Kaleidoscope
Winter 2013/2014

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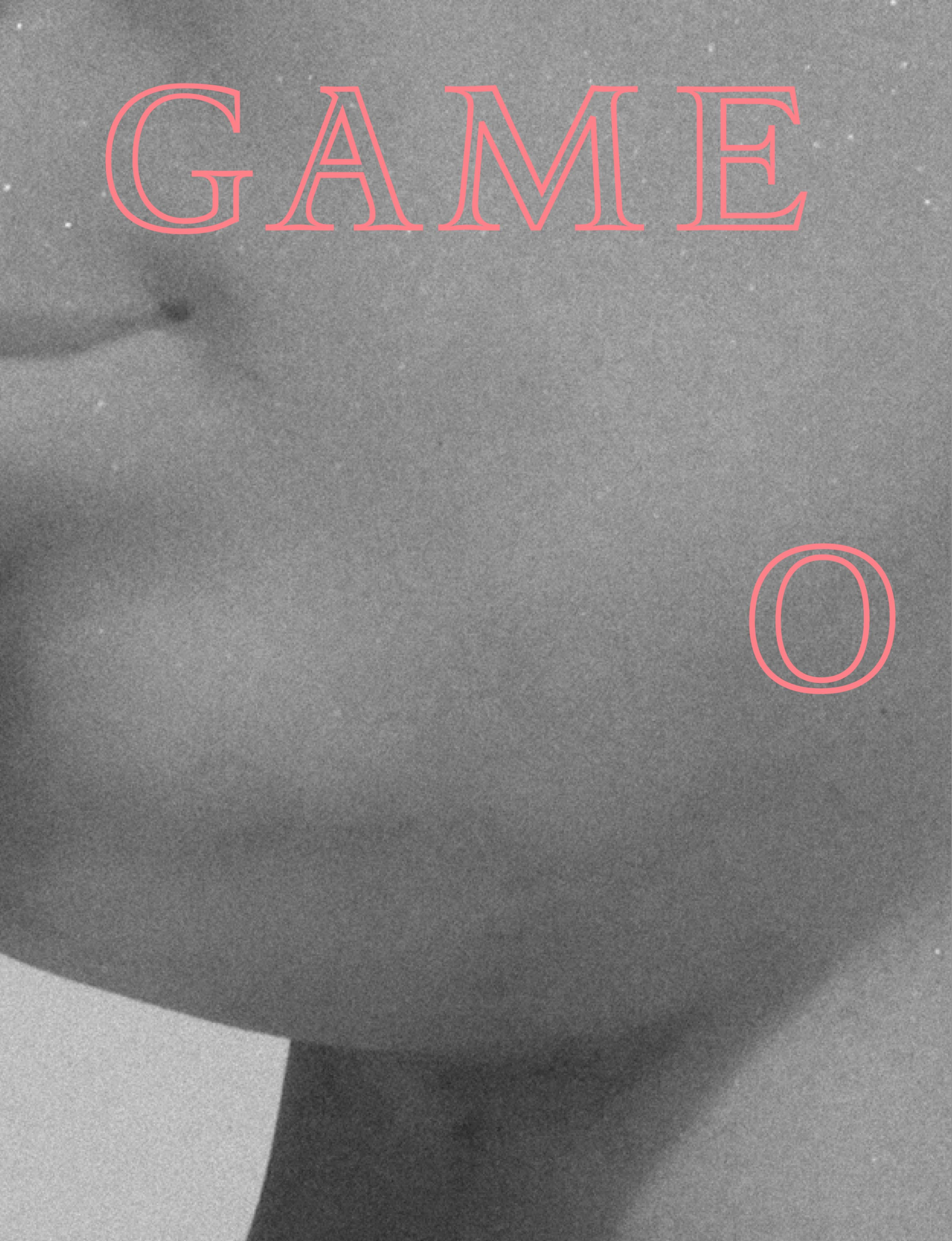
