

THE JFK CULTURE



Dinner in honor of 49 Nobel Prize Winners from the Western Hemisphere, East Room, White House, Washington, D.C. 1962. (L-R) Lady Bird Johnson; Pearl S. Buck; President John F. Kennedy; First Lady Jacqueline Kennedy; Robert Frost.

Robert Knudsen. White House Photographs. John F. Kennedy Presidential Library and Museum, Boston

THE JFK CULTURE

Art, Film, Literature and Media

Edited by
Simona Čupić



AMERICAN CORNER
— BELGRADE —



Cover photograph: Jacqueline and John Kennedy in Georgetown, May 1954
The Lowenherz Collection of Kennedy Photographs, Friedheim Library and
Archives, the Peabody Institute of The Johns Hopkins University, Orlando Suero,
photographer

Published in 2013 by
Faculty of Philosophy, University of Belgrade
(The Journal of Modern Art History Department/Special Edition)
American Corner Belgrade

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ISBN 978-86-88803-30-4

Printed in Belgrade by Tipografik

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Simona Čupić

THE FIRST POLITICAL SUPERSTAR: JFK AS THE NEW IMAGE OF HISTORY (1960-1963)

Prologue

I sat crosslegged [...] and contemplated my life. Well, there, and what difference did it make? "What's going to happen to me up ahead?"¹

Was this the sentence that Jacqueline Kennedy was reading in the photos taken by Jacques Lowe during the 1960 campaign in which she sits cross-legged in the private airplane named "Caroline"—the first to ever be owned by a presidential candidate—as she reads *Dharma Bums* by Jack Kerouac? Or was she perhaps contemplating trains, bums in shabby overcoats, cans of sardines and miles crossed, wearing her "good luck coat" by Hubert De Givenchy while glancing over the book at her husband eating, probably his favorite clam chowder, telling her how many miles they had crossed during the campaign? Did I think Jackie had ever really read *Dharma Bums*, David Lubin asked me once. Without a shadow of a doubt we agreed she had but that the fact itself didn't really matter.² Within the carefully constructed and controlled image of John Kennedy nothing was ever left to chance, not even the book his wife would (publicly) be seen reading. *Dharma Bums* was published in 1958. There is no doubt, therefore, that Jackie—who claimed to be an avid reader her whole life—could have already read Kerouac's book. The choice of text can rather be seen as one of the attempts to bring Kennedy closer to the young voters who read Kerouac and most often did not exercise their right to vote. The novel's rootedness in Buddhism could also be used to demonstrate the openness and depth of the Kennedys in a campaign during which one of the most heatedly debated questions was Kennedy's Roman Catholic faith. Some time later Kerouac himself would hope to benefit from the reverse marketing effect. Thrilled when

the First Lady told *Readers' Digest* that she read everything from "Colette to Kerouac," he wished—not without cynicism—that her taste would do for his sales what the President's reading affinities had already done for Ian Fleming's James Bond novels.³ Insufficiently clear composition (the whole right hand quarter of the photograph is blocked by someone's shoulder and arm, while the center of the background is occupied by a man doing something behind the seat) is most probably the reason why Lowe's photograph, which shows both Kennedys, was not utilized during the campaign. Some other photographs reached the public, such as the one where the thoughtful and concentrated Jackie is reading, with the book cover in the foreground. It is also known that John Kennedy avoided being photographed whenever he was eating, drinking, combing his hair or being presented with some sort of hat. As photographer Stanley Tretick claims, "JFK hated anything corny—silly hats, feathered headdresses, flowered leis—and he dodged photographers whenever he was eating."⁴ He also disliked photos that showed any public display of affection. The John F. Kennedy image was carefully, precisely and thoughtfully constructed from the outset.

Born in Boston in 1917, John Fitzgerald Kennedy was the first American president to have been born in the 20th century. At 42 years of age, he was elected as the youngest president ever. His victorious campaign in 1960 introduced the notion of a "new beginning." His two potential terms in office would have lasted until 1968—his successor would normally have been sworn in by January 1969 (if Kennedy had been reelected). All of this must have been a factor in Kennedy's campaign headquarters, as one of the main slogans for his presidential race was "Leadership for the 60's" followed by the phrase "New Frontier." At the Democratic National Convention in Los Angeles he emphasized this concept during his acceptance speech: "[W]e stand today on the edge of a New Frontier—the frontier of the 1960s." These slogans would establish key themes and remain synonymous for the Kennedy administration. However, Kennedy's tenure as president would last only "a thousand days," as it was abruptly terminated by his assassination in 1963. His contemporaries, of course, could not have foreseen this. The driving issue of this essay, dealing solely with the period between 1960 and 1963, will be the visualization of contemporaneous history, viewing the image of the "leader of the 60's" between history and/or modernity, as yet unburdened with the subsequent pressure of Kennedy's tragic death.

The question that has always intrigued me is whether there actually exist any truly private photos of John Kennedy from the 1960's. What I have in mind is the type of amateur candid shots carelessly taken by someone close and kept only in the family album. In all the photographs of various Kennedy interiors we can see framed photos of "private" events—weddings, summer vacations, sports events—but they are always the same, all-too-familiar and media-exploited shots made by known or anonymous photographers. The impression gleaned is that the simple Kennedy image does not really exist. Does this lead to the conclusion that the "ruler's portraits" are never just simple images because they always simultaneously represent a doubler of historical image? The traditional understanding of the historical narrative's sublime nature left as a consequence several centuries of representing the historical image through allegory. By rejecting this allegorical rule, modern art would remind us that our historical memory is based to a large extent on a visual narrative of the era, through "new images of history." In other words, history becomes *its own image*.

In the second half of the 20th century the expansion of new media, especially television, additionally complicates the predefined framework of the "ruler's portrait," still shaped by the traditional principle where the person represented primarily as a (political) artifact in fact does not possess their own personality, but is a complex social construct and an applied projected fantasy of the viewer. Following this line of thought to the concrete representation of John Kennedy, however, makes matters even more complicated. The fact that this was the president of the USA who was immensely popular, even loved, in most parts of the world divided by the Cold War is an image also of the historical moment of ending the process of shifting the emphasis from the "old" into the "new" world, which is finally fully performed by shifting the question of authorial leadership and promoting a new modern—American—iconography.⁵ However, the issue of the representation of Kennedy is by no means only an issue of iconography as it is (too) often presented. According to Griselda Pollock, despite the significance of the social framework in the creation of the work, *what* is represented from modern life becomes modern through *how* it is represented. "Modernism in art is not merely the anecdotal recording of scenes of contemporary life. In modernism the *what* and the *how* are in tension, making viewers work with the alternation between seeing a painting as a painting and seeing a painting as a representation that makes us think about an experience in the world."⁶ As the image of the era, Kennedy's

“ruler’s portrait” thus becomes the image of a time marked by the expansion of popular culture, debates on the significance of formalism, questioning the idea of subjectivity, the new role of photography and the corruption of (the majority) of rules and rigid limitations in culture. His image appears as an artistic and political passage through a visual assemblage, from fine arts to photography, film to kitsch, which leads to “the curious phenomenon of the presentation of the present as history in the fabrication of Kennedy images.”⁷ Within this eclectic process the essential role seems to be played by the concept of appropriation. This appropriation and intertwining of various Kennedy representations is connected by a multifarious pastiche of artistic and non-artistic visual materials that only when bound together complete the “new” and “democratized” Kennedy image, i.e. the history which he is to create. The Kennedy image thus begins to resemble the concept that Jean Baudrillard would postulate speaking of America in general:

America is a giant hologram, in the sense that information concerning the whole is contained in each of its elements. Take the tiniest little place in the desert, any old street in a Mid/West town, a parking lot, a Californian house, a Burger King or a Studebaker, and you have the whole of the US—South, North, East, or West. [...] The hologram is akin to the world of phantasy. It is a three-dimensional dream and you can enter it as you would a dream. Everything depends on the existence of the ray of light bearing the objects. If it is interrupted, all the effects are dispersed, and reality along with it. You do indeed get the impression that America is made up of a fantastic switching between similar elements, and that everything is only held together by a thread of light, a laser beam, scanning out American reality before our eyes.⁸

It is precisely these elements of the popular, the mundane and the simple, carried inside the Kennedy hologram, which open up the possibility for everyone to project it within their own abilities. These elements thus essentially subvert the artistic dogma of the elite, so closely and so often connected to the representation of the ruler in the past. In other words, the Kennedy image was produced with the intention of equalizing the idea of de-elitization (of art) with the idea of democratization (of society). The Kennedy “thread of light” or “laser beam” connected the “unconnectable” elements by scanning the American reality. This is the surreal pastiche present in the Lowe photograph: at ease in their private jet Jack and Jackie eat and read about Kerouac’s bums, while in the same

time being processed and presented to middle class as a commodity. It is interesting to note that only two years later Kennedy would categorically refuse Stanley Tretick's urging to do a photo-story on the presidential Air Force One plane entitled "The Flying White House" explaining that "the pictures would come out looking like they were of rich man's plane."⁹ All of the above becomes the reason why the photographs in which Jacqueline Kennedy, wearing her "good luck coat" by Hubert De Givenchy, sits with her feet up in the private airplane as she reads the *Dharma Bums* by Jack Kerouac while "on the road" during the campaign are emblematic images of all the differences, debates, questionings, ideals, changes and dualities which would come to mark the 1960's, in American art as in society.

