



Francesco Vezzoli, *Democracy: Political Advertisement for the Election of Sharon Stone as Patricia Hill*, 2007, color video, 60 seconds. Production still. Photo: Matthias Vriens.

GO AHEAD, ADMIT IT: You're more than a little curious to see Francesco Vezzoli's contribution to the new Italian Pavilion at the 2007 Venice Biennale. If, for some, disclosing such curiosity might be a kind of quasi confession, it's in part because Vezzoli's last Venetian outing—*Trailer for a Remake of Gore Vidal's Caligula*, 2005—has over the intervening years become something of an art-world guilty pleasure, an unrepentant consummation of art's long and sometimes agonized courtship with the firmament of celebrity-addled spectacle. Sure, we've managed to carve out an amorphous critical space for Warhol's late portraits and even Matthew Barney's hyperproduced extravaganzas, but the same cannot so easily be said of a splashy five-minute video starring Helen Mirren, a gaggle of nubile slave boys, and a cassoneful of golden dildos. And it will only be more difficult to discern proper vanguard pieties in Vezzoli's newest work, now that he has overtly claimed the once-sanctified arena of electoral politics as the subject of an installation pitting Sharon Stone against Bernard-Henri Lévy in a race for the American presidency.

Vezzoli's stars need no introduction, but his offscreen collaborators just might: To create the "ideal" presidential candidates, he called on Squier Knapp Dunn and Public Strategies Inc., the image maestros behind winning Democratic and Republican presidential bids, respectively. These "real" PR gurus worked with top Hollywood specialists to script, oversee, and edit two sixty-second TV spots that are not so much modeled on actual campaign ads as cut from the same finely spun cloth. Indeed, if there were ever any question that spin is all, a comparison of the commercials reads like an exercise in Wölflinian connoisseurship aimed at parsing not the nebulous platforms but the subtle stylistic differences between the wares of two elite public-relations

concerns. The reality effect may be a bit compromised by the candidates' irrepressible true identities, yet ultimately such muddling only serves to emphasize the utter irrationality of campaign hype in the age of Armani-clad congressmen and renegade Swift boaters. As the artist bluntly puts it, "The project is not so surreal when you consider that Arnold Schwarzenegger is running California."

Vezzoli doesn't just walk the now nearly imperceptible line between art and spectacle; he crosses it, with abandon and without apology. Some might consider this the ultimate capitulation, while others might chalk it up to using the conventions of spectacle against itself, as Yves Klein or Cindy Sherman are said to have done for previous generations. Yet we might do better to regard Vezzoli's method as a refreshing form of realism in an era when it seems almost quaint to bemoan the presence of art (and artists) in the glossies' pages, and the golden umbilical linking it to the bourgeoisie now all but chinks with Tiffany charms. The yachts are already moored at the Biennale's gate. So, while it has become a critical commonplace to wring hands over the increasing colonization of art's institutions by money, fashion, and the like, Vezzoli's work exhibits no such angsty contradictions; it demonstrates a shrewd and almost Teflon-like resistance to the charges of hypocritical complicity that seep below the surface of much new art today. Rather than assuming an increasingly untenable pose of distance from the culture at large, Vezzoli takes as a given art's problematic place within it, making the excesses and contradictions of that entanglement his very raw materials. Like it or not, we all share the guilt. The question remains as to where we find the pleasure.

—SCOTT ROTHKOPF

1000 WORDS

Francesco Vezzoli

TALKS ABOUT *DEMOCRACY*, 2007

JUST AS COMIZI DI NON AMORE (Non-love Meetings), 2004, was a pilot episode for a reality show that wouldn't appear on television and the *Caligula* piece was a trailer for a movie that doesn't exist. *Democracy* is a campaign for an election that will never occur. The pilot, the trailer, the political campaign—they're all pretty much about the same thing, *selling*. And the art world has become such a self-promotional universe that I've basically grown obsessed with deconstructing the very means of promotion.

I wanted to create a fictional campaign as close to reality as possible—with a website, posters, and TV ads—and it had to be American, because for me Washington, DC, is like the Hollywood of worldwide politics. If you're a very rich Italian company,

you go to Hollywood to make a great ad, and in the same way, Angela Merkel and Francesco Rutelli want to work with the top teams in Washington. In Europe we don't have political advisers as sharp as the American ones, and I wanted the toughest guys in the business, the real wizards. I come from the country that produced Berlusconi, whose public identity was inspired by American politicians, and I felt I had to go back to the source.

I began by going to Washington to meet with top political PR advisers. A collector there introduced me to the firm Squier Knapp Dunn, which worked on the last four Democratic presidential campaigns, and to Mark McKinnon of Public Strategies Inc., who masterminded George W. Bush's two presidential bids and has now, ironically, been hired by John

McCain, whom Bush defeated in the 2000 election. Each firm agreed to work for free to create the "ideal candidate" and to direct and edit TV spots to sell that candidate.

