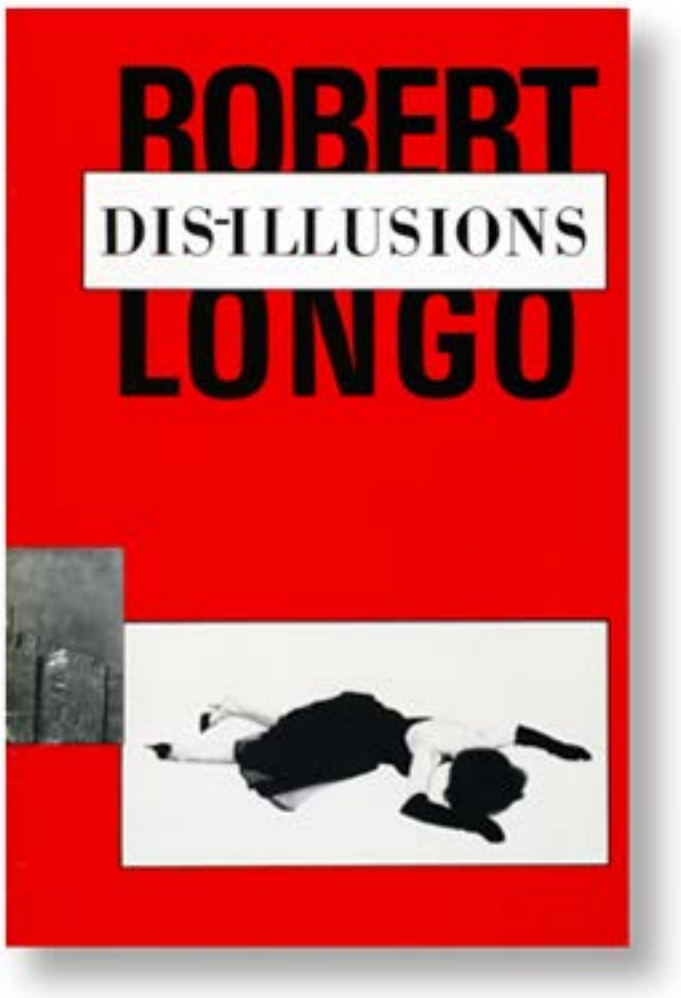


*Robert Longo—Dis-Illusions*. Iowa City: The University of Iowa Museum of Art, 1985.

Robert Longo, Study for *Albright-Knox*, 1981. Charcoal, graphite and ink drawing, 36 × 84 (91.4 × 213.4). Lent by Rita Krauss. Photo by Pelka/Noble, courtesy Metro Pictures, New York.


The University of Iowa
Museum of Art
Iowa City, Iowa 52242

Design: Jami Spittler
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On the cover: Robert Longo, *National Trust*, 1981. Charcoal and graphite drawings; fiberglass and aluminum bonded sculpture, 63 × 234 (160.0 × 594.36). Collection Walker Art Center, Minneapolis, Art Center Acquisition Fund.

## *National Trust* (on the cover)

*National Trust* is built on a multiple pun. The word "trust" refers to belief, to a tax loophole for securing funds, to a cartel, to custody, and to a United States government agency for safeguarding national landmarks. Between two dead figures in this work is "The Tombs," a court of justice and also a prison in lower Manhattan. Ironically this *moderne* building could someday conceivably become a national landmark and then its inscription, "Liberty and Justice for All," would take on a totally different meaning from that associated with a court. Then the prisoners would ironically become in name the national trust which they are in fact.

The two figures in *National Trust* are dead because Longo wanted to confirm the dance of death theories advanced by so many critics writing of the *Men in the Cities* series and also, I think, because he regards the idea of National Trust—that is, belief in the inherent goodness of government—to be an outmoded concept and a dead idea. The idea of the death of *National Trust* is confirmed in the composition which, according to the artist, resembles an upside-down eagle with wings fully spread. The figures, then, communicate the death of the absolutist values which the buildings in the center of the work signify. And it is no accident that the artist has referred to the dying man as an updated version of the Roman sculpture of *The Dying Gaul*, which is a famous and still unsettling image of one of

(continued on inside back cover)

# ROBERT LONGO

# DIS-ILLUSIONS

## APRIL 20-JUNE 16, 1985

**Exhibition and Catalogue by Robert Hobbs**

**The University of Iowa Museum of Art**

This project is supported in part by a grant from the National Endowment for the Arts.

