# The Medium Is The Message

October 1, 2000 By Patrick Califia

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The new ad for *hivstopwithme.org* is everywhere—on billboards, web banners, and even in *POZ*. The gym-carved torso pops out from the orange background, big arms decorated with lickable veins, a wide white elastic stripe of underwear illuminating a "+" belt buckle with just enough color in it to fight the luscious denim-covered basket for a cocksucker's attention—whew! I am so consumed with the desire to turn myself into a drop of sweat running down the man's body that it takes awhile for the caption's message to register. Then I feel a little pissed off, like when you open a piece of e-mail with a cute subject line and it turns out to e another fucking piece of spam.

It takes a few minutes to figure out why, but it was simple, actually: *I want to see his face*. That body could be anyone at a good party, some anonymous guy you would blow without a condom or a second thought. (Call it a stereotype, but I don't associate all that carefully crafted, club-hopping muscle with stewardship of other men's health.) I want eye contact, some hint as to who had the decision to so publicly become, if not the face of HIV, the body. Or maybe I'm just a silly old face queen.

As I spend an afternoon at Better World Advertising—the agency responsible for creating my new dream boy—watching them videotape auditions for a new CDC-funded campaign targeting positive gay and bi men and "transgenders," already have plenty of questions. The first is why nobody at the agency seems aware that many tranny girls do not identify with the gay community, though Felicia, one of the trasngendered women who's auditioning tells she wants be chosen anyway.

Better World president and creative director Les Pappas and his crew chat about the onerous task of selecting seven or eight models out of some 50 candidate interviews scheduled over three days.  I'm not sure who mentions Warhol's line about 15 minutes of fame—implication being that all these people were booking appointments because a chance to be on television is irresistible—but I have my doubts. Going public about being HIV positive is no light matter for most people, even in liberal San Francisco, because you never know who's going to see it. "I was in an HIV positive prevention campaign three or four years ago, targeting club-goers and ethnic minorities, says candidate Carlos Morales. "I was relieved when they told me it would run in only on the East Coast. Then a friend of mine said, "Hey, I was in Boston at a urinal and guess who I saw?"

Each of the interviews follows the same format. Guys are asked to read a line for the camera and then there is some small talk about their reasons for being here. Pappas gives a spiel about the possibility of shooting them with their shirts off. "Would that be a problem for you?" he asks. When

models say it’s not, he asked them to take their shirts off for the camera, (Felicia is allowed to keep her sportsbra on, and is asked to cross her arms in front of her chest. Apparently we can only look at the wonders that steroids, not estrogen, have wrought.)

Today, everybody hesitates, but nobody refuses. One guy says, “This is an important cause, and I trust you to do the right thing with my image.” Another says, “Maybe I’ll have time to lose weight before the commercial is produced.”

Pappas tells them,” We actually want bodies that aren’t perfect,” and off come from the shirts. But these men are not professional actors. They feel nervous about being judged by people behind the camera. And there’s an old power differential here that’s difficult to erase: brains on side of the lens, meat on the other.

“After I left and processed it, I felt pretty sleazy,” says one volunteer I talk with later. “But I do understand that—unfortunately—that’s what most people are looking for.” He’s rationalizing now, and admits it. “You have to do that,” he finishes quietly.

Better World has put together some of my favorite anti-AIDS material, including a hep C brochure you can use as a fixing area and a circuit-party poster that shrieks “Get Barbie! Ken’s in a K-hole!” Pappas has been working in HIV prevention since 1984 and he knows how to grab a viewer’s attention. The tenet that people will pay more attention to a pretty, scantily clad speaker than to a thoughtful, garbed, ordinary-looking pitchman or-woman is an advertising article of faith. But should HIV positive people have to inflate or expose their pecs to get a hearing? San Francisco is one of six cities that is getting federal money to do so-called prevention for positives, and the only one to have allocated finds do an ad that will be aired in prime time. Heads are sure to turn. Let’s hope the message gets as much attention as the muscle.

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