

TALES FROM THE CITY: New York

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By the time this issue of *ArtReview* makes it onto newsstands, the US presidential primary races will be well underway. By 5 February, more than 20 states will have held their Republican and Democratic primaries, and by the end of the month, all of the largest (ie, most populous) states, save for Texas, Ohio and Pennsylvania, will have cast the necessary votes to determine each party's nominee for presidential candidacy. In other words, all of the supporting actors will have played their parts, but it will finally be time for the leads to enter from stage left and stage right.

US presidential contestants turn to 'the arts' as a way of giving themselves that well-rounded, enlightened candidate look

As I write, however, three names still dominate the Democratic contest: Barack Obama, Hillary Clinton and John Edwards. On the Republican side, things are a bit less decisive, with Mitt Romney, Fred Thompson, John McCain, Mike Huckabee and Rudy Giuliani divvying up most of the media's attention. The contest up to now has largely revolved around each candidate attempting to show the American public just how unlike the opposition he or she may be, while at the same time trying to fit into the clothes of the ideal candidate stitched by his or her own party's so-called base (which, as we all know, consists of Chardonnay-swilling homosexual socialists on the left, and Uzi-toting Christian zealots on the right). Needless to say, most of the time it's an awkward fit.

Inevitably, though, the candidates will be asked questions about their positions on 'the arts', which is something of a trick, because for a political candidate, it's hard to take a position on something you only know as an adjective: 'arts' only ever precedes 'funding' or 'education', where the latter term is good - who isn't for education, after all? - and the former, a synonym for 'spending', is bad - we want less of it, either

to keep our taxes in check, or to ensure the kind of art that appeals to Chardonnay-swilling homosexual socialists stays out of our museums.

We who still think of 'the arts' as a noun must be very wary of how it gets played as a political chip. For example, Senator Clinton's own campaign information detailing her efforts in 'Promoting the Value of the Arts and Humanities' states that, 'As President, Hillary will reverse the course of the Bush Administration and increase funding for the National Endowment for the Arts...' A quick look at NEA appropriations, however, shows that funding under Bush rose from roughly \$98 million in 2000 to \$124m in 2006, an increase, and one which outpaces inflation by about \$10m. (Notably, it was under President Bill Clinton's watch that NEA appropriations suffered their deepest cuts, from \$176m in 1992 to \$98m in 2000.)

It's not stellar, but it's hardly the drop kick issue upon which to base a candidacy, or one's vote; unless, of course, the issue is really more one of character, in which case Giuliani must be seen to have done irreparable damage to his own for his row with the Brooklyn Museum of Art over Chris Ofili's *The Holy Virgin Mary* (1996). But that was before 9/11, and no one can remember what Rudy was like before then anyway, let alone the candidate himself.

These idiocies - and there are more of them, committed by all of the candidates - make one thing quite plain: art, let alone 'the arts', should be left out, or above, the campaign fray. Mind you, this is in no way meant to suggest that the US federal government (or state and city ones, for that matter) should be let off the hook for funding arts programmes, institutions, archives, nonprofits and, yes, education programmes at every level. What else are lobbying groups for? But we should not have to suffer our political contestants turning to 'the arts' as a way of giving themselves that well-rounded, enlightened-candidate look. And given that more than \$400m was spent at Art Basel Miami Beach just this past December, there's obviously better money to follow than the sums Washington and its keepers feel so privileged to dole out.