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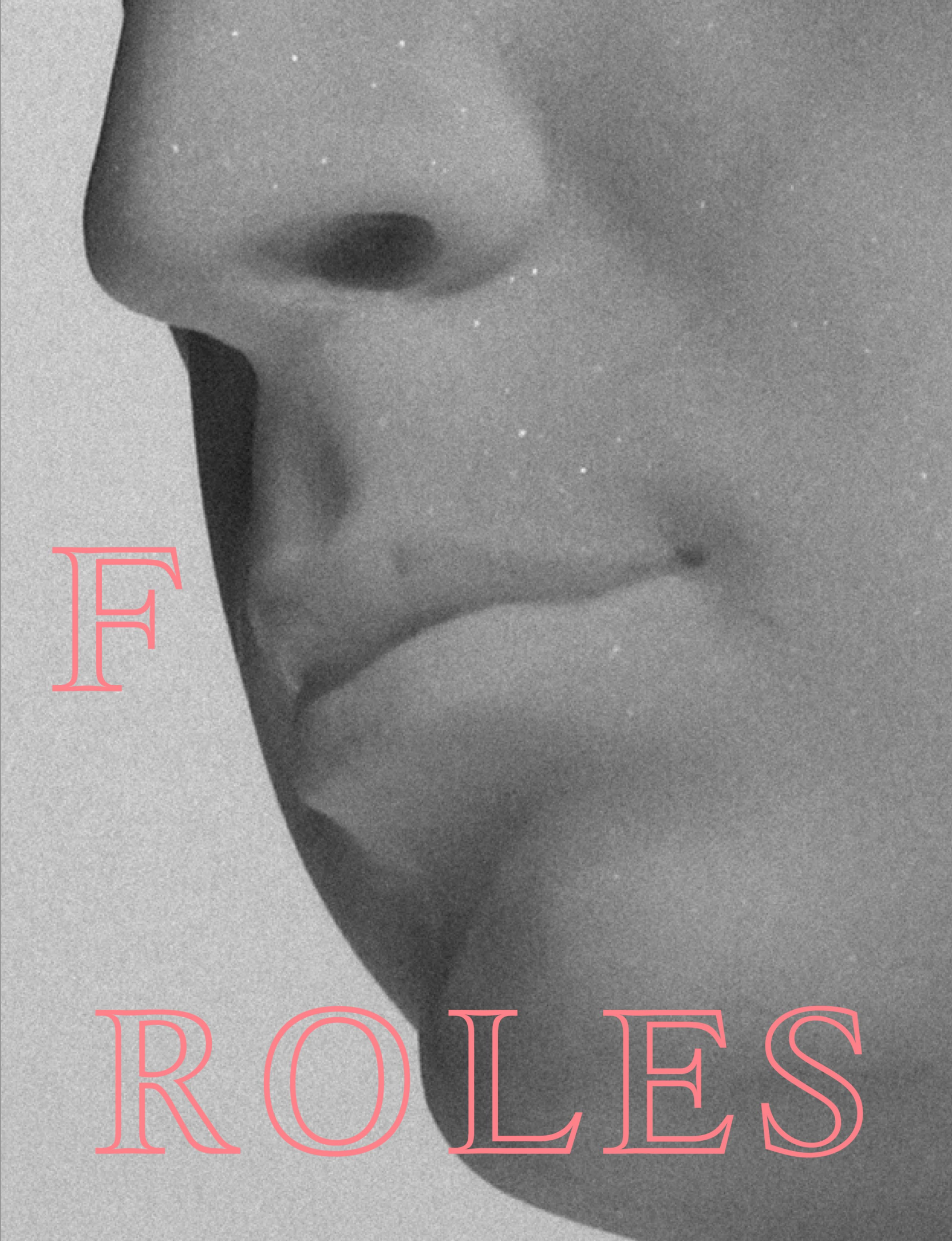
