

THE STATUS OF THE POLITICAL IN CONTEMPORARY ART AND CULTURE

KLARTEXT!

A SERIES OF DISCUSSIONS WITH INTERNATIONAL ARTISTS, ACTIVISTS, CURATORS AND THEORETICIANS
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Gerd Brendel: My name is Gerd Brendel and I am going to give a short introduction of those two gentlemen sitting to my right. One of them is leading the precarious existence of an artist between Paris and the American west coast. The other one is leading the peaceful life of college professor of media history at a little university in upstate New York. But both are driven by the wish to lead a double life. This wish started at a young age. Mike managed to implant little voice-generating models into Barbie dolls, making them say the male version was for like a GI Joe figure, a military Ken type. So this male Barbie figure said, "Let's go shopping." Whereas he made Barbie say, "Bad men don't tell lies." At that time, Andy and Mike didn't know each other, but Andy already had a double life. He was working as a software developer of computer games, and he managed to implant little soft porn sequences into the computer games. In their present work, they have of course some – they are not without a tradition. One might be able to point out their link to the Situationism movement, they also lean on Augusto Boal's "theatre of the oppressed" but of course when it comes to their performing, they extended the performing tradition that dates back to the legendary caliph Harun ar-Rashid who walked the streets of Baghdad clad as a beggar in order to find out what his subjects really thought of him. And of course being in Berlin, one has to name the figure of the shoemaker Wilhelm Voigt, who, as the Captain of Köpenick, clad in the uniform of a Prussian officer, managed to fool the Prussian society into believing that he had the power to do everything. Yes Men in German means *Ja Sager*. They are two U.S. Americans, Andy Bichbaum, Michael Bonanno, or Humphrey Birken, Jacques Ivan, or simply Andy and Mike. They change their names as often as their professions and maybe a most suitable description would be "impostors with the inseparable claim to make the world a better place." That's a popular quotation by someone. They themselves call their work *identity corrections*, a term which of course refers to a field of crime identity theft that's a big deal in the USA and, of course, refers to all kinds of fraud. And of course correction also refers to criminal punishment; it not only means to make something better but also reminds you of the institution where juvenile criminals get corrected. They are not artists in the classical manner. They refuse identifiable authorship. Their works don't bear a signature. And along with many different names, they have dozens of email addresses. Therefore, I thought it would be best to ask them to introduce themselves - not only one introduction but maybe three – very short. Maybe one intro, Andy, for the foundation that you want to get money from for the next project. Maybe Mike would like to introduce himself to an audience of Berlin cultural producers who are becoming potential receivers of Hartz IV, which is the unemployment fund in Germany. And maybe you can do a little introduction for the CNN broadcast on the theme of World Economy. So, who wants to do the first introduction?

Mike: Ok. Thank you for attending our request for funding. We've been following the activities of the foundation for a long time, with interest, and we are absolutely desperate for cash, because we have needs, like others. Go ahead, next.

Brendel: Next one would be to introduce yourself to an audience of wannabe Bohemian, Berlin cultural producers. Females and males, also with different identities and in the precarious situation of not knowing whether they would get unemployment benefits.

Andy: Hello St. Precari. Yeah it won't be much different when you do this sort of thing, so you'll feel right at home. You'll continue to be precarious, and certainly there's not much opportunity in the gallery scene, so you might as well do this kind of job we are doing.

Brendel: And you are the one introducing yourself as some sort of expert in a CNN network special news broadcast about world economy. And people want to know what you do and who you are.

Mike: My name is Erasmus Ham and as you know, I am an expert in corporate finance. And I am very honored. This is an important subject, which affects all of us and the way that we do business everyday. Thank you.

Brendel- You have probably detected that the most professional intro was the last one referring to the TV media thing, and there's a reason for that. The two of them are quite experienced in playing a role in public broadcast and mass media. We are going to see a clip in a minute. You can see their latest appearance. It's an appearance of someone who looks very much like Andy.