Once I had the PR teams on board, the next step was to convince the two players: Sharon Stone and Bernard-Henri Lévy. For the female candidate, I didn't want someone too obviously political, like Jane Fonda or Susan Sarandon. I also didn't want anyone too young, like Scarlett Johansson or Kate Moss, because that would have become too jokey. I tried to pick two people who, without being politicians, use their status as celebrities to be somehow political. That's what Sharon does through her fund-raising for AIDS charities and other causes; she was the perfect artist because she's very outspoken

in public life. In Europe she epitomizes the idea of the Hollywood diva, which has nothing to do with how an agent might describe someone as "hot." It's more about the archetype, which is what I go for when I cast my actors. I need someone who can become symbolic to an extreme degree, and in that sense Bernard-Henri was perfect too. He was the biggest intellectual lobbyist in France for Marie-Ségolène Royal, who recently lost the presidential election. And after the death of Baudrillard, he may be the best-known French philosopher in the world and also the biggest French expert on American politics, from a certain perspective.

Next, I formed two teams that could create the images of Sharon and Bernard-Henri as president. For Sharon, we worked with Julie Weiss, who's one of the most respected costume designers in Hollywood (and who also happened to advise John Edwards), and we had set designers and hair and makeup artists of a similar caliber. We filmed in the Presidential Suite and the ballroom of the Beverly Wilshire hotel, because we thought the interiors could pass for the White House. Everything had to be approved by the advisory team, who flew in from Washington to determine what would be credible for their candidate. They would say, "This couch is too fancy. This suit is not fancy enough." They brought a script for Sharon with a whole list of things they wanted her to say, and she changed them all, and then they changed them again. So there was a back-and-forth between the candidate and the advisers, just as in a real campaign. We filmed silent establishing shots, a rally with four hundred extras, and a Barbara Walters-style interview in which Sharon completely improvised her character. Everything had to be shot very quickly, which is always how it is in my work, because I don't have the financial means to pay all these people. Basically, it's like occasional sex—you have one day with Sharon Stone, and you have to make the best of it.

In a way, the project was a psychological game in which everybody had to give up his identity. First, I did, as the artist, since I let others do my job. Then, the PR teams gave up their political identities to collaborate, which is almost like a world-peace mission, since these people fiercely hate each other. And the actors gave up their identities to a certain degree, even though their characters end up having a lot to do with who they are in real life. In Bernard-Henri's case, he was very intelligently playing with his own identity, trying to outsmart the game. We shot pretty much the same types of scenes with him as with Sharon, but since

he's the more alternative character, we filmed at his home in Paris. We even got him to wear a tie, which was the greatest violence we could do to his image, since he's never worn one at any public occasion in his life—including his three marriages and an audience with the pope.

The idea was not to cast one of the candidates as a Democrat and the other as a Republican. I couldn't care less about the movie director who goes to Cannes and says, "Oh, I got Sharon Stone to play a right-wing bitch." It's not an interesting artistic

