

# Non-Preaching Activism in New York. The Theatrical Militancy of Billionaires for Bush and Reverend Billy

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**Abstract** This article, grounded on a fieldwork conducted in 2007 and 2008 in New York City, aims at analyzing the social usages and effects of artistic and ironic actions led by two activist collectives: *Reverend Billy and the Church of Stop Shopping* and the *Billionaires for Bush*. The first organization is opposed to excessive consumerism and denounces actors, like multinational corporations, involved in the privatization of public spaces in New York City. The second collective—by using forms of action and ironic slogans pretending to endorse US government decisions regarding tax cuts and, more generally, any law favouring privileged groups—condemns policies which widen social inequalities. The resort to artistic and ironic actions assumes *denouncing* and *non-preaching* characteristics. First, these actions target elected people or institutions perceived as responsible for the social, economic, and political problems identified by the collectives. Then, the activists tend to criticize and disassociate from connotations which to them are associated with certain forms of religious ceremonies and political activism, delivering sermons and *preaching to the choir*. A major interest of the non-preaching nature of these artistic and ironic actions would precisely lie in their capacity to sensitize outside the social circles of converted activists. The article first examines formal transfers between art and activism—narratives, costumes, musical repertoires—drawing on US cultural and religious references while taunting them. The analytical description of these actions will lead to a critical insight into their political and social effects. To which extent do these musical and theatrical forms of protest have the capacity to call political beliefs into question, to arm convinced activists, to convert the undecided, or even the opponents to the causes championed by these protest groups?

**Keywords** Activism · Art · Militancy · Protest

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This article analyzes the social usages and effects of artistic and ironic protest acts, drawing on the example of two American organizations: Reverend Billy and the Church of Stop Shopping<sup>1</sup>, and Billionaires for Bush.

The first of these was founded in 1996 and is composed of Reverend Billy—a caricature of American televangelist preachers—and an “omniscient” chorus-cum-choir taking its inspiration from the theatre of Ancient Greece. Through a parody of American religious conservatism, this protest group is against excessive consumerism and endeavors to denounce those involved—especially multinational companies—in privatizing public spaces such as Union Square or Coney Island.<sup>2</sup> The second organization, whose name suggests an ironic, euphemistic opposition to authority and its embodiment in the person of George W. Bush, pretends to endorse government decisions to reduce levels of taxation on the rich, as well as all forms of excessive accumulation of wealth that works in their favor. This American protest group was initially called Billionaires for Forbes in 1999, before becoming Billionaires for Bush (or Gore) when the Republican Steve Forbes withdrew from the 2000 presidential campaign, and then taking its current name after the victory of George W. Bush in 2000. It has just over 60 chapters nationwide and several of its members are activists for or involved in the United for a Fair Economy organization.

More generally, the two protest groups are opposed to the policies of the Bush administration, such as the war in Iraq that started in March 2003. Both produce theatrical performances in the streets of New York, or in the case of Reverend Billy “interventions” in stores belonging to multinational chains (such as Disney and Starbucks), as well as “protest” plays in theater buildings.

These artistic practices call extensively upon a register which might be described as playful and ironic:<sup>3</sup> for example, on June 5, 2008, during a protest gathering against the building of a restaurant in Union Square park in New York, a billionaire dressed up to the nines in a black dress with red flowers, long gloves, a necklace of false pearls, and sparkling earrings and tiara, carried a placard calling for *More Cars/Less Park*. Her associate, dressed in a suit, tie, and dark glasses, brandished a sign that read *Fine Dining? Fine with me!* where the ironic nature of the message was accentuated by the double usage of the word ‘fine’. For both organizations, the use of such ironic practices is part of a strategy to *denounce*, but *without preaching*. The activists seek, first, to attribute responsibility for the problems targeted by the public demonstrations in which they are taking part—whether the charges are being made against people in public life or against institutions. Second, as we shall see, the members of these protest groups seek to free themselves of the connotations they believe society attributes to “classic” activism and to disassociate themselves from any “moralistic preaching”. One of the major advantages of the artistic and non-“preaching” character of their denunciation—stemming in particular from the use of irony and the participation of the public in their protest actions—would seem to reside in its ability to reach out beyond the circle of convinced activists.

<sup>1</sup> At the time when the field research was conducted, the group was known as “Reverend Billy and the Church of Stop Shopping.” Its name has now been changed to “Reverend Billy and the Church of Life after Shopping.”

<sup>2</sup> Union Square is both a square and a park in Manhattan; Coney Island is a peninsula to the South of Brooklyn. The Billionaires for Bush and Reverend Billy and the Church of Stop Shopping conduct protest actions against the pressure to carry out property development in these two places—notably the building of a hotel park on Coney Island and restaurants in Union Square.

<sup>3</sup> The issue of playful and ironic repertoires is treated in a similar way within a French context in Lechaux (2009).

The aim of this study is thus to relate the specificities of these registers of protest action to their ability to reach out to heterogeneous publics. This will be conducted in two stages. First, attention will be paid to the formal transfers between the registers of art and activism—narrations, costumes, and musical repertoires—which draw on and parody American cultural and religious references. Adopting a critical distance from a “preaching” kind of activism seems to throw light on specific modes of awareness building as well as on norms of professional legitimacy. Second, the analytical description of these registers of protest action will lead to a critical analysis of their effects: to what extent do these ironically inflected musical and theatrical forms of protest have the ability, for the activists, to call political convictions into question, fire up converts, convert the undecided, and perhaps even affect their opponents?