Video: BBC on Bophal

<http://www.theyesmen.org/hijinks/dow/>

***Journalist:** Well joining us live from Paris now is Jude Finisterra. He's a spokesman for Dow Chemical, which took over Union Carbide. Good morning to you. A day of commemoration in Bhopal – do you now accept responsibility for what happened?*

***Yes Men:** Steve, yes, today is a great day for all of us at Dow and I think for millions of people around the world. And for today, I am very, very happy to announce that Dow is accepting full responsibility for the disaster. We have a twelve billion dollar plan to finally at long last fully compensate the victims including the 120 thousand who may need medical care for their entire lives and to fully and swiftly remediate the Bhopal plant site. Now when we acquired Union Carbide three years ago, we knew what we were getting: it's worth twelve billion dollars. Twelve billion dollars. We have resolved to liquidate Union Carbide, this nightmare for the world and this headache for Dow, and use the twelve billion dollars to provide more than five hundred dollars per victim, which is all that they have seen. A maximum of about just about five hundred dollars per victim – it is not "plenty good for an Indian" as one of our spokespersons unfortunately said a couple years ago. In fact, it pays for one year of medical care. We will adequately compensate the victims. Furthermore, we will perform a complete remediation of the Bhopal site which, as you mentioned, has not*

been cleaned up. When Union Carbide abandoned the site twenty years ago, or sixteen years ago, they left tons of toxic waste, which can't be used as a playground by children. Water continues to be drunk from the ground water underneath. It's a mess, Steve.

Journalist: It's a mess, Jude. That's good news that you have finally accepted responsibility, some people would say too late. It's three years or almost four years on. How soon is your money going to make a difference to the people in Bhopal?

Yes Men: Well, as soon as we can get it to them, Steve. We've begun a process of liquidating Union Carbide. This is, as you mentioned, late, but it's the only thing we can do. When we settled Union Carbide, we did settle the liabilities in the US immediately. And we are now three years later prepared to do the same in India. We should have done it three years ago; we are doing it now. I would say that it's better late than never. I would like to say that this is no small matter, Steve. This is the first time in history that a publicly owned company of anything near the size of Dow has performed an action, which is significantly against its bottom line, simply because it's the right thing to do. And our shareholders may take a bit of a hit, but I think if they are anything like me, Steve, they will be ecstatic to be a part of such a historic occasion of doing right by those who have been wronged.

Journalist: And does this mean you will also cooperate in any future legal actions in India or the USA?

Yes Men: Absolutely, Steve. One of our non-financial commitments is to press the United States to finally extradite Warren Anderson, who fled India after being arrested in 1984. He posted two thousand dollars bail on multiple homicide charges and fled India promptly. We are going to press the US government to extradite Mr. Anderson, who is living in Long Island, to India to finally face the charges, and I believe they may be lenient. We are also going to engage in unprecedented transparency. We are going to release the full composition of the chemicals and the studies that were performed by Union Carbide shortly after the catastrophe. This information has never been released, Steve, and it's time for it to be released in case any of that information can be of use to medical professionals. And finally, we are going to fund research. Any interested researcher can contact Dow's Ethics and Compliance office. We are going to fund with no strings attached into the safety of any Dow product... Many competent scientists have raised significant doubts about many Dow products, and we do not want to be a company who sells products that may have long-term negative effects on the world. This is a momentous occasion, and our new CEO, Andrew Liveris, who has been our CEO for just less than a month, has decided to take Dow in this unprecedented direction.

Journalist: Jude, we will leave it there. Thank you for joining us. Just to reiterate what Jude Finisterra, spokesman for Dow Chemicals, has just said: he says Dow Chemicals now fully accepts responsibility for Bhopal, and they will cooperate in future legal action.

Brendel: So I think it took the BBC one day until they revoked that breaking news item?

Mike: It took two hours...

Brendel: Well, how often was it broadcast?

Mike: It was broadcast twice, and then they sat on it for about an hour. Then two hours later, the same broadcaster retracted the story, and they played a small clip from a Dow representative who said there was absolutely no basis in the story.

Brendel: The whole thing came about, because an editor for the BBC said we have to do something for the anniversary and came across a web page called Dow Ethics, which you had set up, and then contacted the web page, and there you were confronted with this offer to appear public and say something on it. So, can you tell us what were the two options you were thinking about?

Mike: Well one of the options was obviously this one, to take responsibility, and we figured Dow would have to react and that would in itself be a story, even if the original hoax wasn't a story. And the other option was to be cruel and honest, which was what we did when we set up the website two years ago. We sent out a press release about why Dow couldn't care less about the Bhopal victims, because they would never be shareholders and so there's no legal reason why Dow should do anything about it.

Brendel: The first web page was set up in the name of the son of the chief executive of Dow? Then the son got really mad and took it over.

