ALTERNATIVE SUBTERFUGE: PRANKING RHETORIC IN
SHOPDROPPING AND IDENTITY CORRECTION

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Hilary Beth Tellesen
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ABSTRACT

ALTERNATIVE SUBTERFUGE: PRANKING RHETORIC IN
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Currently corporate rhetoric monopolizes all means of cultural production. A new form of social activism has risen to disrupt the corporate control of culture to humorous levels of intervention. Art activists have become pranksters in order to critique power and disseminate messages of resistance to diverse publics. In this study I examine the projects of the Yes Men, who work to correct the identity of corporate power-holders. The Yes Men create characters personifying free-trade ideologies and present fictitious speeches with candid accounts of free-trade practices. Additionally I examine the work of Packard Jennings who leaves products containing social and political messages on the corporate store shelf. Jennings is a shopdropper: the opposite of a shoplifter. The work of Jennings and the Yes Men articulates the need for social movements to engage in creative tactics against the hegemony. This study asserts that
pranking challenges traditional conceptions of rhetorical analysis that gauge success by access to authority or revolutionary manifestation of the public. Pranking rhetoric’s tactics utilize discombobulating tactics to emphasize confounding inadequacies in our ideological framework and create qualitative change in social discourse. Through analysis of the artist’s purpose and impact the rhetorical implications of the prank speak directly to the democratic principles that have become latent in a progressive, consumerist culture.
CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

Late in the spring of 2008, I went to the “Interrupt! Intervene! Rethinking Art as Social Practice” conference at UCSC, where artists displayed current works and spoke about the role of art in activism. The conference combined gallery exhibitions and festival-like performance with academic conversations about projects that disrupt hierarchies and comment on subversive complicity. While I was there, I realized that the artists had a strong resistance to defining a purpose for what they were trying to do, for themselves or for an audience. It was easier for them to connect method with a broad purpose rather than pin it down to a more intimate and immediate interaction. Like explaining a joke at a dinner party, many artists at the conference felt that “explaining” what your work was trying to do would kill it. Many of the projects’ abstract nature made the works nearly impossible to access, let alone assess. For instance, one man at the conference spent a few hours pushing a cardboard box around the ground with his forehead, and I found myself genuinely perplexed viewing the performance.

However, other works were structured around very specific discourse; these projects had distinct purposes that rung through every feature of the work. There was a “Green Wedding” where two women performed a lesbian wedding ceremony: the couple intends to get married every year illegally until gay marriage becomes legalized. Many of the speakers and artists contended that work without a social purpose did not utilize art-
making’s political potential. Guest speakers and artists at the conference included some of the most innovative boat rockers in today’s art activist community, who strongly encouraged interactive and subversive art activism through the discussion of their own works.

My interest in attending this conference came from my love for theater and performance. As a performer, the work of these artists naturally intrigued me; many acts displayed a wide range of skill, patience, ingenuity, and bravery, but the conversation that the works initiated inspired me as an academic. At this conference, I found that my experience with theater had brought me to the place where I would find a focus for my future research in rhetoric. There I met the artists whose works provided the field for my study: Andy Bichlbaum from the Yes Men and Packard Jennings, shopdropper and creator of the Centennial Society.

Throughout my years in graduate school, I have been amazed at how my theater training has provided a gateway to academic inquiries again and again. In my rhetorical work I have found that studying theater gives me tools to grasp concepts from a diverse group of academic fields. The outline of theater history fashioned in my bachelor’s degree introduced a comprehensive framework in which to study the societal impact of literary methods, which I deliberate on in my graduate work. For example, studying Henrik Ibsen and the controversy of his play “A Doll’s House” illustrated the profundity of the “realism” genre and consequently provided preparation for further genre studies in English. Ibsen’s play, written at the end of the nineteenth century, portrays the struggles of a housewife who, despite her desire to be a good wife, responsible mother, and obedient daughter, takes out a loan to protect her family’s
finances without the aid of a patriarch. The play represents the difficult predicament that women faced at the time and their lack of agency in the societal structure. More importantly, Ibsen’s work was reflective of a new genre of art, where the “real” story was told and where happy endings did not necessarily happen, because a “happy ending” did not help the “purpose” of the work, which was to reflect “real” cultural dilemmas for women.

My prior knowledge of this controversy aided me in my approach and analysis for graduate work in many ways: first, it illustrated the importance of genre; second, it demonstrated how production and genre reflect current social conflict; and third, it showed how creative efforts instigate powerful discourse amongst audiences. From studying movements and projects like Ibsen’s “A Doll’s House,” I have been equipped with an approach to creative works that assumes a work is supposed to “do” something, and with an understanding that creative works reach their purpose through a variety of different methods.

Additionally, my theater background has been the root of many of my dramatic revelations in the field of Composition and Rhetoric. It has helped me conceptualize theory, contextualize method, and it has given me a sense of humor about the dramatics that pervade the bureaucracy of advanced academia. Theater has enabled me to suspend my disbelief that a new approach to something could be more effective than a conventional one. Theater has given me the scope to envision new environments where methodology could be staged. And theater has given me the understanding that humans battle as if their lives depend on the outcome of seemingly very small gains.
Most relevant to the work I plan on doing here, my theater training has helped me understand how rhetoric works in and around texts.

The word rhetoric often produces volatile reactions from people. At least it did for me. I thought rhetoric was the thing that politicians do to lie without directly lying. Sonja Foss in her article “The Nature of Rhetorical Criticism” discusses the misconception of the term “rhetoric” and explains how we use language to get what we want, and that it is not bad or unusual to do so. Foss defines rhetoric as “the action humans perform when they use symbols for the purpose of communicating with one another.” Her definition has four dimensions: “(1) rhetoric is an action; (2) rhetoric is a symbolic action; (3) rhetoric is a human action; and (4) rhetoric functions to enable us to communicate with one another” (4). This definition of rhetoric is far less demonic than the definition I had in my head.

My ability to comprehend this definition of rhetoric has been aided by my training as a performer. We don’t normally think of rhetoric as being a human tool. We think of it as a politician’s tool, and politicians we hardly ever think of as human. Acting theory has aided me in seeing how rhetoric is a human tool that everyone uses, as Foss explains. When I began studying rhetoric, I realized that actors in theater are taught to take a rhetorical approach to their work--for every line in a play the actor must know what she is fighting for, who she is talking to, and what she wants this person to do in response. These questions delivered from my acting instructors were derived from Michael Shurtleff’s book Audition (a text frequently assigned in performance classes, but less frequently read by actors in my experience). Shurtleff explains,
How, then, do you achieve balance if everyone is in there pitching hard for what he’s fighting for? Through relationship. Through the give and take of relationship, through consideration for the other characters in the scene, through your sensitivity to their reaction to what you fight for, through an increased awareness of others and how you affect them and how they affect you. (30)

The questions derived from Shurtleff’s text succeed in aiding the performer with developing a relationship with both other characters in the play and, consequently with audience members watching the play. The actor, through these questions, creates her own version of the “real” intentions of the character, and every actor’s version of the character is dependent on their personal identity and translation of the text.

These questions are very similar to the questions asked in rhetorical pedagogy. What is your purpose? Who is your audience? And at the end of all the writing, So what? (A comment I usually loathed to receive from a teacher, but now I understand that they were really asking: What impact do you want this work to make on a reader, or, in other words, What do you want the reader to do in response?) These questions in writing, again, are designed to engage the writer in communicating more clearly with their audience. They are designed for the writer to make stronger and specific rhetorical choices with their text.

Theater theory asserts that in every scene, whether it is a monologue or a party scene with two dozen characters onstage, the actor must be aware of the elements that make up her tactical choices. She must understand that she is making choices with her language, choices that will protect her and aid her with her overall purpose in the work of the play. Theater offers up a metaphor for life, and a metaphor for art as communicable text, and explains to us how rhetoric is used in the “real” world as well. After I made this
connection, artworks that serve the community in rhetorically powerful ways became increasingly visible.

Six years ago in April of 2003, during the beginning of the Iraq war, I found myself sitting at a politically driven burlesque show in San Francisco, performed by an ensemble cast from UCSC’s theater program. The show was in a seedy bar in the Mission district and there was singing, dancing on tabletops, and plenty of stripping. But the content of the production reflected the politically volatile emotions of the times. The scenes, as small vignettes, were severe criticisms of the United States government, the war, and corporate influence on culture. It appealed to the grotesque nature of human desire on many levels. While watching performers ripping off clothes and dazzle viewers with nudity, the audience was challenged to think about the other dirty things they were being conditioned not to talk about at the dinner table: politics, war, capitalism, and religion.

This burlesque show wed together two of my interests succinctly: performance art and social/political commentary. It was a show that offered a criticism to the normal everyday rationalizations produced by the rhetoric in our present-day culture. In this environment, the crowd was able to laugh, drink, think, and criticize --without feeling guilty. The political content allowed for a sense of purpose to the party. The audience did not have to feel they were escaping from the reality of government deception, because in that space they were talking about it and laughing about it. It was a form of celebratory commiseration. There was a cathartic sense of relief that comes when one has been waiting for and finally receives some truth in a communal atmosphere. The audience watched as the performers dug in their heels and made fun of the ridiculousness
of the war and the government officials promoting it; they attacked the weapons of mass
destruction myth (before the WMDs were officially undiscovered); they parodied the
United States bullying so-called allies. They attacked the ridiculousness of supporting
soldiers by tacitly letting them die for lies, and they attacked the repeated likening of the
Iraq War to WWII.

This message of the show gave the party a deeper social purpose, and created
a space that allowed a freedom of expression that during daily life is not allowed by the
canonical citizen—who is made to feel guilty for harboring any questions about the
motivation for the Iraq War in a post-9/11 United States. However, the show did not
attempt to answer or offer up alternatives to the problems it was defining. The purpose of
the show was to relieve tension, not alleviate the source of it.

Then in 2006, Stephen Colbert, who had a bit on Jon Stewart’s The Daily
Show, appeared at the White House Correspondents’ Association Dinner and gave an
impudent performance directly to the highest source in the U.S. hierarchical structure.
Colbert, for 24 minutes, roasted the President of the United States with a ruthless, and
seemingly uninhibited act directed to President George W. Bush himself. Using his staple
character of an ultra-conservative, he ridiculed the President by praising his choices and
his character. Nothing in his performance went unchecked: the War in Iraq, the
President’s photo shoots at the fallen towers, his slow response to the New Orleans
floods, the economy, the environment, Cheney shooting his fellow hunter in the face, the
retired generals that came out criticizing the President’s actions for war, the President’s
rhetorical appeal to the common guy who trusts his gut, and his plummeting approval
rating.
He said at the convention:

I stand by this man. I stand by this man, because he stands for things. Not only for things, he stands on things, things like aircraft carriers and rubble and recently flooded city squares. And that sends a strong message, that no matter what happens to America, she will always rebound with the most powerfully staged photo-ops in the world. (Colbert)

Colbert successfully roasted the President of the most powerful country in the world and faced no immediate rejection from the audience. I watched the roast online and thought, how in the hell did he get away with this?

At first I felt extraordinary discomfort and thought the performance was a great act of hubris. I wondered how Colbert could disregard the rules of convention with such apparent ease. How could he be critical of the President right to his face? How could he call the President a liar to his face in front of an audience? Surely, I thought, lightning will strike him down. He is going to get in BIG trouble, I thought. But instead Colbert’s ratings soared and he landed his own show on Comedy Central. It dawned on me that the rhetorical tool of humor provided a safety net for social criticism that normal tactics could not. Colbert’s performance revealed that humor, praise, and sarcastic deference have the capability to deliver powerful criticisms in the face of power.

After some deliberation on this performance I thought, why not? Why not voice the truths of your criticisms? Why fear social conventions that laud corrupt political leaders for no reason? Why protect the President from straightforward criticism? How can the dissenters go on pretending that political deception deserves some sort of respectful resistance that from the outside looks like support? Maybe the rhetorical ruse of support and respect of convention perpetuates the lying cycle that keeps people from taking action, from information, from true democracy, and from peace as well. Why not
use humor, the tool that gets wide acceptance, and combine it with a rejection of
convention to achieve social change? Thus, my inquiry into social pranks was born.

Free Trade and Dissent

The current systems that work to pacify the public alternately work to silence
and immobilize dissent. I realize that the conditioning that has made me fearful of overt
tactics of dissent has been disseminated in almost every aspect of U.S. culture. For
example, a CNN news broadcast titled “Politics in the Workplace: When Should the Boss
Intervene?” interviewed supervisors about political discussion in the workplace. They
complained that talking about important social/political issues at work disrupts
production. This story illuminated how in public places of interaction people are deprived
of communication that improves social development. Discussion of politics and social
issues is the type of interaction that teaches people about each other and about
compromise and negotiation at a very basic level. This broadcast additionally illustrated
how the aim of maximizing production, the guiding tenet of capitalist culture, disrupts
civic engagement and handicaps personal agency. It was a broadcast that succinctly
demonstrated the problems of the consumerist mentality created by a free-trade economy.

This news story represents the hegemonic ideology that the pranking
movement seeks to interrupt. In order to understand the cultural dynamic that the
consumerist climate creates, one must first examine the system that supports it and
examine the existing resistance movements against it. The current world system is vastly
made up by the innovations of corporate imagineers. Our clothes are mass produced; our
music and entertainment is engineered, picked and produced by industry moguls; our
newspapers operate under a small umbrella of conglomerated corporations; and our international policy is driven by weapons manufacturers. Simultaneously, this corporate-controlled cultural production machine has created a system where consumers in developed nations have their needs met by the industrial production of materials in far-off lands. Our electronic, technological, and household products are made in a vast array of countries like China, Indonesia, Vietnam, and Mexico. It is an international system encouraged by a process known as free-trade or globalization.

The resistance movement to globalization has been growing over the past three decades. In 1999, a protest in Seattle, Washington brought together 50,000 citizens to protest the World Trade Organization, an assembly of transnational bodies and agreements designed to “liberalize” trade (WTO site). It is an organization with the capability to use sanctions and fines to override labor, safety, and environmental laws in individual nations in the name of free trade (This is What Democracy Looks Like). The ideology behind globalization claims that privatizing public assets and freeing the market from government interference “spreads freedom and prosperity around the world, improving the lives of people everywhere and creating the financial and material wealth necessary to end poverty and protect the environment” (Cavangagh and Mander 21). However, the citizen’s movement resisting globalization “recognize(s) that corporate globalists cannot deliver on their promises because the narrow shortsighted imperatives that drive their institutions are antithetical to them” (23). That is, the citizen’s movement understands that when profit is your bottom line, people and the environment become tools to accruing financial gain. Therefore, the system of globalization, rather than
helping people and the environment, threatens the quality of life for all people, animals, and the planet.

The response to the protest in Seattle illustrates the mammoth obstacle the resistance movement faces: the media. In the WTO’s end-of-the-millennium meeting, the protestors, aimed at creating a global citizens movement for a democratic global economy, blocked streets, sang songs, and participated in acts of civil disobedience that challenged the government’s commitment to a citizen’s right to peacefully assemble in the streets of a major U.S. city (This is What Democracy Looks Like). The protestors, using rhetorically constructed chants to question the function of the state’s protection agencies, professed, “Whose streets? Our Streets!” And, into the face of the masked law enforcers, they pleaded, “Whose Cops? Our Cops!” These chants met a severe response from state and federal law enforcement agents. The activists were corralled into “protest zones”; many were subjected to OC spray and CS gas, and were arrested and beaten in the streets by Seattle police officers and the National Guard. One activist, Juan Bocanegra from the NW Labor and Employment Law Office, observed, “it was a manifestation of the people’s voice and the response by the police department was one of the most significant turning points, because it told everybody that ‘all of you are slaves and you better get back in your place’ ” (This is What Democracy Looks Like).

The message of global democracy from the protestors was lost in the reporting by the mainstream media, which portrayed the activists as being rabble-rousers and vandals. One reporter, while interviewing an activist sprayed with pepper spray, said, “She said her eyes are shut and she can’t see anything. That’s pretty much the story for people getting in the way down here…” (This is What Democracy Looks Like). The
language of the reporter describing the protestors as “getting in the way” illustrates the rhetorical approach used by the media to delegitimize the actions of the protestors. The protestors were not characterized as citizens enacting their rights to peacefully assemble, but rather as disrupters and lawbreakers.

