank to illustrate the lack of equal protection for gays. Long-term, same-sex couples applied en masse for marriage licenses, which were refused. A hetero-seeming couple (actually a gay man and straight woman who didn't know each other) was easily able to secure a license, satirizing the state's standards for marriage. By fluidly extending years of demonstrations, guerilla theater, lobbying, and polling to provide protection of LGBTQ people under the state constitution, the group avoided isolating the marriage issue as the only relevant campaign for gays and lesbians. The fun event reinvigorated tired core activists and engaged a large number of supporters who otherwise had not been involved.

Readers of this essay will, no doubt, be eager to nominate specific practices as places where we might find threads of a conscientious pranksterism. It's certainly not as simple as staying small and not getting famous. Every project, including

the ones critiqued here, presents insightful solutions and inspiring models along with entanglements and unanswered questions. Only through cultivating permeable egos alongside open structures will we sketch the contours of an expansive, responsive, and challenging cultural and political practice.

1 Abbie Hoffman, *on the success of Steal This Book*, 1971.

2 Allison Benedikt, "Pointed Franks by The Yes Men," *Chicago Tribune*, October 1, 2004. <http://pqweb.pqarchiver.com/chicagotribune/index.html?is=11113804390> (accessed April 16, 2005).

3 Creative Capital website, [www.creative-capital.org/programs/index.html](http://www.creative-capital.org/programs/index.html) (accessed April 16, 2005).

4 Miwon Kwon, *One Place After Another: Site Specific Art and Locational Identity* (Cambridge: The MIT Press, 2002), 47.