***We Want God***

*We Want God* was originally named *Imitate Your Past.* A picture of German soldiers invading Poland in World War II forms the upper left. In the finished work this image is formed of sand-blasted green marble, beneath it an intaglio of a tree is carved out of pine planks which have been glued together, a construct which the artist terms "an apology to nature." And the image of the child on the right is formed from painted and sanded aluminum. *We Want God* refers to a desire for absolutes; *Imitate Your Past* to bad education; and the carved tree in winter to a dead Tree of Life.

# ROBERT LONGO

## HIS MILIEU, HIS DIS-ILLUSIONS

The French term "avant-garde" and the English word "vanguard" once conjured up a set of associations entirely different from those to which we are now accustomed. Prior to the 1960s, the military associations of the "avant-garde" as an advance guard suggested new and progressive movements, the determination to fight for ideas and to oppose all opposition. During the 1960s, a time marking the height of American consumerism, the "avant-garde" became fashionable, and the New York art world began to look each year for new styles, new avant-gardes to titillate their senses. In the course of this decade there were many catchwords and styles called avant-garde—Pop Art, Op Art, Minimalism, Conceptual Art, New Realism, Earth Art, Fluxus, Post-Painterly Abstraction, Hard Edge, Color Field Painting, ABC Art, Anti-Form, and Systemic Painting—so many, in fact, that the avant-garde became an academic exercise. All the new styles in the sixties looked so historic and so inevitable that many of them also began to look boring: the variety began to achieve a strange similarity, and new art began to seem another form of hype.

Of course, there were many authentic styles and committed artists, but the avant-garde ceased to be a utopian concept and began to take on the look and means of a business enterprise, another form of advertising, still another way to turn artists and their work into merchandise which could be bought and sold, traded and manipulated.

In the 1960s most art stopped looking to the future and attempted to resemble museum masterpieces which are universal and timeless. The major hallmarks of the decade are the unified fields of color found in the work of the Post-

Robert Longo, Study for *We Want God (Imitate Your Past)*, 1983. Charcoal, watercolor, dye and graphite, 26½ × 40½ (67.3 × 102.9). Lent by Dorothy Schramm. Photo by Pelka/Noble, courtesy Metro Pictures, New York.

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Sam Gilliam, *Red April*, 1970. Acrylic on canvas, 110 × 160 (279.3 × 406.3). University of Iowa Museum of Art. Partial gift of the Longview Foundation and museum purchase, 1971.11.

Painterly Abstractionists, particularly the Washington Color Painters. Their huge portable walls of color could signal any number of meanings because they did not describe any particular set of meanings. Like well-designed wallpaper they could be used by corporations to connote progress, by individuals to suggest luxury, and by museums to

***Men in the Cities***

"It seemed that I wanted to undermine the fact that they were being appreciated only for being drawings; this bothered me. I wanted to make them become beyond craft, like monuments or movies. And to make a drawing that was five by ten feet tall was unheard of. It took four people to move a drawing around, whereas you usually do it with one hand traditionally. In that sense they were somewhat trying to teeter somewhere in between that cinematic monumentality. Drawing is also much more like sculpture than it is like painting. Drawings are very much sculpted." (Robert Longo in an interview with Richard Price.)

communicate the universal abstract values of form and color. These works could look advanced or conservative depending on the places where they were hung. According to many of the artists conceiving them, these paintings attempted to do no more than describe their inherent properties, that is, to emphasize the fact that they were paintings on canvas: flat, two-dimensional constructs in color. The works also reflect the concerns of a prosperous group of people intent on perpetuating their materialistic way of life. Although the art promises the ineffable in terms of vague forms and broad washes of color, it in fact provides a clear and rational description of the joys of materialism when it attempts to make the media its subject.

In the 1970s artists began to see how art had been co-opted by fashion and the mass media and how the avant-garde had become academic, a set of predictable codes which could be produced and varied on demand. No longer were artists searching as the early twentieth-century Dutch artist Piet Mondrian has searched; no longer were they daring themselves to reduce to a bare minimum their formal means so that they would present new, radical pictures of the rhythms of modern reality in terms of primary colors and rectangular shapes. The age of formal discovery was over. The avant-garde had become a predictable language which had come to assume more and more the look of big canvases painted in reductive, abstract configurations using matte colors.