In the current consumerist culture, where the establishment is created from the corporate executive’s office down, and where the public feels empowered because they have choices about where to shop and an opportunity to vote for government officials, it may be difficult to acknowledge how this society has its own form of political subjugation. But if one looks at the leniency allowed to corporations in the face of scandal, like the Wall Street bailout, it is apparent that corporations receive advantages and privileges that the consumer would not be offered. When one thinks of “protest zones” and lackluster reporting on oppositional movements such as the WTO protest in Seattle, that garnered media attention only when protestors broke windows, it can be seen that resistance movements are only visible in the collective conscience when the public transcript can portray them as riotous and violent, leaving the impression that resistance as action is fugitive and akin to terrorism—whereas legal and socially acceptable resistance movements created within “protest zones” have become, in fact, powerless. Those that benefit from the privileged ideology of capitalism and free-trade have successfully zapped their effectiveness by making opposition nice, neat, and quiet. In essence, the polite protest is allowed because it does not do anything. And in the event that resistance disrupts the functioning of society, the movement is easily characterized as barbaric extremism.
The coverage of the WTO protest illustrates the massive impact media has on the public. The protestors in many cases were very successful in creating a movement designed to disrupt the functioning of an ever-powerful faction in the global economy. However, the reporting on the protests reveals that the guiding principles of capitalism govern the media outlet itself. In the wake of the most devastating economic downturn since the Great Depression, it is apparent that the ideology of consumerism still dominates the public discourse. We are told that the “for-profit” practices that spiraled us into a recession are exactly the practices we must depend on to get us out of it. Lending and shopping got us into this mess, and now we need to take out loans and to shop to get us out of it.

It is only fitting that given this stage of our democracy, in order to upset the hegemony of a consumerist culture, activism has evolved into a more theatrical, and often ethically challenging, performance. Activists now use pranking, deception, rumor, and appropriation in order to deliver a counter-consumerist message to the public. The pranking activist’s work deliberately manipulates the complacency of the public and the media in order to focus attention towards corporate scandal and deception.

**Pranking**

As a performer, pranking seems like the most risky type of art form. There is no assured response from the audience; no one will be clapping at the end of a prank. Most likely they will be disturbed, because in today’s culture, pranking that is not attached to marketing or politics is considered lying in its worst form. The prankster’s goal is a penetration into the normalized behaviors of the public. The social prank makes
one think about time. It stops you in your tracks. Ordinarily, when everything is in place, daily practices are automatic, but when a prank occurs it makes the participant stop and re-think the space in time that they were fooled, the time when they believed that what was before them was genuine. The recognition of personal vulnerability exposed by a prank is a disconcerting realization. Whereas the deception from advertising or by government officials blends in so well with day-to-day life that the citizen never stops and examines how or why they were pranked by the government or a corporation.

I want to show how interventionist art succeeds in creating activist methods like shopdropping and identity correction that surpasses the possibilities of change offered by traditional protest movements. I do not contend that we do not still need protest movements like the Seattle protest; I firmly believe those movements are vital to democracy. But in order to permeate the extensive control of corporate influence of our culture, we need creative alternatives to stir consciousness in the broader public. My intent in this study is to show how these methods most effectively do so.

Using the basic methodology I learned in theater to ask questions about rhetorical effectiveness, I examine the pranking methods from the Yes Men and Packard Jennings’s Wal-Mart Project by analyzing who the artists are talking to, what the artists are fighting for, and what they want their audience to do with this interaction. My intent is to show that pranking is not only an effective tool for influence, but is also a method of working amongst the people to instigate an awareness of social practices that disrupts the hegemony of corporate influence in our society.

Throughout this study I trace the steps of identity hijacking in product and personality. It is a pranking method that creates likeness to critique the norm. Similar to
Stephen Colbert using the character of an ultra-conservative to criticize conservative ideology, the shopdropping movement and the Yes Men use similarity to comment on consumerist practices engrained in our culture. The shopdropper imitates the product to critique consumer complacency and product necessity. The Yes Men imitate the WTO and other corporate power figures to focus attention on malpractice in corporate procedures.

Theoretical Framework

Creating Space for Resistance

Artists and scholars have written extensively on art as a unifying cultural practice, but the influential relationship of art and political resistance has suffered contention amongst academia. Additionally, the creative methods of pranking have often been overlooked as a lower form of both art and resistance movements. The deceptive nature of the prank rejects viability because the prank alters determined definitions of normalcy and perceptions of identity. The prank creates an environment that is pliable, that questions what is conceived as real and genuine in our surroundings.

This pliable space is similar to the carnival environment described by Mikhail Bahktin in his study Rabelais and His World. Bahktin’s analysis of Rabelias’s work reveals that the carnival is an environment where hierarchy is leveled, where the participants, of all levels of society, commune and perform acts of grotesque indulgence. The carnival creates “special forms of marketplace speech and gesture, frank and free, permitting no distance between those who came in contact with each other and liberating from norms of etiquette and decency imposed at other times” (10). This freedom was a liberating experience for all participating in the marketplace carnival. At any other time
of the year the public was confined to norms of etiquette and decency that severely
governed public interactions. In the carnival those rules did not apply and were replaced
with festive interactions that revealed the grotesque aspects of human nature.

Bahktin contends that Rabelias’s carnival-grotesque features function “to
consecrate inventive freedom, to permit the combination of a variety of different
elements and their rapprochement, to liberate from the prevailing point of view of the
world, from conventions and established truths, from clichés, from all that is humdrum
and universally accepted” (34). Similar to the carnival, the prank functions to challenge
conventions and the humdrum universal acceptance of consumerism, and to permit
different publics to combine and mix for new freedoms.

Bahktin does not contend that the carnival functions as a resistance movement
or as an art form. He explains that the carnival “belongs to the borderline between art and
life” (7). The essence of Bahktin’s study is that the carnival functions as a way to cope
with the given social structure rather than to upturn it. It is a way for all strata of society
to play and burn away conventional frustrations, in order to return to the system relieved.
This purpose of the carnival is similar to the purpose of the burlesque show in San
Francisco; it is a forum to relieve tension rather than alleviate the source of it.

However, Bahktin alternately states that the feasts and celebrations of the
carnivals are linked to societal revolutions, times where people were undergoing change.

The feast is always essentially related to time, either to the recurrence of an event in
the natural (cosmic) cycle, or to biological or historic timeliness. Moreover, through
all the stages of historic development feasts were linked with crisis, of breaking
points in the cycle of nature or in the life of society and man. (9)
The carnival’s existence, according to Bahktin, is linked to a cycle by which the population creates. In order to deal with the crisis, a crisis of the moon or a loss or birth, the public unifies and disregards the rules of convention to experiment with inventive change—change that demonstrates a portrayal of their character free of feudal definitions. Bahktin’s explanation of the cycle of societal pressure illustrates how creative expression is inextricably linked to societal evolution.

The features of carnival can be linked to many different forms of resistance. For example, the WTO protests in Seattle created an environment where music, dancing, and street closing were part of the resistance, a vital part of keeping the protestors together. The festival-like exhibitions additionally served to show the non-protesting public the nature of the group. It showed that they were not violent or angry or abusive to the streets, but were celebrating their unity in the streets. Regardless of the celebratory tone of the resistance movement, the message of peaceful protesters was, unfortunately, lost in the reporting by the media.

The tendency to characterize resistance movements as fugitive behavior has been illustrated over time as a natural part of the power struggle. James Scott, in his book *Domination and the Art of Resistance*, analyzes resistance through an investigation of the subverted messages of subordinate classes. His work studies rhetorical texts in slavery, serfdom, and caste subordination systems. He asserts that there are public transcripts: acts that reinforce an established hierarchy, and hidden transcripts: acts that work to upturn the hierarchy, which must be analyzed in a society that does not have “the luxury of negative reciprocity: trading a slap for a slap, an insult for an insult” (xii). The transcripts of the subordinate peoples are “hidden” because the powerful have the leverage to starve,
imprison, and murder those who threaten to weaken their power. He explains in his introduction that “the hidden transcript is typically expressed openly—albeit in disguised form” (xi). And his purpose in writing the book is to “suggest how we might more successfully read, interpret, and understand the often fugitive political conduct of subordinate groups” (xii).

Scott uses Bahktin’s study to illustrate the power of discourse in the marketplace. Scott’s analysis of Bahktin’s “now-celebrated argument” explains that “the marketplace was the privileged site of anti-hegemonic discourse, and carnival was its most striking expression” (122). Bahktin’s study of the space where hierarchy was leveled naturally lends to Scott’s assertions on public and hidden transcripts. The marketplace serves as an example of the space where the hidden transcripts of the people were spoken freely. Bahktin’s carnival becomes a historical example of a physical location, where resistance to hegemonic principles is expressed under creative cover.

Bahktin’s Rabelias and His World daringly drove literary analysis toward an understanding of the context and environment from which a text is cast. However, Scott’s book pushes beyond the scope of Bahktin’s work with his study of hidden transcripts. In it Scott examines not the relief of societal pressure but the active resistance to it through creative measures.

Given the increasingly creative forms of counter-hegemonic strategies, Scott’s tools of hidden and public transcripts become vital to understanding resistance movements of today’s consumerist climate. The current counter-hegemonic strategies of pranksters utilize and appropriate strategies of resistance movements throughout time. Scott’s work, which examines the historically significant texts of slaves and caste
cultures, deliberates on “how we might interpret the rumors, gossip, folktales, songs, gestures, jokes, and theater of the powerless as vehicles by which, among other things they insinuate a critique of power while hiding behind anonymity or behind innocuous understandings of their conduct” (xiii). Understanding the function of creative resistance proves to be crucial to rhetorical analysis of the resistance to power. It is in the theater of activism, where sabotage, appropriation, and pranks of rumor and gossip aid the delivery of new public discourses and ideology, that I direct my inquiry.

Deference, Appropriation, Rumor, and Gossip

James Scott asserts in his preface that “Short of actual rebellion, powerless groups have, I argue, a self-interest in conspiring to reinforce hegemonic appearances” (xii). Meaning that in the public transcript, groups that intend on resisting those dominating and determining societal discourse have an interest in appearing to be complacent in their prescribed role.

The public transcript is, to put it crudely, the self-portrait of dominating elites as they would have themselves seen. Given the usual power of dominate elites to compel performances from others, the discourse of the public transcript is a decidedly lopsided discussion. (18)

Often as a result the historical context reveals that those determined as slaves or workers by the elites appear “happy” in their subordinate role by many accounts of the public transcript. The appearance of acceptance, according to Scott, is crucial to the progression of a resistance movement, for the performance provides a cover under which rebellion can be constructed. The safety of the subordinates is in their appearance of liking their role, loving their master, and enjoying their allotted freedoms.
Scott explains that the deferential behavior may look a certain way:

The deferential behavior of servants and women—the encouraging smiles, the attentive listening, the appreciative laughter, the comments of affirmation, admiration, or concern—comes to seem normal, even built into personality rather than inherent in the kinds of exchange that low-status people commonly enter into. (qtd. in Scott 28)

And misreading this performance of deference as a type of conformity would be dismissing its sharp rhetorical power. “Thus conformity is far too lame a word for the active manipulation of rituals of subordination to turn them to good personal advantage; it is an art form in which one can take some pride at having successfully misrepresented oneself” (33). Conformity is “too lame a word” because the performance potentially allows the subordinate to access power by keeping their identity of a resistor anonymous. In this sense the acts of conformity used by subordinate groups are simultaneously methods of protection and aggression, because only in a cloak of safety can one learn and understand the practices and language of the hierarchy in order to find its weaknesses.

From the interpretation of this text’s view of constructed appearances it can be derived that there is an innate understanding that in order to successfully resist the hegemony, there must be a level of deception toward the powerful, because if the powerful understood the resistance they would squash it at its conception. The key purposes for creating that deception and appropriating practices of the hegemony are to 1) appear deferent and 2) upturn the power structure.

For example in Chapter 2, “Domination, Acting, and Fantasy” in his section “Power and Acting” Scott deliberates on the performance of deference and the appropriation of language patterns of the dominant group. He explains that findings of sociolinguists “indicate how hierarchies of gender, race, caste, and class are encoded in
the domination of talk” (30). Scott illustrates this with an example from Robin Lakoff’s language study of the “history of male dominance” on women. And he explains that the study shows that “women increasingly use men’s language – imitating the higher status dialect—” (30). Women in their ascension to a more powerful status must and do use masculine language to achieve that status. In doing so the women seemingly accept that feminine language is a weaker form of communication. However, though appropriating language can be seen as necessary to improving status, it is not always apparent that it comes with the acceptance of deference, though the performance may imply it.

Scott examines the use of language to control relationships in the Punjab caste system. He explains how language is used to mark place, bar ascent, and provide a safe haven for the hidden transcript in a caste system (32). He asserts, with an example of the Punjab’s subordinate’s use of multiple names within the power structure, that the language of the subordinates allows for a performance of deference to the hegemony and, simultaneously, acts as a cover for identity. The subordinate using one name for himself in front of his superior and another name for himself with his fellow subordinates, allows the subordinate a certain amount of anonymity (32).

This use of language is only one way that the subordinate participates in the performance of deference. “The performance, as I shall continually emphasize, comprises not only speech acts but conformity in facial expression and gesture as well as practical obedience to commands that may be distasteful or humiliating” (29). These acts, and this performance, though humiliating, serves to deceive the powerful in the caste system in Punjab. It is one of the multi-faceted approaches to masked disobedience. This approach of creating deference in order to deceive the powerful and deliver counter cultural
messages in the hidden transcript is utilized in the projects of pranking rhetoric detailed in this study. The technique of deference is apparent upon examination of the use of language in the various pranking projects.

Scott’s analysis of the purpose of language can be used in two ways. First, by understanding that there is a language system that serves the privileged in society. And, second, that to upturn the power structure there must be an understanding of its function. At times a resistance movement playing along with the public transcript must adhere to linguistical rules and enact a performance of willing subordination. And at other times the resistance movement must appropriate the language to create another character, a character worthy of ascending into the discourse of the “superior” class. Pranking rhetoric, similarly, demonstrates an understanding of the privileged language in both consumerist culture and corporate culture. In order to create a deferent character worthy of occupying a privileged “superior” class, or space, the prankster appropriates that language to conceal themselves and fold into the cultural context.

There are four tactics that I want to pull apart from the text of *Domination* to use in my analysis of creative resistance: Appropriation, Deference, Rumor, and Gossip.

As I have previously discussed with Scott’s book, deference is a performance commanded by the hierarchal structure in a caste system. Scott explains that domination is not guaranteed once established by a particular group but must be maintained by a system of vigilant attention to societal interaction. The dominant must always maintain a face of righteousness, and subordinates must continually prove their ineptitude for a hierarchal system, such as a caste system, to function (45).
Scott explains that subordinates must keep up the appearance of ineptitude to participate in a resistance that allows appropriation. Scott emphasizes appropriation as an integral part of resistance, because “The bond between domination and appropriation means that it is impossible to separate the ideas and symbolism of subordination from a process of material exploitation” (188). Scott notes that domination and appropriation are linked because in order to become master, one must justify within their societal system the rights to property and ownership. The dominant become dominant because of their access to material wealth, and the subordinate become so because of their lack of access to it. He explains that the dominant power groups “extract material taxes in the form of labor, grain, cash, and service in addition to extracting symbolic taxes in the form of deference, demeanor, posture, verbal formulas, and acts of humility” (188). This extraction for property and the justifications for sole access to material wealth at the expense of the subordinates drives subordinates to acts of appropriation.

In response to the prescribed distribution of wealth and status by the hierarchy, the resistance movement must assume some type of appropriation in order to upset the societal structure that enslaves them.

In the case of slaves, for example, these stratagems have typically included theft, pilfering, feigned ignorance, shirking or careless labor, footdragging, secret trade and production for sale, sabotage of crops, livestock, and machinery, arson, flight, and so on. (188)

Scott’s examples of the appropriation of materials by slaves show that those strategies are in response to the material exploitation of the power holders. The slaves’ purposes for that appropriation of material wealth remain undefined when Scott questions their presumed fugitive nature. “Was the taking of grain, chickens, hogs, and so on a mere
response to hunger pangs, was it done for the pleasure of adventure, or was it meant to chasten hated masters or overseers? ... Publicly, of course the master’s definition of theft prevailed” (188). Scott shows that the legality of the acts of appropriation is subject to the very rules prescribed by power holders. The acts of anonymous pilfering are in fact a rejection of the order of the law, and more importantly, the societal structure that creates it. In response, the dominant argue on the basis of ownership and law, and characterize the acts as fugitive. But regardless of that characterization, the acts of defying those laws work to embolden other subordinates because the demonstrations show the cracks of the supposedly impenetrable façade.

In addition to the performance of deference and the process of appropriation, resistance movements use a more clandestine, infectious form of cracking the glass ceiling. In Chapter 6, “Voice Under Domination: The Arts of Political Disguise,” Scott explains that “Most of the political life of subordinate groups is to be found neither in overt collective defiance of powerholders nor in complete hegemonic compliance, but in the vast territory between these two polar opposites” (136). He contends that resistance is not readily identified in the public transcript because of the threat of retaliation by the powerholders, but that the ideology of resistance can infiltrate and circulate in the public transcript via certain anonymous methods. The two I am most interested in are rumor and gossip.