This text is based on field work carried out in 2007 and 2008 in New York. Activists belonging to the two organizations mentioned above were interviewed, more particularly members of Billionaires for Bush who belonged to Follies, a group of actors and singers involved in the organization’s events, which are mainly performed in theaters. The majority of activist profiles within these two organizations fall into two types, reflecting a dual relationship between art and activism. The first of these corresponds to *art worlds’* professionals (Becker 1982) who wish to use their artistic skills within a protest organization; the second corresponds to activists working in a field other than that of [the] *art worlds* but who wish to work with organizations using creative protest strategies. Most of the people interviewed had paid employment in theater and/or music, having previously followed specific training (primarily at school and/or university). Interviews were then conducted with journalists working for *The New York Times*, *Village Voice*, *Daily News*, *AM New York* and *Time Out New York*, writing principally for the ‘Politics’ and the ‘NY’ sections of the papers and involved with varying frequency in covering street theatre. These interviews are especially interesting for what they reveal about the logic underlying journalistic coverage and the media contextualization of protest actions carried out by the two organizations—actions which are frequently closely linked to political deadlines and/or larger social movements. Interviews carried out with theatre critics offer an insight into the way they see the relationships between theatre and activism. The final element underpinning the analysis presented here is based on observation of Billionaires for Bush’s and Reverend Billy and the Church of Stop Shopping’s protest actions and events, and on audiovisual material showing actions conducted by the two organizations.<sup>4</sup>

### Formal Transfers Between the Repertoires of Art and Activism

The first stage of the analysis will consist in studying the forms given to and conditions of the interconnection between arts and activism as they transpire in the registers of the artistic actions of the two protest groups.

#### Characters Who Are Not Entirely Fictional

Given the background of William Talen, who adopted the name Reverend Billy, one might conjecture that his theatrical and musical rendering of preaching is a kind of cathartic reversal of a biographical scar. W. Talen was brought up in the Midwest by “abusive right

<sup>4</sup> This work is part of a doctoral thesis in political sociology about the commitment of theatre professionals *for the cause*, in France and the USA.

wing” Dutch Calvinists, “traditional and militarist republicans”, and experienced his religious education as a “trauma”; he felt that his meeting with Reverend Sydney Lanier, although it did not reconcile him with this education, at least introduced him to a form of spirituality combined with radical activism which denounced conservative preaching. In the late 1990s, Reverend S. Lanier—who had seen William Talen acting in a play—became his mentor and suggested he create a character that would come across as “a new kind of preacher”. S. Lanier was a friend of Lenny Bruce (1925-1966), a writer and humorist who assumed the role of Christian characters and whose shows, based on a social satire of American society, resulted in him being charged with “obscenity” in 1964. Reverend Billy’s theatrical performances draw on American religious references—one playwright underlines the fact that “a preacher giving a sermon, it’s a very familiar show to us”—whilst adopting an irreverent attitude towards the Church. The organization’s most frequent targets are televangelists such as Jimmy Lee Swaggart and Jim Bakker, denounced by the activists for their greed and corruption cloaked in morality. One of its hallowed expressions is: “We believe in the god that people who don’t believe in God believe in”. William Talen is not ordained as a minister, though he is authorized to conduct weddings and baptisms and officiate at burials. The satirical staging of conservative religious rituals is not the exclusive preserve of this group; the American organization Church Ladies for Choice also produces theatrical and musical performances which parody the Church and ridicule conservative stances on abortion.<sup>5</sup>

The idea of a choir to accompany Reverend Billy comes from Ancient Greek drama. Its omniscient and critical stance, arising from the fact that it is not directly involved in the issues and plot of the performance, enables it to comment on the way the story is unfolding. Its supposed wisdom further lends it the legitimacy to pronounce the correct moral, and bring those in temptation, such as Reverend Billy, to see reason.

The fusion of theater and committed activism is not necessarily a form of paid employment, insofar as artists involved in the work of protest groups can also carry out professional artistic activities unrelated to their activism. William Talen, however, has chosen to make his activism his profession, and vice versa. Members of the Reverend Billy choir on the other hand, are not paid for their participation in the events produced by the organization.

The names chosen by Billionaires for Bush activists for themselves involve a play on words, pointing ambivalently to a name and to a pejorative expression, Rob Dapore evoking “rob the poor”, and Noah Countability equating to “no accountability”. During interviews, the people spoken to punned on their chosen names: “I rob the poor, and I rob them very well” (interview with an actor and theatre producer, whose Billionaires for Bush alias is Rob Dapore). These extravagant characters, wearing evening dress and smoking cigars, are an ironic embodiment of what the organization denounces, i.e., the excessive accumulation of wealth.

### Theatrical Performances in Emblematic Places

Both organizations produce theatrical performances in the streets of New York and in the case of Reverend Billy, “interventions” in stores belonging to multinational chains, as well as “protest” plays in theaters. These configurations imply different relations with the performance and distinct expectations on the part of the uninitiated, peers, and theatre reviewers. A certain degree of professionalism is required for plays performed in a theater

<sup>5</sup> See Cohen-Cruz (1994), about *Church Ladies For Choice*.

building that the public has chosen to go and see (a choice for which a financial contribution is made, either by buying a ticket or making a donation) and where theatre reviewers attend the performance (or the dress rehearsal). Street theatre performances and interventions in stores are more improvised and more uncertain in character due to the fact that the police might intervene, and to the relationship with a non-static audience that does not necessarily believe in the message put across.

