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Confidence tricks

In the Sixties he turned hoaxing from stunt into fine art, and that's why Joey Skaggs is Mark Borkowski's mentor

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Anyone who has delusions of influencing the media ought to see the recently released movie *The Yes Men*, an object lesson in how to turn pranksterism into political action.

It is the work of Andy Bichlbaum and Mike Bonanno, a pair of anti-corporate film-makers-cum-political activists who set up a website posing as the World Trade Organization. Despite it being an obvious spoof, they were soon invited by corporate types to speak at trade conferences all over the world. There they expounded what they felt were clearly satirical points of view (using slavery as an economic model, selling votes to influence elections, etc), only to find them welcomed as progressive ideas in the world of global commerce and trade.

It is a good film, making a good point. But there's nothing as effective in it as the stunt that the Yes Men pulled last December on the 20th anniversary of the Bhopal chemical disaster in India. Bichlbaum and Bonanno had earlier set up a bogus website for Dow Chemical, the US company that took over Union Carbide, the plant's owners at the time of the catastrophe that has killed 20,000 in the 20 years since it happened, and someone at the BBC logged on in the hope of an interview. In a magnificent piece of effrontery, Bichlbaum went on air posing as a Dow spokesman and announced that, after 20 years of evasion and denial, Dow had finally accepted full responsibility for the disaster and would pay £12bn in compensation. What was brilliant about this was not the stunt itself, which was criticised for giving false hope to the victims' families (albeit for only two hours, until Dow woke up to the hoax), but its effect forcing Dow to retract its apology and withdraw the bogus compensation offer.

In an age of cheap PR stunts, the Yes Men are following in the distinguished footsteps of one of my mentors. Joey Skaggs' distinguished career of anarchic stunts demonstrates the difference between a prankster and a publicist, while at the same time making the prank an art work. What Skaggs does is manipulate the media in order to highlight hypocrisy. As a result, much of the media, who are not known for enjoying jokes at their own expense, dislike him. Crucially, Skaggs does not work for anyone but himself. He has no unseen corporate clients lurking in the background, and he rarely profits from his stunts (although he has made a tidy living from his "fish condos": designer apartments for guppies that started as a joke and ended up being must-have gifts for yuppies the very people who were the butt of the joke).

Skaggs considers himself to be a performance artist, and cites as his influences the Surrealists and Absurdist of an earlier era. While others use publicity to sell us stuff, he's a refreshing throwback to the more innocent age of men such as P T Barnum and Jim Moran.

A proper prankster (such as Skaggs or the Yes Men) picks deserving victims and makes them look gullible or foolish, making us laugh while making his point. Skaggs is a master of this form of hoax because he always has a point to make and he's never trying to sell us anything because he's not looking for profit.

I first made contact with him when I was researching my book (*Improperganda The Art of the Publicity Stunt*), but he made his name long before that. Skaggs is a product of the Sixties counter-culture, and that is what separates

him from his acolytes today. America in the Sixties was an era of anti-Establishment protest, and it's in that spirit that Skaggs staged and still stages his stunts.

The first was in 1966 when he carried a 10ft crucifix on an Easter parade in New York to rail against the hypocrisy of the Church and man's inhumanity to man. He later strung a 50ft bra across the steps of the US Treasury on St Valentine's Day to highlight the American male's obsession with female breasts. His premise was simple: he set out to ridicule the media façade, and the fallibility of the public's blind acceptance of the media, so he used the media as his medium.

One of his best stunts was a 1976 newspaper ad announcing the opening of a brothel for dogs ("A cat house for dogs featuring a savory selection of hot bitches"), followed by a photo-opportunity for the media. One TV company was nominated for an Emmy for its coverage of an event that was not only a figment of Skaggs' brilliant imagination, but proof of how easy it was to manipulate the media with two of their favourite subjects sex and animals. Only when Skaggs faced prosecution did he expose the idea as a "conceptual performance piece".

Other stunts by Skaggs to fool the press included the opening of a "Celebrity Sperm Bank", where Bob Dylan and The Beatles had allegedly left deposits again satirising the media's obsessions with sex and medical advances. And a bogus laboratory where Dr Josef Gregor (alias Skaggs) had bred a strain of cockroaches that produced hormones that would cure all known ailments and protect humans from radiation. The press, in its frenzy to report the new miracle drug, failed to note that the doctor's name was strangely similar to the character in Kafka's *The Metamorphosis* who turned from a human into a giant insect.

My favourite was when Skaggs appeared on national TV as "Joe Bones" to launch his "Fat Squad" \$300-a-day commandos who would shadow dieters throughout their day to prevent them snacking in a send-up of America's obsession with obesity and diets. Almost as good was when he posed as the president of a Korean organisation called Kea So Joo, sending letters to dog shelters asking for any unwanted canines to be sent to him for food, causing predictable outrage in the media, much of it with racist overtones. Perhaps none of the writers were Korean, or they would have smelt a rat from the organisation's name it means "Dog Meat Soup with Alcohol" in Korean.

Perhaps Skaggs is my greatest contemporary muse. Without him there would have been no Yes Men, no Michael Moore, because Skaggs as little known as he is is the originator. Unlike Moore, he is not driven by ego, because he is an artist first and an activist second. Because he shies away from publicity for himself, he remains unknown to the world at large, but his name should be written in lights as an example to us all. Hang on... I think I know just the man to do it. Now, where did I put Joey's phone number?

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