Scott defines rumor and gossip as “elementary forms of disguise” (138) that serve subordinates because no one can track their origin. Scott differentiates gossip from rumor specifically by saying that “The character of gossip that distinguishes it from rumor is that gossip consists typically of stories that are designed to ruin the reputation of
some identifiable person or persons” (142). Gossip, he explains, works most effectively between people of an equal class. That is, gossip that circulates among slaves about the master may hardly damage the master’s reputation. But in the resistant movements that I intend on examining, the anonymity and function of gossip are highly relevant and effective. The circulation of rumor, however, can successfully work in a caste system. The rumor of rebellion can circulate in the public transcript and can both inspire subordinates and successfully threaten the elite.

Inquiries utilize Domination and The Art of Resistance’s rhetorical lenses of hidden and public transcripts in a vast array of studies, ranging from social inequality in the medical industry to gender studies (Behague; Chow). Many works focus on areas with cultures similar to those focused on in Scott’s book, areas that operate in disciplinary systems. More closely linked to my study is Majken Sorensen’s use of Scott’s work in his article “Humor as a Serious Strategy of Nonviolent Resistance to Oppression.” Sorenson defines the book as useful to his study of humor as resistance, when he explains that

Scott’s nuanced understanding of resistance to domination, as opposed to traditional understandings of resistance as open rebellion, provides us with concepts for looking at all the space between complete compliance and openly declared rebellion, the space where things are not as they seem on the surface. (173)

This illusion of the surface identity work constructed to cover stinging criticisms has been used in rhetorical inquiries in literature as well as social sciences (Larsen).

However, studies like Sorenson’s inquiry of humor’s utility in resistance come closer to the type of use I intend on implementing in my examination of pranking rhetoric. The specificity of pranking differentiates itself with Sorenson’s use of Scott in a number of
ways, but most importantly, by connecting the methods of the oppressed to the anti-
consumerist movement of the 21st century and by addressing the essentiality of fugitive
and deceptive, albeit humorous, conduct in order to successfully resist the hegemony.

Similarly, this study differentiates itself from other uses of this text, because I
do not claim that the social structures examined here are equivalent to the areas examined
in Scott’s book. I’m not arguing that activists today are resisting in systems identical to
caste systems and slavery systems, or that consumers are somehow slaves. That the
activists are not slaves is evident by the fact that the artists analyzed are working in the
developed world and are in some cases speaking directly to the corporate executives
themselves. The access and ambitious intentions that these artists possess reveal their
status is not on par with slaves.

Scott observes that the more oppressive a system, the more subverted the
messages, and in my observation of resistance movements today, the messages they
subvert are in many cases supposed to be unearthed by members of the power structure.
My hope is to make connections in method and note the utility of them in the evolution of
resistance. Scott himself claims that his analysis of slavery, serfdoms, and caste
subordination systems is “diagnostic,” for a purpose to “teach us about power, hegemony,
resistance, and subordination” (x). My intention is to examine how these methods of
resistance examined by Scott aid the resistance movement in our present consumerist
culture.

While I do not identify the social structure in the globalist economy as being
disciplinary, I do agree with Christine Harold when she explains in her book Our Space:
Resisting the Corporate Control of Culture that in a consumerist society we experience a
“contemporary capitalism” that marks a shift from a *disciplinary* to a *control* society, as described by Foucault. She asserts that in a control society those asserting dominance…do not operate through the confinement and silencing of individuals but instead ‘through continuous control and communication.’ In a control society, people are not denied access and information and knowledge, but are instead granted ever greater access to them through the opening up of technologies and the hybridization of institutions. However, what might appear as new freedoms enables business to increasingly modulate every aspect of life. (xxviii)

This picture of control is not the master lording over the people, openly asserting dominance—it is far less transparent; in fact, in Harold’s view, the dominant are never visible, but are, rather, an omniscient presence in our entertainment, businesses, news, schools, on our streets, and in our houses. In this proliferation of consumerist rhetoric, in our overload of information that encourages an insatiable desire for consumption, in a system sculpted to strip the consumer of both their money and their wit, the prankster intervenes. Although this system is not a disciplinary system, the control society’s assertion of dominance is an obstacle to true democracy. It is this obstacle that the anti-consumerists, or the counter-hegemonic activists, wish to disrupt. According to Harold, “Two modes of intervention emerge out of and in response to the logics of disciplinarity and control—sabotage and appropriation. Media pranksters prefer affirmation and appropriation” (xxviii).

However contrary to Harold’s justification for pranksters, many of the critics of government policy and procedures describe pranksters’ actions as antithetical to effective resistance. For example, in his piece “Democratic Dissent and the Trick of Rhetorical Critique,” Robert Ivie claims that only by operating within the established structure can we provide a legitimate form of dissent and thereby create change. Ivie
claims that when dissent is squashed within the upper tier of society’s structure, the result is the unruly behavior of the masses: they march, they protest, they throw rotten tomatoes at congressman. Ivie alludes to forms of resistance that are comparable to those used by the prankster. According to Ivie, it is these savage behaviors that obstruct democracy as well as impede a logical evolution of change in a democratic resistance.

Ivie’s argument for a more rhetorically savvy form of dissent uses an example of a documentary that critiques the Bush administration’s actions in Iraq. The documentary uses military officials, politicians, and “insiders” to legitimize the claims made by the documentary. This method of operating within the established structure, according to Ivie, is the most effective way to make change in society. He disregards people’s movements, which he fears lead to violent acts of rebellion that can largely be dismissed in the public’s eye, therefore leaving dissenters without authority (279). And Ivie contends that we must have a “connected criticism,” which he describes as a “sharp rhetorical thrust against governing opinion and policy balanced by an equally firm footing in the underlying culture of values, beliefs, and accepted ways of acting” (277).

Ivie’s example of an effective form of rhetorical criticism is a documentary criticizing the Bush administration’s occupation in Iraq, Uncovered. The documentary is deemed successful because it uses voices within the administration to criticize the hegemony, thereby legitimizing the claims of the documentarian producing the film. This method of operating within the established structure, according to Ivie, is the most effective way to make change in society. The generals and the authority figures, and even the form of the documentary, are a “connected” form of criticism. Its connection to the system it is criticizing lends to the credibility of its claims.
Ivie’s dismissive acknowledgement of the less privileged forms of resistance shows how people work to delegitimize the types of resistance that are accessible to everyone outside of the decision-making structure in the same way the media delegitimized the WTO protest in Seattle. If the generals and the types of resistance that revere the structure empowering the given leaders of the time are the only legitimate forms of criticism to the power structure, then the fact that in a democracy a citizen should have as much say, as much agency, as much of a legitimate claim on criticism and method as the “professionals” connected to the system is discredited. Similarly, this phenomenon discredits the ways that the individual does work from a “connected” criticism by working amongst the public of which it is a participant.

Ivie’s analysis of effective dissent is reminiscent of Walter Lippman’s theory on democracy and the press. In Eric Alterman’s article “Out of Print,” detailing the democratic ideology behind web reporting and its fallible consequences, he explains that Lippman thought the political world was too complicated for the average citizen to comprehend. “Lippman identified a fundamental gap between what we naturally expect from democracy and what we know to be true about people” (Alterman 4). Lippman contends that journalism on political issues only confuses the easily manipulated public. He asserts that there should be a class of experts to sort out problems when they arise, and not report the problems to the public. Similarly, Ivie describes resistance movements handed over to the people to be erratic and counterproductive. Ivie wants the matters of resistance left to those who fully understand the matters at hand, to those that are connected to it by an authoritative stance.
John Dewey famously countered Lippman with his own publications of essays where he asserts that democracy is like a conversation. Dewey was in support of educating the public and had “faith in the capacity of human beings for intelligent judgment and action if proper conditions are furnished” (qtd in Alterman 5). Like Dewey, Christine Harold examines a new form of resistance much like the “conversation” of democracy offered. In her book, Our Space: Resisting the Corporate Control of Culture, Harold examines the new shift in activism that has been labeled “culture jamming” in order to suggest alternatives to the artistic infringement of copyright law. Harold’s book demonstrates the importance of communal involvement in alternating policy and procedure.

Control Jam

Culture jamming is a process that in many ways can be looked at in terms of wrench throwing, going against the machine by creating obstacles that upset the normal humdrum of consumerist culture. But Christine Harold has an approach on the term culture jamming that is useful for my own purposes in this study. She explains that, “‘jamming’ as a metaphor does not have to be interpreted only as a damming or stopping of corporate media. More interestingly, it can be a strategy that artfully proliferates other media and messages that challenge the ability of corporate messages to make meaning in predictable ways – to jam with rather than against” (Our Space xxvi). Harold’s metaphor linking culture jamming to the musical verb ‘to jam’ creates a whole new meaning for resistance and offers new opportunities for rhetorical analysis of creative methods and texts.
The environment that Harold illustrates in her book is that of consumerism, where U.S. corporations create brands, not products. It is the marketability of those brands that propels financial gain, and corporations get more and more creative in order to market their brands as a “must have” in the public. She quotes a Wall Street Journal article to explain that

‘Creativity is overtaking capital as the principal elixir of growth. And creativity, although precious, shares few of the constraints that limit the range and availability of capital physical goods.’ In the current economy, rhetoric emerges as a key site of economic and cultural production. Ideas and the ability to communicate them are valuable currency in an economy for which one good brand campaign can change an entire industry. (Our Space xxiii)

The creativity invested and needed to maintain the brands’ marketability in our control society produces an ever-evolving trajectory of consumerist rhetoric. In order to keep up with this creative capital, activists naturally need to appropriate these rhetorical strategies. She explains that, “Ultimately, if marketing is…a new instrument of social control, then perhaps engaged publics must better learn to play and manipulate that instrument” (Our Space 78).

Similar to her innovative definition of “jam,” she takes an alternative approach to the defining of pranking. Pranking, traditionally, and especially in terms of culture jamming, is defined as tricking or fooling someone. But Harold explains prank in terms of folding something over on itself.

Prank…is an augmentation of dominant modes of communication that interrupts conventional patterns. In the second alternative sense, a prank is a wrinkle, or a fold. Like a fold, a prank can render a qualitative change by turning and doubling a material or text. This qualitative change is produced not through the addition of novelty, but through the reconfiguration of the object itself. (Our Space 77)
In this sense, pranking does not work to, again, stop up something outside of itself, but is working within itself. The prank works to “fold” over, or manipulate something that it is inextricably a part of. Harold’s definition of prank recognizes that the system is something that connects each of us. She stretches her meaning of prank “to include a folding over of the rhetorico-cultural field” (Our Space 77). And therefore working within a rhetorico-cultural field rather than against becomes the operative work of the rhetorical prankster.

The hegemonic problem Harold identifies with appropriation and sabotage in the rhetorical field of ideas is the siding on behalf of corporations by the judiciary on copyright laws. She illustrates the problem with examples of artists who have manipulated brands with a political message. Artists like Kieron Dwyer, who manipulated the Starbucks logo with changes that showcased the Starbuck’s mermaid holding a disposable coffee cup in one hand and a cell phone in the other with the words “Consumer Whore” stated above her head. The manipulation artfully restructured a nearly identical version of the Starbucks logo. It was a replication that expressed the consumerist principles the artists was working to expose. He represented greed with dollar signs, waste with a disposable cup in the mermaid’s hand, apathy with aster profanity, and materialism with the accompanying text “Consumer Whore.” Dwyer was sued successfully by the Starbucks corporation for his “trademark dilution” of the company’s logo (Harold, Our Space 121).

While Harold extends on notions derived from Thomas Jefferson on protecting intellectual innovation as a public endeavor (meaning citizens have the right to add infringements to brand logos while expressing new ideas about them), she claims that
most of the pranksters that she analyzes in her book fail to offer viable alternatives to the copyright law that represents corporate culture. They fail to work with, rather than against, consumerist climate. The “anti” consumerist artist movement in counter-hegemonic strategies, she feels, reinforces the hegemony the activism seeks to upset. She explains that, “If we perpetuate romantic notions of rebel auteurs stealing from established corporate authors ideas as property that can be hoarded or denied and a nostalgia for an open creative utopia, then a response to juridical restrictions as repressive, ideological, and prohibitive necessarily follows” (Our Space 131). I agree with Harold’s assertion that creating an “anti” reifies the ideology of ideas as property. The intention of “stealing” the property confirms, rather than eradicates, the system by which most artists lose their rights for intellectual innovation, the same rights that allow for creative public criticism of the hegemony.

But Harold somehow misses an important factor in her analysis of the pranking movement. She resolves most of her argument about copyright by pointing to a group operating out of Stanford University: Creative Commons, an innovative group that folds copyright law over on itself in order to jam with current marketing strategies for positive culture production. They create ever more rules for copyright use in order to make materials more accessible for creative use in a new public space (Our Space 138). Thus, they offer a new discourse capable of resisting the hegemony of corporate ownership of ideas. The artists can copyright their own work in an authorized fashion on the site and use the work of others on the site within their given rules of product conduct.

I do agree with Harold that at times the art activists’ work can appear to reinforce the hegemonic values it wishes to undermine, but I cannot see how the Creative
Commons “jams” or “pleats” or “folds” more with the given materials in our culture than these other methods. The Creative Commons site limits use to those who enter the site, creating the same top-down strategy that Harold claims does not work. Additionally, the site is created out of Stanford, which on its own represents a class of the elite that few can access. In her introduction she explains that ideas spread like diseases, not from the top down but from the bottom up. Harold’s resolution to her study quantifies rhetorical significance by its success or failure to achieve authority. Yet, the Creative Commons starts with “rules” of copyright, which implies that change in the public starts with a rule maker, or a top-down approach to making change. Harold’s conclusion distinctly reminded me of Ivie’s work gauging rhetorical dissent in terms of authority and access. By elevating authority, both suggestions for resistance methods devalue the importance of the individual in a democracy to a certain extent, Ivie at a much greater level than Harold.

Harold asserts that it is futile to direct inquiry into the purpose of a prank because pranks do not rely on an “aha” moment (Our Space 106), and therefore the field for rhetorical analysis is too vague to step into. She contends trying to “attach a specific argument or making a prank make sense may undermine what is unique about pranking’s signifying rhetoric in the first place” (Our Space 106). In the end of her analysis Harold does acknowledge pranking as an interesting form of folding and augmentation, but dismisses it as a viable area for rhetorical analysis. And in doing so passes over the varied fields of social ineptitudes in the consumer culture that the pranksters are attempting to alter. The prankster’s intent in the consumer culture is not limited to one purpose, as Harold’s is; they are, in fact, offering much more change than what is described in the
communal public offered by the Creative Commons site. Contrary to Harold’s assessment, I do see the new pranks movement as being a rich field in which to direct a rhetorical analysis.

I contend with this study that the anonymous activist does work in a “connected criticism,” a term very similar to Harold’s “jam,” by working with rather than against the culture of which it is inextricably linked. And I contend that these artists’ work, as of yet underappreciated in the resistance community, is an integral part of the vehicle for change in a counter-hegemonic body.

I do not claim that we do not need the type of intervention described by Ivie and Harold. The works represented in their studies and the idea of connected criticism are important parts of a greater system of resistance that is made up of an infinite field of methodologies for resistance to the hegemony. Nor do I claim that pranking is the only effective form of resistance. There are appropriate situations for utilizing authority and populace protest. This study does not assert that pranking is better than satire or the documentary that showcases the military’s leaders, but that these methods work together. This study does assert that pranking is a type of resistance that creates a new environment for change because it hijacks our perception of identity and offers up alternatives to existing social conventions of living in a capitalistic society. The aims of this study are to illustrate the rhetorically powerful methods used by pranksters that of as now have been dismissed as too vague and too elementary for study.

My hope is to show how these activists are working with rather than against the consumerist culture with their methods of appropriation, rumor, gossip, and deferential deception, and that they are most effective in making qualitative change
towards democratic ideals when they appeal with a “bottom up” approach. And I want to emphasize that rhetorical significance of counter-hegemonic strategies cannot be reduced to too narrow of a focus by the rhetorical analyst, because qualitative change is as nuanced as any established culture is contextually connected. What I mean is that the change garnered by a prank is not as simple as a “yes” that worked or a “no” that did not work process, and that no rhetorico-cultural artifact should be reduced to such a simplistic binary of success in matters of analysis because it limits the fields by which we can extract socially substantial meaning.

Thesis Organization

In Chapter I, I describe the theoretical framework for this study. I examine pranking methods of appropriation, sabotage, rumor, gossip, and performance by their representation in other rhetorical analyses. Through an analytical connection to Mikhail Bakhtin’s *Rabelais and His World* and James Scott’s *Domination and the Arts of Resistance* I trace the development of social discourse of subordinates to the current counter-hegemonic strategies of today’s activist movement. Additionally, I examine the current academic conversation surrounding creative resistance movements through an overview of Christine Harold’s book, *Our Space: Resisting the Corporate Control of Culture*, and Robert Ivie’s article on dissent in democracy, “The Democratic Dissent and the Trick of Rhetorical Critique,” to show how alternative forms of resistance are valued in rhetorical analysis.