1960 – "Superman Comes to the Supermarket"

The television cameras were out, and a Kennedy band was playing some circus music. One saw him immediately. He had the deep orange-brown suntan of a ski instructor, and when he smiled at the crowd his teeth were amazingly white and clearly visible at a distance of fifty yards. For one moment he saluted Pershing Square, and Pershing Square saluted him back, the prince and the beggars of glamour staring at one another across a city street, one of those very special moments in the underground history of the world, and then with a quick move he was out of his car and by choice headed into the crowd instead of the lane cleared for him into the hotel by the police, so that he made his way inside surrounded by a mob, and one expected at any moment to see him lifted to its shoulders like a matador being carried back to the city after a triumph in the plaza. All the while the band kept playing the campaign tunes, sashaying circus music, and one had a moment of clarity, intense as a *déjà vu*, for the scene which had taken place had been glimpsed before in a dozen musical comedies; it was the scene where the hero, the matinee idol, the movie star comes to the palace to claim the princess, or what is the same, and more to our soil, the football hero, the campus king, arrives at the dean's home surrounded by a court of open-singing students to plead with the dean for his daughter's kiss and permission to put on the big musical that night. And suddenly I saw the convention, it came into focus for me, and I understood the mood of depression which had lain over the convention, because finally it was simple: the Democrats were going to nominate a man who, no matter how serious his political dedication might be, was indisputably and willy-nilly going to be seen as a great box-office actor, and the consequences of that were staggering and not at all easy to calculate.¹⁰



James Rosenquist, *President Elect*, 1960-1961/1964,
Musée National d'Art Moderne, Centre Georges Pompidou, Paris
© James Rosenquist/Licensed by VAGA, New York NY

Norman Mailer's description of the atmosphere at the Democratic National Convention in Los Angeles is immediately brought to mind when viewing the three-piece panel entitled *President Elect* (1960–1961/1964) by James Rosenquist which represents the image of Kennedy's electoral victory, his successful campaign, his electoral promises of prosperity.¹¹ All of these positive characteristics are embodied in his laughing face, the cakes and the cars as symbols of optimism, opulence, the quality of life and the value system of the growing suburban middle class. And there is no doubt that the 'Kennedy image' was to a large extent constructed by the media, especially in several key journalistic pieces including "Survival" (by John Hersey, *The New Yorker*, 1944), "Superman Comes to the Supermarket" (by Norman Mailer, *Esquire*, 1960), and the "Camelot interview" with Jacqueline Kennedy: "For President Kennedy. An Epilogue" (by Theodore H. White, *Life*, 1963). It is also interesting to note that both Rosenquist's and Mailer's impressions of Senator Kennedy's new phase of political life also coincide with the beginnings of new phases in their respective careers. "Superman Comes to the Supermarket" represents Mailer's breakthrough into political journalism while *President Elect* is Rosenquist's first work done in a style which introduces the technique of producing paintings as billboards, using masonite and creamy paint. This painting, which does look like a billboard—in size and technique—only



Kennedy for President,
Campaign poster, 1960



JFK campaign button, 1960

lacks Joseph Kennedy's motto "We're going to sell Jack like soap flakes" to make it one.¹² In the consumerist culture that forms the defining basis of Rosenquist's work, political marketing functioned through a system of representations which deftly decorated everyday issues with lively colors, the spectacle of commodity and the industry of fun. That is why Kennedy does not appear to be anything less than a product, equivalent to cakes and cars. After all, Rosenquist appropriated all three motifs from advertising samples. The cake, Swan's Down Devil's Food Mix, was taken from a 1954 *Life* ad ("Try the only one mix that wins on all four 'musts' for homemade cake!"); the car was also appropriated from a *Life* ad ("New Chevrolet for '49")¹³, while Kennedy's face was appropriated from a campaign poster—the one that dominated the convention in Mailer's description. Donald Wilson, who designed this poster, describes its creation in this way:

President Kennedy was fascinated with pictures of himself and extremely critical of them and so the poster was of great interest to him. The big problem in the summer of 1960 was whether to have a serious, mature poster or a smiling poster. At that particular time one of the major arguments being made by the Republicans was that he was not experienced enough to become president, and therefore, this led a lot of people around him—and himself

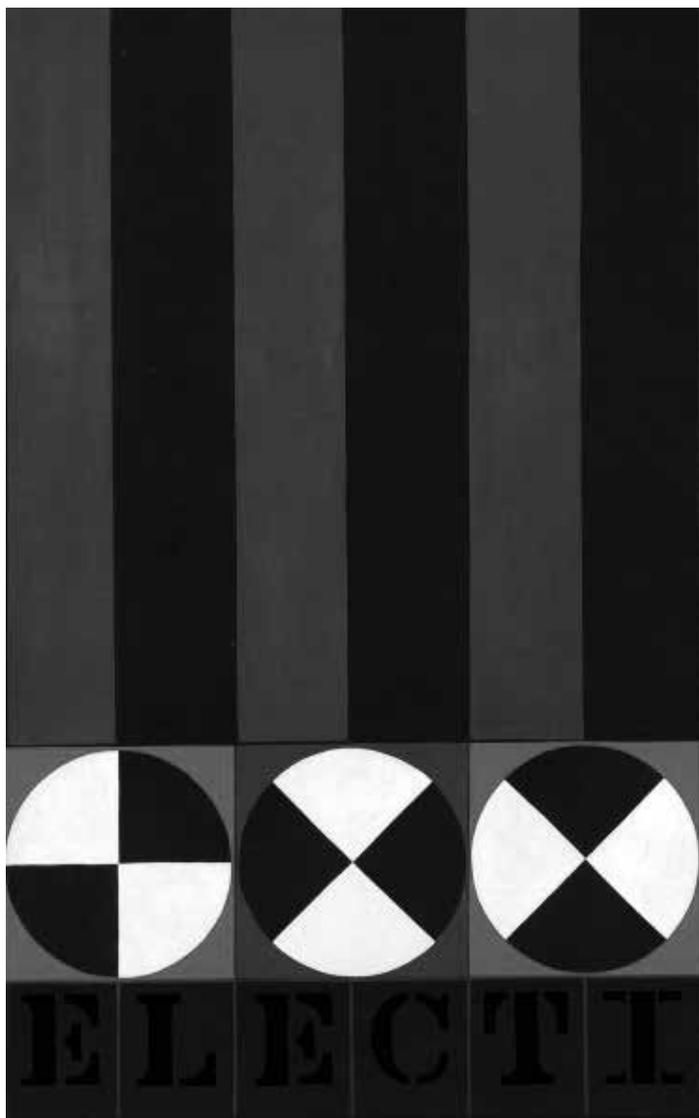
included—in the beginning to think that he should have a rather serious mature poster. I convinced him that he looked wonderful smiling, but it wasn't easy... The smiling one was produced in the millions and millions that appeared all over the United States.¹⁴

It is well known that Rosenquist did not use live models but instead used photography, posters and ads. His paintings always have a visual intermediary. As a subject, Kennedy made an excellent fit with this concept. Even though there has persisted an impression that his private life and his political activism were completely known, the image to reach the public—just as in Rosenquist's paintings—was always mediated, selective, and carefully controlled. As Arthur M. Schlesinger witnessed “even his faking had to stay within the character.”¹⁵ The projection of John Kennedy as a “political artifact” was actually as a form of visual commodity. This commodification was based on a carefully thought out idealization rather than on reality. In other words, accepting John Kennedy meant accepting his final change within the framework of possibilities, interest and functionally utilized historical heritage. This, in fact, implied an indirect acceptance of the way the majority of voters wished to view, define, and value the presidential candidate/president. As Gore Vidal cynically commented in 1967, “[s]ince the politics of the Kennedys are so often the work of publicists, it is necessary to keep trying to find out just who they are and what they really mean.”¹⁶ Ten years or so after the creation of his painting, Rosenquist commented that his “attitude toward Kennedy was positive. I had a certain hope in him. He seemed to have the correct responses to our muddled situation. But I had some sense of insecurity.” Finally, thirty years later, and after numerous historical and pseudo-historical deconstructions of the “Kennedy image,” Rosenquist answered the question “What is *President Elect* about?” through a complete and final deconstruction of his own painting by posing counter-questions: “*President Elect* is about an empty promise. It is a picture of man advertising himself. What is he promising? What are you going to get?”¹⁷ Rosenquist uses this to direct us towards the intervention made upon history, affirming that the image of history has never been permanent, just like the interpretation of history is fleeting. History as a construct and its participants as political artifacts are defined by those who interpret/view them within the framework of the moment in which they are being interpreted/viewed.