For store interventions such as that carried out at the Disney store in Times Square in New York in 1999, Reverend Billy and the Stop Shopping Gospel Choir enter a shop incognito and talk to each other or imaginary persons, referring to consumer acts in pejorative terms. Jason Grote explains that (these interventions) are based in part on techniques developed by the invisible theater form of theatrical performance in the 1960s and 1970s, where actors—both theatre artists and activists—mingled with the crowds and joined in conversations in a critical way<sup>6</sup>.

The spaces where the plays are performed or the protest actions carried out are places of historical or symbolic significance. In the case of Reverend Billy, there is an admixture of art, activism, and spirituality, which also characterizes the performance places to which the activists have access: “We are close to certain churches who invite arts and theatre to their space” (interview with Reverend Billy). These churches, like Saint Mark’s Church or Saint Clement’s Church—which include a theater performance space—are also characterized by their activism and left wing positioning. Starbucks and Disney stores, on the other hand, are seen by the organization as emblematic of excessive consumerism and the precarious working conditions of their employees, as shown in the words of the song composed by the playwright Jason Grote during the Reverend Billy and the Church of Stop Shopping protest action in the Disney store in Times Square in 1999: “Just whistle while you work/For fifteen cents an hour/Cheap labor, dear, has brought you here/And now you work for us!”<sup>7</sup>

### Transmuting Professional Skills into Activist Skills

The transfer of capital between art and activism may be associated with the transmutation of professional skills acquired via the theatre and music into activist skills: the ability to express and exhibit oneself on the stage or in public spaces, the theatrical staging of oneself. The use of honed, inventive strategies can be seen in the protest events put on by the two organizations, in which the professional skills of artists trained in improvisation and sensitive *dramatization*, in bodily and sometimes musical expression, and the multiplication of created identities, are put to the test of activism. The ability to handle different dimensions of rhetoric and to give body to protest issues is no doubt more generally rooted in socialization and a specific mode of professional organization. The source of an artist’s “talent” or absence of “talent” resides in his or her ability—in the case of actors for example—to bring characters and their emotional dramas to life. Moreover, this skill constitutes a criterion of professional excellence, associated with the ‘logics of self-esteem’ (Braud 1996, p. 145) operating within a highly competitive artistic world, and the activist corollary of this is the explicit exhibition of the self, not its effacement, and the staging of suffering and dissatisfactions.

The protest event organized by Reverend Billy on June 24, 2007 at the Highline Ballroom in New York is emblematic of the admixture of artistic and activist skills and

<sup>6</sup> See Grote (2002, p. 362).

<sup>7</sup> Quoted in Grote (2002).

religious references. The choir accompanied Reverend Billy's narration with spirituals combining religious references (the repetition of the word "Hallelujah"), a protest message (a polyphonic chant called 'Stop Shopping'), militant texts inserted between chants to a blues or jazz musical background denouncing developers who "may live in Westchester County and not in Bedstuy and Queens", and narrations targeting the international chain Starbucks, calling listeners to take part in the Gay Pride Parade which was being held the same day in New York, or proclaiming the first amendment of the constitution guaranteeing freedom of speech.

Objects acted as the concrete manifestation of this combination: the costumes—the white robes of the conservative priest and televangelist for Reverend Billy and green togas for the choir, and the use of a megaphone, as for a demonstration. The conservative codes and the rigor suggested, in particular, by Reverend Billy's costume contrast with the unceasing temptation to which he is subjected, and it is this mismatch which produces the irony targeted at the contradictions of the televangelists and seeking to denounce them. With his hands stretched out to an imaginary product and his eyes aglow with desire, he states: "I know I can't afford it, but I want that product". The choir's mission, as the supposed embodiment of wisdom, is to cool the consumerist ardors of the Reverend and make him aware of his vices via the successive narrations and chants.

For street protest actions or those carried out in stores belonging to multinationals, details about the roles of the characters are sometimes scripted in advance for the performance, in an attempt to plan ahead for situations which are not entirely predictable. Such was the case on February 18, 2004, when the Billionaires for Bush took advantage of a "surprise visit" by Karl Rove to New York to organize a parodic staging of his arrival.

### **Parodying Karl Rove's visit to New York: An Opportunity for Activism?**

On February 18, 2004, the Billionaires for Bush took advantage of a "surprise visit" to New York by Karl Rove—for a meeting to collect funds for the Republican party held at Eugene's restaurant and bar in Manhattan—to stage a parody of his visit. At the time, Karl Rove was Deputy White House Chief of Staff and one of George W. Bush's closest advisors.

"I think my greatest contribution was a street theatre we did with Karl Rove. I composed and organized, and it was basically an opportunity, because the real Karl Rove was in town, and we had inside information, because he was a special guest that was unannounced, and we had people in the Republican party helping us out, that didn't like Bush (...). So we had our own Karl Rove and he's a really good actor" (interview with an actor, Billionaires for Bush).

Before the arrival of the "fake" Karl Rove, the Billionaires for Bush, standing on the side of the road reserved for Republican supporters, staged a fake quarrel with environmental activists protesting against the Republican party on the other side of the road. The strategies used by the Billionaires for Bush here include not only ideological reversal (they chanted "We love Karl Rove!"), but also the creation of a mock scandal ("Karl Rove is innocent!"), the aim being to generate doubts and questions, "so then people ask, why is he innocent? Why is he innocent?" The policemen then realized "that we weren't real Billionaires, [that] we weren't real Republican supporters, and they pushed us across the street" [to where the protesters were].

