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THE YES MEN PITTSBURGH

Still, its use did not seem to be an indictment of racism, or even a commentary on white guilt. Rather, Biggers might have sampled the words of Harlem Renaissance writer Gwendolyn Bennett in "Heritage": "I want to feel the surging / Of my sad people's soul / Hidden by a minstrel-smile." Whether or not one finds something inappropriately carnivalesque about the lampooning of these videos and their creators, Biggers juxtaposes the minstrel-smile precisely to indicate a troubling despondency lurking beneath the laughter.

Layers and fragments also mark the coded short film that follows: with swift cuts, a black child rides a school bus and applies clown makeup, taking care to draw in the corner of his painted smile; a grown man paints his face white, on a bus, in a nightclub, near a low-hanging branch on a lone tree. The minstrel lips reappear by the tree, flashing, and pulsing to the music—old recordings of Haitian death ritual music with dizzying syncopated drums and a spectrum of gong-like bells. Towards the end, the lips hang eerily from the low branch, the man is bound to its trunk, and finally at the close, he walks away from it. Much is communicated, and Biggers succeeds in being both oblique and acute in his creative analyses of history and contemporary racial politics.

—Natalie Bell

In a telling moment from the 2004 documentary *The Yes Men*, Mike Bonanno floats a revealing rhetorical musing: "Maybe it's more fun to be satirical than...serious." Curated by Astria Suparak, *Keep It Slick: Infiltrating Corporate Capital with The Yes Men* is a timely acknowledgement of the work of Bonanno and Andy Bichelbaum, two of the great social satirists of our time [Feldman Gallery, PNCA + Miller Gallery, Carnegie Mellon University; November 14, 2008—February 15, 2009].

It seems strangely anathema to even exhibit the work of such artists/provocateurs as The Yes Men in a gallery setting. In stark contrast to artists who present discreet issue-based work in the modest environment of a contemporary art gallery—for its modest audience—The Yes Men ply their trade and make their points across the entire terrain of consumer culture. For the past several years, they have—as the exhibition's title suggests—*infiltrated* that culture repeatedly in a seriocomic gesture of speaking truth to corporate power. Their fourteen-page *New York Times* spoof, handed out on Manhattan streets in November 2008, speaks to the ease of their infiltration. As does their gumption to stand before an audience at a Catastrophic Risk Conference in Florida and admit that, while the Black Death was horrible, "without it, the old business models of Europe would never have been overturned by the entrepreneurs of the Renaissance and what would the world be without the *Mona Lisa*?" I can see Jonathan Swift grinning in his grave.

The exhibition has an appropriate trade-show feel—informative, friendly, with lots to chew on. Ten news clips detailing The Yes Men's various hoaxes impersonating public officials are presented on a monitor at the show's entrance, smartly introducing the work. Upstairs, the gallery explodes with a slick iteration of the *SurvivaBall*, a fake product devised by Halliburton for disaster survival. Versions of the ball bounce out of a graphic wall painting of a burning building. A fake conference setting presenting The Yes Men's utterly convincing corporate videos and an Executive Board Room frame the buoyant

set piece. The Board Room takes banality to a new height, pointing to the bankrupt and soulless corporate culture that is the permanent target of The Yes Men. A smaller space features a nicely plastered wall of overlapping red, yellow, and black posters depicting Ronald McDonald as Gandhi, Che Guevara, and Rosie the Riveter. Another houses an eloquent shrine to Reggie, the Exxon janitor featured in one of the videos, as valiantly giving his life in the service of *Vivoleum*.

The exhibition's pointed installation hits it just right. Rather than mold The Yes Men's activist artwork into a discreet, restrained presentation, Suparak gets into its spirit—both its serious underbelly and its consciously foppish exterior.

Nonetheless, the compiled news clips at the gallery's entrance draw out a horrifying reality, as the media perpetually frames their hoaxes in terms of "cruelty" toward their targets. With the exception of the BBC and a plucky anchor from FOX Carolina, no one seems remotely cognizant of the fact that the pranks may have a serious motive. Which might suggest that The Yes Men are hopelessly railing against a goliath too dumb to ever change. And yet, during a news piece about Bichelbaum's posing as a HUD official promising action the real HUD never intended, an elderly black woman, informed of the hoax, replies: "But I guess it's just to call their hand. I respect this hoax because maybe it'll take a hoax like this to bring 'em out here to see what we goin' through. So, if it's a hoax it's gonna be, a hoax is gonna be got. And I ain't mad, I'm gonna get some barbecue." That the corporate stooges never seem to get it and a woman on the street gets it right away may be the highest praise of all.

—John Massier

ABOVE: *The Yes Men*, Halliburton *SurvivaBalls*, 2006, 68 x 68 x 60 inches, in the Apocalypse scene of the exhibition *Keep It Slick: Infiltrating Capitalism with The Yes Men*, 2008-2009, at the Miller Gallery at Carnegie Mellon University, Pittsburgh [courtesy of the artists; photo: Tom Little Photography, 2009]