Almost simultaneously with Rosenquist's work Robert Indiana created *Electi* (1960–1961), which dealt with the same topic, evidenced by its title and date of creation. That Kennedy was, at that moment, the

subject of Indiana's interest is further witnessed by some of the titles of news articles mentioned in his diaries: "Kennedy – Democratic Nominee – 7.13.60"; "Kennedy Elected – 11.8.60," as well as from November 1963 when Indiana mentioned the assassination among other rarely made notes¹⁸. On the page dated January 2, 1961, beneath the ink and watercolor drawing, *Election*, Indiana noted: "Going on 'Election' is now easy; my commemoration of Kennedy's victory." Incidentally the painting was begun in November, immediately after the elections, since sketches for it appeared in one of his record books (the New England Calendar for Engagements 1960) dated November 24, Thanksgiving Day.¹⁹ Done in his characteristic hard-edge style, the painting is dominated by vertical black and brown alternating surfaces. In the lower zones, on a rectangular red and blue surface black and white discs are painted. Beneath each are two dark fields with lettering E L E C T I. The original composition was one quarter wider. It contained a rectangular surface, with a fourth disc in blue field, above rectangles containing letters O and N, spelling out the word "election." The right side of the work was damaged when Indiana's sculpture *Zeus*, fell on it, after which he decided to remove that whole part of the painting. According to the artist's explanation, which definitely takes us away from abstraction and non-representation, the painting contained "the computer memory tapes viewers saw spinning during TV coverage on election night."²⁰ In other words, what is being represented here is the actual machinery of information technology instead of the data itself.²¹ Although the connection between politics and television intensified even during the first presidential campaign of Dwight Eisenhower in 1952 it would reach its culmination only during the Kennedy administration. The power of the new medium combined with Kennedy's abilities to utilize its potential—from his first Senate campaign in 1946 to "his televised press conferences [that] became national theater"—would mark the era.²² However, consciously or not, Indiana created a hierarchy of significance by which the television image became primary in relation to other images, including even the face of the newly elected president. In other words, the television transmission itself became the basic visual information, the history that was (just) *its own image*. This was vividly recalled by contemporaries who almost always described the cult events of the 1960's through stories of where and in what kind of atmosphere they have watched them being shown on television.

If we accept the idea of history as its own image then every subsequent intervention performed on this image acquires a special



Robert Indiana, *Electi*, 1960-1961, Portland Museum of Art, Maine
© 2013 Morgan Art Foundation/Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York

meaning. The correction of the painting becomes a correction of history. Indiana's *Electi* is unlike the conscious and deliberate Rosenquist's intervention on *President Elect*, where we witness a strategy that could be taken as a palimpsest—the removal of the original text to create space for new inscription, while keeping the significance of the relationship of the primary (original) and the interpretative (newly created) text. Writing over writing is double writing; it has a complex meaning as it is simultaneously writing and overwriting, and not a simple act of erasing. On the other hand, it is certain that Indiana's abbreviated title of *Electi* represents a forced situation which was brought about through accidental damage. The shortening of the composition from containing four to three parts would subsequently coincide with Kennedy's term of office being brutally and roughly stopped by the end of his third year of service. This unusual analogy further leads to the notion that the political and/or historical painting is in fact never a finished painting. The accidental alteration of this work resulted also in a shift from the textual element, "Election" to the Latin *electi* or chosen/select, an intervention that not only altered the meaning, but that paralleled Kennedy's victory in the 1960 election.²³ In contrast to the situations that changed Indiana's or Rosenquist's paintings, the most drastic "historical intervention" happened to Jacques Lowe's negatives, including those of photographs taken in the jet during the 1960 campaign. All of his Kennedy negatives were destroyed in the September 11, 2001 attack on the World Trade Center, where they were stored in a vault.²⁴

The illusion of a definitive historical truth, as well as the notion of the possibility of reaching some sort of finality, is always a new reason to review the image itself through parameters of various interpretative matrices. In this process, the social reality intertwines with the iconographic, morphological and thematic analyses. These parameters include the cultural and social context of the artist's formation and activity as well as the evolving significance and meaning which the work acquires. The latter shifts with respect to changes in the dominant political and/or ideological stance, and all the subsequent readings which are partly or completely characterized by the changed political and cultural frameworks. Thus it is not strange to find a situation in which the artist himself makes interventions within his own "image of history" to make it "more historical" in an attempt to reach the impossible feat of making it timely. Michael Lobel explains very convincingly how and why Rosenquist would, after the assassination, responding to a climate with profoundly changed attitudes towards Kennedy, make interventions to

his *President Elect*.²⁵ These conditions also recall Robert Rauschenberg's dilemma. After the assassination, he debated whether the pre-ordered Kennedy silkscreens should be used despite the recent turn of events. Having realized that the decision to use them or not would constitute the same type of intervention, Rauschenberg decided to use them, regardless, creating some of his cult works such as *Retroactive* (1964). Rauschenberg's decision seems especially justified if bearing in mind how much the changed political climate after the assassination would determine the inscription of new meaning into all Kennedy images, regardless of time of their creation.

Incidentally, besides these forced or deliberate historical interventions Rauschenberg also shares with Rosenquist and Indiana the simultaneous interest in Kennedy's electoral victory as embodied in the solvent-transfer drawing *Election* (1960), created during the televised announcement of results of the presidential elections.²⁶ Rauschenberg would subsequently send this work to the president as a gift, accompanied by a letter:

Dear Mr. President:

This drawing should belong to you or me. If you enjoy it I would be deeply honored if you accept it. My concern with the election, primarily your becoming our next president, interrupted a 2 1/2 year project of illustrating Dante's *Inferno*. That fact + a need to celebrate your victory in my own medium is the subject. It is the only drawing in which the Dante image is used outside of the illustrations. (Small figure, lower right hand corner next to large D). The Greek head and Washington reiterates that the content of the drawing is art and politics. Red, white + blue is your color. The headlined, televised, radioed purple is Jacqueline's. The rest is, I think, self-explanatory, including the formal fading waves of "Dick + Pat" in the upper right.

Very truly yours,
Robert Rauschenberg

The dilemma regarding to whom the drawing should belong was obviously solved in the president's favor. At the time of her death, in 1994, Jacqueline Kennedy Onassis still owned the work.²⁷ Thinking about the newly elected president in the context of Dante's *Divine Comedy* Rauschenberg undoubtedly projected that moment as being historical while simultaneously emphasizing the significance of art within this historicity. He mentions "a need to celebrate [the president's] victory in [his] own medium." Regardless of the solemn tone of the note meant to celebrate the presidential win, one should not lose from sight that this



Robert Rauschenberg, *Election*, 1960, Private Collection
 © Robert Rauschenberg Foundation/Licensed by VAGA, New York NY

calling for respect for the history and culture of the past, shown in “his own medium”, actually becomes an indirect statement as to Rauschenberg’s own right to belong to this history. “The Greek head and Washington” (a head of a sculpture of Aphrodite and portrait of George Washington) leads us directly to the issue of John Kennedy’s inauguration and the Augustan Age (which I analyze more thoroughly in the following section). The new history built its own historicity by appropriating and equating with the mythologized ideals of the past. According to Gotthold Ephraim Lessing’s influential 18th-century discussion on narrative in the visual arts, the painter, as opposed to the poet, is limited to the key moment of the event he represents by the boundaries of his own medium. His choice therefore needs to be very carefully made so that based on this one moment the full significance of the event could be gleaned. However, even if he does strive for historicity, Rauschenberg does it through a completely different technique. By abandoning the logic of the key moment of the event in favor of a narrative sequence the author rejects the traditional definition of theme, the meaning that the theme possesses and its time frame.

Offering a changed image of history the artist creates a different matrix of visualization of contemporary artistic and historical messages. In such changes one can seek out the genesis of the narrative, i.e. the modernist transformation of the historical image type which one observes in Rauschenberg, as well as Rosenquist and Indiana.

1961 – “Poetry and power is the formula for another Augustan Age”

The term of office of John F. Kennedy, the 35th American president, began on January 20, 1961 by his taking the oath of office at the inauguration ceremony in Washington, D.C. The ceremony included a speech given by Robert Frost, the first poet ever to participate in this ritual, who wrote that “the arts, poetry, now for the first time [are] taken into the affairs of statesmen.”²⁸ I consider Frost’s often-repeated prediction that Senator John Kennedy would become the next American president to be the prehistory of this event. He had advanced this opinion in public ever since the celebration of his 85th birthday in 1959, and Kennedy himself had concluded his campaign speeches by quoting lines from Frost’s poem “Stopping by Woods on a Snowy Evening”: “But I have promises to keep, / And miles to go before I sleep.”²⁹ During the preparation for the inauguration Kennedy asked Frost to recite “The Gift Outright,” a poem Frost has called “a history of the United States in a dozen lines of blank verse.” Kennedy also suggested that the last verse “such as she would become” be replaced with “such as she will become.”³⁰ Frost obviously agreed, realizing himself that the change would suit the celebratory atmosphere and optimism of the new leadership for the 60’s. Once again, we witness an intervention that aimed to make art more timely. Days before the inauguration Frost wrote a new poem: “Dedication” (later retitled “For John F. Kennedy His Inauguration”). However, the strong glare of daylight and the whiteness of the snowy January day forced another intervention. The elderly poet could not see well enough to read the newly written poem, so he decided on the spot to recite “The Gift Outright” from memory, dragging out the last line: “Such as she was, such as she *would* become, *has* become, and I—and for this occasion let me change that to—what she *will* become.”³¹ After thanking the president for the invitation to participate in the inauguration, he presented him with the manuscript copy of “Dedication,” on which he wrote: “Amended copy. And now let us mend our ways”, including the advice: “Be more Irish than Harvard. Poetry and power is the formula for another Augustan Age. Don’t be afraid of power.”



