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D.C. power players appear in new video portrait — but is it art?

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Artist Lincoln Schatz, far left, debuts his video portrait "The Network." (John Harrington)

The art of the Washington interview is now museum-worthy — which has to be good news for C-SPAN, but we digress.

We speak of "The Network," a video portrait of local power players that debuted Tuesday morning at the National Portrait Gallery. Chicago artist Lincoln Schatz sat down with 89 VIP subjects — Nancy Pelosi, Eric Cantor, Grover Norquist, Bob Barnett, Tommy Boggs, Bob Bennett, Vernon Jordan, Steve Case and Francis Collins among others — then mashed all the videos together for one continuous gabfest.

You'll watch, say, Barney Frank talk about New Jersey politics, then the video abruptly switches to Hilda Solis reminiscing about her father. Kind of like flipping through TV channels on Sunday morning, minus the PJs and remote. But the madness has a method — Schatz said the video is embedded with keywords that prompt the jumps from speaker to speaker to create "a portrait of leadership in the United States."



Tommy Boggs and Bob Bennett, two of the 89 subjects featured in "The Network," at the opening Tuesday at the National Portrait Gallery. (Photo courtesy of John Harrington)

Is this really art? Or a clever ruse to get dozens of Washington bigshots into the gallery? A couple dozen of the participants showed up for the opening, where gallery director Wendy Wick Reaves spoke about the “interconnectedness that defines Washington” and Smithsonian Secretary Wayne Clough (one of the 89 subjects, small world) joked, “I’m not sure the world is ready to see my face from so many angles.”

Schatz told us he was inspired by the Corcoran’s 2008 show “Portraits of Power” but wanted to add high tech to the VIP mix. Any interview stand out?

“Karl Rove,” he said. “Absolutely! Karl illustrates why I did this project. In the media, he’s villainized or glorified; he’s highly polarizing. My conversation with Karl was a deeply engrossing, warm, personal exchange about his life and 9/11.”

The video doesn’t identify speakers by name; the artist said it’s because he doesn’t want viewers to project their particular biases about these people onto the work.

But they’ll probably figure it out. Norquist told us he talked on video about “the Taxpayer Protection Pledge, why limited government is important, how one does political organizing in the center-right.” Why did he sign on? “It’s art. I haven’t participated in art since 4th grade.”

And, frankly, this counts as Washington’s idea of a good time. As Bennett put it, “Whenever you’re asked to talk about yourself, you can’t be too upset about it.”