The arrival of the Karl Rove character—doubtless less of a caricature and thus less recognizable than the Billionaires for Bush themselves—was not questioned:

“And so we’re standing there and our fake Karl Rove arrives in the town hall, and our Karl Rove is a little shorter than the regular Karl Rove, so I cast a woman who is very thin and short, and then she was with him, and then we had a guy playing security (...), who’s played security a lot with sunglasses, he can do it very well, so he played secret service, and from what I understand, real secret service thought he was real. The police thought he was real. So when they came out, they opened up the red velvet robes, the velvet robes opened up for him to come in, because he’s the guest of honor”.

The confusion between G.W. Bush’s political advisor and his fictitious counterpart, on whom all cameras were trained, generated an opportunity for activism by the “fake” Karl Rove, whereby the media was used as a mouthpiece for all those who are “without a voice”:

“And then all the cameras are on him, specially the big CNN cameras, obviously this is somebody of importance. So nobody questions that this is the real Karl Rove, and at that time most people didn’t know what he looked like that well (...). He was seeing us as if we were his supporters and then they’re going, ‘no they’re not real’, and he was acting like he wasn’t listening, and he just went up and kissed people and shook their hands, and this is part of the script (...). And then [an activist], from the environmentalists, she goes ‘shame, shame’, cause she’s so mad, here she is next to the person that has poisoned her son, in the world trade centre toxic fallout, that put the priority on Wall Street ahead of children’s health. So they’re face to face with Karl Rove. And they’re furious. They’re just really mad. So you have this incredible theatre, you cannot cast people well enough and act well enough to express the righteous rage that they are expressing on film with Karl Rove, you can’t do that in a real theatre. You couldn’t make it any more real. That was real. That was them expressing their anger against the administration. So he gave them a voice of what they were doing, of what their problem was”.

The activist value of this protest action was based in its inherent characteristic of combining a theatrical work of fiction with a genuine protest situation, enabling the spatial juxtaposition of two facts which were commonly disassociated in the media: the visit by Karl Rove and the presence of people opposing the policies of the Bush administration. However, this parodic staging calls for two interlinked comments. Firstly, the opportunity for activism generated by the fake Karl Rove seems secondary and even anecdotal given the “personified” imagery of the event, in the sense that it preceded, in terms of media priority, the coverage given to the protest event itself by journalists. Secondly, this opportunity for activism is very much a one-off and contingent. The highlighting of the environmental activists’ message is less the product of a strategy than the consequence of the timely rollout of the parody, itself largely subject to chance occurrences taking place as it was played out.

#### Using Creative Performances: The Reasons for Distinction

Participating in a protest action by drawing on their artistic skills is, for certain artists, part and parcel of their commitment. There may be various sorts of explanation for this. Exploiting artistic skills as a form of activist commitment can function as a vector of both *distinction* (Bourdieu 1984) and identity reassurance.



“I don’t know how to organize a March, whereas I know how to sing and dance, and act. So I do that for that. It’s a way of not feeling powerless (...). What I do is act and sing and dance, so that’s how I express myself politically. It makes sense” (interview with a singer of the choir, RB).

On the one hand, it is a matter of aligning a protest action with a political identity so as to consolidate it—most of the artists interviewed were on the Democratic side of the political spectrum and defined themselves as “progressives”—and, on the other hand, of distinguishing themselves by drawing on specific skills. A theater writer quoted the expression generally attributed to Emma Goldman: “If I can’t dance, I don’t want to be part of your revolution”. The professional distinction at stake here is more readily identifiable in an activist context than in an artistic one, and might be compared to a militant *assertion* of skills considered mundane in the art worlds.

For some of the artists who were interviewed, opportunities to assert their artistic skills provided their first experience of militant commitment.<sup>8</sup> Their commitment, initially perceived in terms of professional opportunity, i.e., the opportunity for geographical mobility and to display their artistic skills, was coupled with a sense of disillusionment with the competitive and largely depoliticized world of Broadway.

“I’ve got to be honest with you. I came to New York to perform, to be an actor, and Billy and the choir have given me that opportunity, in a depoliticized Broadway—not just depoliticized, but there’s not a lot of work—if someone says ‘come on, we’re gonna do a funny skit, or we gonna learn songs’, I’m like, I’ll learn songs, you know, I’ll perform, I’ll travel. I originally joined because I thought they were going to London and to Burning Man<sup>9</sup>, and I wanted to sing, and I wanted to sing harmony. I’ve been a singer, but I hadn’t learned harmony, so I joined for my own selfish reasons, cause I primarily wanted to perform. And then you get involved and you realize that it’s about much more than that” (interview with a singer of the choir, RB).

For this activist, it is about incarnating protest issues, with the staging of artistic skills itself perceived as a source of politicization.<sup>10</sup>

This enhancement of professional expertise is accompanied by a negative image of ‘classical’ militancy, which is underpinned by two sorts of cognitive association. First, demonstrations may be perceived as being conducted by violent and uncontrollable groups and breakaway groups on the radical left. The professional distinction referred to above is further reinforced by what certain artists say about the way “classical” militancy is assimilated to supposedly impetuous mass meetings. For example, during the National Republican Convention that took place in New York between August 30 and September 2, 2004, one of the people interviewed observed: “250 000 people are going to March in front of Madison Square Garden. And there’re all sorts of protestors and people costumed and they were gonna be angry, and they’d be yelling and screaming... And I was thinking ‘I

<sup>8</sup> “I wasn’t an activist, I wasn’t really politically active. I never registered with a party. I was neither a Democrat nor a Republican. No party. I voted, but I wasn’t politically active. I wasn’t politically conscious, I think it’s from performing with Billy, from being informed on issues, studying different causes that we’ve taken on different campaigns that has made me political” (interview with a singer, actor and photographer, RB).