President John F. Kennedy presents Congressional Gold Medal to Robert Frost, 1962
 Abbie Rowe. White House Photographs. John F. Kennedy Presidential Library and Museum, Boston

Although at first glance it might seem that “another Augustan Age” begins with the inauguration, it actually reaches its culmination with it. The idea of a special place that culture claims within the Kennedy image was created much earlier. A series of photographs by Orlando Suero from 1954 depicting the young senator and his wife in their first home in Washington, D.C. gives us Kennedy painting, Jackie studying political history at Georgetown University’s Foreign Service School and a home where culture and tradition are held in high regard.³² The photographs suggest a man who knows his etiquette, has taste and style. This image successfully deepens the idea of a young but mature intellectual created as early as the 1940’s. Jules Davids believed that the course in political courage that Jackie Kennedy had attended in 1955 played a key role in the invitation being issued later that year for him to aid Senator Kennedy in writing *Profiles in Courage*.³³ This book, for which Kennedy would receive the Pulitzer prize for history in 1957, is a continuation of his “literary career” which began with *Why England Slept* (1940), a published version of his thesis written while in senior year at Harvard College. So, this new Augustan age culminated with the Inaugural celebration which gathered numerous artists—Mark Rothko, Franz Kline, Robert Lowell, John Steinbeck—who were included on the list of invitees, with the approval of the President, and despite the opposition of many in



Pablo Casals performs at White House, 1961

Cecil Stoughton. White House Photographs. John F. Kennedy Presidential Library and Museum, Boston

Washington who took this as an act of bad faith, bearing in mind the limited seating and the avid interest of “more important” guests. The intention to state clearly from the outset the role that culture would play within the new administration was obvious. A meticulously planned and well-implemented cultural policy would, it turned out, remain one of the most recognizable “Kennedy images”—“poetry and power” would evolve into “poetry as power”. The number of cultural events to mark the years of Kennedy’s term would acquire a strong political dimension as well, only deftly transformed through the exigencies of art. “The new frontier of culture” would thus be delineated by a concert held by the cellist Pablo Casals in 1961. He had previously performed in the White House in 1904 during the presidency of Theodore Roosevelt. After 1938 he had demonstratively ceased all public performing in America as the result of American recognition of the dictatorial rule of Francisco Franco in Spain. He decided to change his decision due to a deep admiration for the new president, which was emphasized in the media through comments surrounding this cult cultural event.³⁴ The year 1962 saw the African-American mezzo-soprano Grace Bumbry perform at the White House as well.³⁵ The invitation issued by the First Lady Jacqueline Kennedy followed the events of 1961, when Wieland Wagner, the



President Kennedy, Pablo Casals, and Governor of Puerto Rico Luis Muñoz Marín, 1961
Cecil Stoughton. White House Photographs. John F. Kennedy Presidential Library and Museum, Boston

grandson of Richard Wagner, cast Bumbry as Venus in a new production of the opera *Tannhäuser*. Bumbry would be the first black opera singer to appear at Bayreuth Festival in Germany, which is dedicated to Wagner's operas only.³⁶ The same year the Kennedys organized a dinner party honoring the Nobel Prize Winners of the Western Hemisphere and a dinner in honor of composer Igor Stravinsky.³⁷ Both events were highly publicized.³⁸ Two days earlier Stravinsky had received the State Department's medal. In his correspondence with Pyotr Suvchinsky, Stravinsky laconically comments upon the political background of this invitation: "I think I was not invited for my music so much as for my age (and, I think, to be ahead of the Russians, whom *I will not visit*)."³⁹ In 1963, in the midst of the EEC crisis in the western alliance and problems with the French President Charles De Gaulle, there was the exhibition of Leonardo Da Vinci's *Mona Lisa*, arriving from the Louvre as a personal loan to the President and the First Lady.⁴⁰ The queues in front of the National Gallery in Washington and later the Metropolitan Museum in New York would anticipate the era of blockbuster exhibitions in American museums. The complex restoration of the White House began as a project sponsored by Jacqueline Kennedy at the outset of Kennedy's term, a project that would continue to demonstrate the stance of the administration not



Igor and Vera Stravinsky arrive at White House, 1962
 Abbie Rowe, White House Photographs, John F. Kennedy Presidential Library and Museum, Boston

only towards culture, but above all towards history, American history especially.⁴¹ On February 14, 1962 *A Tour of the White House with Mrs. John F. Kennedy* was broadcasted on all three television networks at that time (ABC, CBS, NBC). The tour was filmed and distributed to 106 countries. "It's so important the way the presidency is presented to the world," Jacqueline Kennedy would state briefly, openly and pithily. For this show, which was seen by 80 million viewers in America, only the First Lady would receive an honorary Emmy Award in 1962. The historical progress embodied in the development of culture and enlightened governance completed the image of power, signaling Kennedy's plans to position the country not only as politically and militarily dominant, but also as a leader of culture and civilization. As he said, "I look forward to an America which commands respect throughout the world not only for its strength but for its civilization as well."⁴² The aforementioned cultural events were intentionally organized to promote another image of Kennedy: the leader of the free world, fighter for democracy and human rights with respect for history and the true heir of the major



President Kennedy with Opera Singer Grace Bumbry and Pianist Charles Wadsworth, 1962
Cecil Stoughton. White House Photographs. John F. Kennedy Presidential Library and Museum, Boston

figures of the (American) past. How much and to what purpose the new history relied on the old is evident from Kennedy's text entitled *The Arts in America* and published in 1962 in *Look* magazine.⁴³

Both Roosevelt and Lincoln understood that the life of the arts, far from being an interruption, a distraction, in the life of a nation, is very close to the center of a nation's purpose—and is a test of the quality of a nation's civilization. That is why we should be glad today that the interest of the American people in the arts seems at a new high.

Heralding this symbiosis of patriotism and art as early as the beginning of 1960 Tom Wesselmann had, according to his own words, a dream in patriotic colors: red, blue and white. But "[i]t was not a color dream; it was just about those words." Driven by this message he decided to create a series of nudes entitled *The Great American Nude*⁴⁴ as a dialogue of sorts with the idea of the Great American Novel in literature and the even more universal notion of the American Dream.⁴⁵ However,

Norman Mailer's comment from "Superman Comes to the Supermarket" comes to mind as a possible continuation of the sequence; he states that if Kennedy is elected "America's politics would now be also America's favorite movie, America's first soap opera, America's best-seller." In 1961 Wesselmann completed the *Great American Nude #21*. In the upper left corner of the painting there is an official photograph of President Kennedy sitting in front of the American flag, and beside it there is a framed print with the flag motif, essentially duplicated with the slogan "Old Glory." On the extreme right the painting ends with a red curtain containing a blue and white lines in the upper zone. Beneath this line of motifs, in the center of the composition, there are two blue stars. The lower half of the painting is filled with still life elements and a reclining female nude, lying on a bed, her head on a pillowcase of blue and white stripes and with a red coverlet with a blue seam, juxtaposed in color to the whiteness of the sheet. Commenting on the painting some twenty years later Wesselmann stated:

When JFK was president, a museum in Washington dropped one of my nudes from a show. It was a very harmless nude, just a blank pink shape, except for a glued on mouth. But on the wall of the room, along with other elements, was a portrait of JFK. The museum feared the public would think the nude and JFK had some illicit connection, that she might be his lover.⁴⁶

This is another example of reading additional meaning into the work and rewriting "new older history." Wesselmann's comment obviously offers an interpretation colored by subsequent images of Kennedy. Although one could speculate that the composition which intertwines the image of the American president and the female nude might generally be considered problematic for a conservative audience—by virtue of one image (the nude) belittling the significance of the other (the president's function)—the allusion that the relationship between the characters in the painting might be taken literally and as indicative of real life personages represents induction of additional meaning. Stories of Kennedy's adulteries were not known to the general public during his tenure in office, nor were they the subject of speculation. However, here it is more significant to note the impression that in the work itself and outside the additional interpretations, John Kennedy not only is *not* the subject of the process of personalization, but in fact its opposite; he becomes subject of the ultimate objectivization. His portrait is the obvious iconographic part of a sequence of symbols that correspond to the term



The Exciting New Game of the Kennedys, 1961

“American,” from the title of the work/series, an element like the flag and the combination of patriotic colors. The titles “The President of The United States” and “Old Glory” written beneath both of these motifs form an unbreakable bond. The President’s promotional photograph, however, can in its original purpose belong to a sequence of ads as well. In other words, immaculately groomed and carefully stylized, JFK is being advertised in the same way as the “world’s finest” Wolfschmidt’s vodka and the juicy fruit seen beneath his photograph. Within a multidimensional process of appropriation the Kennedy image becomes an integral part of a certain patriotic performance of image de-elitization and democratization.

