The Chosen People - a Small Guide to a Big Revolution

"The resolution of the occupation is obviously not going to happen right now, but there are a lot of things that might happen very soon. The question is where to start.” The Yes Men’s Jacques Servin (aka Andy Bichlbaum) in conversation with Maayan Sheleff, following his recent visit to Jerusalem.

Conversation / Maayan Sheleff December 14, 2015

Last summer I invited Jacques Servin (aka Andy Bichlbaum, of the infamous culture-jamming activist duo the Yes Men) to The Art Cube Artists' Studios International Artist Residency in Jerusalem - an invitation he accepted on condition that his workshop and other public activities focus exclusively on the Israeli occupation.

Through actions known as "tactical media" or "media hacking,” and going by the principle that lies can expose the truth, the Yes Men aim to build awareness and outrage over corporate and governmental injustice. The duo have also produced films that document the Yes Men’s lives and practice, focusing mostly on "identity correction” - their tactic of impersonating entities that they dislike, whereby they attend conferences and television talk shows as their opponents1.

The_Yes_Men.jpg



[1]For the action “Vivoleum”, Andy Bichlbaum and Mike Bonanno impersonate ExxonMobil and National Petroleum Council executives in an oil conference in Canada 2007. courtesy of the Yes Men

During his residency in Jerusalem, Andy Bichlbaum gave a workshop to a group of artists and activists, which focused on developing responses to the Israeli occupation, using the Yes Men’s methods for creating guerilla media. The workshop lasted two intensive weeks, during which he met with various local anti-occupation activists and NGOs, and held a screening of the Yes Men's latest film, The Yes Men Are Revolting *[2]*. This report is based on a conversation between Andy and myself following the screening.

Maayan Sheleff: Did you have doubts about coming to Israel, and if so - why and how did you resolve them?

Andy Bichlbaum: I did have doubts. I know there’s a boycott, and I totally support it. I just felt that the only way I could actually contribute would be through a workshop on occupation issues. I’m not sure whether my visit was useful, but I think it potentially could be.
In the workshop, I worked to get the Israeli activists to focus on what seems to be the really big weak spot of the occupation — there are all these evidently unhinged settlers who have been so persistent and clever that they’ve really come to influence the government, much like their counterparts had in the US (read *What’s the Matter With Kansas*2 for how that happened). There’s a reason why Israeli policy seems so completely insane: it originates from an authentically, certifiably insane place.
Israeli activists could exploit this weak spot to oppose the occupation. Many Israelis, I think, would be as relieved as I was to know that their country’s criminal policy is at least in part the result of systematic efforts by religious nutcases — because that means there’s a way out: send the nutcases to the margins, where they belong. And it also means that Israel isn’t *intrinsically* horrible.
I still have hope. In the US, the Tea Party has been largely marginalized, as have the religious

extremists who systematically, over a period of decades, took over our government. But it has to start with this analysis, and it was actually pretty hard for me to convince Israeli activists to see what had seemed to me so obvious, and still does. But I think I had, at least for that afternoon, and we came up with four awesome projects that I think would be amazing to see carried out.

Mike (left) and Andy (right) survey Superstorm Sandy damage (credit Human Race) (1).png **[3]**



[4]Mike (left) and Andy (right) survey Superstorm Sandy damage
Photo: Human Race

MS: How would you define a good activist action? What should it entail in order to be successful?

AB: It depends on the context. Usually we try to be very precise about what we are doing. For example, the Chamber of Commerce Goes Green action [5] developed from a moment when a lot of people opposed climate change legislation, and it was possible to join that wave and be a little part of it. So it looked like we had something to do with the Chamber changing its position, but actually it was many individuals and groups doing something. Sometimes our actions might have to do with spreading a good idea, so that more people start thinking: why not? We could have an energy revolution in the US, we could stop contributing to climate change. And if it's not fixable we could stop making it worse, it's totally possible. The final action in our last film (*The Yes Men are Revolting*) was about helping to spread that idea, so that if one day there is a change in the political circumstances, people will have this idea in their head.

