

2020 Vision

A perpetually provisional undertaking, *Political Advertisement* assumed public form in 1984, when Antoni Muntadas and Marshall Reese first presented it: a video compilation of television commercials in support of candidates laboring to win the American presidency. Extending backwards to the Eisenhower era, the clips proceeded sequentially, up to and including instances of the then-current political moment.

Every four years since its original iteration, *Political Advertisement* has returned, aligned with the quadrennial election calendar. From viewing and endurance exigencies, each update of the project has adhered generally to the contours of a feature-length media production intended for consumption in a public arena, a space shared with other viewers and other citizens. Maintaining that temporal protocol forces its producers, as they assemble the latest version, to repress or withdraw elements from earlier installments, this in part to accommodate footage drawn from the near-present moment. *Political Advertisement's* inventory of clips retired in order to accommodate their successors lurk as a ghost presence, a tribe of wise elders watching from a better but likely no less contentious after-life.

As a project intended to appear once every four years, and, at that, a collaborative one, anchors *Political Advertisement* as a rule-based artistic endeavor that's been unbroken, miraculously, for thirty-six years. The nature of the undertaking hasn't had as its core the impulse merely to demonstrate the cynicism and vapidness of political commercials (a blogger's errand) but to excavate moments from broadcast television's historical ecosystem and to enlist them in a newly-imagined sequence of clips given, so to speak, at face value. Performing the labor of *Political Advertisement* every four years, the artists then have the tact to leave viewers alone to sort out judgment, or to allow breathing room for no judgment at all, *Dragnet*-style: Just the facts.

At the same time, it would be disingenuous to claim that this artistically free-floating project reflects the need to adhere to either a spurious or felt idea of 'balance'; the clips within any of the compilations include those supporting progressive candidates no fewer than monied mouthpieces, but certainly the dubious gift (or is it a curse?) of hindsight might be said to have figured in the inclusion of clips from the likes of Ross Perot, John Edwards and Dennis Kucinich, footnoted players within now hazily recalled national charades.

The clips are re-presented with no exterior editorial special-pleading; they're harvested and assembled front to back, but the artists' dialectical method depends crucially on what was once relegated to 'the aesthetic dimension,' and which in another context moves openly among us and answers to the name of 'taste.' That's just to acknowledge that the artists' connoisseur-level ownership of this body of broadcast television results in a video mix-tape showcasing the vivid and supple style-book of moving image-based advertising over close to a span of seventy years, and that their imaginative purchase of this archive mandates, in fairness as the artists-as-editors made their decisions, an almost even-handed treatment acknowledging in the clips a formidable stylistic diversity,

the subtle when not blatant forms of rhetorical address, and the casting of the republic in tones exalted when not depraved.

In the years since 1984, political advertisements and their targeted consumers have shed their unopposed dependence on broadcast television; information and persuasion find new ground daily within cable narrowcasting and within the chaotic plenitude of an online infinity. Against that background, Muntadas' and Reese's *Political Advertisement* remains true to its calling, every four years using a dry wit and a cool hand to produce a compendium of those televisual devices and tricks invoked to conjure into being a plausible and willing presidential effect.

— Bill Horrigan, Wexner Center for the Arts, Columbus OH, 2020