The images of the President (and the First Lady) flooding the public spaces further evolved into the process of his literal translation into a pop-object grotesquely embodied in the latest technology in beauty products or *The Exciting New Game of the Kennedys*.⁴⁷ Colorful plastic masks of a material that screened out harmful ultraviolet rays and admitted those that tanned, caused beaches to bloom with ‘Jacks and Jackies.’ These masks came in eight colors; the deeper the shade the lighter the tan. The Transco company launched *The Exciting New Game of the Kennedys* in 1961, undoubtedly spurred by the thought that “[p]eople avidly consumed not just the event but also the products associated with the event.”⁴⁸ The cover of the box shows six players “attempting to gain control of the country”: John Kennedy, Robert Kennedy, Edward Kennedy, John Kennedy Jr., Caroline Kennedy and Jacqueline Kennedy. Through the process of visual quotation their portraits have been translated into replicas of presidential heads from the Mount Rushmore National

Memorial. In the upper left corner, slightly covering the mountain, red and white stripes of a vertically placed flag can be observed. It is obvious that even at the most banal level, the effects of which should never be underestimated, the new history creates its own historicity by quoting and indirectly equating itself with the mythologized ideals of the past. As Sidra Stich claims, "The country was inundated with visual images of its president, some reproduced so often that they became national emblems—the contemporary equivalent of Gilbert Stuart's portraits of George Washington."⁴⁹ Within the framework of easily recognizable and available popular culture the idea of the continuity of nation was being formed. Based on their resemblance to the primary motif, these images rely on the sense of collective identity produced by the primary motif through its unbreakable bond between its own specificity and the national memory.

The culmination of the process of commodification of the President and the First Lady, and their ultimate translation into pop-objects can be seen on a series of photographs by Yale Joel for *Life* magazine in 1961. A caption under the single published photo—"[m]aking its debut, Jackie mannequin, a standard size 10, stands at John Frederic's shop in New York where pillbox hats sell for \$35 to \$70"—explains the commercial role the First Lady is intended to perform this time.⁵⁰ Other photographs depict sequences of street settings where in a semblance of a religious procession the dolls in the likeness of the presidential couple are being carried to the windows of a shop. By recording photographically the reactions of passers-by to what would seem to be a banal marketing gimmick, *Life* transforms the event into a performance of sorts which previews not only the notion of an era marked by consumerism, but also the culture of spectacle in which Jack and Jackie are being carried through the streets of New York like Christian saints or, rather, pagan idols.

1962 – "He was incandescent, golden. And bigger than life"

In the fall of 1962 President Harry S. Truman asked Thomas Hart Benton and Robert Graham, director of the Graham Gallery, about the possibility of a portrait of President Kennedy being done for his library in Independence, Missouri. Between Christmas, 1962 and New Year's Day, 1963 Elaine de Kooning, commissioned by the White House, started to work on a series of preparatory sketches of JFK's portrait in an improvised studio in an old theater in Palm Beach. This marked one of the rare occasions that Kennedy sat for an artist's portrait.⁵¹ The intensive eleven-

month long process—which lasted until November 1963—would result in hundreds of studies of the head, the full body and the sitting pose in charcoal, pen-and-pencil, casein and watercolor sketches. Recalling their first meeting de Kooning says, “He was incandescent, golden. And bigger than life.”⁵² The coloristic effect of Kennedy’s portrait reflects this first impression: light, golden yellow, green and blue colors, a lot of whiteness combined with a wide free stroke.

Everyone has his own private idea of President Kennedy. The men who worked with him had one impression, his family another, the crowds who saw him campaigning another, the rest of the world, which saw him only in two dimensions, smiling or frowning on a flat sheet of paper or a TV screen, still another—and this, by far the most universal. Beside my own intense, multiple impressions of him, I also had to contend with this ‘world image’ created by the endless newspaper photographs, TV appearances, caricatures. Realizing this, I began to collect hundreds of photographs torn from newspapers and magazines and never missed an opportunity to draw him when he appeared on TV. These snapshots covered every angle, from above, below, profile, back, standing, sitting, walking, close-up, off in the distance. I particularly liked tiny shots where the features were indistinct yet unmistakable. Covering my walls with my own and these photographs, I worked from canvas to canvas (the smallest 2 feet high, the largest 11), always striving for a composite image.

The studio was covered in portraits and Elaine de Kooning also spent a lot of time sharing her working dilemmas with her students and friends.⁵³ It is interesting to note that these recollections mostly relate to uncertainties dealing with composition and the choice of pose. She felt desperate to have achieved so little success after such work, and she had the impression of always being on the verge of an artistic breakthrough, which nevertheless eluded her. At one point she was working on 36 different portraits simultaneously, and each was at a different level of completion.⁵⁴ She even asked friends of similar build to Kennedy to sit for her. Elaine de Kooning finally reached the painting she had been searching for in September 1963. But in this standing portrait the president was dressed inappropriately, in a sweatshirt, sailing pants and sneakers, and sunlit like the first time she met him.⁵⁵ The problem was obviously in working on commission, generally not de Kooning’s practice—her only endeavors in this field were the Kennedy portrait and the one of the Brazilian footballer, Pele—which constricted her ability to choose the pose, costume, or atmosphere. In other words, despite her role

as author, she was not the one dominating the painting's composition process. It is also obvious that "everyone's own private idea" of the president, which she mentions relates not only to other groups she lists, but also to herself. The aforementioned and other "unacceptable" works she was satisfied with contain her "own intense, multiple impressions of him", embodied in the intimidation which characterizes her other male portraits. She claims that she preferred men in her paintings to become objects of sexual attention.⁵⁶ This remark—"I wanted to paint men as sex objects"—is especially evident in several sitting male portraits, their legs spread wide apart.

One morning, the President sat sprawled with one foot up, resting on a beach chair. 'Is this pose all right?' he asked. 'Well,' I said doubtfully, 'it's supposed to be an official portrait.' He smiled and left his foot there. I thought, OK, I'll take what I get. I smiled and nodded back and went to work on a small casein sketch. I liked the informality of the pose, and after I got back to my studio in New York I concentrated on paintings made from that sketch.⁵⁷

The said drawings would become the subject of her "conflict" with Jackie Kennedy when the two met in her studio after the assassination. Having taken several drawings from the exhibition in the Graham Gallery the president's widow allegedly expressed a wish to see more of de Kooning's works. If de Kooning's recollection is to be trusted, the visit started off badly. The artist did not appreciate her guest's haughty attitude. In her account of the conversation concerning the charcoal drawings, especially the two where the president was depicted "seated with one leg thrown over the arm of a beach chair," de Kooning states:

Well, of course, there was the presidential crotch, right at the center of the drawings. So, when Jackie said she wanted those pictures, I just said, no, they're mine. And then she said, 'Well, they make him look like a fag on the Riviera.' And I said, 'They look good to me.' And I knew right then that I would just never let her have my pictures of Jack Kennedy.⁵⁸

This homophobic and inflammatory commentary only confirms the sexual anticipation of the subject matter.⁵⁹ Further on de Kooning also admits to having been "a teeny little bit in love with [Kennedy]. In love with his mind, in love with the whole idea of such a gallant, intelligent, handsome man leading the country and the world"⁶⁰, and that after the assassination she felt "that I lost a brother or a lover. It was a personal

loss.”⁶¹ Observing her works we can trace a complex transposition of reality into an image, continuously intermingled with an intimate and even erotic experience. By reducing the official commissioned presidential portrait to an intimate experience of personal pleasure, de Kooning reaches the peak of perverting the image of reality into a subjective statement transformed by desire, need and the artist’s experience. In a series of photographs taken in Palm Beach while working, Elaine de Kooning is always in the foreground, she is the subject, the creator, while John Kennedy is relegated to the background, a passive object, the object of her active gaze. This triumphant, domineering, and patronizing role can also be perceived in later studio photos in which the artist stands center-stage, “surrounded” by Kennedy portraits, her legs apart, arms bent to rest on her hips, or looking at the enlarged visage directly “in the eye.” In comparison with studio photographs of other artists, i.e. Rauschenberg or Wesselmann, these scenes leave an impression of the final moment of triumph over the representation captured within the painting and framed. They confirm the relationship within which Kennedy is given the role of the observed object while de Kooning is most definitely the observing subject. In this way, the artist inverts one of the most enduring traditional constructs in art history, based on gender division, forced societal roles and consequential easily presumed stereotype of man-as-artist and woman-as-model. Seen this way, the series of Kennedy portraits becomes the integral part of a logical continuation of male portraiture done in the 1950’s. Celia S. Stahr describes these works by saying that “de Kooning’s active gaze creates a new style of male portraiture,” suggesting that they are perhaps the most interesting in their doubled disjointedness from the moment in which they are created.⁶² The inversion of roles—woman-as-artist and man-as-model—is no less unusual than regarding de Kooning as belonging to representational painting while simultaneously being part of the circle of abstract expressionists.

To get back to the work process and the “acceptable” portraits, in an initiation of sorts, by “covering [her] walls with [her] own images and [other] photographs,” de Kooning transforms her own micro/intimate world into a macro/public space. When Bill Walton, the representative from the White House, came to observe the progress of the portrait in November 1963, “wherever he looked he saw an image of Kennedy—in the bathroom, in the kitchen, in her bedroom, on every wall.”⁶³ Elaine de Kooning’s studio thus became a newspaper stand, the TV screen, a supermarket shelf with magazines, the billboards on the highway; the



Lt. John F. Kennedy aboard the PT-109 in the South Pacific, 1943
 Photograph in the John F. Kennedy Presidential Library and Museum, Boston

image repeated and occupying the entire visual space. In the process of creating the “acceptable” painting, without necessarily being aware of it, de Kooning exhausts herself with images, systematically distancing herself from clarity, through adapting her own mind to the ways of observing and the expectations of those the portrait is intended for: those whose attitude towards the Kennedys Thomas McEvilley vividly describes by saying “their faces are our property.”⁶⁴ Through this process she simultaneously shows that the recognizable Kennedy image is a carefully created applied projection and an artifact of mass culture. This is the reason why de Kooning cannot manage to reach the painting she feels would fulfill expectations while working with a live model. Only as the impression is corrected through the medium of photography, a drawing made based on a TV appearance or some other mediated image, can she reach what Kennedy really is. Her own private image of him, her truth, she keeps for herself as shown and the last thing she might want is to share it with Jackie Kennedy who, in the years after the assassination, came to represent the metonym for the constructed Kennedy image.