<sup>9</sup> *Burning Man* is an artistic event that is held every summer in the Nevada desert, and the culminating moment is the burning of a human effigy, where this act is synonymous with radicalism and the purging of certain social “ills,” such as frenetic individualism and excessive consumerism.

<sup>10</sup> “Yes, it made me politically active. The physical, the physical. Through the physical, I became politically conscious” (interview with a singer, actor and photographer, RB). This is less a matter of the politicization of the artists than a question of activating their political commitment.



could do that because I am mad and I am sick of these people. But that's not my style. I'm in theatre. I wanna do something different. I didn't know quite what it was. And then I heard about this press report that had gone out, that a bunch of Billionaires or supposed Billionaires were going to privatize Central Park [the Billionaires for Bush], and I said, 'those are my kind of people!' (laughter)" (interview with a theatre producer and actor).

The second cognitive association considers "classical" militancy and the way its protest actions are perceived as routine and thus not worthy of the attention of the mainstream media. Here, the gratifying image associated with artistic performance is reinforced by the strategic dimension granted to it: to boost awareness of the issues raised by protest groups outside so-called "alternative" media. The use of performance underpins the idea of a non-preaching form of activism aimed at transforming, in the media and in society, the negative connotations associated with "left-wing" militancy into a gratifying representation:

"Creative activism is still vital, if only to *dispel the stereotypical notion* of leftists as humorless purists or policy wonks. Because late capitalism thrives so much on enjoyment, there has been a feeling that, in order to be leftist, one must eschew pleasure or, alternately, embrace pleasure in a sort of radically hedonistic way, as in some queer culture. I think it's important to *show* an alternative to the spectacle, even if that means *creating an alternate spectacle*" (interview with a theatre writer).

By creating an *alternate spectacle*, the artists are operating on two fronts. In addition to challenging the pejorative connotations associated with the radical left is the implicit claim to be socially *identified* as artists and thus to some extent *apart* from the rest of the demonstrators. In a wider perspective, this enhanced use of critical distance draws on dramaturgical codes, as theatrical writing and performance encourages people to "ask questions," not "give answers," thus attributing value to questioning rather than making peremptory statements.

The whole aim of performance here is to combine qualities required in two distinct domains, i.e., the need for artistic professionalism and for political relevance. The Follies, in particular, seek to combine, within the "Dick Cheney's Holiday Spectacular and Spring Bling!" events, the expertise in these two different domains—artistic and activist—refusing to consider them as mutually exclusive.

"I think with the Follies, we wanted... we took that idea of making it spectacular and raising the level of protest music, of protest comedy performance, to something, like, you know, the kind of work that I like to do in my professional active life. To sort of bring those things together and something happens where it's not, you know... a lot of times, one can make excuses for somebody singing a protest song, and that's not the best singer and they get a few notes wrong, but they mean very well and you agree with that and you care about the issue, so you make allowances. And our approach has been to try to provide something that was on a more professional level, and still has the sort of intrinsic value of the protest song on a guitar" (interview with an actress and Follies director).

Here, above and beyond the transmutation of skills, it is a matter of transferring "conventions," and, in this instance, theatrical conventions. The increasing professionalism of artistic militancy transpires in the fact that entrance tickets have to be bought and that theatre critics sometimes attend performances, both of which somewhat temper the notion that using artistic skills for militant ends equals less professional commitment and an impact on the artist's "career". More generally, when theatre professionals commit to a cause *via* political theatrical productions, and draw on the same resources for these extra-

professional undertakings as they do for their professional activity (for example using artistic resources for staging), they put their artistic *professionalism*, as well as the construction or maintenance of their legitimacy vis-à-vis theatre critics, to the test of militancy. But this twofold demand for artistic professionalism and political relevance does not only relate to a career strategy; it also amounts to a way of maintaining *continuity of identity* between professional and non-professional contexts. The empirical results of the survey carried out for this study shed light on a “blind spot” in certain theories of the plural actor (Lahire 1998). The obligation for militant performances to conform to standards of professional excellence does not so much raise questions about actors belonging to plural worlds, as about how they cope with this sometimes awkward situation by establishing, in certain practical configurations of protest actions, coherence between these different activities. Any lack of artistic excellence amounts to reappraise one’s own professionalism and mastery of artistic skills, *including* in an extra-professional context.

These militant practices, which reinvest artistic skills, are in turn a spur to reflection about professional artistic practice. The key idea here, and one which is counter-intuitive when speaking of the transfer of artistic resources to militant skills, is that in addition to serving as a necessary prerequisite for the actor’s performance, artistic skills are just as importantly put to the test by militancy, which can therefore serve to perfect some of them (such as improvisation). Thus, the artistic confidence actors acquire by their involvement with the organizations’ protest performances can in turn sustain their professional artistic practice or compensate for the uncertainties arising from the synchronic and diachronic multiplication of professional roles, a characteristic of the artistic careers of most of the activists who work with Billionaires for Bush and Reverend Billy. Artistic involvement with militant organizations can also incite actors to reflect on their professional choices and change the way they exercise their profession. An activist with the Reverend Billy collective, who used to audition for shows produced by Disney prior to being involved with Reverend Billy, admitted that he no longer did so. Not only does such involvement lead to a readjustment in professional career choices, but it also plays a role in the *practical* understanding of dramaturgical issues via their militant appropriation:

“It’s the first time I really understood Brecht. Because you know, I studied Brecht, and I did some Brecht. The first play I actually did in New York City was a Brecht play down at LaMaMa. And my understanding of it was very intellectual until I sort of realized with Billionaires that what we do is in the alienation effect (laughter). So now, I own that knowledge, instead of sort of being able to explain my way around it intellectually. I’ve experienced it in the body, with another person, seeing them have the reaction” (interview with an actress and Follies director).