Andy: There was a website at dow-chemical.com and we made the mistake of registering under the son of the CEO's name, and he was actually able to claim it for himself and take over the domain, so it was kind of a stupid fun idea that ended up adding to the story. But it ended up adding to the story in an interesting way, so you have to imagine when they were panicking, someone had to call the CEO's son and get him to Fed-Ex a legal letter to France, where the domain was registered, demanding that he take back his own website. It's a weird side story.

Brendel: So you tried to correct the identity of the son and he wouldn't accept the offer. But other people have accepted your offer. This was the first time you appeared as some sort of expert. You went on TV as a representative of the World Trade Organization (WTO), appearing on a program of CNN. And that was almost in the middle of a project, where you traveled the world as WTO experts, and that actually started as a web page. You had set up a web page in the name of the GATT (General Agreement on Tariffs and Trade, www.gatt.org). Then people found it and thought, "This is great why don't we invite them to our conference... of managers of textile plants in Finland?" And there you had a very well received presentation, and we'll see a clip of that presentation now...

Video: Tampere Conference, Finland

<http://www.theyesmen.org/hijinks/tampere/index.shtml>

***Yes Men:** Had the leaders of the 1860s in the US understood what their leaders understand today, the Civil War would have never happened. In a world where the headquarters of a company might be in New York, Hong Kong, or Sidney, or possibly Finland, and the workers are in Gabon, Romania, or Estonia, how does a manager maintain a proper rapport with the workers, and how does he or she ensure from a distance that workers perform their work in an ethical fashion? I'm about to show you an actual prototype of the WTO's solution to two major management problems of today. And we all know that not even the best workplace design can help the manager to keep track of workers. What you need is a solution that enables complete rapport with workers. Especially when they are far away. Mike, can you help me a little? This is the WTO's answer to two of the management problems. We're calling it the "management of leisure suit." It's the two problems again: how to maintain close rapport with workers, distant workers, and how to*

remain comfortable and increase leisure activities. How does the management of leisure suit work, besides being extremely comfortable, as I can guarantee you? This is the EVA, the Employee Visualization appendage. It's a deployable, hip-mounted device with totally hands-free operation that allows the manager to see his employees directly, right here. Signals communicating the exact amount of quality of physical work are transmitted not only visually right here but directly through channels implanted directly into the manager. The workers, for their part, are fitted with transmitting chips that are implanted, directly into the shoulder. The other equally important aspect of the MLS has to do with leisure. In the United States, leisure – another word for freedom – really has been decreasing steadily since the 1970s. The MLS permits the manager to reverse this trend by letting him do his work anywhere while remaining in complete touch with the workers, physically sensing what's going on in the workforce on the floor through channels implanted directly into the manager. Again, the manager sees the employees but also feels what they're feeling and can select where to focus in the workplace environment. So in conclusion, I'd like to ask, "Is this a science fiction scenario?" The answer is no. Everything we've seen here, everything we've been talking about is entirely possible today. We can always look forward on the highways of progress toward ever-new horizons with cooperation and mutual delight in the fruits of prosperity. I'm very excited to be here. Thank you very much.

Brendel: How did they react?

Mike: They applauded, they laughed, and afterwards they didn't have any questions. We did walk around the conference all day. We had lunch. We had cocktails. We had dinner with them at which the chief of the conference thanked us for the presentation. We asked people if they felt there was anything weird about it, because quite a few people thought it was weird to have something that dramatic and that clear as part of a WTO speech, but nobody really took issue with the talk, which was about slavery and sweatshops... nobody really took issue with any of the content of the talk.

Brendel: A female participant was offended by the phallic structure of the device? That was the only criticism you encountered?

Andy: At the end of the day we managed to talk with a woman, who was part of the audience, and we really pressed her to find out what was wrong with the talk, and eventually she conceded that the problem was with the phallic shape of the device, and that women could be factory owners too... Andy suggested that if it was a different shape, and he kind of made a gesture around his chest, you wouldn't have a problem with it, and she said yeah, then that would be fine.

Brendel: But you were a little unsatisfied with that resonance. You were questioning yourself about how far can one actually go before one encounters disbelief, protest of people who are in the middle of this whole globalization, this whole economic process... So you prepared one last appearance in an academic setting, right? Wasn't it an academic setting?

Mike: We did a dress rehearsal that you'll see.

Brendel: The students didn't know? It was a campus-wide discussion set up as a discussion of WTO experts... that's the last clip...