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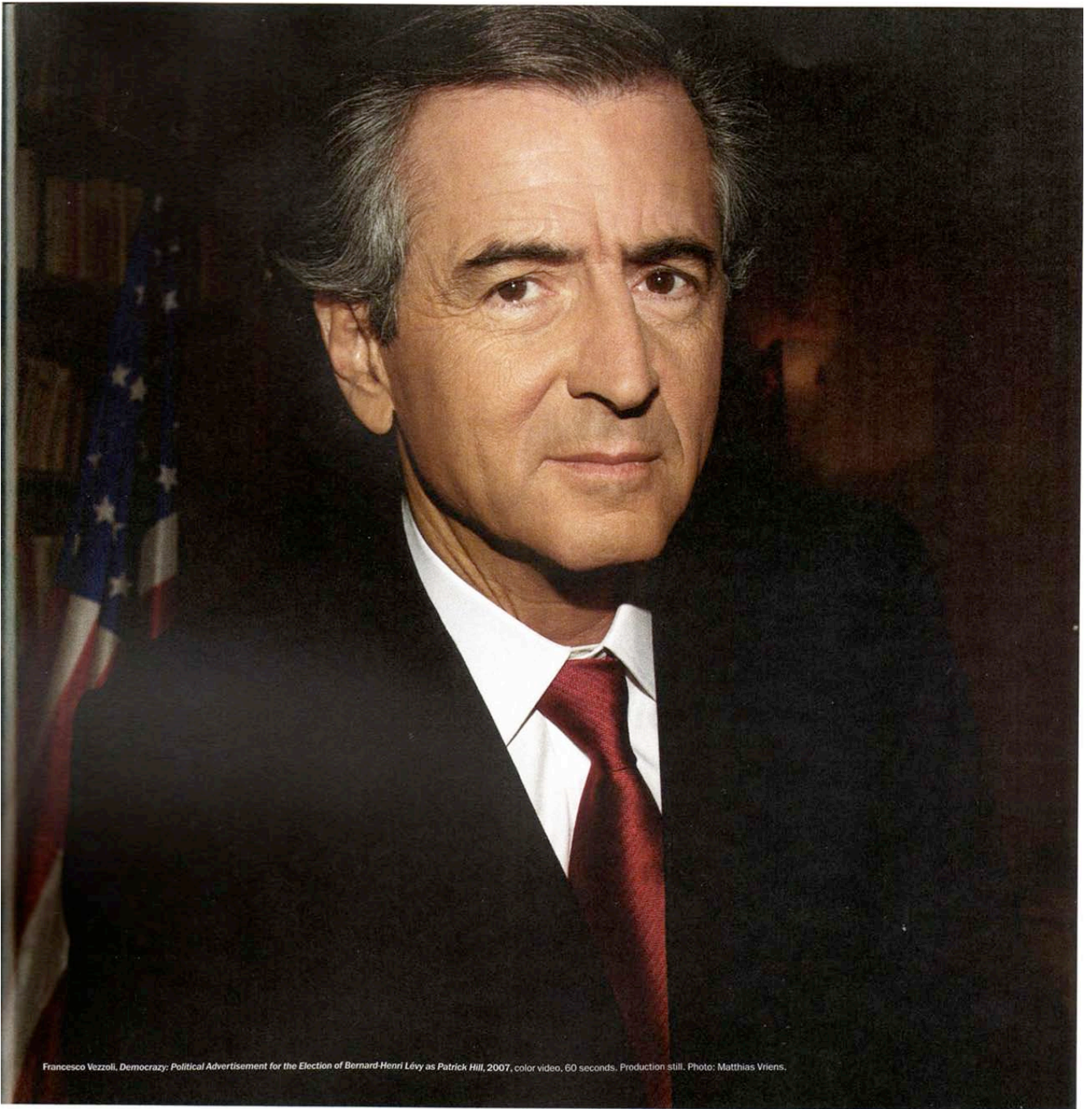
statement to convince an actress to play a character that doesn't mirror who she is. Everybody does that all the time. The statement I'm trying to make is that because of how the world functions today and how influential the media is, the publicity machine behind a movie star or a very public philosopher or a politician is pretty much the same. They may as well all have the same publicist. After all, Squier Knapp Dunn worked for both Ann Richards and Michael Bloomberg. The point of the project is that the vocabularies are completely interchangeable. They're not supposed to be, but they are. I've even given the two candidates the same name: Patricia Hill and Patrick Hill. So it's not really about the political positions they take but about the production values that create their political identities and make them look different. In the end, it's the deconstruction of audience manipulation that interests me.

Election campaigns are so glamorous, so powerful, so precise, and so cruel that they themselves become the object of debate. And it's partly because they're so expensive that politics gets corrupted from the start. All we hear about is fund-raising, and all the money is being raised because you have to pay Mark McKinnon to create the most bombastic, yet modest, yet convincing, yet politically correct candidate. The campaign is the object of desire. It's like the handbag of the political world. Fashion is

the same way—it's all about the campaign. And art, too. There are so many exhibitions, and what do most people know about them? The ad they see in *Artforum*. The campaign is all people see. I mean, who of all the voters ever gets the chance to actually see the candidate at a political rally? What will they remember? The ads.

From the beginning, the project was supposed to be critical. When I showed the *Caligula* video, I thought I was making this big challenge to the art world and that everyone would freak out seeing it next to some iron sculpture or abstract painting. But the incredible thing was that people just went into that room and sort of loved it, which was very strange for me. I was thinking they would see themselves, not Hollywood; I was talking about our practice. Yet the art world seems so anesthetized, so ready to swallow anything, that I'm not sure to what degree the new project can be perceived as critical. The point is to make political art, but not in some romantic way, not by making a map of world evil or drawing a mustache on Bush. If you really want to do political work, you can do something that has a real impact. If you're working with any gallery in Chelsea you can have access to anyone, to politicians and diplomats. Make some phone calls—Mary Boone can probably hook you up with Kofi Annan.

For the pavilion in Venice, we're planning a big oval room with a red floor, blue walls, and a white ceiling hung with balloons. There will probably be two huge projections—one for each candidate—facing each other so you're just immersed in the babble of politics. When you see the ads running simultaneously, you'll perceive how ambiguous they are, and hopefully you'll be thrown into this world where everything is very confusing, and compromised, and questionable. But each commercial will be very short, no more than sixty seconds. I'm obsessed with the idea of speed. Let's face it, video art in group shows can be boring. People have no time to look at it, so you have to be honest with yourself and make something watchable for the situation it's in. Just like a real TV spot, you've got a minute to decide, end of story. And for me, this seemed like an interesting way of confronting the idea of a national pavilion, which many people think is obsolete. After all, the promotion of a potential president is the promotion of a nation, to a certain degree. And then I'm conscious that as an artist I'm promoting myself through my work. In a sense it's a game where you have a box inside a box inside a box—and in the end, perhaps the real candidate is me. □



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