TYMAR Andy Bichlbaum and Mike Bonanno with Survivaballs (1).jpg **[6]**



[7]TYMAR Andy Bichlbaum and Mike Bonanno with Survivaballs
Photo: Nate “Igor” Smith

MS: You mentioned in a conversation we’ve had prior to this one that there is a difference between the method and the vision, when it comes to your actions. Could you talk about that, considering the political situation in Israel?

AB: The resolution of the occupation is obviously not going to happen right now, but there are a lot of things that could happen very soon. The question is where to start.
You start with a vision. You start with the ideal. There is a utopian solution, it's not hard to see if you don't live here...
The problem is, people are so tired here, for a good reason, that as soon as I said one idealistic word it was like, this could not happen for this reason or that. But you do have to start with a utopian vision to inspire people. A lot of utopian things have happened in the last 30 years, like gay marriage in the US - completely, radically unthinkable! - or Podemos [8], the Occupy movement taking some power in Spain, that would have been completely unthinkable to Spanish activists a few years ago! And crazy utopian stuff has happened again and again in history: the abolition of slavery, women's rights, ACT UP [9] and the way they forced the government to research AIDS treatments, the civil rights movement, workers' rights, universal health care, etc. All those things were at one time completely unthinkable in one place or another, utopian, crazy-sounding (universal health care still is, in the U.S.)

Taking action towards utopia might at least get us closer. So what's there to lose? The methods are figuring out ways to reduce fear around the situation, and get to this place that's different, eventually. You think: where do we want to go and how can we sell that vision? Then you sell it over

the years. (Steve Duncombe's book *Dream*[3] should be required reading for Israeli activists, because dreaming seems so damned hard here. It's not a manual for dreaming, exactly, but it explains why it's really important to do it.)

IMG_1851.JPG **[10]**



[11]"Yes, Bush Can", a campaign that toured the country, encouraging people to sign a patriot pledge, and included a visit to the Republican national convention
2004. Courtesy of the Yes Men

MS: Different regimes respond differently to activists. You can see in your latest film that in Russia, for example, there is a lot of police violence . In 2012, the Social Justice protesters in Israel admired the protesters in Gezi Park in Turkey for their bravery in light of real police brutality. And these days in Israel there is increasing censorship, in the arts and culture too. Funding is being cut and events are cancelled just because they raise some sort of debate. How can activists deal with these counter-responses? What might encourage them to fight back rather than engage in self-censorship?

AB: I think it's a matter of just not being afraid, realizing that eventually we win. Even Gezi park;

they were really depressed in Turkey after the repression of the protests. But then the Kurdish party, which became an umbrella for disaffected Turks by adopting Gezi's ideas and channeling that energy, got enough seats in the last elections to limit Erdogan's insane ambitions. And that's only the beginning.
So I think the key here is just to say “fuck it, what are they gonna do?” It's not like they are going to come and shoot everyone, probably, so you just need to have faith that putting things out there and doing things eventually results in some kind of change, even if you don't know how, exactly. The risks for Israeli activists are far smaller than for Turkish activists.
For us in the US, the risks are pretty much non-existent. We still think about it, though. Take for example our method of impersonation: the main thing is that you can do even illegal things and you're not going to get in trouble, if getting you in trouble is embarrassing to the target. Any of our targets over the last 20 years could have sued us or attacked us in various ways, and they used to send these legal threats which we would then send to many journalists and that would get press and negative attention for the target, so they stopped doing that after a while. You need to calculate that. If they attack you, can you make fun of them? Can you make people laugh at the situation? It’s like the David and Goliath story - David is always going to win.

MS: when you work on the details of your actions, for example, when you write your speeches or work on the presentation, it always seems like it goes to the point of absurd, but at the end it's still reliable and has impact. How do you balance absurdity and humor with reliability? How do you know when it has gone too far?