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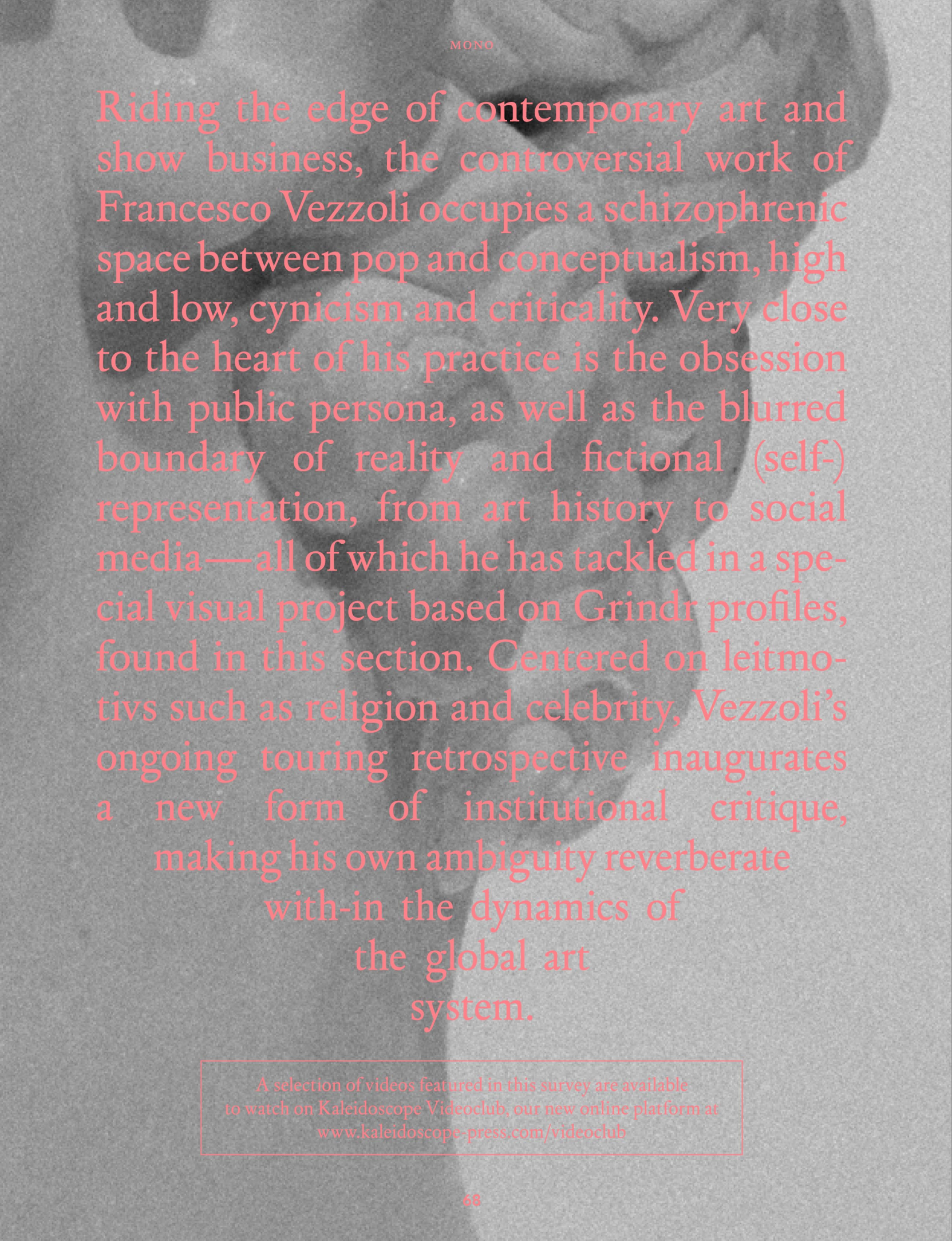