### Playful and Ironic Performances and Their Publics

To what extent are musical and theatricalized forms of protest, using the dual nature of irony—i.e., its ability to convey at one and the same time a conventional, literal meaning and an implicit, subversive meaning,<sup>11</sup> in order to turn against the target of the protest—able, for activists, to call political convictions into question, fire up converts and convert the undecided? A study of the playful and ironic repertoires of the Billionaires for Bush in particular will provide some answers.

<sup>11</sup> As suggested by Boyd (2002).

## Productive Uses of Irony

Over the course of the organization's performances, the repeated use of hyperbole, as for instance in the expression "Never before has one man done so much for so few at the expense of so many" [about G.W. Bush] serves to amplify the ridicule and devalue the target of the protest. Irony—sometimes tainted with cynicism—transpires in slogans denouncing the pecuniary values that the administration in power embodies in the eyes of the activists: "It's a class war and we are winning!", "We don't care who you vote for. We've already bought them" or: "George Bush is the best president money can buy".<sup>12</sup>

Antiphrasis, the ironic figure of speech par excellence, is one of the methods the Billionaires for Bush use most frequently. It even transpires in the interviews, when the interviewees sometimes incarnate the role they play for the militant organizations: "Of course the media produce good articles about us. We own them!" The activist premise underlying the use of irony is associated with the idea that it results in a productive destabilization of the public's ideas, as it awakens constructive doubts about their political certainties. One of the people interviewed saw it as analogous to a Brechtian experience, transferred from the theatre to the field of activism:

"And one of the things that Billionaires does, it's a very Brechtian thing, Brecht talked about the alienation effect, which is this moment where, as an audience, you are shocked or prodded into realizing that what you're looking at is not necessarily what you thought you were looking at, and Billionaires does that" (interview with an actress and Follies director).

Such destabilization, which gives rise to a process of critical doubt, challenges the interpretative schema which divides politics up into a series of binary alternatives, whereby one subscribes either to a certain stance or to its opposite. Indetermination here is thought of less in terms of an end in itself, and more as a first stage in a process of awareness raising. By preventing hasty classification, the use of irony should make critical dialog possible and thus further the transmission of militant information.

These performances relate analogously to "corrective hoaxing" referred to by Erving Goffman (Goffman 1974). By seeking to raise awareness amongst a wide public, the aim of this sort of hoax is to "make a moral point as well as to have some fun. The gullibility of audiences is typically at issue, and behind this the argument that those who manage the public interest have become frozen in their roles, cut off from functioning properly" (p. 90). This combination of humor and denunciation—which is a characteristic of irony—is meant to function in this case as a *euphemistic* encouragement to get involved. Part of the process of raising public awareness thus involves getting audiences to take part in the staging of the protest action (Lamizet 2003). With the Reverend Billy group, such joint participation—aimed at the incorporation of militant issues—can come in the shape of invitations to interact with the characters:

"I want to dedicate this show to peace. Say 'Peace Hallelujah'" [and the public repeats together: "Peace Hallelujah"] (Reverend Billy, spectacle of July 24 2007).

<sup>12</sup> Note the historical similarity here between these slogans and the aphorisms of Will Rogers, an American humorist of the 1920 s, and especially: "We have the best Congress money can buy."

The roundabout way in which the guilty are identified and named can lead the public to appropriate the activists' discourse. Some spectators of Billionaires for Bush street performances even partake in the militant game by assuming the role of the Billionaire characters they have before their eyes. The playfulness and complicity generated with the public by protest events and street actions vehicle the indignant solidarity directed against the targets of the irony and are a way of supporting those standing up to these targets. These actions may be perceived as both epideictic—denouncing irresponsible acts—and as eulogistic, encouraging people to resist consumerism. The insistence resulting from the use of anaphora may be related both to a poetic esthetics and to a militant use of rhetoric, with the repeated use of terms being comparable to the slogans protestors chant during demonstrations:

“Blessed is the artist who is not corporate sponsored [the spectators applaud].

Blessed are those who are confused between consumerism and freedom and wanna make the difference” (Reverend Billy, spectacle of July 24 2007).

The aim of these participatory forms is to provoke reactions and actions by the spectators and even to convert them to militancy. But whilst the performances of the Billionaires for Bush implicitly seek to act as political incitements, they explicitly exclude preaching about any recommended political stance. The members of the organization emphasize its non-partisan aspect. The aim is “to use humor and satire to get people to pay attention to protest, and to become active in whatever small way they can. And if that just means going out and voting, that’s fine, that’s great” (interview with an actress and Follies director). It is worth pointing out, however, that the “ironized” exhortation to act, and to vote, moderates the didactic dimension but without wholly doing away with it.<sup>13</sup>

The performative aspect of the Billionaires for Bush’s activists events is a product of ironized entertainment rather than grim observation, according to one of the people interviewed.

“I had a friend of mine who is a theatre director, not a particularly political person but who doesn’t like Bush. She came and she told me afterwards that she had come expecting to leave depressed, and that she was quite the contrary, feeling not only sort of her heart can be lightened but that she didn’t feel helpless about going forward. That was a wonderful thing to hear because that’s one of our goals” (interview with an actress and Follies director).