President John F. Kennedy meets with actor Cliff Robertson, Oval Office, White House, 1963
Cecil Stoughton. White House Photographs. John F. Kennedy Presidential Library and Museum, Boston

1963 – “When he shall die / Take him and cut him out in little stars”⁶⁵

In John Hellmann’s words “[n]ever appearing in an actual film, but rather turning the television apparatus into his screen, [Kennedy] became the greatest movie star of the twentieth century.”⁶⁶ Hellmann’s intention is to emphasize the significance television would have in forming the John Kennedy image. However, two completely different films to “feature” Kennedy appeared in 1963. The poster for the film *PT 109* (1963)—the adapted screenplay based on Robert J. Donovan’s book on Kennedy’s active military service and his heroism during WWII—informed the audience: “PT 109 was a grimy, battle-scarred veteran of the Guadalcanal campaign. Its skipper was a skinny, handsome and boyish lieutenant from Boston named John Fitzgerald Kennedy.” It was the first commercial film about a sitting United States President released while he was still in office, made with complete cooperation and with the approval of the White House. The president was played by Cliff Robertson, chosen after Warren Beatty refused to take on the role complaining of a weak

and action-deficient screenplay.⁶⁷ The film premiered in June 1963 and it represents the pop beginning of Kennedy's campaign for his second term of office. Lest there should be any doubts as to who the film is about, on the poster of the film (whose action takes place twenty years before), Kennedy's current official photograph was used next to Robertson's. The audience was in this way, even before they saw the film, led to expect the correct ending. During the two hours and twenty minutes of the film the intention was obviously to make a strong connection to the current moment. When to the question of a frightened soldier "What can a man do except pray?" Kennedy replies "You can do your job," the dialogue sounds like a modified quote from the well-known question posed by Kennedy in his inaugural address: "Ask not what your country can do for you – ask what you can do for your country." Other dialogues also reflect the 1960's much more than the 1940's. The past transformed by the present, and the especially contemporary rhetoric, of course, is nothing new for film; insufficient creativity and a lackluster script, however, create an impression that "*PT 109* is a WWII morale movie made twenty years too late,"⁶⁸ or simply is an official film adequately advertised by the photograph included in its poster. A carefully thought-out and long-nurtured public image of John Kennedy is rendered complete by Hollywood's "historical" epic.

As opposed to the multimillion budget utilized by the makers of *PT 109*, and the additional logistics afforded by the open support of the White House, the film made by Abraham Zapruder—"the most famous home video in history"—was created almost accidentally. The recording of Kennedy's assassination in Dallas on November 22, 1963, although not the only one (the Orville Nix film is considered the second most important film showing the assassination), would become the most famous recording of Kennedy ever made. Perhaps even more Warhol-like than any Warhol film, Zapruder's recording has all the necessary elements: the assassination as a public spectacle, his own fifteen minutes of glory and the bizarre performance of having it proclaimed a work of art when a professional appraiser hired by Zapruder's heirs in 1999 to sell the film explained why it was evaluated as worth 33.8 million dollars:

The colors are beautiful. The ever-familiar hues of the tragedy—the pink of the first lady's outfit, the red of the wounds, the green of the grass, the bluish-black of the presidential limousine—would not have been better if selected by Warhol or Matisse.⁶⁹

Zapruder's film and its history might well represent the most vivid metaphor for the complex intertwining of John Kennedy's destiny and his projected public image; an unbreakable bond ending in death on the stage, in front of an audience. Thus perhaps it should not come as a surprise that only several hours after the assassination, this important evidence and a celluloid piece of history ended up owned by a media house.⁷⁰ Just one day after the assassination Zapruder would sell the rights to print frames of the film for \$50,000 to Richard Stolley, editor of *Life* magazine. The next day *Life* would buy all the rights to the film for \$150,000.⁷¹ Although an alleged nightmare in which he saw a booth sitting on the Times Square bearing an ad "See the president's head explode"⁷² did not prevent Zapruder from making money off the film, it did lead him to commit another attempt to intervene with history. Not wishing for the public to see the full horror of what he had witnessed, in selling the rights he demanded that the frame 313—the moment depicting the fatal shot in the head—not be made public. However, the frame was reproduced in the Warren Commission Report the next year, as well as in *Life* magazine on October 2, 1964. "The four dark days"—during which American, and world audiences would, through television, witness the history of the 1960's, from the assassination to the arrest and murder of the assassin Lee Harvey Oswald, to the oath taking of the new president Lyndon B. Johnson—would end with an immaculately orchestrated funeral service. The decision made by Joseph Kennedy to watch his son's funeral on television alongside millions of other Americans, in Hyannis Port, with his old friend Reverend John Cavanaugh, despite the doctor's permission to travel to Washington, would seem especially symbolic.⁷³ The new image of history was completed by the new medium of television and a naïf belief that television transmissions allowed us to finally attain the full truth of visual information. This transparency/accessibility had earlier been rendered impossible through the mediation of the creator of the image. And this is also why the painting by Willem de Kooning entitled *Reclining Man* (1963) depicting the dead president, as an image of history expressed in contemporary formal language but within a traditional medium, could never compete with Zapruder's dramatic scenes. At least it could not compete until the time that questions the faith in the finality of the television/video recording in an endless pursuit for new truths. This is why the de Kooning painting—although chronologically and formally distanced—is essentially closer to Sir John Everett Millais' *The Death of Ophelia* (1851-1852) or Manet's *The Dead Toreador* (1864), works with

which it shares the timeless tragedy and martyrdom, striving to lessen the sorrow over the death of a young (and beautiful) person by utilizing dramatic pathos. De Kooning's *The Reclining Man* remains one of the last relics of the poetic image of death which would in the years after Kennedy's assassination, within a process of repulsive and uncontrolled curiosity, culminate beyond necrophilia with the publishing of the autopsy photographs.

"For President Kennedy. An Epilogue"

The little bum in the gondola solidified all my beliefs by warming up to the wine and talking and finally whipping out a tiny slip of paper which contained a prayer by Saint Teresa announcing that after her death she will return to the earth by showering it with roses from heaven, forever, for all living creatures.

"Where did you get this?" I asked.

"Oh, I cut it out of a reading-room magazine in Los Angeles couple of years ago. I always carry it with me."⁷⁴

The photograph by Thomas Hoepker from Reno taken in June 1963 and entitled *A John F. Kennedy Plaque in a Souvenir Store* almost prophesies the destiny of John Kennedy, but also captures the process of his beatification, which started with the Jacqueline Kennedy "Camelot interview" ("For President Kennedy. An Epilogue" by Theodore H. White).⁷⁵ Among the icons of saints, the "trust and obey" plaques and one dollar stickers there is the "icon" of John Kennedy (interestingly, the same photograph which Tom Wesselmann uses in *The Great American Nude #21*). The icon of St. Therese holding roses which she seems to offer Kennedy evokes again some quotes from *Dharma Bums*, but even more parts of White's article: "[Mrs. Kennedy] remembers the roses. Three times that day in Texas they had been greeted with the bouquets of yellow roses of Texas. Only, in Dallas they had given her *red* roses. [...] and then the car was full of blood and red roses." Later, as she was preparing to escort the body from the hospital to the airport, Dr. Burkley, the White House physician, would give Jacqueline Kennedy "two roses that had slipped under the President's shirt when he fell, his head in her lap."⁷⁶ As John Hellmann claims "[t]he representation of John F. Kennedy, aesthetic and erotic in his lifetime, now became also religious"⁷⁷. This relocation of the center is vividly witnessed by Elaine de Kooning's experience. Traumatized after having "identified painting with painting Kennedy," in 1964 she would begin to sculpt. "The first sculpture I made was a head and shoulders of Kennedy—the last



President and Mrs. Kennedy arrive at Love Field, Dallas, Texas, 1963
 Photograph by Cecil Stoughton, White House. John F. Kennedy Presidential Library and Museum, Boston

image the world had of him, above the rim of the car. Then I made some crucifixes. I didn't want them to be recognized as crucifixes but as floral forms reaching up in growth or flight."⁷⁸ The sense of a certain religious rapture—present with de Kooning ever since her struggle to find a proper way of creating the portrait—is evocative of the Byzantine legend on the creation of the first icon: King Avgar sent his finest painter to paint the portrait of Christ. The painter never seemed to manage to capture Christ's image as, according to John of Damascus, his model shone with "unbearable light". Finally, taking pity on the artist Christ pressed his face onto his robe where the imprint remained. Although Kennedy could not have taken the same kind of pity on Elaine de Kooning, the similarities between these two stories exist. John of Damascus, during the period of iconoclasm used the story to clarify the origin of icons, defending them by saying that the first icon was "created" by Christ himself. Thus Kennedy from the outset creates his own image, fighting