Riding the edge of contemporary art and show business, the controversial work of Francesco Vezzoli occupies a schizophrenic space between pop and conceptualism, high and low, cynicism and criticality. Very close to the heart of his practice is the obsession with public persona, as well as the blurred boundary of reality and fictional (self-) representation, from art history to social media—all of which he has tackled in a special visual project based on Grindr profiles, found in this section. Centered on leitmotivs such as religion and celebrity, Vezzoli's ongoing touring retrospective inaugurates a new form of institutional critique, making his own ambiguity reverberate with-in the dynamics of the global art system.

A selection of videos featured in this survey are available to watch on Kaleidoscope Videoclub, our new online platform at www.kaleidoscope-press.com/videoclub

ESSAY BY
ANDREA VILIANI

As a critic, I've often asked myself what makes Francesco Vezzoli such a controversial figure. Both influential and highly criticized, Vezzoli pushes his position as an artist to the brink of self-destruction. More than any other, Vezzoli seems at ease in that infernal, magic circle defined by the overlapping of the culture industry, underground counterculture, intellectual radicalism, infotainment, communication 2.0, the society of the spectacle and the global art market, which has come to define contemporary

culture. His works oscillate between these contexts with a subtle nonchalance, the exact opposite of the conceptual, aesthetic and political coherence associated with a legible or defined — and therefore curatorially defendable — artistic practice. His projects seldom escape the suspicion of opportunism, perhaps because the works' dazzling surfaces often appear to outweigh the depth of their articulation.

It is possible to relate Vezzoli's practice to the artistic avant-garde because of its sharp analysis of the mechanisms of pop imaginary, as well as simultaneously to the commercial trash from which he deploys traits, contents, rites and Barthian myths. This ambivalence is reminiscent of what, some years before, critic and curator Alison Gingeras wrote (in an essay related to Dakis Joannou's private collection) regarding the conceptual strategies adopted by some of the most relevant contemporary pop artists. While bringing together pop and conceptualism may at first appear contradictory, pop nonetheless asserts a strategy of examining the mechanisms of the collective imaginary and mass communication that requires a refined conceptual articulation in order to be successful. However, I suspect that few of the artists practicing this strategy would push themselves to the point of its unavoidable conclusion: that is to say, feeling artistically fulfilled in the schizophrenic space between pop and conceptualism, commercialism and criticality, high and low, popular and unpopular, and, importantly, seeking not only consensus, but also critical dissent as a positive factor in the definition of one's own artistic practice.

Vezzoli seeks dissent in a programmatic manner. An excellent example is a project from 2009, in which I invited *Kaleidoscope* to edit a libel entitled *Contro Vezzoli* ("Against Vezzoli"). Perhaps masochistically, but more likely as a self-defense strategy, Vezzoli didn't boycott the project, but instead gave his full approval under one condition: that he wouldn't be directly involved (in order to not interfere with the outcome). Five critics — Martin Herbert, Jens Hoffmann, Stéphanie Moisdon, Michele Robecchi and Dieter Roelstraete — joined the project with the precise task of writing a *J'accuse*-type critical invective addressed to the artist. On the basis of different beliefs and motivations, the critics accepted the invitation to write under a pseudonym with a mixture of good and bad faith. During the preparation of the pamphlet, we realized that even though some

Jessica Chastain in *The Church of Vezzoli*, 2013
Courtesy of the artist, Galleria Franco Noero, Turin and Galerie YvonLambert, Paris

24 Hours Museum, 2012
Courtesy of Prada Spa

Marlene Redux: A True Hollywood Story!, 2006
Courtesy of Francois Pinault Collection

of the texts sharply criticized Vezzoli, they nonetheless focused on critically relevant aspects of his artistic practice. Paradoxically, this caused the emergence of the work's validity, efficacy and critical strength—precisely as the critics were attempting to destroy it. But if Vezzoli is the devil for some, for others, he is a star; thus, I believe this also could have worked the other way around. We could have edited a pamphlet with the opposite spirit: an appreciative apology entitled *I Love Francesco!,* resulting in the same critical relevance fueled by exaggeration.