What may be discerned here is a discourse relating to the (social and political) profiles of those taking part in the organization’s spectacles. It is possible to make out in the words of the person above an affirmation of a sense of identity based on a shared set of values and political and professional affinities, probably deriving from the common inclusion in larger affinity circles. Shared political convictions are a *sine qua non* condition for the smooth functioning of the events staged by the Follies and the Reverend Billy and the Church of Stop Shopping. The irony is only effective if the cultural prerequisites are fully mastered.<sup>14</sup>

<sup>13</sup> “Personally, I don’t care how persons vote, but I find it incredibly important that they vote, knowing as I do that there are forces on the right side of the spectrum in America who have explicitly said that they don’t want everybody to vote, because they know that if everybody voted, their ideology wouldn’t be... they wouldn’t win elections. So, everybody should vote (laughter)” (interview with an actress and Follies director).

<sup>14</sup> “What’s so funny about Billy is that he takes the preacher and he uses that motive with a fake choir, and that the audience *knows* he’s not a real preacher, and they *know* the choir is not a real choir” (interview with a singer, actor and photographer, RB).

When it comes to street protest actions, the strategies used are dependent on distinct publics. They demand an ability to use *kairos*, to seize the opportune moment depending upon the public being addressed. The controlled interplay between person and character should make actors respond flexibly to public reactions. When confronted with conservative opponents, the strategy will tend to involve maintaining the character, as confusion prevents the public from hastily classifying the political positioning of the activists. When the Billionaires for Bush, however, are confronted with people who contest the policies of George W. Bush, this results in a strategy based on leaving the role behind, as playful and ironic repertoires are no longer a prerequisite for political argument. In this case the aim of the interaction is to stabilize a sense of identity based on shared militant values by providing “quantified” and “documented” discourses that reinforce convictions and refine the political counter-arguments.

### An Exhortation to Pronounced Critical Introspection?

On account of the shared irony intended to encourage the public to subject their political positions to critical self-analysis, it might seem that playful and ironic protest actions have the ability to bring political convictions into question. However, even though they are likely to attract to militancy a public not reached by preaching forms of exhortation, their ability to build awareness outside of a relatively circumscribed microcosm is only limited, as irony and access to the codes needed to appreciate its impact are without doubt socially situated and generated.

“If they approach you and they’re angry, unnecessarily so, you know – for example, they think you’re really for Bush, then you’re not, and they’re actually progressive, because you have that too. You have people... we were outside of Detroit, and we were talking about the auto industry, and there were a lot of union workers there, who tend to be more for the Democrats, and we were talking about how great it is for us that all the factories are closing down and moving overseas, because we’re able to make so much more money when we’re paying people pennies an hour, instead of union wages, so that’s the joke kind of that we’re making. But of course, some of them who were made of union workers didn’t really find that funny, thought we were actually for Bush, that we were actually wanting the fact that we close down factories, and were very mad at us, and the more humorous we could be about it, the more ridiculous we could be in our humor” (interview with an actor).

One of the factors determining the ability to laugh at satire is undoubtedly the *distance* at which the spectator stands from the social ills it evokes and reveals. There is little scope for self-derision when standing on the lower rungs of the class ladder. This leads to another dimension of identity based on shared values, which is further discriminating factor in access to the organization’s performances. In addition to the shared political, activist, and professional values referred to above, is a social dimension. The issue here is the affiliation with a limited group of initiates sharing the same social codes, which presumes and reinforces a *specific* ironic register involving the outrageous replication of the practices of the wealthy. The activists use a form of cultural domination to symbolically reverse the social relationship they have with those who dominate them socio-economically. The Billionaires for Bush are nevertheless caught in a double bind which involves paying a high price for their use of irony: the political will to represent the underprivileged classes, to which they do not belong; and the strategic necessity to ironically distance themselves from them, to get society to hear about social problems and make them acceptable to the media.

This contradiction transpires in the mismatch that activists experience between, on the one hand, the use of protest strategies which privilege irony as an effective strategic protest register and, on the other hand, a sense of political disillusionment given a political context which leaves them powerless, which can only be spoken of among themselves.

“There’s a humorous way to approach everything. Sometimes, it’s almost sad. You know one of the things that we like to say in the Billionaires, *among ourselves*, is that to be in Billionaires, is that *if we weren’t laughing, we’d be crying* (laughter). Because the situation really is so bad that it can be so depressing. So by approaching it in a humorous manner, and trying to add a humorous twist to it, it lightens the mood and *makes it easier to talk about, and mock about*” (interview with an actor).

