

“The Manhattan Art Review”

The Yes Men - Carriage Trade - ****

The problem of art as activism is, of course, that a gallery is an idiotic place to attempt activism. The Yes Men, knowing this, are more of a media terrorism group than artists, although their interventions are more art-inflected than Michael Moore or *The Daily Show*, the best remembered examples of the early oughts consciousness-raising political humor trend that The Yes Men are a part of. Consciousness-raising doesn't turn out to be very useful when we don't live in a democracy where the political system is actually beholden to its citizens, but things were less cynical back then. Their impersonations of media figures and advertisements has a clear conceptual lineage, although putting them in a news/popular media context makes those moves more effective than if they were done in the art world, not to mention funnier. The show itself is mostly an archival document of their activities, and the jokes have aged better than the aforementioned references. A gold bodysuit with a giant gold penis/tv monitor for more efficiently tracking employees is very dumb symbolic humor, but it's followed through with enough persistence that the execution outdoes the initial joke. It's also integral that The Yes Men actually put the work into understanding the protocols and legal structures of the things they were messing with, which proves the seriousness of their joking. Unlike most political art these days that is predicated on an artist's presumption of significance and moral rectitude by virtue of their subject matter, they engaged materially with the systems they were critiquing instead of just being condescending.