It is evident that Vezzoli operates in a system in which the Warholean morphemes have become elements of the set design as well as of the script, all the way down to even the most tacky TV show. As a contemporary artist, it is thus unavoidable for him to situate his practice in a post-pop scenario. In other words, he can no longer operate with the critical adoption of these morphemes, but, more likely, with

the contradictions generated by their popular assimilation, the mimetic neutralization of its original artistic assumptions and the productive standardization of their daily applications at a planetary scale. And, paradoxically, it is in this regime of the globalized digital-cinema-television imaginary, in this empire of the contemporary collective fiction, that Vezzoli recovers his virginity as an artist: not only post-pop, but neo-pop. It doesn't matter if the serigraphs, the fifteen minutes of fame, the coated and multiplied high life of the Warholean *Interview* ("The Crystal Ball of Pop") have become the hyper-reality of 3D films, the obscene banality of reality shows or the pandemic political populisms. Vezzoli's interest lies

in how contemporary society conveys, or has the illusion of conveying, its inner reality through these fictitious palimpsests. All of this, by the way, had been masterfully imagined, in the context of the Italian society of the '60s and '70s, by an interpreter as non-aligned and controversial as Pier Paolo Pasolini. Vezzoli turned Pasolini's *Comizi d'amore* ("Love Meetings," 1964) into the fake pilot of a TV show in his *Comizi di non amore* ("Non-Love Meetings," 2004), one of the artist's most mimetically kitschy, and therefore critically denigrated, works.

In this sense Vezzoli confidently relies on the recognized genres of contemporary fiction, in particular those that better allow him to flirt with the reality that underlies it, like the docu-fiction

Is Veruschka in Paris?, 2001
Courtesy of the artist

Trailer for a Remake of Gore Vidal's Caligula, 2005
Courtesy of Guggenheim Museum, New York

(*Marlene Redux: A True Hollywood Story!*, 2006), the advertising spot (*Greed, A New Fragrance by Francesco Vezzoli*, 2009), or the cinematographic trailer (*Trailer for a Remake of Gore Vidal's Caligula,* 2005). If Vezzoli maintains, like Warhol, that it is less and less necessary for an artist to act in the first person (that is why he outsources production, communication and marketing of his projects, and even assigns the direction of his films to other filmmakers, such as Roman Polanski for *Greed*), then he surely also confirms the Warholean conclusion that the only product worth promoting is one's own brand. Indeed, his works often focus on the communication of his own persona, but in a mythopoetic relationship with the "star." It is difficult to enumerate the many celebrities with whom Vezzoli has collaborated, especially movie stars from the European auteur cinema and from the great Hollywood cinema. The celebrities

here have the function, as Leporello the servant with Don Giovanni, of a security seat belt to protect him from the external, undifferentiated world of the audience, of the fans. However, Vezzoli the *star* and Vezzoli the *fan* are, ultimately, the same person. One role is the emanation of the other: Leporello is also Don Giovanni, and vice-versa (which actually happens onstage when they exchange their clothes). Vezzoli is the one who in fact makes a star of himself; he doesn't ever stop to build his projects around this assumption, constantly repeated as if seeking confirmation and evidence. As this melancholically aspirational character, Vezzoli subjects himself to the most merciless critiques, which he could have avoided by assuming an auto-referential and distant character, silent and secluded, iconic in his neutrality

(like the masking of the Warholean character: *Warhol by Warhol*). However, it is precisely this dependence on the judgment of the other that enables Vezzoli, as an artist, to put pop in a dynamic and highly controversial perspective.

And significantly, once the artist's discourse is introduced in an institutional framework, Vezzoli makes the same ambiguous judgment that we direct towards his persona reverberate towards his exhibitions, as well as the museums and biennials that he is invited to collaborate with. Following the path opened by his recent exhibition at the Qatar Museum Authority in Doha and his *24 Hours Museum* (2012) at Palais d'Iéna in Paris, the artist's latest project,