In Chapter II, I examine the work of the Yes Men, an activist organization that draws attention to the culpability of corporate practices. I examine the trajectory of their
works and the impact on their audiences through an analysis of their documentary and other projects documented on their website. Their success at media manipulation and identity correction pushes beyond parody and satire, like that offered by the Stephen Colbert performance. Again, I am not contending that parody is not important in relieving stress amongst a politically repressed public, but that the *prank*, and the deception that is inevitably part of it, works to initiate change amongst the seemingly unaffected areas of the public. This chapter focuses on how the Yes Men’s projects ambitiously attempt to create an impact amongst the very audience they sought to critique: power holders. This chapter argues that their work, through an augmentation of the public transcript, forces the power holders to address the social resistance movement’s solutions to free-trade problems.

My study examines the indicators that reveal answers to the inquiry of an artist’s intent. In order to examine the rhetorical usefulness of the Yes Men I have to assess how it is received; therefore, I have to give it an intention and an audience. In my study I examine their intentions and their self-evaluations on a varied group of projects in order to attain an understanding of how media works as a manipulating device in society, and to define significant features of the Yes Men’s rhetorical tactics.

Chapter III focuses on the work of shopdropper Packard Jennings’s and his Wal-Mart Project. My intent with the study of shopdropping is to trace the pattern by which the prank reverses the flow of consumerism at the public level. A consumer market is based on a gorging process. Citizens are trained to receive: we receive laws, products, advertising, messages, and lessons. The people are not asked to reciprocate, and are forced to agree and get along to increase production and sales. The corporations and the
government are in charge of “giving,” and in doing so accrue power over the people. But the shopdropper leaves the product, the message, the object, by dropping—not taking, and in doing so resists. Shopdropping reverses the process of reception and creates an opportunity for giving and a reversal of hierarchical order. The shopdroppers leave their product in the space that has hijacked cultural product exchange: the corporate store shelf. The participant of a prank is encouraged to interact with a message of counter-consumerist activism.

Chapter IV concludes by emphasizing how a prank works in direct contradiction to prescribed rules of convention. And that the antithetical nature of the prank is precisely what makes a prank rhetorically significant. I connect the work of the Yes Men to the work of shopdroppers by their manipulation of misunderstanding and deliberate on the features by which each movement initiates alternative practices in a consumer culture.

This is a nation based on consumption; we eat, buy, and take orders from the hegemony, and yet call ourselves a democracy. With a corporate system that flows one way, from the top down, democracy becomes impossible, a pipe dream. The Yes Men ambitiously attack the rationalization and the manipulation at the top of this societal structure. And shopdropping offers an alternative to the daily practices of the people that legitimizes that power structure. Their work exemplifies the features of pranking that have the potential to enact qualitative change in our society, that can unearth corporate scandal and consumer complacency and encourage citizens towards true democracy, where the people’s vitality is of greater value than corporate profits.
CHAPTER II

APPROPRIATING DEFERENTIAL BEHAVIORS

Analyzing the Rhetorical Power of Agreement, Humor, and Rumor in the Yes Men’s “Identity Correction”

On December 3, 2004, the 20th anniversary of the Bhopal chemical meltdown, the largest industrial chemical meltdown in history, where over 35 tons of toxic gases including methyl isocyanate and possibly hydrogen cyanide, nitrous oxide, and carbon monoxide leaked from a pesticide plant owned by a multinational corporation based in the United States, Jude Finisterra, a spokesperson from Dow Chemicals, made a shocking announcement on the BBC (Eckerman 7; Amnesty International). Finisterra stated that Dow, which had bought Union Carbide Corporation (UCC), the original chemical plant operations blamed for the meltdown, accepts full responsibility for the “catastrophe” that caused the deaths of over 2,000 citizens of Bhopal. The spokesperson additionally stated that Dow intended to fully compensate the nearly 120,000 victims that had been affected since the meltdown by liquidating Union Carbide, and that they would clean up the toxically contaminated site that UCC abandoned sixteen years ago, which continues to pollute waterways and populated areas in Bhopal (“Yes Men: Dow”).

The announcement came as a shock to the BBC, their audiences, and to the citizens of Bhopal. But the biggest shock came to the Dow Corporation, who had not sent
a spokesperson to the BBC to discuss the catastrophe of Bhopal, and who had no
intention of cleaning up the site, compensating victims, or accepting responsibility for the
catastrophic incident of December 2, 1984. In response, two hours after the interview
aired on the BBC on December 3, 2004, Dow released this statement on its website:

Dow confirms that there was no basis whatsoever for this report. BBC has been
informed of this error and has pulled the erroneous story. According to a statement
issued by the BBC, "This information was inaccurate, part of an elaborate
deception. The person did not represent the company. We want to make it clear the
information he gave was entirely inaccurate. This is an unfortunate situation for
everyone involved." ("Dow News Center")

Thus the prank was revealed to the media and to the public, which corresponded with a
deluge of interest regarding the meltdown in Bhopal, India, and the mysterious media
pranksters who call themselves the Yes Men.

The Yes Men is an organization spearheaded by activists who take the
interpretation of corporate rhetoric to new levels. As the name implies, their approach
uses deference and conformity as methods for tactical resistance. According to their
website, they use “identity correction in order to impersonate big time criminals in order
to publicly humiliate them” (Yes Men, “Homepage”). Their acts target leaders and big
corporations, “who put profits ahead of everything else” (Yes Men, “Homepage”). The
Yes Men impersonate corporate personalities from the World Trade Organization, Dow,
EXXON, and many others. They put on secondhand suits and walk into conferences or
are interviewed on major media networks giving candid accounts of corporate scandals.
In short, the Yes Men put on the masks of the major players in the corporate sector in
order to point out the fundamental flaws of their operations via emphatic agreement
housed in corporate rhetoric.
Using identity correction as a mirror, the Yes Men reveal unethical corporate practices with the performance of the corporate character to the corporate character. In order to do this, the Yes Men have to be well versed in the rhetoric of the elite and, to a certain extent, have a grasp of their larger ideological framework. James Scott’s analysis of the subordinate’s creative resistance using alternate identities can also apply to the identity work of the Yes Men. The method used by the Yes Men adopts similar features of conformity with their presentation. The Yes Men’s performance comprises various aspects of the subordinate corporate character that reveal an unquestioning stance toward commands, an attitude that is required to gain admittance to the elite of the business world. In their performances, the characteristics that are distasteful and humiliating to those that consider themselves progressive members of a democracy are brought to the surface.

In Chapter 2 of Domination, Scott deliberates on the privileged characters that the Yes Men work to personify. Scott notes the limitations of the privileged in a caste society and addresses the humility that comes to the oppressor with his retelling of George Orwell’s essay “Shooting an Elephant.” The essay illustrates the “masks” of the actors in a caste system when Orwell finds himself trapped playing the role of master as a sub-inspector of police in Burma in the 1920s. Scott extracts from this essay that “If subordination requires a credible performance of humility and deference, so domination seems to require a credible performance of haughtiness and mastery” (11). The dominant as much as the subordinate has a “role” to play, that in the larger picture of their identity appears entirely hypocritical. The Dow chemical plant, which expresses “sorrow” over the catastrophe of Bhopal, alternately rejects any alternative to inaction, because it would
be financially unprofitable. The Yes Men’s scheme directly plays to an audience made up of corporate personalities, and appeals to the nature of the individual wearing the mask of master in the corporate world.

The Yes Men are not subordinates, but “citizens” that borrow the method of linguistical agreement, and by doing so offer the most stinging of criticisms to the hegemony. Scott quotes Hochschild, who explains that “‘to have higher status is to have a stronger claim to rewards, including emotional rewards. It is also to have greater access to the means of enforcing claims’” (qtd. in Scott 29). The emotional rewards of the American corporate elite tout life, justice, and liberty for all. It is an ideology that asserts that if one works hard enough in a free society, then there is no limit to success. But the performance of the Yes Men shows that those humanistic principles run contrary to corporate practices, and that there is a “limit” imposed by a free-trade market that is propagated by the roles played by the corporate elite. The Yes Men borrow the method of the deferential performance of the “underdog” for a resistance to the “top dog.” The actors tuck their tails between their legs and agree with every action a corporation has taken to cover up scandal. This agreement is the performance. In order to validate their criticisms of the corporate world they adopt the roles of those that they intend on changing, and, consequently, their masks give them access to enforcing those claims.

Sonja Foss states that “the notion that reality is created through rhetoric means that reality is not fixed. It changes according to the symbols we use to talk about it” (6). The pranking used by the Yes Men, in its most valuable sense, works to alter the symbols by which we comprehend the first world’s relationship to consumerism. They work to alter the naturalized ideology behind profit that the hegemony constantly advocates by
bringing to the surface the subverted nature of the “for profit” culture. By using methods of appropriation and assimilation, the Yes Men adopt the identities of the corporate bodies, “correcting” their language and identities in order to alter the conceptualized reality of consumerist culture. Their performance reveals the degrading nature of the oppressor and the ruthless truths that come from a profit-based free-trade system.

Because we live in a free-trade world and a technologically savvy age that encompasses a global economy, the impact of corporate hegemony is not confined to any one nation, but is felt by many. Consequently, pranksters such as the Yes Men have created an artistic resistance with an audience, purpose, and tactical strategy that spreads across the transatlantic. Analyzing the creative resistance movement of the Yes Men reveals how deception and humor act as aids to resistance, and how performance and grandeur help deliver a potent and dangerous criticism of the public transcript. Their work is an example of the “rare moments of political electricity when…the hidden transcript is spoken directly and publicly in the teeth of power” (Scott). In doing so, I hope to connect their movement to the innovative resistance movements explained in James Scott’s book Domination and the Art of Resistance.

While Scott’s book is directed toward resistance movements from nations that employ slavery and caste systems, the principles of creative resistance in social systems where there is no negative reciprocity very much applies to the capitalist systems that the Yes Men work on altering in developed countries. However, one difference that benefits the Yes Men’s work is that in a democracy many in the public sector have some power. For example, college-educated Caucasian males have more access to the hegemonic
system than a slave had in the United States in the 18th century. Additionally, they have access to effective tools like the Internet.

In their grand scheme to trade a subversive slap to the hegemony, the Yes Men utilize what power they have by using their jobs, their schooling, and their access to the Internet in an attempt to land their blow accurately on the face of the corporate body. But even with this limited access to power, it should remain clear that in the present-day democracy, the public body comes to being nowhere near as influential, privileged, and powerful as the corporate body.

The Yes Men

In the documentary about the activist group, the creation of the Yes Men is credited to two men with similar purposes who enjoy complementary skills: Andy Bichlbaum and Mike Bonnano—activists endowed with technological literacy, artistic flair, biting wit, and experience with clandestine operations. Bichlbaum garnered media attention while working in a company that made video games, where he created characters in a game that showcased Speedo-clad men frolicking in the background of the video game world, planting kisses on each other. Similarly, Bonnano caught interest as part of the Barbie Liberation Operation, which had an operation during the Christmas season where they switched out the audio voice boxes of talking Barbie and GI Joe action figures. Consequently, little girls unwrapped Barbie Dolls that said things like, “Dead men tell no tales,” and little boys unwrapped GI Joes that said, “Math is hard!” and “Let’s go shopping!” Both men were using engineering skills for product manipulation, acts that
similarly challenged concepts of gender reified in manufactured goods for children (The Yes Men).

In 1999, Bichlbaum and Bonnano were connected when asked by rTM Mark.com to make a website mocking the George W. Bush website during his first run for the Presidency in 2000. The activist group bought the domain name gwbush.com, a URL nearly identical to G.W.’s georgewbush.com. Bichlbaum and Bonnano subsequently created a satirical website that looked identical to the George W. Bush website, except it posted information left out by the campaign. For example, it showcased Bush’s revoking of the Clean Air Acts in Texas during his stint as governor and his past drug use. The website garnered massive media attention when a reporter questioned Bush about the site by asking what limits should be enforced for internet use, because the site showcased a doctored photo of Bush giving the middle finger to African Americans. George W. Bush responded that there “should be limits to freedom” (The Yes Men).

After the media heyday with Bush’s response to the site, Bonnano and Bichlbaum were quickly encouraged to make another satirical site. The domain name is www.gatt.org, and they have used it to make a website mocking the World Trade Organization. The site is still up and proudly fabricating stories that emphasize the lack of human sensitivity that the WTO’s policies exert. For example, one of the articles on the mock site states:

**WTO Announces Formalized Slavery Market For Africa:**
At a Wharton Business School conference on business in Africa that took place on Saturday, November 11, the WTO announced the creation of a new, much-improved form of slavery for the parts of Africa that have been hardest hit by the 500-year history of free trade there (“WTO Announces”)
The Yes Men fabricated this story in order to point out a major problem with the WTO; the issue they are emphasizing is the fact that Africa has been hard-hit by economic exploits for cheap labor. Using a transformative subject matter, slavery, that has negative connotations for most of the modern world, the Yes Men point out with dramatic flair that what we use today for labor in our free-trade system is just as bad.

According to the Yes Men documentary, the WTO may not have begun as a tool for corporate domination of the planet, but monetary gains in the corporate sector quickly altered any noble objectives. Michael Moore, featured in the documentary, explains that the WTO probably started for a good purpose: so the world community could help raise others out of poverty, but it was quickly hijacked by corporations who wanted to go into vulnerable countries to profit from the cheap labor workforce (The Yes Men).

After the Yes Men created a website that looked identical to the WTO’s site, they received an email request for a representative of the WTO site to speak at a conference in Salzburg, Austria. Bichlbaum and Bonnano saw the opportunity to extend their pranking operation to a larger audience and confirmed that they would send a representative of their site to the conference. They produced the character Doctor Andreas Bichlbauer, one of Bichlbaum’s many Yes Men characters, who appeared at the conference in Austria and gave a lecture on “doing away with customs in the name of free trade, doing away with the siesta in Spain so that business hours could be the same… and allowing people to buy and sell their votes” (The Yes Men). In a PowerPoint lecture at the conference, they showcased a made-up website, “Voteoption.com,” where citizens of smaller struggling democratic nations could put their vote up and sell it to interested
parties. At the lecture they explained that the site was “a forum for people to offer their vote to the highest bidder” (The Yes Men).

The lecture, designed to spark outrage amongst the audience of businessmen, was greeted with polite applause. The Yes Men had unsuccessfully pushed the envelope.

Here lies one of the major problems of pranking: does a prank work if your audience doesn’t get it?

Christine Harold addresses this difficulty in quantifying rhetorical results of a prank with her discussion of Joey Skaggs, a man who set up a prank Cathouse for Dogs in Manhattan. Skaggs advertised for an imaginary prostitute house for pets, and no one discovered that it was not legit until Skaggs faced legal charges by animal rights activists. Harold explains that “Skaggs’s project clearly functions as a prank in its most familiar sense: a trick, a practical joke or a mischievous act” (Our Space 76). Harold acknowledges that this prank’s rhetorical significance works in the most basic sense of pranking, a fundamental aspect that underlies all pranks. The purpose being: just to prank. She qualifies her theory by defining the term prank with two alternate meanings one, to “add stylistic flourish to one’s dress.” And the second alternate definition of prank is “to ‘fold’ or a ‘pleat, as in the figurative sense of wrinkle’” (Our Space 77). According to Harold, a prank need only alter an object to add to its meaning and its intensity. The function of the prank is to simply reconfigure a pattern of communication that is so repetitive to the participant that their responses to it have become naturalized to the point where they never think about their action. It is this naturalized action that the prankster reconfigures. The Yes Men fold over the forum of the conference in order to add new meaning to its purpose. In the case of the cathouse, Joey Skaggs explained he was using
“media as a medium” in order to comment on “the phenomenon of the media and communication” (qtd in Harold 74).

In this interruption, the prankster attempts, according to Harold, to “challenge the connection of rhetoric to truth” (“Pranking Rhetoric” 207) by reconfiguring naturalized events. For example, Skaggs’s project of inserting an advertisement for an imaginary prostitution house for pets into the normal event of reading advertisements in the newspaper. The participants are ultimately forced to reexamine practices of culture. The outraged animal activist attempts to close down the Cathouse; the dark-humored citizen calls to ask if they accept humans; and the skeptic wonders how many other fabrications are advertised as legitimate in the newspaper. In the Skaggs event, he had no known desired outcomes with which we could assess some quantifiable results, because he articulated none. However, the response garnered by the event showcases the versatility of interpretation offered by the method of pranking.

Harold contends that “Clear arguments do not often follow pranks, but those arguments are translations of pranks. Making a prank make sense, may undermine what is unique about pranking’s signifying rhetoric in the first place” (“Pranking Rhetoric” 200). According to Harold, trying to decipher a purpose for a prank is futile. Harold does claim a purpose for the prankster: “unlike other corporations, its ‘bottom line’ is to improve culture, rather than its own pocketbook; it seeks cultural profit, not financial” (“Pranking Rhetoric” 200). However, contrary to Harold’s claim about purpose, the Yes Men have specific expectations of their operations. Skaggs never intended on his Cathouse being discovered, but the Yes Men in their documentary express shock at the reaction from their audience in Austria. From this reaction, it can be deduced that the Yes
Men intended on being discovered, and that they had a specific cultural profit in mind that did not come to fruition.