This ironic register is also *specific* insofar as it depends upon political configurations and the positions adopted by protagonists within them. Affinity—or lack thereof—with an ironized critical attitude to power is as much attributable to the social characteristics of the activists as it is due to any ideological proximity with the policies of the Republican or Democrat parties, or the structure of the positions held by the party the militants in question support.<sup>15</sup> Therefore, it is not all that surprising, quite the opposite even, that certain members of the Billionaires for Bush organization gave a negative reception to the supposed humor of the Communists For Kerry, its antagonistic double, which was set up during the Republican convention in New York in 2004. A comparison with the tonal register of protest action carried out by Communists for Kerry reveals how reciprocally porous the possibilities are for the reception of humor. This protest group, formed in early 2004 as a reaction against the setting up of the Billionaires for Bush, with the aim of leading George W. Bush to victory in the presidential election, organized “counter events” to the “anti-Bush” demonstrations during the electoral campaign. In addition to exaggeration, the absurd was one of the mainstays of the Communists for Kerry parodies. One of the activists underlined that certain protest actions were based on the “juxtaposition of incompatible things.” The utterances and creation of militant images by the group draw upon deliberately falsified historic associations, such as making Hillary Clinton appear on the “gulagosphere” website the group belongs to. The negative reception the Communists for Kerry activists reserved for the irony in the protest action registers of the Billionaires for Bush, and their ironized handling of certain topics such as the war in Iraq, also reveal the social, ideological, and positional determinants governing the reception of irony:

“Most comedians on TV, they tell jokes that describe Bush as stupid, as an idiot, and when Bush is fighting a war against terrorists, they are making jokes that describe this war against terrorism as something that is wrong, something that is criminal and describe Bush as evil or as an idiot. That kind of humor, I mean, it’s not a place (...). You can make fun of a president but when there is a war, and when you make jokes about him leading this war and when... you jeopardize... There’re soldiers there. They’re dying. And you’re making a mockery of what they’re doing and you’re making it harder for them to win this war” (interview with a Communists for Kerry activist).

Furthermore, when humor is effective in raising awareness, the questions it raises are ones of the effectiveness of a policy. The performative reach of the underlying didacticism of the Billionaires for Bush spectacles is indeed effective when the ironic aspect of their

<sup>15</sup> On this last point, irony seems less likely to be used when this party is in power than when it is not, the display of unwavering loyalty untainted by any hint of irony going hand-in-hand with the belief in the effectiveness of government policies.



shows—combining laughter and the denunciation of certain targets—is integrated by the spectators. However, their effectiveness becomes far less certain when the performances generate a type of humor which has come uncoupled from the conflictual dimension specific to irony. Thus, certain conservative spectators may appreciate the humorous qualities of the spectacles but without reconsidering their ideological positions.

In addition to the question of ascertaining whether irony is socially situated, is that of the sort of subjects against which it may be directed and the radicalism of the causes addressed. The “non-preaching” militancy of the Billionaires for Bush does in fact leave little place to issues over which there is a lack of consensus – within the Democratic party and especially within what the activists hold to be the American “public opinion” (e.g., abortion, the death penalty, or immigration).

Finally, when “activist theatre” is judged by the yardstick of “conventional” theatre, certain critics consider that the staging of productions by the Billionaires for Bush and Reverend Billy, which they describe as “documentary theatre”, cannot encourage the public to any pronounced critical reflection. The exaggerated caricature means that the political stance of the activists is almost instantly recognizable, and this discredits it with art critics.<sup>16</sup>

“I am anti-consumerist, I too have questions about Bush, I too have questions about this government. I mean by choosing to be part of that audience, you’re already saying: ‘yes, I agree’. And so there’s a lot of theatre that... still this is a political theatre and there’s fun and there’s amusement but it’s really kind of about audiences giving themselves a pat on the back. And saying: ‘Look, isn’t it good that I went to a serious evening of theatre that seriously engaged with politics?’ But, it just isn’t that serious an engagement. You already know from the scene as the lights go on which side is going to win and which side has the intellectual and the moral argument. I don’t think that is engaging (...). It isn’t dramatically provocative. For me. It’s not as intellectually interesting to just listen to your own sort of sentiment and argument [about the Billionaires for Bush]. Once you very quickly realize: ‘no it’s not true’, then you don’t have to engage that much more. Which doesn’t mean it isn’t funny. And it doesn’t mean it doesn’t make a point. But it tends to make the same point. So you have to think about it initially, but then you sort of get stopped and just enjoy it” (interview with a theatre critic).

The expression “just enjoy it” carries a dual connotation within the context of this interview: firstly, the theatrical parody of the world of politics can be so successful that it becomes an entertainment. The political relevance and critical denunciation, which are characteristics of the parody, are thereby diminished. Secondly, the criteria of theatrical legitimization—one of which is the ability to provoke reflection—are not met, and so the parody results in a less favorable critical assessment in esthetic and dramaturgical terms.

If the playful and ironic registers of protest action have professional consequences, it is not simply because they subject artistic skills to the test of activism, but also because they may be subject to the legitimization and judgment of peers. The fact that these action registers may be observed to have lesser cultural and social scope than might be anticipated

<sup>16</sup> It is worth pointing out that some of the theatre professionals in question may be considered as marginal to the world of American theatre, insofar as they are not part of so-called “professional” unions (such as *Actors’ Equity*) and perform very little or not at all in Broadway and off Broadway shows. Whilst they may perform in plays that generate critical debate (notably in *The New York Times*, *The Village Voice* and *Time Out New York*), they do not necessarily receive any individual recognition from critics. Furthermore, analysis of these militant plays sometimes appears in the News section of these newspapers, not the Theatre section.

does nothing to deprive them and mobilizing their symbolic and, to some extent, their performative dimensions—i.e., the effects they have, if not in converting reticent publics to activism, at least in garnering the support of converted or even undecided publics. This performative reach may also be detected in the artists involved in what these performances make possible: the activation of a political commitment that leads to the artistic incorporation and staging of protest action. For some artists, this *specific* mode of commitment contributes to a practical understanding of dramaturgical issues. Despite their limited effects, the strength of these ironized artistic repertoires is also that they allow social realities normally segregated in the media to be juxtaposed in improbable ways, such as in the Billionaires for Bush performance when Karl Rove visited New York in 2004.

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