The Trinity, clearly illustrates this attempt to subvert the traditional artist/museum dynamics, unveiling all of Vezzoli's explosive ambition, but also the reaction of an institutional context — long after giving up access to institutional critique — against the disturbing hypothesis of an institutional *chronicle*. In 2013, Vezzoli proposed a project to three important museums: MAXXI in Rome, MoMA PS1 in New York and MoCA in Los Angeles. He sought permission to transform their architecture, exhibitions and the expectation of their audiences into something else: a surprising, and pertinent, re-writing of the individual identity of each museum. In "Galleria Vezzoli," the first chapter of *The Trinity*, the cold, science-fictional architecture of the MAXXI, designed by the

contemporary archistar Zaha Hadid, suffers the outrage of a real leap into the past: a makeover into a nineteenth-century salon with boiserie walls, damask carpet and pompier sculptures punctuating the exhibition tour. The second chapter of the project, "The Church of Vezzoli," hosts the reconstruction of a small church from Montegiordano, a small city in the Southern Italy in the courtyard of New York's MoMA PS1. Finally, "Cinema Vezzoli" transforms the spaces of the Los Angeles MoCA, right at the heart of the business of contemporary dreams and nightmares called Hollywood, into cinema rooms.

During the making of this project, an incredible controversy arose (unless you are accustomed to Italian bureaucracy). The authority for cultural heritage

Comizi di non amore, 2004
Courtesy of Fondazione Prada, Milan

refused to authorize the disassembly and transport of the church, which was originally granted by the private owner. The fragments, already packed for shipment to New York, are still split between the original site and the port of Gioia Tauro, while the artist risks being incriminated for the illegal exportation of artifacts. After the initial shock of this debacle, which gained media attention well beyond the contemporary art scene, it became clear within the space of a few weeks that the situation had great potential because of its interconnected strategic, curatorial and mediatic implications.

What was meant to be a Duchampian ready-made updated for a globalized era turned out to inaugurate a new kind of institutional ready-made. First, the whole structure of the exhibition collapsed into a news segment, and then, after curator Klaus Biesenbach's invitation to find an alternative plan, suggesting that the controversy had aspects of a "real-time performance," the original project has been reinvented

All About Anni, Anni vs. Marlene (The Saga Begins), 2006
Courtesy of Gagosian Gallery

Right You Are (If You Think You Are), 2007
Courtesy of Performa and Gagosian Gallery

Greed, The New Fragrance by Francesco Vezzoli, 2008
Courtesy of Gagosian Gallery

by Vezzoli to take the shape of a press conference, a communication event that has freed itself from the burden of the exhibition — increasing its results in terms of attention, if not of acceptance, from the public.

In the video that was originally conceived to be projected inside the church, American actress Jessica Chastain declares her "faith" in Francesco Vezzoli in the manner of an initiate of a personality cult bearing witness at a TV talk show. Chastain claims that she was lost and he saved her life, which clearly illustrates how Vezzoli has perfected methods of "stratifying" (or even, in this case, "sanctifying," insofar as it is ironically ambiguous) his figure as an artist. He has honed a modality of expression that uses artworks without having to show them, and does not depend on exhibitions and museums as we know and understand them. Vezzoli not only appears able to dominate,

with acquired maturity, his destiny as a post-neo-pop artist who moves deftly among the diverse genres of contemporary fiction, but he also seems to have the power to semantically transform the "museum" with an injection of institutional fiction: a narrativization and performativization that seem to be the only antidotes to the marketing-oriented museum model that dominates the contemporary art scene, from Rome, to New York, to Los Angeles and beyond.

With its transformation of the New York exhibition into a communication event and an act of artistic diplomacy, *The Trinity* alludes to Vezzoli's "Sympathy for the Devil" (to quote the 1968

Rolling Stones song and Jean-Luc Godard film by the same name). In other words, contemporary pop can not only attract, but also frighten us, with its multiple and unexpected attires, revealing, in the cynicism of its realpolitik, an unexpected dose of white magic and black humor; in the calculated ambition of its VIP relations, an imaginative metaphoric madness; and in its refined political and economic strategies, a magnificent indifference (towards exhibitions, museums and his own reputation). After all, if the Devil wears Prada, it can't be all that evil.