In the trajectory of the Yes Men’s works there can be seen an evolutionary element of shock tactics that increases with each project. Their use of “identity correction” becomes more and more daring in order to achieve a more specific response from the businessmen. Their work does, as Harold suggests, fold the object onto itself and “highlight the function of control and hype and intensify it” by appropriating the public address forum (Our Space 91). But their ever-increasing strategies of “identity correction” to the corporate body reveals that their “prank” is intended for a more specific interpretation than to just fool, fold, or to never have their illustrations of the corporate body be rooted out. That is, they are not trying to just prank, but are trying to communicate through the prank form.

Mike Bonnano explains the purpose behind their pranking method of “identity correction” in the documentary, and links it back to his work with the Barbie Liberation Organization and Bichlbaum’s work within the video game world. Bonnano explains that the Yes Men are trying to “correct” corporations’ identities or products that present an image in a misleading way, a way that leaves certain characteristics hidden. On “identity correction” he states that:

These things that are not really presenting themselves honestly, or that hide something about their nature that’s really scary, we want to bring that out, we want to show that, we want to demonstrate that. So for the WTO we think that the WTO is doing all of these terrible things that are hurting people, and they’re saying the exact opposite. We’re interested in correcting their identity in the same way that an identity thief steals somebody’s identity in order to engage in criminal practices. We target people we see as criminals and we steal their identity to try and make them honest or to try and present a more honest face. I guess this whole thing has its roots for both me and Andy in stuff that we’ve been doing for a long time, which is
trying to create public spectacles that in some kind of poetic way reveals something about our culture that is profoundly a problem. (The Yes Men)

The method of identity correction is the through line in the pranking progression of these two activists. They have “corrected” the identities of characters in video games, children’s toys, websites, and corporate characters. The Yes Men use this method of folding and pleating the object upon itself in the same way that Harold explains the fundamentals of pranking, but they are doing it with a purpose: to expose truths of corporate exploitation in culture and to reveal concealed characteristics of the hegemony.

In this sense they are pranking with the hope of being discovered. Their elaborate farces are a medium to both agreement and dissent to effect change. The Yes Men are pranksters, but, more than that, they are pranksters who are keenly invested in their audience’s responses, like any good engineer of rhetoric. Which is why their audience responses augment the evolution of their method of “identity correction.”

The businessmen in Austria, with their polite acceptance, demonstrate how the distasteful and humiliating agreements made in the business world are in stark contrast to the ideology of democratic rhetoric that the progressive first-world nations tirelessly tout. Additionally, their politeness shows their own confusion about their roles in a progressive society, which emphasizes James Scott’s point about the role played by the powerful when he states, “Power means to be more negligent and casual about any single performance” (30). The businessmen face no repercussions for not defending the democratic process. In Austria, the businessmen do not need to defend the rights of others, rights humans inevitably possess, because in their position they face no possibility of losing power unless they critique the power that has made them powerful.
Consequently, their actions show their negligence to maintaining principles in their culture’s ideological ideals.

Only in the eyes of the secondary viewer, the audience member watching the documentary or reading the NY Times articles where it is explained that the act was a prank, are the distasteful and humiliating aspects of the business audience acceptance of an online “vote auction” completely comprehended. And the Yes Men’s target’s well-mannered behavior means that the rhetorical power of the prank was not felt enough for the pranksters’ satisfaction, thus fueling their trajectory for more specific communication with the influential public in the corporate body.

**Free Trade Principles Personified**

After their experience in Austria, the Yes Men created a more outrageous spectacle in order to establish a greater impact on their primary audience. In the spring of 2001, World Trade Organization was contacted to participate in a conference in Finland. The Yes Men gave a lecture titled “Textiles of the Future.” At this conference the Yes Men, doubling as WTO reps, gave a lecture on the “History of the Labor Management Problem” ([The Yes Men](#)). The lecture traces the beginning of the “worker management problem” to the United States Civil War. Bichlbaum, as the WTO representative Hank Hardy Unruh, describes the Civil War as the “bloodiest, least profitable war” that the United States ever experienced ([The Yes Men](#)). The framework of the Yes Men’s identity correction can be broken up into three parts: personification of the corporate character, sabotage of the public address forum, and selection of subject matter for their presentations.
Hank Hardy Unruh, the WTO representative/character who presents the lecture in Finland, is labeled by his adherence to corporate rhetoric. The Yes Men carefully produce a character that looks and speaks the part of corporate control that they wish to alter. Their detailed attention to apparel, language, and form works to present this personification. Unruh’s character is a white educated male, and these qualities naturally benefit the legitimacy of his status. The Yes Men, with their small budget, shop in secondhand stores to dress Unruh with the appropriate attire. In the documentary, they even spend several short scenes discussing the inadequacies of Bichlbaum’s shoes (The Yes Men). The presentation of Unruh as the face of the WTO requires attention to his appearance, gender, and attire in order to form him into a believable purveyor of corporate interests.

In addition to manipulating their character’s appearance, the Yes Men created a lecture with language that helped personify free trade as well. Unruh’s rhetorical moves in his lecture rely on business principles that reflect the ideology that supports free-trade economics. The basis of free-trade markets explains that when demand changes so too do markets. In a “free trade” global economy, letting the market “work out” institutional and industrial problems is a guidepost for most trading legislation. It is a principle that contends that if it is “profitable,” it is “good.”

In the lecture, Unruh explained that had slavery been “left alone,” the issues in the economic market would have naturally fixed the “involuntary worker” system (The Yes Men). He justified this claim with a slave cost-comparison analysis. A slave worker program in Finland, according to the lecture, would cost a business because the living expense and the quality of life there would be very high, and therefore paying for a slave
to live there would be outrageous. The language of the lecture confirms that Unruh believes that the logic of a free-trade system, a system that has profit as its bottom line, can correct unethical and immoral catastrophes like slavery:

The biggest benefit of the remote labor system, though, is to the slave him- or herself, because in Gabon there is no need for the slave not to be free. This is primarily because there are no one-time slave transport costs to recoup and so the potential losses from fleeing are limited to the slave’s rudimentary intraining. So since the slave can be free he or she suddenly becomes a worker, rather than a slave. Also terrific for morale is that slaves, workers, have the luxury of remaining in their native habitat and don’t have to be subject to such un-pleasantries as homesickness and racism. I think it’s clear from our little thought experiment that if the North and South had simply let the market sort it out, without protectionist tariffs, they would have simply given up slavery for something more efficient anyhow. By forcing the issue the North not only committed a terrible injustice against the freedom of the south, but also deprived slavery into its natural development into remote labor. Had the leaders of the 1860s United States understood what our leaders understand today, the Civil War would have never have happened. (The Yes Men)

The design of this lecture shows how the Yes Men work to connect slavery to “remote” labor. Corporations operate today by a means of production that allows for a labor workforce that is not visible to the consuming world. These workers are stripped of their natural resources, their natural means of survival, because they don’t own them and are forced to work in order to feed their families. Unruh’s lecture illustrates how the logic of free-trade principles is contrary to principles that take human welfare into account. Throughout the lecture Unruh continually uses the terms “slave” and “worker” interchangeably. In doing so, the Yes Men make an audible connection for the participant to register. Additionally, the interchanging of words replaces the hidden term of “slave” with the public term of “worker” in the public transcript.

According to Unruh, the worker in today’s free-trade system has the status of a slave in the corporate world. By augmenting the free-trade lingo and logic with their
prank they demonstrate how the system needs alternatives to the current regulation system to protect those that are subjugated in third-world publics. The Yes Men use the rhetoric and the personification of the corporate body to unveil subject matters typically subverted by corporations—the subject matters that seem too dirty to deal with. Typically, free-trade logic asserts that workers in third-world countries are making more than they would have without industrial employment, and that their lives are better because they need less than others in progressive countries. By connecting remote labor system to slavery, the Yes Men show how profit rationalizations historically have not best served the people they subvert.

Unearthing Subverted Subject Matters

The Yes Men’s approaches to language aid the specific choices in subject matter for the lectures. As discussed previously, the lecture was framed around the overtly contentious subject of slavery. Most people, even the elite, even business personalities, would never openly admit to condoning slavery. It is distasteful subject matter in the public transcript. Yet, the Yes Men picked this subject matter purposefully to make connections between the unaccepted form of worker subjugation, slavery, and the accepted form of low-cost labor, using it to ironically emphasize the slave-like nature of free-trade economics. The subject matter presented in Finland was composed of three parts: slavery, low-cost labor in far-off nations, and the “solution” to transnational management challenges that low-cost labor presents.

In addition to slavery Unruh’s lecture emphasizes the importance of child labor, another contentious and subverted subject matter that underlies free-trade agreements. The lecture asserts that one of the first challenges of keeping labor closer to
management areas is that in those countries child labor laws prohibit child employment. Whereas in a third-world country where the cost of living is far less and “child labor can be gainfully employed,” naturally those areas become where the industrial world seeks out a workforce (The Yes Men). Had the Civil War never been fought, Unruh contends, there would have been a natural progression to a low-cost labor system similar to the one first-world countries have today (The Yes Men). The Yes Men’s purposeful selection of subject matter, child labor and slavery, highlights the lack of protection for human rights offered by a profit-based trade system.

Their visual demonstration of the “logical conclusion of neoliberalism” (qtd. in Harold 92) is where the elements of extreme alteration embellished onto their performance become apparent. In their lecture they pose the problem with the “remote labor” system today by asking, “When a headquarters of a company may be in Hong Kong, New York, or Finland and the remote workforce is in Gabon, Rague, or Estonia, how does a management keep watch on their workers?” (The Yes Men)

Inserting innovative subject matter into their lecture, they introduce the solution to the “worker management problem,” which they term the “Management Leisure Suit.” The problem, the lecture contends, is effective monitoring of production from a transnational distance. The answer is a golden spandex suit, equipped with an electronic screen located on the end of a large phallus that shoots up from the CEO’s crotch that monitors workers in far off countries at all times. It is called the E.V.A, the Employee Visualization Appendage, and the CEO wears it at all times. It is outfitted with a stimulation device inserted inside the CEO’s rectum to be able to “feel” the effects of production in the far-off industrial settings. Bichlbaum, as Unruh, unveils the
Management Leisure Suit by ripping off his clothes in the middle of the lecture in Finland and pulling a string to inflate the phallus of constant monitoring (*The Yes Men*).

The hilarious nature of the proposal cannot overshadow the metaphoric possibilities of the Management Leisure Suit or the Employee Visualization Appendage device. One participant observed at the lecture that the suit implied that CEOs were all male. She explained that she liked the idea, but that she did not like the inherent sexism that the piece embodied. The participant ironically points out how the piece directly emphasizes the patriarchal nature of corporate control of trade (*Beyond the Golden Parachute*). It is a nature that assumes that those at the top are entitled to dominance, leisure, and constant control over the means of their profit.

Additionally, the suit emphasizes the enslavement of the elite by making a connection between the “monitoring” of others with a direct invasion of the CEO’s body by the insertion of the “sensory” device in the rectum. The connection reveals that the principles of free trade enslave all ends of the market.

The Yes Men, in their “History of the Worker Management Problem,” masterfully demonstrate the unethical consequences encouraged by free-trade rationalizations for all parties involved. They explain that “the goal of this performance, of course, is to clarify how dangerous it is to equate human freedom with a free market. Demonstrating visually the logical conclusion of neoliberalism” (qtd. in Harold, *Our Space* 92). Their subject matter was aided by their visual and creative criticism of the logic of corporate power. And their careful attention to dress and subject matter was geared to best utilize the environment that they were infiltrating.
Hijacking The Public Address Forum

The Yes Men quite literally take their criticisms directly into the mouth of the powerful: they impersonate them in dress and speech, they penetrate their subverted subject matters, and they do all of this in a forum that is designed for the corporate public exclusively. The business conference serves the corporate world as a means of idea exchange, and the Yes Men’s hijacking of this forum exposes its vulnerability. In the audience the business personalities are polite and accepting of new processes of information. It is true that the Yes Men have been kicked out of a few forums, and they have even been banned from a conference, but from what is shown in the documentary, they are met with no resistance from the forum operators or the audience members.

In order to infiltrate the forum the Yes Men pay attention to details like appearance and speech, as discussed before, but they also concentrate on presentation of information. The lecture on slavery utilized several technological features that were painstakingly prepared for this twenty-minute presentation. They created a PowerPoint presentation to highlight different features of the lecture. They used a digitally engineered video that showed a computerized image of a CEO, a white male with a mustache, who walks around his office, home, and other areas wearing the “Management Leisure Suit” with the Employee Visualization Device fully erect (The Yes Men).

In addition to the digital video that they made, they also made a montage of videos for when they were discussing the Civil War. There is footage of a number of African Americans jumping around happily to music as Unruh emphasizes that the Civil War deprived Slavery of its natural course into a remote labor system. Afterwards, the screen shows a picture of a third-world figure holding a hoe in a field, and in one frame
he is wearing clothes under the caption “Paid”; in the other frame he is wearing rags, holding the same hoe, in the same position, under the caption “Unpaid” (The Yes Men). The visual worked to punctuate the different points that the lecture worked to drive home, that slavery and low-cost labor are connected, and that the CEO’s adherence to constant maintenance of this system require a subjugation of personal integrity.

The features that the Yes Men used to initiate reaction in this forum from the audience were again, unsuccessfully met. At the end of his lecture the conference moderator offered an opportunity to audience members to question Unruh the WTO representative, but the lecture hall was question-less. And again, the Yes Men performed an outrageous prank to a seemingly unaffected audience. In the documentary the exasperated activists explain that the lack of response proves how oversight of corporations is necessary. Their reaction proves according to Bichlbaum, that

…the WTO, me, can come in and say these amazingly hideous things to this group of the most educated people, like the top 0.1% education-wise people in the entire world; in a developed country like Finland, these people all have PhDs or advanced degrees, and you can say the most atrocious things and nobody will really react and no one will really care, it’s like, what can’t corporations get away with? (The Yes Men)

The passive response proves the performance of the most educated sector of society, potentially, could permit atrocities directly, which illustrates how politeness and the negative connotations that surround social criticisms imbedded in our social structure have the potential to create and allow the destruction of democracy. If our erudite society is too polite to notice a prank, does it not prove that we are accustomed to being pranked? If critical response exemplifies distasteful or disloyal characteristics, then doesn’t critical thinking become a disadvantage? Rather than become defeated by this compliance, the
Yes Men again alter their direction with their program for resistance. Their next work shows how the compliant nature of the business audience in the forum could be used to serve new purposes that deliver greater impact and response from the hegemony.

**Same Objective, New Methods**

Rather than increase their methods of pranking to new levels of ridiculousness, in the final act portrayed in the documentary, the Yes Men take a new approach to the forum, where they rely on a new tactic: sincerity. The lecture they created is on the disbanding of the WTO, which they presented at a conference in Australia. Rather than try and prank to reveal the negative aspects of the WTO and corporate hegemony, the Yes Men took a positive approach and attempted to articulate viable options for new trading systems. They sincerely expressed their perspective, as representatives of the “WTO site,” that the World Trade Organization has become an entity clearly in need of major modification. According to UN Reports, they stated to the business audience, the WTO instituted trade laws that cause “poor countries to lose 2 billion dollars a day” ([The Yes Men](#)). Additionally, they asserted that the WTO would disband and reassemble to make a new world trade organization, one that has human interests as its guiding tenet. They claimed that the new WTO would have “Human, rather than business interests as its bottom line” ([The Yes Men](#)).

The response by the audience was, again, polite and encouraging. There is footage of one audience member who expresses some cynicism. He explains that he does not think the WTO will ever be able to deviate from an economically gainful standpoint. But some members of the audience express relief, happiness, and hope for a better future with this humanistic move by the WTO. One woman stated after the presentation:
I have to say, I believe it’s fairly positive because I think that, as the gentleman said, the strong are getting stronger and the weak are getting weaker. And you can’t let that keep going. Even we notice that here with some of the trade arrangements that are made. If you are powerful you can get whatever you like, and if you’re not you can’t. It’s just the world with the population we’ve got, can’t keep going that way. So I think it was fairly positive and I think it was a very brave decision to admit that they were going down the wrong track and to dissolve themselves and to start looking for something different. I think it’s fantastic. (The Yes Men)

The positive responses reveal that we do not know what the business audience thinks or feels. We cannot quantify their response because they are an audience that seems unable to disagree with the leaders of the free-trade movement. The acts of deception that reveal complacency of the primary viewer are by no means unimportant, and they speak to the larger issues that stifle resistance movements within society. It is clear by the response of the primary audience that one cannot directly read how they have interpreted the prank or if they found anything wrong with the presentation. We cannot tell if they hated it, if they loved it, or if they knew it was a joke. Quantifying the success of the prank becomes impossible to gauge, because there is no process to engage their internal response. But it can be seen that by utilizing the compliancy of the audience that the Yes Men have created a situation where rumor about the disbanding of the WTO will have fertile soil to grow.