Video: WTO lecture at the State University of New York in Plattsburgh

<http://www.theyesmen.org/hijinks/plattsburgh/index.shtml>

Yes Men: I'd like to thank everybody for coming. We're all grateful at the WTO that you've chose to listen to us for an hour and to our messages about things that will impact everyone. I'd like to that say by joining us here you are essentially embarking with us on a mission. I'd like to start right at the beginning. As I was saying, trade liberalization is a project of faith; it's a crusade. And in any crusade, there are problems. There are invading armies. There are big blockades. And one of the problems we run into is starvation in the third world. You may recognize that symbol from those green bins you see, where cans, bottles belong. The kind of recycling I am talking about - that we have developed at the WTO - is not really this irrelevant kind of recycling where the target individual consumers like you and me, of non edible industrial products, are such a tiny part of the problem. Really, we are talking about really recycling what counts, where it counts. To begin to understand the theory behind this you must understand that the human body is not very efficient. When ingesting heavy foods, only about 20 percent of the nutrients are absorbed by the elementary passageway, while the other 80 percent finds itself expelled by post-consumer by-products. Already twenty years ago, NASA scientists began to tap into this nutritional gold mine by developing filters that could transform their astronauts' waste into healthy, hygienic, and even delicious food once again. With the use of this technology, a single hamburger can be eaten more than ten times, providing a cumulative total of three times the nutritional value of the original hamburger.... I'd love to take any questions...

Brendel: In Germany we have a nice saying: turning shit into gold. And that's what it was mostly about. The idea this WTO expert addressed to the audience was that people in the third world, they would only be able to eat recycled hamburgers, and the more you climb up the stage of economic development the more non-recycled food you get. That performance was very well documented, and you can see it in the Yes Men movie shown at the last Berlinale. Before we start the discussion with the public, I would like to give you the chance, briefly, to tell us about your experience in the field of practical politics. Like Deborah Kelly, you have also decided to engage in politics. That was because of last year's election. You have given Yes Men a new political meaning, and you have started quite a successful campaign. Who were you there, and what did you do?

Andy: Last summer we drove around the US in a bus that looked a lot like a Bush campaign bus, and the idea was we were going to try to correct the identity of the Bush campaign and show up at events that Bush might be at and set up appointments with other Republicans like us, who we could talk to and get enthusiastic, in the same way that we met up and talked with people about the employee visualization appendage. Of course, what we learned in this process was what we already knew from the WTO events - that people really fit what we were saying into their worldview as it existed already, and so the thing was a total failure from a political perspective. As we were trying to correct the identity of Bush, there were all of these people applauding what we were doing no matter what, and we may have only been successful in getting people more enthusiastic about Bush. By the end of campaign, we had a missile and oil derrick mounted on top of the bus, and the missile said "The end is near," and we were asking people to sign petitions in favor of global warming and in favor of cutting down all the trees in the national parks and in favor of nuclear waste. And yet people were still willing to sign on the

line, even young men of draft age were willing to sign on the dotted line in favor of Bush, so it was a failure.

Brendel: And they look completely incredible. I mean these are Bush supporters, in their little blue suits, and I had the privilege to follow them in Washington, and we arranged a meeting with a Republican candidate in Eugene, and the occasion was the opening of the football stadium in Eugene, and everybody was there with their pick-up trucks and barbecuing. And I arranged a meeting as a German journalist, and in the course of the interview the two of them turned up as the Bush campaigners. And this politician wasn't aware that we were a team, and he was taken by surprise and confronted by their enthusiastic sympathy and a song mocking old environmental worries... What was the song?

Mike: The mascot of the national forest system in the US is called "Smokey the Bear," who is a bear who is out to prevent forest fires. He's very recognizable... So we made a simple costume based on "Smokey the Bear," called "Smokey the Log" with a tree stop symbol, which is about using the forest and about cutting everything down so that we can make paper and get rich. We were getting people to sign petitions in favor of cutting down Yosemite and Yellowstone, and this is of course what they are actually doing... We went up and this candidate meeting that Gerd had arranged, this contact was delighted by "Smokey the Log." It was very nice.

Andy: We sang a song together. We led him in a round of music, which someone had written for the occasion.

Brendel: And when they had left, I asked him, "What were they? Have you ever heard of them?" And he said, "No. Interesting. We will find out." He was dodging a little. Then he said, "Well, for a moment I thought they were Log Cabin Republicans." The Log Cabin Republicans are some republican gay people forming a pressure group with the same name. So that was the impression he got. I would like to open the discussion now, and I'd like to ask Deborah to come and join us. And I hope there are some questions.

Deborah Kelly: Could you please sing the song?

Transcription: Ron Amber Deloney