Allan D'Arcangelo, *Madonna and Child*, 1963, Whitney Museum of American Art, New York
 © Estate of Allan D'Arcangelo/Licensed by VAGA, New York NY

against criticisms concerning idolatry. However, John of Damascus also teaches us that we venerate God, but we also venerate things, places and people associated with God.⁷⁹ What happened after (the crucifixion/assassination) is heralded by the painting *Madonna and Child* (1963) by Allan D'Arcangelo. Here is the president's widow in a modern dress with pearls around her neck and her daughter beside her rendered as a contemporary icon; it signifies the process of beatification which started with her Camelot interview. The image thus becomes iconic and equated with the concepts of time and permanence in their archetypal dimensions in order to subtly, by connecting with the contemporary moment, form a new meaning and its own narrative stereotype. Using her privilege of what Damascus called "people associated with God" the President's widow in the days after the assassination performs another intervention upon history. Wanting to save him from history written by "all those bitter old men"⁸⁰—"[s]he did not want Jack left to historians"—she attempts to forestall them by utilizing the legend of Camelot as an epitaph for the Kennedy administration. "Myth turned into a cliché" as

Arthur Schlesinger, Jr. called Camelot metaphor, thus becomes another appropriation in what is now seemingly an endless chain of intercrossed appropriations. The mythology of Camelot was in the decades after the assassination criticized by many in various ways; although Jackie Kennedy would not reject it, she would go on to admit in 1964 that the comparison was “overly sentimental”. However, the musical comedy *Camelot*, a popular Broadway show which opened only weeks after Kennedy was elected, exists as the most brilliantly clever metaphor of the Kennedy era. To be absolutely clear—this refers not the myth of “real” Camelot, but Broadway’s *Camelot*, or, in other words, “history” sung by the language of pop culture.

Incidentally, Camelot—the castle and court associated with King Arthur—was already the key symbol of the Arthurian world in literature and popular culture starting in the 12th century, long before it became the Broadway and Hollywood spectacle. The imaginary Camelot which, as Norris J. Lacy describes it, was “located nowhere in particular, can be anywhere,”⁸¹ made it to Broadway as a double projection: the (new) projection of (an older) projection—precisely in the same way as did the John Kennedy visualization, an embraced concept of his already carefully constructed image. In other words, the presence of John Kennedy in the variety of forms discussed here represents an appropriation of his public image, visible in those works which celebrate him, as well as those which have been “able to resist the Kennedy charm”⁸² like Marisol Escobar or several European artists.⁸³ But, as we have seen, the Kennedy visualization becomes complete only when seen through the full spectrum of the usage of his picture. Although at first sight it might appear that the process of commodifying the President dominantly takes place in the field of the widest possible range of visual culture, this process is by no means this simple. I have already mentioned the various moves the Kennedy administration made in an attempt to present the issue of culture as a leading concern whilst using it in creating another Kennedy image—the historical progress embodied the development of culture and enlightened governance completed the image of power. It is thus precisely within this two-way process that Kennedy transforms culture into a useful commodity (for himself). This is why the answer to what the contemporary image of history is lies within the pastiche of the context, the media and ideas, but also in the intertwining of arts, pop-culture, camp and politics, specific for the particular historical and social circumstances of the 1960’s, where John F. Kennedy became a both the commodity and the consumer.

Notes:

1. Jack Kerouac, *Dharma Bums* (Cutchogue, New York: Buccaneer Books, 1986), 8.
2. On the same occasion we also commented on many other Kennedy trivia facts inspired by Lubin's wonderful book *Shooting Kennedy: JFK and the Culture of Images*. Some of them have found their way to this text (May 2013, San Francisco).
3. Ellis Amburn, *Subterranean Kerouac: The Hidden Life of Jack Kerouac* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1998), 317.
4. Kitty Kelley, *Capturing Camelot: Stanley Tretick's Iconic Images of the Kennedys* (New York: Thomas Dunne Books, 2012), 28. As Tretick explains: "Kennedy absolutely will not pose for any picture which he thinks smacks of corn. As his good friend [the journalist] Joe Alsop says, 'Two things make him nervous—nuns and silly hats.'" Kelley, *Capturing Camelot*, 31.
5. For more on American iconography, see Sidra Stich, *Made in USA: An Americanization in Modern Art, The '50s & '60s* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1987).
6. Griselda Pollock, *Mary Cassatt: Painter of Modern Woman* (London: Thames and Hudson, 1998), 21.
7. My thanks to Margareta M. Lowell for these remarks, as well as the whole BAG (Berkeley American Group)—Kevin Muller, Elizabeth Bennett, Edwin Harvey, Linda Phipps, Sarah Gold, Meredith Massar—for their suggestions during the collective reading of the first drafts of this text.
8. Jean Baudrillard, *America* (London and New York: Verso, 1989), 29-30 (translated by Chris Turner).
9. Kelley, *Capturing Camelot*, 91.
10. Norman Mailer, "Superman Comes to the Supermarket," (*Esquire*, November 1960). <http://www.esquire.com/print-this/superman-supermarket>
11. For detailed argumentation on what was made in 1960–61 and what was added in 1964 see Michael Lobel, "Rosenquist Repaints History. The Curious Case of *President Elect*," in: *James Rosenquist: Pop Art, Politics, and History in the 1960s* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 2009), 67-95.
12. Quoted in Richard J. Whalen, *The Founding Father: The Story of Joseph P. Kennedy* (New York: The New American Library, 1964), 446.
13. Julia Blaut, "James Rosenquist: Collage and the Painting of Modern Life," in: Walter Hopps and Sarah Bancroft, *James Rosenquist: A Retrospective* (New York: Guggenheim Museum, 2003), 28-29.
14. http://www.jfklibrary.org/Asset-Viewer/Gqn--eD0n0-_BlhwbeTtoQ.aspx Similar to the photograph that features his smiling face, which one would allegedly associate with Kennedy's youth, or as his detractors would put it—his inexperience—using nickname, Jack, was also considered risky in his campaign headquarters. To create a more serious impression, his team decided to offer the media the acronym JFK, which was simultaneously useful as a reminder of FDR.
15. Arthur M. Schlesinger Jr., *A Thousand Days: John F. Kennedy in the White House* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1965), 115.
16. Gore Vidal, "The Holy Family: The Gospel according to Arthur, Paul, Pierre, and William and several minor apostles" (orig. *Esquire*, April 1967), in:

- Reflections Upon a Sinking Ship* (Boston: Little Brown, 1969), 181.
17. Interview given in October/December 1991, Judith Goldman, *James Rosenquist: The Early Pictures 1961-1964* (New York: Gagosian Gallery/Rizzoli, 1992), 101.
 18. Daniel E. O'Leary, "The Journals of Robert Indiana," in: *Love and the American Dream: The Art of Robert Indiana* (Portland: Portland Museum of Art, 1999), 13 and 25.
 19. O'Leary, "The Journals of Robert Indiana," 26.
 20. Artist's statement quoted in O'Leary, "The Journals of Robert Indiana," 17.
 21. My thanks to Linda Phipps for these remarks.
 22. David Halberstam, "Introduction," in: *The Kennedy Presidential Press Conferences* (New York: Earl M. Coleman Enterprises, 1978), iii.
 23. My thanks to Linda Phipps for bringing to my attention this detail.
 24. For more detailed description see Thomasina Lowe, "The Lost Negatives," in: *Remembering Jack: Intimate and Unseen Photographs of the Kennedys* (New York: Bulfinch Press, 2003), 8-9.
 25. See Lobel, "Rosenquist Repaints History: The Curious Case of *President Elect*," 67-95.
 26. Joan Young with Susan Davidson, "Chronology," in: *Robert Rauschenberg: A retrospective* (New York: Guggenheim Museum, 1997), 559.
 27. *Election (Drawing for President of the USA with Dante)* (lot 53), *The Estate of Jacqueline Kennedy Onassis* (New York: Sotheby's Auction catalogue, 1996), 74-75.
 28. In a telegram (December 14, 1960) replying to Kennedy's invitation to participate in the inaugural ceremony, Frost states: "If you can bear at your age the honor of being made president of the United States, I ought to be able at my age to bear the honor of taking some part in your inauguration. I may not be equal to it but I can accept it for my cause, the arts, poetry, now for the first time taken into the affairs of statesmen." L. Boyd Finch, *Legacies of Camelot: Stewart and Lee Udall, American culture, and the arts* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 2008), 24.
 29. Jeffrey Meyers, *Robert Frost: A Biography* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1996), 322.
 30. Jay Parini, *Robert Frost: A Life* (New York: Henry Holt, 1999), 413.
 31. Parini, *Robert Frost: A Life*, 414.
 32. Anne Garside, *Camelot at Dawn: Jacqueline and John Kennedy in Georgetown, May 1954* (Baltimore and London: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 2001).
 33. Garside, *Camelot at Dawn*, 46.
 34. Nancy Hall-Duncan, "Pablo Casals Concert," in: *JFK and Art*, (London: Frances Lincoln Limited, 2003), 52.
 35. Barbara A. Perry, *Jacqueline Kennedy: First Lady of New Frontier* (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 2004), 137.
 36. <http://gracebumbry.com/biography/>
 37. For more about Stravinsky and the Cold War, see "Stravinsky's Cold War: Letters About the Composer's Return to Russia, 1960-1963" (letters translated by Philipp Penka with Alexandra Grabarchuk, introduction, commentary, and notes by Tamara Levitz) in: *Stravinsky and His World* (Princeton and Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2013), 273-317.
 38. Levitz (ed.), *Stravinsky and His World*, 289. Conductor Robert Craft writes in