The most important place for the prank to reach, according to the Yes Men, is in the major media, where criticism of the WTO is a non-issue because of the first world’s economic dependency on free-trade principles. The corporations that run the mainstream media do not report on seemingly “liberal” or humanitarian protests absent of some violent action or celebrity-propagated event. However, when the Yes Men’s stunts are extreme enough, they have and do land in the stories by the media. Bonnano and
Bichlbaum explain it is these instances of mainstream media reporting that they are really shooting for. They concede that the primary audience of 200 businessmen is not the main focus of the prank, but that the wider, secondary audience of mainstream media viewers is the focus (The Yes Men). Therefore, the prank becomes a tool to infiltrate the larger social conscience by cracking the mainstream media ceiling.

In a conference on Interventionist Art and Activism at UC Santa Cruz, Andy Bichlbaum addressed the problem with the primary audience in his lecture. He was there explaining the 2004 Yes Men operation of impersonating Dow. Andy Bichlbaum again using “identity correction” posed as Jude Finnesterra, the Dow chemical representative that took full responsibility for the Bhopal catastrophe, where thousands of people were exposed to lethal and generational mutational toxins. Bichlbaum explained that when the Yes Men faked Dow doing the “right thing” by admitting responsibility for the meltdown and offering to “clean up” the mess and compensate the victims, Dow’s stock consequently fell 400 points. This illustrated an example of the type of people that the Yes Men were attempting to reach in their primary audience, people who fear profit loss from environmental or human protection actions and sell their stock.

However, by studying the trajectory of their work, it can be seen that the primary audience has proved to be important to the Yes Men’s strategy. Without the unaffected audience, the Yes Men may have never developed a method that worked so well with the corporations and the media. The Yes Men, tired of agreeable audiences, produced new information that held viable solutions to existing industrial problems, and thereby forced the corporations to respond directly to the alternatives posed by the counter-hegemonic resistance.
The Dow operation is an excellent example of how the Yes Men used their method of presentation, ideological understanding of the public, and their development of identity correction to produce a rumor in a new public forum, the media, to create a widespread discourse over a subverted subject matter. Unfortunately, what the stunt revealed about corporate nature, and what Bichlbaum emphasized at the UC conference on interventionist art, is that the corporate body will never do anything to stop human rights violations created by the global industry, because it is not economically justifiable. Taking care of people is not cost effective to the business world, and in fact, showing a willingness to do so adversely affects economic markets. That is, when the Yes Men faked Dow doing the right thing, Dow was not rewarded monetarily.

Which leads me to my concluding points on the functions of the prank in society.

Unfortunately, the Yes Men’s appeal to the better nature of corporate players, where they show them their own suits and display the cruelty of the “sub-inspector” role as Orwell illustrated it, is ultimately unsuccessful in creating visible change in the body of the corporate elite. But their tactics are successful in demonstrating the adverse effect of human rights principles on the economic market, revealing the systematic problem of free-trade ideologies. A conclusion that illustrates that economic profit and human rights are not compatible in the current global economy.

According to Andy Bichlbaum, they have given up trying to change the minds of those with power at the top, and instead are concentrating on their secondary audience. But that leaves the rhetorical force of the prank as only a tool to pry open the sealed doors of the media. And how effective is the prank on a secondary participant compared to the
possibly unseen affects on the pranked primary participant? The secondary participant is already privy to the actions, and they know that what they are seeing is an engineered prank. If the secondary viewer was the primary participant, would they recognize the prank, or more importantly, would they react complacently and politely to atrocious claims like the businessmen did? What if it were their monetary interests that were able to exceed record profits from the degradation and subjugation of others—would they react differently? In my cynical view I would say, probably not.

I believe that those that have less are willing to challenge authority, are willing to contend, are willing to resist, and it is their participation in culture that is most vital to the health of a democratic global economy. In the public space, how do participants react to pranks? I contend that they react responsibly, by utilizing systems of civic engagement. For example, in the Joey Skaggs incident of the Cathouse for Dogs, it was animal rights activists who worked to close down the prostitution house for pets, even though there were no doors to close.

The challenge that faces the public sector in the progressive world, the very people with the capability to make changes for a more accountable global industry, is the consumerist rhetoric inundated in our communities. It is the control system articulated by Christine Harold that overloads information into the public sphere. In this type of control, citizens are unable to decode events of human atrocities and are pranked by corporate marketers to consume rather than think. Consequently, the modern-day citizen, rather than concerning herself with political action and civic engagement, finds herself in the mall or shopping at Wal-Mart, pranked by corporations on a daily basis.
Imagine walking into a Target store to buy some picture frames for your latest family photos. You walk into the store, find the cheapest frames for the quality and style that complements both your pictures and your house, and proceed to the checkout aisle. When you get home and remove the frame from the bag, a five-year-old Indonesian girl stares at you from the freshly purchased picture frame. This is odd because normally the store frames have pictures of happy families, or animals, or serene landscape imagery inserted beneath the glass, whereas this girl looks malnourished, and has, you notice, what looks distinctly like a fly buzzing around her cheek in the captured instant. Most likely, you do not realize that a third party has been introduced; most likely, you do not realize that you just became a participant in a “shopdropping” prank.

Products that Question Consumption:
The Gifting Shelf

Shopdropping can best be described as a “reverse shoplifting”; rather than taking products off the shelf and out of the store, the shopdropper leaves altered or new products that replicate similar itemized goods on the shelf to be picked up and purchased by an unknowing customer. A shoplifter takes advantage of the surplus of stock in the store and the apathy of corporate employees to remove products off the shelf, whereas a shopdropper takes advantage of the corporate store’s ability to engage and communicate with the consumer through the medium of the store shelf. Shopdropping or forms of it have been noted previously in this study. Mike Bonnano of the Yes Men worked with the
Barbie Liberation Operation and experimented with swapping Barbie Dolls’ and GI Joe action figures’ voice boxes and returning them to the store shelves for purchase by customers during the holiday season (Jahn and Shada, “Introduction” 6). In the few documents on shopdropping pranks, this approach to store shelf sabotage has been noted in various stages as far back as the 1960s for various purposes (Jahn and Shada, “Introduction” 6). More recently, shopdropping has been used to question the social practice of consumption in developed nations.

Alan W. Moore, in his article “A Drop in Consumption,” explains that shopdropping is a method that artists use to direct inquiry into the social system of consumerism. The capitalistic control system depends on brands and marketing at the semiotic level in order to push the public into store shelf purchasing. Previous artists and activists, for example, Adbusters, have pranked at the brand end manipulating the image and content of trademarked brands. The Yes Men work at the corporate end of consumerism, attempting to bring awareness to the deceptive practices of corporations in a global sense. But shopdroppers work at the local level, at the store shelf end, where customers fulfill their role in consumerism. “A key area for artwork rooted in the social today is the system of consumption. The simple act of buying and selling, repeated by most people daily has become the terrain for a set of adventurous artistic and cultural practices” (Moore 23). It is to this reified practice of the store shelf purchase, the “repeated” naturalized action of physical exchange, that shopdropping draws attention in the arena of consumption.

Moore explains that “shopdropping messes with the systems. It questions the commodity. The practice is a kind of constant gnawing at the edges of the great retail
system through insertions, through ‘gifting’ to corporate colossi” (Moore 23). By this process of “gifting” the shopdropper becomes the provider, the supplier to the customer and to the corporation, and in doing so delivers a potent message about the practices of consumption, a message that contends that the customer is always right. The shelf, where the customer spends their time, a space that seems widely controlled by omniscient managers, becomes the area where subversive content can be disseminated amongst a variety of representatives of dissimilar publics.

This interruption on the shelf has become increasingly intriguing to artists and consumers. Over the past decade, shopdropping by artists and activists has garnered media attention and notoriety for its socio-political messages and its widespread infiltration into the corporate cultural space. In a progressive capitalist society, the space of the store shelf has become a spectrum by which the public is fascinated by its sabotage.

In London, 2006, notorious and anonymous graffiti artist Banksy replaced 500 copies of Paris Hilton’s musical debut with his own audio remixes, the titles of which were: “Why am I Famous?” “What Have I done?” and “What am I for?” (“Paris Hilton Targeted”). The scandal broke headline media sources much to the happiness of Paris-cynical crowds. The recognition of Banksy’s scheme was in large part due to his notoriety as a rebel artist, not entirely because of his method of shopdropping. However, the phenomenon of CD appropriation and store shelf sabotage incited excitement over the dropped products, none of which were returned (“Paris Hilton Targeted”).

But in many instances shopdropping pranks are barely noticed because they are so well concealed within the context of the corporate environment and the content is
so subversive that the participant does not understand that the product is not delivered from a corporate entity. It is in this way that shopdropping alters the purpose of the corporate store shelf, and quite literally makes it the rich field from which the artist appropriates for an altered cultural harvest. The shopdropper infiltrates the environment, plants a seed, and the process begets a new discourse to the consumer transaction.

This process of infiltration speaks directly to the role that a consumer plays in a capitalist economy. It is a method that implies that the consumer’s identity, ideology, and role in consumption need to be examined as much as the corporation’s methods for production need to be regulated. Through a variety of mediums, the shopdropper attempts to intervene and address the ideologies and naturalized practices that inhibit consumers from thinking about the larger picture of corporate control of culture and their role in that vehicle of control.

Contrary to the traditional connotations of the term “prank” and to the remixed Paris CD stunt, replacing a family photo with an image of a malnourished five-year-old girl is not attempting to be humorous. Its content proves that it is geared to make the consumer, maybe even just for one moment, take notice of a peculiar global disparity: that this girl is starved and the consumer, who just bought a cheap frame from Target for $4.99, is certainly not. The moment of oddity does successfully pleat or fold into the consumer’s naturalized patterns of consumption. It folds by using the shelf in the same way the corporation does, to communicate with the consuming public, but alters the subject matter on the shelf with anti-consumerist content. Utilizing a variety of devices, shopdropping allows the corporate store shelf to become the venue for a new cultural
exchange between activist, artist, and consumer, a process that reverses the flow of corporate ideologies.

The Transferential Nature of Gifting

Following the assumption that pranking works best when it is working within something else, when it is not introducing “new material” with which to jam the social process but rather is a “folding” or “pleating” into given contexts, certain elements pop out to illustrate how shopdropping works with the consumer atmosphere. There are the elements of “likeness” for goods, the utilization of product space, the emphasis on visual communication, the anonymity of producer, and the delivery of ideological content through physical, inexpensive exchange. And there are elements that pop out to define shopdropping’s alignment with resistance: mimicry, appropriation, deception, false deferential appearances, and sabotage.

My intent with drawing out these elements is to prove that this method works within the social structure to create a new discourse of resistance that does not create an Other. Like Harold in her analysis in Our Space, I contend that simply resisting the Other, or creating an “anti,” legitimizes the processes the activist seeks to resist. However, each of these elements help deliver an alternative discourse and do not work to “stop up,” jam, or appropriate cultivated power in the social structure, but attempt to work with it in order to revert energy to areas of ideological depravity in a consumer social system.

In James Scott’s analysis of creative resistance he contends that there are “four varieties of political discourse among subordinate groups” (18). The first, and safest, is where subordinates maintain the public transcript in order to deceive the elite.
The second resides in the carnival atmosphere where the hidden transcript is safely discussed “off stage” (18). The third variety, and the most relevant to the analysis of shopdropping, “lies strategically between the first two” (18). Scott explains that in this realm the discourse “is a politics of disguise and anonymity that takes place in public view but is designed to have a double meaning or to shield the identity of the actors” (18). The fourth variety is where the hidden transcript is completely revealed in the public transcript with no shield or mask of the subordinate (19). The Yes Men, with their brazen acts and their willingness to enter the realm of corporate forums, operate in the fourth variety of political discourse. However, shopdroppers work in the third realm.

Shopdropping resides in the third realm of discourse in a resistance effort. The shopdropper’s project is designed to have a “double meaning” and is intended to shield the identity of the creators of the object. The method, the anonymity of the shelf, and the ideological content of the object create a shield of protection for the participants in a shopdropping event. The anonymity of production protects the artist, and the content of the object delivers an anti-consumerist message, which alternately protects other invisible workers employed by the system to reproduce store shelf objects. Additionally, the store shelf works as a faceless communicator; it is the place where objects steeped in double meaning are transferred to others in the public—the audience.

The “double meaning” for the participant interacting with the creative object necessitates a brief explanation of art theory. Analysis of the elements that make up shopdropping’s rhetorical significance points to the intermediacy of art. The theory of intermediacy in art is defined as the “‘transferential function whereby the past dissolves into the present, so that the future {of identity of art} becomes, once again, an open
question, instead of being specified by the fixity of the past,” (qtd. in Nelson and Schiff 439). In this sense, the reaction of the participant in a shopdropping event is confined by their ability to develop a question. In terms of intermediacy, shopdropping succeeds by creating a commodity that challenges consumer practices. Shopping is a naturalized process fashioned by a systematic marketing of images, objects, and texts that direct consumers into specific actions. Creating a space that introduces alternate cultural practices that defy specific instruction encourages inquiries of identity and time.

When a prank occurs there is an awareness of time that comes to any person dealing with a new or foreign space. This element of presence is created by the deception of the method, its reuse of the space formerly determined for corporate consumer exchange. It is in this time that a participant has to re-identify and reorient their role with an object. The transferable content is not limited to the dispersion of material or the amount of people that come into contact with it, but to the magnitude of interpretation the one participant will have with the object. Shopdropping, a method that resists the fixity of the past and the naturalized process of consumption, specifically poses a question about that process by utilizing devices of appropriation, sabotage, and visual deception in order to transfer new ideological discourse to an alternate audience.

Sabotaging the product is not necessarily an attempt to damage the product or even to keep the consumer from buying it. For example, the method of replacing a photo propagating an all-white family clad in clean clothes with the photograph of an impoverished child keeps all of the same information of the original store frame, including size measurements and price, in order to ensure that a customer can still purchase the item for their given needs. However, the sabotage is in the ideological
content of the product on the shelf, altering the normal marketing schemes that appeal to purchasing power as an equivalent to happiness in the shape of an all-white, heterosexual, nuclear family, or a fluffy kitten, or an ocean boardwalk view. The new imagery introduces an alternative to that originally offered by the corporate rhetorical text.

The impact of this kind of prank can hardly be reduced to a simple “yes, that worked” approach. The consumer may not ever know that they were pranked, nor may they send money to a dollar-a-month charity that offers food and education to third-world nations, if that was the artist’s intent. The impact and alteration may only be the consumer’s momentary recognition of the face of poverty, which for many in a first-world nation is a foreign anomaly with which they feel very little connection.

Shopdropping works in a field of rhetorical analysis that cannot easily be assessed by a quantifiable nature as is done with other types of social and political artifacts.

On the quantifiable nature of shopdropping, artist Packard Jennings, a well-noted shopdropper, had much to say in an interview on interventionist art in July of 2008. Jennings has been part of many clandestine operations within the corporate sector and is notably appreciated for his Il Duce project, where he crafted a Mussolini doll, dropped it in Wal-Mart, and as part of his artistic production, videotaped himself trying to buy the “Il Duce Action Figure.”

Jennings describes the work of public art and political message as being a fickle thing. Artists like Jennings have to balance message with a wide-ranging audience, which often results in content that uses humor and suggestion to cloak larger political messages. The subversive content in a given shopdropping product makes rhetorical assessment difficult because the interpretation is dependent on the unknown audience
member that picks the product off the shelf. Additionally, the nature of product placement makes results difficult to track without constant surveillance of the product in the store and the ability to monitor the unknown participant during and after the transaction to assess their reactions.

On the subversive nature of the content Jennings explains that in the public, clear messages, though possibly “quantifiable,” do not always attain success with the audience they seek to convince. On clear messages in political and social artwork in the public sector, he explains:

A lot of work that way immediately repels people because you can see its banner right off the bat. People who don’t agree with it immediately turn it off. They’re just like “No.” If you hold up a sign and it says “Stop the war” everybody who is pro-war is not going to think about it, and everybody that is against the war is just like “Yeah”… I think it’s great to voice your opposition. I’m not saying don’t do that: I think it’s great. But does it actually infiltrate into other people that you might want it to? I don’t think it necessarily does, and it probably doesn’t. So while I’m not always successful in this, I have some devices that I use, one of them being humor which I think allows a broader spectrum of people, who do not necessarily all disagree, to access it. And then all that content is there and it saturates them before they know it. And that’s the other benefit of doing it in public and getting a broad range of people that I described is that you can hit people that are not necessarily or maybe are more your target audience. (Jennings, interview)

By this notion of an abstracted purpose, or not having a clear message that is readily available for interpretation, the artist cannot gauge in numbers the success of his work. Jennings's analysis of public art reveals the nuanced motivations for the shopdropping artist around audience, rhetorical devices, and intent.