AB: If you're faking, like when we pretend to be someone that we're not, you just listen to yourself and think: I can get away with this phrase or that one, but is the other one too much? It has to be weird enough, so that afterwards, when people know that's a joke, they think and laugh about those things. For example, in the Chamber of Commerce speech [12] there were a lot of strange phrases and jokes that nobody heard the first time around, because they weren't expecting it to be a joke, but when you listen to it again it's funny. Sometimes you use phrases that the opponent uses, to sound like the opponent.
In the workshop we did in Jerusalem, two of the projects ended up being really hilarious versions of occupation-related segregation, with the purpose of highlighting how intensely crazy it was.

3-1 chamber of commerce.jpg **[13]**



[14]Andy Bichlbaum in "the Chamber of Commerce goes Green" action 2009. courtesy of the Yes Men

MS: What advice do you have for Israeli artists and activists who are discouraged by the current situation?

AB: Have fun with it! As the workshop participants have found out, I think, there's a lot of fun to be had around the occupation, because the opponents are so incredibly insane. And you need it to be fun for you, if you're going to keep going over the long haul—which you certainly have to do.
As I think I finally did convince the workshop participants, one reason to focus on the settlers is that they've been really, really influential over the decades and have really morphed Israel into a weird expression of their insanity. And another big reason is that they're hilariously insane, and therefore vulnerable, and so this is a point that can change; because they're vulnerable, this becomes a facet of the situation (which, yes, is complicated) that can actually change, unlike many of the other facets (global capitalism, historical Jewish fear, etc.).
In the US, in 2004, we had a blast impersonating the Bible-toting lunatics4 that had taken over the country and driven us to war; nothing could have been more somber and depressing than that reality, but we still had a lot of fun poking at it. Lots of people did! And eventually—miraculously you might say—the bulk of Americans turned their back on the bullshit that the crazies were using. Now we've got gay marriage—not just because gay activists aimed at it in a strategic and intelligent way, which they did, but because of the fatigue the whole country came to experience. And part of that came out of the persistent fun a lot of leftists had with it.

MS: Any specific ideas for fun?

AB: Well, one idea would be to start repurposing all the fun language that the crazies get to use, that we don't. "Chosen People," for example—perfect! The craziest settlers use it unironically; the rest of the right just has it implicitly lodged in their thinking. If we focus on those settlers—again, because it's fun, and because they actually have influenced things systematically and consciously since the early 1980s—then we could, for example, take over their language.
Israel's the one place in the world everyone points to as being in an impossible political situation that will never be resolved. But the whole world is in the same situation—look at the futility of military or police responses to Daesh, for example.
So, imagine if the Israeli Left wins, kicks out Netanyahu, stops the settler influence, enacts an enlightened approach to ending the occupation (there are some good proposals already)... Just imagine that. Wow! The whole world would change all at once. The Chosen People indeed. (That's not an original idea, of course—others have thought of that.)

MS: So that's what we have been chosen for...

AB: Well, who knows where that can go. Maybe it's just funny. It's just one stupid thought I had. The workshop we did actually resulted in four amazing ideas, all of which basically took the right's language and ideas and used them in a bit of jiu-jitsu that exposed how crazy the situation is, and in a couple of cases, how we could do things very differently. I don't think we should reveal those ideas yet—but maybe in the near future!

For more about the Yes Men and ways to get involved: www.yeslab.org [15]

- 1. See, for example, their action regarding Dow Chimical [16] and the Bophal disaster (2004), or their impersonation of a U.S. Deparetement of Energy official in Operation Second Thanks [17] (2014)
- 2. Thomas Frank, What's' the Matter with Kansas, How Conservatives Won the Heart of America, Henry Holt and Company, LLC, New York, 2004
- 3. Stephen Duncombe, Dream: Re-imagining Progressive Politics in an Age of Fantasy, New Press, New York, 2007
- 4. Some of these action involved the touring campaign “Yes , Bush Can!” [18], that encouraged people to sign a patriot pledge, and included a visit to the Republican national convention (2004)

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