his diary: "We have been honored to have had two great artists," [the President said]—I am wondering if I. S. realizes that [Pablo] Casals is meant by the other—"here with us in the last months. As a student in Paris, my wife wrote an essay on Baudelaire, Oscar Wilde, and Diaghilev" (I. S. later: "I was afraid he was about to say his wife made a study of homosexuality.") "I understand that you, Mr. Stravinsky, were a friend of Diaghilev. And I was told that rocks and tomatoes were thrown at you in your youth." The President's speech is based on [Vera's] briefing during dinner, and the story of the *Sacre* premiere amazed him and even made him laugh aloud. Rocks and tomatoes, I explain later—I. S. has understood the phrase literally—is an American interpretation; they are thrown at baseball umpires. But the speech is short and—because an American President is honoring a great creative artist, and that is so absolutely unheard of in American history—it is moving.

39. Stravinsky describes the evening as follows: "At this small dinner party there was an atrocious selection of 25 people who had nothing in common with me. There was a lot of drinking and everyone (especially I) drank too much. When the President's secretary asked me, "How do you feel, Maestro?" the maestro answered, "drunk," and we went home early, because what are we to do at such parties other than drink. She is very striking and charming, he is quick-witted, but both have very little to do with art." Levitz (ed.), *Stravinsky and His World*, 289. Stravinsky composed in 1964 *Elegy for JFK*, in memory of assassinated President.
40. For more details see Herman Lebovics, *Mona Lisa's Escort: Andrè Malraux and the Reinvention of French Culture*, (Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 1999).
41. For more details see James A. Abbott, Elaine M. Rice, *Designing Camelot: The Kennedy White House Restoration* (New York: Wiley, 1997).
42. October 26, 1963, JFK's speech at groundbreaking for Amherst College's Robert Frost Library, Massachusetts; Boyd Finch, *Legacies of Camelot*, 59.
43. The article was printed in the December 18, 1962, issue of *Look* magazine as part of a special adaptation of "Creative America", a book scheduled to be released in October 1963. The text goes on to state: "Above all, we are coming to understand that the arts incarnate the creativity of a free society. We know that a totalitarian society can promote the arts in its own way—that it can arrange for splendid productions of opera and ballet, as it can arrange for the restoration of ancient and historic buildings. But art means more than the resuscitation of the past: it means the free and unconfined search for new ways of expressing the experience of the present and the vision of the future. When the creative impulse cannot flourish freely, when it cannot freely select its methods and objects, when it is deprived of spontaneity, then society severs the root of art. Yet this fact surely imposes an obligation on those who acclaim the freedom of their own society—an obligation to accord the arts attention and respect and status, so that what freedom makes possible, a free society will make necessary."
44. The works to bear this name today were not created until 1961. After switching from small format collage (around 5 inches) to produce works of around 48 inches/4 feet in size, all of Wesselmann's previous works were

- retitled *Little Great American Nudes*, and the work from 1961 received the additional mark #1.
45. Slim Stealingworth (Tom Wesselmann), *Tom Wesselmann* (New York: Abbeville Press, 1980), 20.
 46. Comment made in 1982, quoted in John Wilmerding, *Tom Wesselmann: His Voice and Vision* (New York: Rizzoli, 2008), 80.
 47. <http://boardgamegeek.com/boardgame/7672/the-exciting-new-game-of-the-kennedys>
 48. Christin J. Mamiya, *Pop Art and Consumer Culture: American Super Market* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1992), 109.
 49. Stich, *Made in USA*, 36.
 50. <http://life.time.com/icons/jackie-kennedy-jfk-mannequins-nyc/?iid=lb-gal-viewagn#1>
 51. Besides de Kooning, Kennedy sat for only two other artists during his time in office: Petro Annigoni and William Draper. *The Estate of Jacqueline Kennedy Onassis*, 78.
 52. Elaine de Kooning, "Painting a Portrait of the President (1964)," in: *The Spirit of Abstract Expressionism: Selected Writings* (New York: George Braziller, 1994), 201.
 53. Lee Hall, *Elaine and Bill, Portrait of a Marriage: The Lives of Willem and Elaine de Kooning* (New York: Harper Collins, 1993), 229-230.
 54. Eleanor Munro, "Elaine de Kooning," in *Originals: American Women Artists* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1979), 257.
 55. See Munro, "Elaine de Kooning," 257.
 56. Ann Eden Gibson, *Abstract Expressionism: Other Politics* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press 1997), 135.
 57. Munro, "Elaine de Kooning," 256.
 58. Quoted in Hall, *Elaine and Bill, Portrait of a Marriage*, 230.
 59. "Several Kennedy insiders were thought to be homosexual, although only one, the columnist Joseph Alsop, ever acknowledged it. Despite the macho image of the Kennedy administration, JFK was comfortable with homosexuals, perhaps, some friends believed, because he understood the tensions of having a secret life". Sally Bedell Smith, *Grace and Power: The Private World of the Kennedy White House* (New York: Random House, 2004), xxiv.
 60. Hall, *Elaine and Bill, Portrait of a Marriage*, 230.
 61. Hall, *Elaine and Bill, Portrait of a Marriage*, 230.
 62. Celia S. Stahr, "Elaine de Kooning, Portraiture, and the Politics of Sexuality," *Genders*, 38, 2003. http://www.genders.org/g38/g38_stahr.html#fig1
 63. Lawrence Campbell, "Elaine de Kooning: The Portraits," in: *Elaine de Kooning* (Athens: Georgia Museum of Art/University of Georgia, 1992), 33.
 64. Thomas McEvilly, "Ask not what," in: *Artforum* (New York, February 1986), 71.
 65. At the 1964 Democratic National Convention in Atlantic City, speaking to the delegates Robert Kennedy in his speech known as "The Star Speech" stated: "When I think of President Kennedy, I think of what Shakespeare said in *Romeo and Juliet*... 'When he shall die, / Take him and cut him out in little stars, / And he shall make the face of heaven so fine / That all the world will be in love with night, / And pay no worship to the garish sun.'"
 66. John Hellmann, *The Kennedy Obsession: The American Myth of JFK* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1997), 91.

67. For more detailed version of Beatty's refusal and casting in general see J. Hoberman, *The Dream Life: Movies, Media, and the Mythology of the Sixties* (New York and London: The New Press, 2003), 56-58.
68. Richard Reeves, "PT 109," in: *Past Imperfect: History According to the Movies* (ed. Mark C. Carnes) (New York: A Society of American Historians Book, Henry Holt, 1995), 232.
69. Quoted in David M. Lubin, *Shooting Kennedy: JFK and the Culture of Images* (Berkeley and Los Angeles University of California Press, 2003), 181.
70. For the detailed account, see David R. Wrone, "The Film and Private Ownership of American History," in: *The Zapruder Film: Reframing JFK's Assassination* (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 2003), 49-74.
71. Wrone, "The Film and Private Ownership of American History," 20-37.
72. Richard Stolley, "What Happened Next...," (*Esquire*, November 1973), 134-135.
73. Whalen, *The Founding Father*, 486.
74. Kerouac, *Dharma bums*, 6-7.
75. During the celebrated interview with Theodore H. White only a few days after the funeral Jacqueline Kennedy would share with the nation an intimate memory of the late president and the moment when he would play records for her before going to bed, especially cherishing the verses from a song in the current Broadway musical *Camelot*: "Don't let it be forgot, that once there was a spot, for one brief shining moment that was known as Camelot." In order to make sure that this allusion would be correctly understood she added: "There'll be great Presidents again [...] but there'll never be another Camelot again." Theodore H. White, "For President Kennedy. An Epilogue," (*Life*, December 6, 1963), 159.
76. White, "For President Kennedy. An Epilogue," 158.
77. Hellmann, *The Kennedy Obsession*, 145.
78. Munro, "Elaine de Kooning," 259-260.
79. For more details on St. John of Damascus in English: St John of Damascus, *Three Treatises on the Divine Images* (translation and introduction by Andrew Louth) (Crestwood: St. Vladimir's Seminary Press, 2003).
80. White, "For President Kennedy. An Epilogue," 159.
81. Norris J. Lacy, "Camelot," in: *The New Arthurian Encyclopedia* (New York: Garland, 1991), 66-67.
82. Hall-Duncan, "Marisol Escobar. The Kennedys," in: *JFK and Art*, 50.
83. The way President Kennedy was seen in Europe goes outside the scope of this text, although it is of no less interest as a topic. On Kennedy criticism in art see: Kenneth E. Silver, "Artists as Critics: JFK's Detractors," *The Presidential Spectacle. Art, Culture and JFK*, in: *JFK and Art*, 28-31.