Jennings is, first off, aware that the audience does not want to be told what to think. The shopdropper’s intention is not simply to change the consumer’s mind on a given issue with a didactic message. And, second, in the example of Jennings, the shopdropper is aware that the audience is not an opposite. The audience is not an Other,
but is another nuanced person that the artist recognizes as being important to the production of alteration and change in the social sphere. The consumer is recognized as someone outside of the “normal” activist/artist audience with which the artist normally interacts. Jennings’s recognition of the significance of including this audience in the discourse of resistance, and his assertion to not “speak” down to them while attempting to do so, is indicative of the magnitude and complexity of shopdropping’s rhetorical influence.

In order to attain that interaction, Jennings explains that the consumer is saturated with content that they have to, albeit briefly, asses on their own terms, and in their own way. The consumer neither simply shakes his head “No,” nor nods his head “Yes.” The argument of a shopdropper, not clearly defined by their product, makes results impossible to assess in terms of traditional rhetorical analysis. But if we look at the qualifying indicators, the shopdroppers’ methods reveal a new creative approach to resistance that speaks directly to democratic ideology. The participant must think and come to terms with content by using her own methods of rhetorical interpretation.

The Mechanics of Gifting

Let’s take Jennings’s Mussolini Doll for example, a far less subtle alteration to the store shelf in terms of political messages, but no less subversive in its extractable content. The Mussolini Doll, an artifact humorous in its coupling of the action-figure genre, a plaything for young American boys, depicts the historical figure most notably recognized for his notions of governance antithetical to the ideologies of democracy—e.g., fascism. This coupling cannot easily be identified with a clear and contained
message for rhetorical effect. Packard Jennings’s use of an icon of fascism to appropriate the consumer space of a corporate store shelf in a “democratic” culture creates an inquiry where the metaphorical possibilities for interpretation become multifarious.

In this instance the Il Dulce action figure, made with a vacuum plastic form and wrapped in the same Wal-Mart type of hard plastic cover and background, proudly touts the corporate logo, and produces the same presentation and likeness to other store-shelf action figures. The process Jennings used to create the action figure is detailed in a short video titled “The Wal-Mart Project,” where he explains that the action figure was sculpted out of roma plastilina clay, made into a rubber mold creating a rubber positive, and from the rubber positive made into multiple plaster casts into which he poured a ceramic slip, creating a master positive that allowed him to mass-produce the doll relatively cheaply. The dolls were then hand painted and put into vacuum-form packaging. On the package where on a normal action figure exhibits the cartoon version of the action hero, an actual photo of Benito Mussolini with Adolf Hitler at his right shoulder is displayed (Figure 1).

On the back of the package there are photographs of George W. Bush, Sam Walton, the founder of WalMart, and other notable forerunners for globalization. Also on the back of the item is Centennial Society’s website address and email information for consumers that wish to contact Jennings about the project. The meticulous creation of the Il Duce doll amounts to much more than the offered price attached to the sticker. Packard Jennings purchased his own action figure at Wal-Mart, and the checker priced the doll at five dollars. When considering the work of an independent artist, that price seems
Fig. 1. Il Duce action figure.


miniscule. The work therefore ceases to be gauged in terms of monetary value. In its stead is the value born in the inquiry the work potentially creates in the participant.

The Il Duce action figure emulates the action-hero genre in its product display. This mimicry can be seen as a kudos to the original product, validating its profitability in a consumer system. In this way, the likeness is the mask of deference offered by the creative resistor. However, upon closer examination, this strategy of likeness in form proves to be a deceptive deference, where the emulation of the object shows an understanding of the systematic corporate-consumer structure and its hypocrisies. A doll hand made in the United States by an artist would be priced much higher than a doll made in a factory in China, where production costs are cheap. The
likeness is used to both blend the product into the store shelf environment, to compliment genre, to fold in, to play along, and, alternately, to emphasize the disturbing inadequacies of the pricing and creation of the product in the current industrial system.

Genre of Likeness

Constructed likeness for the purpose of evaluating context and content has been circulating in the conversation of art since Duchamp’s urinal was placed in a gallery hallway for exhibition. In Marisa Jahn and Steve Shada’s article “The Paradox of Likeness,” they define the rhetorical power of likeness with examples of Conrad Bakker’s work. Bakker replicates “ordinary household items” with papier-mâché and sells them on eBay. Bakker says his project “‘is part of an ongoing investigation that involves careful reconstruction in wood and paint of a consumer moment when the transparency of brand frames the content of consumption”’ (qtd in Jahn and Shada, “The Paradox of Likeness” 30). Jahn and Shada’s article explains that, “In striving for likeness, the almost-same instead foregrounds difference” (27). For example, with Bakker’s work, his creations show visible marks of crafting the object; when people buy his replications they must wait weeks to receive them. The time it takes for Bakker, a respected artist, to create this object emphasizes how quickly and cheaply the “original” store object is made for the consumer. The almost-identical replication of a thing in order to invite its investigation illustrates the shopdropper’s awareness of process and production. Reproduction in order to point out difference attempts to understand the worth of the object while simultaneously critiquing its process of consumption, industrial production, marketing, and disbursement.
Jennings, however, does not illustrate the exact likeness of another product, but instead emulates the action-figure genre. The project is not accompanied with a clear message to be digested, either. Rather, Jennings poses a question with his project: “Why is or isn’t it alarming for such a toy to exist...” (Jahn and Shada, Shopdropping 31). The consumer is led to inquire into Benito Mussolini as a character and to rationalize why the Mussolini doll should not be a plaything for children. But more importantly, Jennings’s particular language about “such a toy” leads the audience to compare the toy to other action figures. Action figures that are “acceptable,” that do exist are Batman, Spiderman, or other caped crusaders that take absolute law into their own hands, who “clean up” corrupt cities on their own terms, which often means aggressive and violent actions of making change. This comparison reveals contrasting ideological messages that before may not have come to mind when purchasing a toy for a young boy.

But not all audiences are forced to see the Mussolini Doll on those terms; on the contrary, participants may not make that connection. The inquiry Jennings poses is not noted on the packaging, but is part of a rationale in a text accompanying his work in a book on shopdropping. The readers of a shopdropping book are vastly different than the pranked Wal-Mart customers or employees in that they are aware of the process and the purpose of the project to a certain extent. The Wal-Mart participant’s interaction may be far less introspective towards the genre, but is no less important. As Jennings contends, their interactions are probably more important than the gallery-type audience’s interpretations.

Jennings’s emulations of corporate genre inspire an investigation into the practical implications of store shelf content. Similar to emulating the genre of the
“action” figure, Jennings’s works mimic other genres of products available in a Wal-Mart store. For example, one of his projects, “Bric-a-Brac,” was created as a product for the “impulse-buy” section of Wal-Mart. Plastic “Bric-a-Brac” is a packaged group of plastic balls that the consumer can buy and simply throw away. On the package it states in bullets: “Fast! Easy! Safe! Disposable! As Seen on T.V.!” There is even a warning on the corner for choking hazard (Figure 2).

Fig. 2. Plastic bric-a-brac.


It additionally exclaims in the text, “It’s Easy! Simply Use Bric-A-Brac….Then Just Throw It Away!” The product is not an exact replication of an object bought and sold in Wal-Mart, but is likened to the products in the impulse-buy section by its emulation of their futility. The usefulness of such an item can be compared to a
blown-up balloon. A child wants to hold the balloon, the parent purchases it, and within five minutes the balloon pops and becomes trash. The plastic becomes an exchange of minimal or no use to the consumer, but a financial profit for the corporation selling the balloon.

“Bric-a-Brac” creates an inquiry around not a particular product but about an entire genre of product. The “impulse” section of the store is almost demeaning in its manipulation of space. Products are placed near the checkout aisle, and consumers, while they wait to check out, impulsively pick up the products colorfully placed around them. These products are not purchased out of necessity. They are products that appeal to a frivolous and juvenile desire for comfort or satisfaction. Jennings’s project of creating a product that is simply for “throwing away” points out the wastefulness and calculating nature of such a genre. Alternately, it exposes how placement and content of the store shelf becomes the element by which corporations attempt to profit by the consumer’s complacency.

If we assume that the store shelf is the “customer’s” space in consumption, it is also the public space for interaction. However, the public has very little control over the content that the corporations provide for consumption. The sabotage of the shelf becomes an intimate way for the art activist to interact with the audience and communicate with them about the uses of such a space without telling them what to think, what to buy, or where to shop next. The subverted content becomes a tool for different sections of the public to make contact and communicate with each other. In this sabotage, shopdropping appropriates the store shelf for a personal interaction between artist and consumer.
The Gift of Fascism

Along with the Il Duce Action Figure, Packard Jennings also created an oak-framed series of Mussolini (Figure 3). Jennings replaced Wal-Mart’s framed photos with pictures of the fascist dictator of Italy that included the frame’s original price and size information and again, his trademark “Centennial Society” website and email for consumer contact. The project begs the questions: What does fascism have to do with Wal-Mart? What does this mean to Packard Jennings? And, most importantly, what meaning does this deliver to the consumer?

Fig. 3. Solid oak frames.

On the Centennial Society’s site, Jennings offers an in-depth critique of Wal-Mart to articulate his artistic purpose for creating this coupling of Wal-Mart products with Mussolini-related content that together is titled the “Wal-Mart Project.” Jennings’s inspiration for the “Wal-Mart Project” is credited to his own experience with a Wal-Mart franchise. In the small town where Jennings received his MA, he watched downtown businesses fail to keep Wal-Mart out of their county and, subsequently, close their doors for business (Jannings, The Wal-Mart Project).

As the site explains it:

Primarily, Wal-Mart locates itself on the outskirts of small towns with populations of 5,000 to 30,000. Local downtown business then goes head to head with Wal-Mart, an impossible task. Because Wal-Mart separates itself, people will not only buy the item they went for, but also shoes, auto parts, pharmacy needs, video rental, electronics, clothing, groceries, banking, and more. A whole downtown. The result is the disintegration of the local economy that begins to resemble a fascist regime, or perhaps more accurately, a feudal system; the vassals tied to the land (generations of land owners in low income areas, unable to move due to economic circumstance.) and serving their lord Wal-Mart. (Jennings, Centennial Society)

Jennings’ rationale describes the Wal-Mart strategy as a magnitude of corporate influence that dwarfs all attempts of a community’s democratic processes to maintain their cultural identity. In this rationale two answers to the above questions become apparent. What is the connection between Wal-Mart and fascism? The metaphoric comparison creates Wal-Mart as the fascist overtaker of a small town where all products and profits lie with the provider of goods. Ownership is not dispersed amongst the community, but is concentrated in one superpower that is never seen because the estate is run not by the power holders or corporate CEOs, but by members of the smaller, less powerful, Wal-Mart managerial team comprised of community members in need of employment in the overtaken community.
The consumer’s ability to make the metaphorical connection between Wal-Mart's takeover of the community and fascism or feudalism may not be realized. However, Jennings contends that the project is not intended to make people do a 360 in their consumer lives. He likens the saturation of content to NASA operations that plan on pulling possible asteroids headed toward the planet Earth off their path. If an asteroid is destined to collide with the planet, NASA has plans to send a space probe out to the asteroid to gently push it or pull it towards a new line of travel. This works as an energetic deterrent designed to nudge the asteroid toward a less destructive path for human existence.

If they just push it a tiny bit and a long time after the trajectory has changed so dramatically. I think that kind of thing is possible. I don’t think anybody is going to make a 360 degree turnaround. Very few people with or without intervention will do that. But I think even small changes in people’s perspective or attitudes are tremendously helpful. (Jennings, interview)

Jennings intention with the Wal-Mart project was to gently push consumers with subversive content. The increments of change are only as subtle as the participant’s capacity to disseminate the content offered by the coupling of Mussolini and Wal-Mart. If the consumer can make the connection, or if they cannot, they have to sit with the illogicality of the space and moment offered by the alternative ideological content.

In other projects by Jennings the instructional quality seems much more direct than his Wal-Mart Project. In his “Anarchist” series, the hidden transcript is far more revolutionary. It features a utopian society in pamphlets for distribution into products in stores at various malls. Jennings made a video for his website on the disbursement of the pamphlets at the Stonestown Galleria in San Francisco. The pamphlets showcase everyday consumers setting fire to clothes and overtaking the space of the mall for a new
life. The pamphlets emulate instructional guides. Each step to creating a utopian society is numbered. First step, drop your shopping bag; second step, find a chair; third step, pick the chair up; fourth, throw it into the display window of the nearest shop in the mall (Figure 4). The steps go on until the mall has completely transformed into a new landscape. The final pictures show grass growing in the mall and naked children frolicking in the flowers.

Fig. 4. A Day at the Mall Steps 3 & 4.


The pamphlets were placed in the pockets of jeans, inside book jackets, and many other different places. This work is far less subversive in content because there is an obvious and humorous suggestion of reclaiming cultural identity and space. Although the work emulates an instructional guide, the project was not made to instigate anarchy.
Jennings explains that the work was, again, not intended to make people change direction immediately. “I’m not trying to spark riots. No matter what it looks like” (Jennings, interview). Regardless, Jennings has received criticisms of his projects from both ends of the scale. From the art and activist community Jennings’s work has been criticized as not being effective enough, and from others it has been criticized as trying to induce anarchic revolt. On the range of criticism regarding the scale of his pamphlet project Jennings explains, “I’ve read some criticisms of people who it seems like that what they think I’m trying to evoke is massive societal change” (Jennings, interview). The project showcases the extreme of a utopian society not to create one, but to make people laugh. Jennings uses the extreme as a tool for engagement. He explains about most of his projects, “What I’m trying to get to happen is usually nothing more than conveying information and hopefully some slight shift in perspective, increasing some understanding” (Jennings, interview). Jennings’s response exposes an understanding of the degree to which he plans on altering his audience. However humorous and extreme the content of the product is, the object provides the participant with underlying content about consumer practices and alternatives to it. These pamphlets do not literally suggest anarchy amongst consumers, but encourage agency in the local consuming public.

Jennings may not be trying to invoke massive societal change, but his projects work to shed light on a subverted anti-consumerist message. In a consumerist culture, the resistance to this resistance is strong. Consumers are sensitive about shopping practices; they can be resistant to resistance. However, Jennings does not shy away from producing
objects that invite an investigation of those practices. Jennings explains that he does not fear ruffling feathers in the public:

I think that we’re at a point where...public demonstration does nothing. Our votes get stolen, our voter lists and Karl Rovian subterfuge hijacks our elections. And so how do we, when all of our language of revolution and our language of change and freedom is all really corrupted by advertising...how do we proceed and try and provoke change? I think the answer is we have to get more and more creative with it. And I am a firm believer in the idea of creative resistance. So I don’t feel bad that people get tired of being reminded that things are fucked up because they are, I mean there is obviously, there are great things too, but if we are not diligent we are going destroy ourselves and everybody else. (Jennings, interview)

Although Jennings intends on only gently pushing participants with his method of shopdropping, his aims and intentions are nothing short of radical change. This aspect of the work speaks directly to democracy, because it encourages stages of development toward change. Creative intervention is not small in scope or intention; in fact, the intention is quite monumental. However, the strategies of the act encourage small steps toward change. The self-analysis of Jennings work suggests that leaps of change, or fierce pushing towards change, may actually disrupt the possibility of change happening. It suggests that authoritarian and demanding techniques of control are not useful to the creative resistor. The art activist does not hijack or appropriate the current hegemonic means of control that insist and demand; their work succeeds when it creatively delivers the hidden transcripts of the anti-consumerist movement to the public.

Off the Shelf: Public Response

The transferential factors of shopdropping vary depending on consumer awareness to the project. The impact to the consumer participating in the prank, as assessed earlier, is nearly impossible to track, however, the discussion over the
theoretical criticisms of the method are in many ways trackable in online commentary. On WebUrbanist, an alternative art website, there is an article titled “Shopdropping aka Droplifting: Beginners Guide to the Subversive Urban Act of Reverse Shoplifting” that details aspects of shopdropping through a variety of projects, from Banksy’s CD manipulation to relabeling cans. The article online contains a litany of reader responses.

What is most intriguing about this site is the range of commentary that it evokes from readers. One reader, Brian, on December 27, 2007, voices concerns about rising costs to compensate for the replacing of products. Brian writes in response to an enthusiastic affirmation of the product that contended that shopdropping is great if no one gets “harmed.” Brian states in response: “How do you define ‘harm’? Would you consider stores (particularly large ones) who have to add staff to locate, remove, and dispose of these items, harm? Their costs (and our costs) go up. The consumer (me and you) ends up paying the price” (Brian). Another participant on the discussion board points people to a Fox News story where a very upset Wal-Mart customer found that their purchase had been tampered with and returned to the store shelf. The Ipod was missing and inside was a note that stated: “Reclaim your mind from the media shackles. Read a book and resurrect yourself. To claim your capitalistic garbage go to your nearest Apple store” (Parmentier). And yet another voiced concern on safety:

I would think that the people that have issue with this are concerned for customer/employee safety and are wary of lawsuits. Who is to say the products being placed on the shelves are not dangerous? Poisoned or tainted food products, explosives, computer viruses, etc. While I agree that this is a novel idea, I would not want someone putting items of an unknown origin on my store shelves. (Tim)

The range of critical responses reveals the nature of store shelf ideology that the consumer depends on for purchase, and additionally points to some features of
shopdropping that can severely disrupt the potentiality for rhetorical effectiveness. First off, the response by Brian reveals the weight typically put on monetary value in a capitalist society. It reveals that the hidden transcript of an anti-consumerist message is secondary to the margin of economic impact for many consumers. Brian’s pragmatic preoccupation with cost demonstrates the priority of consumers’ concern. What is most disconcerting about this response or hyperconcern about economic impact is that it reveals what James Scott calls the “conforming behavior of the less powerful…when there is no apparent use of coercion” (70). Brian assumes a stance that cannot divorce itself from the consumerist rhetoric designed to protect, not the consumer, but the corporation.

Typically, this response could only be conceived in a theoretical format, because most likely if the shopdropping’s subversive content is ambiguous enough, the process of purchase is not even disrupted, therefore not necessitating any extra work in the store. Another commenter notes, in response to Brian, as an employee of a major corporate store, that managerial systems would never hire more people for this purpose. He/She explains:

You hire just enough people to do about 50-75% of the work well and put 100% of it on them, pay them exactly what’s required to keep them from quitting and you stay with this trend through the temporary rise in profit you will see WELL into the inevitable sharp decline due to poor customer service, when everything is in the shitter then you do a round of pay raises and hiring, but ONLY enough to bring morale up to just above the suicide threshold and watch profits rise again. (Anonymous)

The employee here participates in the discourse to correct the misconception that costs would rise in response to a shopdropping event. But more importantly, as can be seen, the nature of the corporate system begins to be revealed in a discourse over corporate
practices.

In the matter of the Fox News site, where the IPod was replaced with a cryptic message about social practices, there are a few elements of the shopdropping procedure that misdirected any delivery of a hidden transcript. I would suggest that this prank did not successfully pleat or fold into the system, and succeeded in only providing an “anti” by treating the consumer as an Other, rather than as a participant with which to share a common discourse about consumption. By removing the product and not visibly marking any type of emulation, without providing any type of deferential mask or concession of likeness, the participant was invited into the discourse as a loser from the beginning. The participant immediately was at a loss financially, with the loss of the item and the currency, and also at a loss for any type of rhetorical interpretation, because the activist provided all interpretive content. Thus the Ipod shopdropping prank failed to have a successful anti-consumerist rhetorical impact on the participant.

On June 17, 2008, at 8:23 P.M., Staked Plains Texan made a comment in response to a barrage of criticism directed at the worthless nature of artists in our society. Many on the site commented on the shopdropping artists as being “whiners” and “good-for-nothing.” Staked Plains contended:

I give credit to any artist who tries. Some things are productive within, rather than in a material way. It’s silly that some judge artists by their productivity in a society that is rampantly encouraged to be wasteful consumers. The materialistic nature of capitalism is exactly why they generalize that artists are not productive. Can’t see the forest for the trees. Like most ideas, capitalism serves us better as a tool rather than a vision of reality itself. Otherwise, you get people for whom fulfilled desires and even greed are a measure of social and economic merit. (Staked Plains Texan)

In Staked Plains Texan's response about the use of productivity as a gauge of cultural worth, he makes many astute observations I want to reiterate for my conclusion. Staked
Plains explains that the artists are working from “within.” From a financial perspective, shopdroppers are working within a value system based in the interactions of the public. The exchange with the consumer compensates the costs that the artist does not “make” by selling their product for the highest price. By working within the system the artist/activist is able to communicate with a new audience, which may not have been possible otherwise. The potential profit of personal interaction is weighed at a far greater value for the activist, which is a hard thing to imagine in a consumer environment. Which is why Staked Plains contends that “capitalism serves us better as at tool rather than a vision of reality itself.”

Staked Plains’s comment struck me as a major mark of contention between the rhetoric of democracy and capitalism. In our culture we consistently interchange democratic ideology with capitalist ideology, even though they are vastly different. Capitalism is designed to create profit, whereas democracy is designed to give the voice to the people. Capitalism and democracy are not synonymous, and capitalism should only be a tool to support our democratic system. However, currently we have a society that uses our democratic principles to support our consumerist system. Shopdropping is a method of communication that gently pushes us away from capitalist ideology and toward democratic ideology. The successful work of a shopdropper guides its audience into an open question about the identity and practices of the consumer and about the major role that the public of a first-world nation shares in a free-trade global economy.

In our current cultural climate, where the environment is in dire straits, international warfare has the potential to obliterate the planet, and asteroids threaten to collide with the Earth, we depend on subtle shifts and innovative techniques to avert
disaster through nonobtrusive, nonviolent means of interaction. These methods of
diversion become the vehicle of survival, and the main source fueling that system is not
money, but creativity. The shopdropping method, whereas it is not flawless, does speak
to an evolution of creative resistance movements that date back for many years. It is not a
method that promises fast or volte-faced action, but it does utilize methods of interaction
and inclusion at a local level in order to impact global change. When these methods are
used not to deride but to engage the public, they transfer onto the participant a discourse
that potentially can alter the course of our materialistic and destructive interactions with
each other and the planet.
CHAPTER IV

CONCLUSION

In a society governed by omniscient corporate rhetoric that insists the public must continuously consume to remain free, the voice of the counter-consumerist resistance must be disseminated systematically and underhandedly to the public. Simultaneously, this voice must also have the ability to invite disparate groups to work together, because we live in a country comprised of a vast array of cultural identities. In order to create change in a control society resistance comes in different forms and is necessarily limited by its subjugation to social convention. Currently, populace protest is corralled into “protest zones” or characterized as anarchic. Carnival performances may relieve tension, but does not offer viable alternative solutions to social unrest. Unfortunately, mere mockery of political and social distortion does not necessarily initiate change among the public, and can often make people defensive and further polarized. The delivery of anti-globalization solutions to the public, at times, requires clandestine operations combined with a rejection of social convention, because access to political and social information is controlled by a corporate-dominated media system.

Throughout the works of pranksters like the Yes Men and shopdroppers, the elements of pranking rhetoric at first glance appear unethical; the tactics seem like a disconcerting method of making change. The Yes Men use identity correction and enter corporate forums in order to dupe the audience and deliver a severe critique of corporate
business practices and ideology. Their deceptive impersonations and statements on established broadcast news networks have sent stocks plummeting, revealing the intentions of economic markets around corporate responsibility. Shopdroppers sabotage corporate store shelves, a privately owned space, and manipulate consumer products to initiate discourse for alternative consumer and cultural practices. However, the very elements of pranking that appear unethical and immoral are precisely what make the impact of the projects rhetorically significant.

Traditionally, studies of rhetoric have pressed for an ethical and moral preference for the intention and tactics of society’s rhetors. Mike Edwards in his article “Ethics, Motives, and Character in Wayne Booth’s The Rhetoric of Rhetoric” deliberates on a common perception in rhetorical analysis. He explains that Booth’s analysis of the “rhetoric surrounding the second invasion of Iraq in 2003” contends that the “rhetor must have good ethical reasons for using the rhetoric she chooses, and that rhetoric must be used in a moral way” (354). Additionally, in the article Booth explains that “‘It is ethically wrong to pursue or rely on or deliberately produce misunderstanding...’” (qtd. in Edwards 355). Whereas I agree with Booth’s major manifest in which he “poses rhetoric as the alternative to violence” (353) I find that the signifying factors of pranking rhetoric directly contradict his claim about the production of misunderstanding. Pranking rhetoric works in its encouragement of misunderstanding, in its process of deception, and in its inquiry into the morality of our current progressive and democratic culture.

Similar to the work of creating likeness to create the norm, the pranksters’ works that encourage misunderstanding guide their audience to either an awareness of misunderstanding or to a new understanding about corporate and consumer practices.
The Yes Men impersonate corrupt people and shopdroppers impersonate corrupt objects. The tactic of “impersonation” is a process of deception designed specifically to create misunderstanding. The Yes Men’s work in deceiving the businessmen in Finland was designed to point out a misunderstanding of what they call the “remote labor workforce.” Their work in connecting that current system of remote labor to slavery highlighted a disparity in world trade practices. But in order to do so the Yes Men created a misunderstanding of identity to deliver that work.

Packard Jennings’s work depends on a misunderstanding of store shelf content. Creating a Mussolini Doll, or by inserting instructional guides on anarchy in the space intended for corporations to sell their goods, the misunderstanding around the object and its placement invites investigation. He appropriates the widely accepted use of space and directs the consumer into an inquiry into their own consumer and cultural practices. Jennings’s shopdropping strategies directly challenge the corporate dominated influence of cultural identity in the consumer space. In critiquing the genres of action heroes, the “impulse buy” section of the Wal-Mart, and the instructional handbook distributed in the mall, his work defies conventions of privatization and corporate owned public space.

It is this area of misunderstanding that Christine Harold contends that the work of pranking rhetoric becomes most difficult to assess because of its ambiguity around intent and the subjectivity of a participant’s response. Booth’s argument contends that the intention of the rhetor must be as honorable as her tactics. However, pranksters like the Yes Men present noble intentions and ignoble tactics. Their projects represent the hidden transcripts around free-trade business practices: they give voice to the rights of
“workers” in third-world nations – those that have no voice currently in the governance of the global market. In order to unearth this voice and to bring it into the fourth realm described by James Scott in his analysis of political discourse of subordinates, where the hidden transcript is revealed in the public transcript openly, the Yes Men deceive, impersonate, lie, and create physical facades to deliver that message. Additionally, Scott’s analysis of the “art of resistance” reveals that methods of deception have been a vital aspect of counter-hegemonic resistance. Within the features of pranking rhetoric deliberated on in this study, deception becomes another word for “creativity.” The Yes Men use deception creatively by inventing characters within the free-trade system.

Additionally, the shodpropper deceives corporate employees and consumers by leaving creative artifacts saturated with subversive content. In both instances the features of the pranksters utilize innovative interventions by deceptive measures in order to penetrate reified fields of communication. They infiltrate areas previously dominated by corporate influence.

For example, Packard Jennings’s use of appropriating space to disseminate anarchist pamphlets in the mall. Jennings does not steal products for his projects, he steals space. Public space has been increasingly privatized by corporate ownership. Along the highway, billboard advertisements encourage consumption and reinforce hegemonic ideologies, however, unauthorized artwork, otherwise known as graffiti, in a public space is a felony. The public does not control where billboards go because they do not own the road, nor can the public vote on industrialized operations in third world nations because the publics of all nations are denied influence by transnational free-trade
organizations, like the World Trade Organization. The current confines of cultural-production are governed by capitalist and not democratic ideology.

Additionally, pranksters use a means of communication that works to bring together factions of the public that are connected only by their consumer practices. These diverse groups are unified by one thing in the work of pranksters: laughter. In the work of the Yes Men and Packard Jennings, their deceptive methods utilize humor and irony as tools of engagement. Jennings uses the extreme to engage in a discussion of anarchy and a reuse of space with his Anarchist Pamphlets. The Il Duce action figure is an extreme of the action figure genre. Similarly, the Yes Men use the humor with their phallic Employee Visualization Device that physically penetrates the CEO with a censor in his rectum. This tactic is used to evoke laughter and crack the masks of the audience made up of the corporate elite.

These aspects of communication: deception, humor, appropriation, and infiltration are rhetorical tools for the counter resistance to a corporate-controlled world. The Yes Men use humor and deception to infiltrate major media networks and communicate with a global audience. Their identity correction personifies free-trade principles in order to reveal the cryptic nature that the rhetoric of the hegemony hides. By using a humorous interpretation of the rhetoric and ideology, the work of the Yes Men aim to become accessible and communicable to a broad and often complacent audience.

Whereas the work of Jennings may not have the outreach and scope of the Yes Men’s work, he has received media attention on a smaller scale with his shopdropping operations; however, his rhetorical influence is successful at a local level, which is fitting, because the work focuses on the apathetic nature of consumer practices. Alternately,
Jennings work encourages agency and resistance by means of extreme imagery and humorous content.

However, in terms of audience and intent the Yes Men differentiate themselves from Packard Jennings in a way that expresses the different utility of pranking rhetoric. The Yes Men have a specific audience in mind and intend to garner specific responses from it. In the beginning their projects geared to the corporate audience intended on wrinkling feathers, sparking resistance, or inspiring critical discourse on corporate practices. This can be seen from Bichlbaum’s outrage at the complacency of the audience in Finland. Additionally, when their project did not garner a response in Austria the Yes Men increased the intensity of their ridicule. These acts illustrate the investment and the expectation that the Yes Men have as engineers of rhetoric. The Yes Men, like corporate marketers with their engineering of rhetoric to push consumer purchases, have specific actions attached to their rhetoric. When those markers are not achieved by the receivers of their rhetoric they augment and increase their strategies in order to attain success.

Packard Jennings’s intentions with his projects, however, are far less expectant. His projects demonstrate that he uses pranking in order to invoke an inquiry. The works do not suggest a specific action, but encourage the audience to delve into their own inquiry on the absurdity of the projects. In both instances the activists use pranking rhetoric: they appropriate space, deceive, encourage misunderstanding, and take advantage of the less vigilant features of consumerist culture. But both have severely different expectations of their projects.
Analysis of pranking rhetoric that considers the deceptive and “unethical”
tactics as a relevant means of communication reveals that all rhetorical discourse to some extent is a type of infiltration. Communication to get what you want assumes many different forms. Tactics in order to achieve successful communication are dependent on the nature of the relationships of the rhetor and the receiver of the rhetoric. This means that in order for the rhetor to communicate with the receiver they have to develop and understanding of the varied responses their work can garner from them, and the rhetorician must change tactics when their work is not communicating what they want to the participant. In this approach the “ethical” deliverance of language becomes secondary to the successful communication to the participant.

Additionally, evaluating communication’s ethical content is dependent on the nature of the culture. Judging any rhetorical communication by its unethical attributes is subjective and becomes dependent on the analyst’s awareness of their personal subjugation to hegemonic ideologies. In order to understand the impact and the nature of a rhetorical artifact, the context by which it is created is necessary to determining the ethicality of its content. In this case, pranking rhetoric demonstrates that deception and creativity work hand in hand in a control society to deliver counter-hegemonic messages to the public. Much as deception and false deferential appearance are vital to resistance in an authoritarian or caste society.

Humans use visual texts to communicate relevant discourse in order to create progressive change in society. Pranksters use visual texts, performance, and language to communicate anti-consumerist messages in a capitalist, free-trade, global society. Their work has the potential to both unify diverse publics and create alternative patterns of
cultural production and consumption. The continual repudiation of their work as a viable faction of political discourse dismisses the vital aspects of their work that is concurrent with democratic ideologies. Pranking rhetoric succeeds by making connections within the cultural context, while simultaneously offering alternatives to the current destructive corporate and consumer practices dominating our culture. It does not merely point out flaws in the system but offers solutions to the inadequacies of the system. The Yes Men contend that Dow should clean up Bhopal and explain exactly how it should be done. Packard Jennings encourages a humorous, albeit extreme, alternative to shopping: reclaiming cultural space. Both studies of pranking rhetoric reveal that alternative forms of communication are vital to creating substantial change in a diverse public. As seen by current corporate marketing strategies, how we interpret and disseminate texts in the public determines cultural practices. The work of pranksters is to reclaim the rampant dissemination of texts in the public from corporations that has become inaccessible to the people.

The Yes Men and shopdroppers work to emphasize the importance of people having access to powerful rhetorical devices that have been widely controlled by corporations. In order to create connections among the people the Yes Men and shopdroppers reclaim that space and encourage the public to participate in that action of agency. On most websites for shopdroppers there is a “how to” section that instructs others on specifically how to participate in a dropping event. They offer stickers or specific explanations on how to create your own work for the public. Similarly, the Yes Men strongly encourage others in their documentary and on their site to become a Yes Men. Although the implications of becoming part of a group imply membership and hierarchy
as does the print up stickers on the shopdropping site, I think the invitational nature of the projects are not merely to create mirror images that the activists present. But rather the invitational act is a process of transparency that encourages participation and engagement in the public. In the end the implications provided in the projects of the pranksters demonstrate the most important aspects of a social movement that need to be emphasized to maximize rhetorical significance: inclusion, access, action, and creative alternatives to reified social practices.

The Yes Men and Packard Jennings deliver a counter-consumerist message vital to the health of our culture, planet, and economic survival. Their works demonstrate Harold’s claim about how pranking “challenges the connection of rhetoric to truth” (“Pranking Rhetoric” 207). Truth in rhetoric is subjective to the rhetor, the audience, and the analyst. Rhetoric is the means by which humans communicate with one another, and in all forms of communication there are varied degrees of honesty and deception. In communication honesty and truth are masked as readily as lies and deception. We utilize these tactics in communication in terms of their service to us. In this study the works of pranksters prove to unearth, not only the hidden transcripts in a consumerist culture, but, additionally, the misunderstandings in rhetorical analysis around truth in communication.
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