If the avant-garde could be reduced to a set of signs or a language, young artists began to reason, then, perhaps, they should look to language and criticism and attempt to understand the ways that it pigeonholes and prescribes thought. In the 1970s and 1980s, artists have been involved primarily with French critics schooled in semiotics who have attempted to figure out the rules of language and to understand ways these rules govern writing and turn it into a type of fiction, a set of readily understood conventions. What these critics have attempted to do is to break apart these conventions, these little fictions, so that their readers can see that real understanding depends on these formerly unanalyzed assumptions about the nature of writing and reading.

These critical texts are admirably suited to the needs of a generation which has grown up on computers because they take discussion away from the specific meaning of individual works of art and attempt to understand systems and codes that govern all writing, all forms of knowledge. This base-level reevaluation of knowledge has been of great importance to artists disenchanted with the avant-garde because it has helped them to view the avant-garde as a grand construct, a fiction, which has depended on the tacit agreement of a great number of people who have wished to delight in the radicalness of art and to be stimulated by unfamiliar and deliberately tough works of art. Without the needs of these people the avant-garde would probably have lost its power as a concept several decades before. These people find modern and advanced art comforting. Although they may not fully comprehend that the modern era is already sixty years old, they do enjoy the security offered by the styles of their grandparents' youth.

The final academicization of the avant-garde in the 1960s and 1970s has provided artists a number of new ways of looking at themselves and their work. Now that artists no longer have to act out our society's nostalgic belief in progress and also its materialistic desires, they are free to be reactionary. And they can still be pertinent to the times even if they choose to create illusions in the time-honored sense of the pre-Moderns. But if they create illusions and still wish to be regarded as thought-provoking, they must somehow let their viewers know that they do not really believe in realistic art, that the illusions they are creating are merely fictions which must be broken apart.

Several artists have developed remarkable stratagems for dealing with the fictional nature of illusions. Photographer Cindy Sherman has created a number of roles for herself which she acts out and at the same time photographs. She

Robert Longo, *Cindy* from *Men in the Cities*, 1984. Lithograph, 68 × 39 (172.7 × 99.1). Lent by and photo courtesy of Brooke Alexander, Inc., New York. Photo by Ivan Dalla Tana.

Robert Longo, *Eric* from *Men in the Cities*, 1984. Lithograph, 68 × 39 (172.7 × 99.1). Lent by and photo courtesy of Brooke Alexander, Inc., New York. Photo by Ivan Dalla Tana.



***Love Will Tear Us Up (The Sleep)***

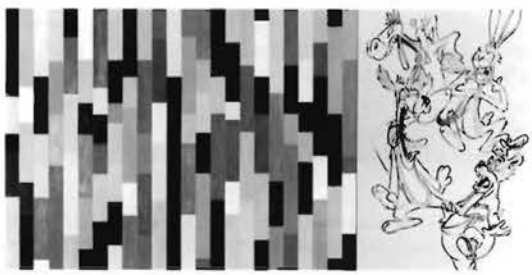
"I'm going to be the person who blows the whistle. It's a kind of guardian quality that comes to me. I watch the visual mechanisms of culture, which are so sophisticated—the way the Nazis turned Germany into a Nazi state, for example. That is like child's play compared to the mechanisms that exist now to turn their country into something quite horrific. So one of the things about the artist, what the artist has to do, is that he has to be like a policeman. A great deal of my art, particularly the relief *The Sleep*, is about blowing the whistle on society. I made the piece right after Jonestown and right before the Phalangist murders. [The image is actually taken from a family leisure-wear ad that was reproduced in the *New York Times Magazine* a few months after the Jonestown deaths]. Here they are selling the image of genocide in family sportswear. *The Sleep* is a perfect example of the artist serving as a guardian of culture . . . in *Sleep*, I wanted to create something that, in relationship to the climate of art, would present the same kind of irony that exists in mass media or in history. You can look at this thing and pay attention because it is a bronze relief—made with hands and all that crap from history. On the other hand, you're going to see this other thing which is the commercial image taken from a magazine. The basic conflict has to be corrected. So all of a sudden, I'm presenting something that we've all participated in creating. It's like putting a bad mark on your report card, or something like that—something we have to be accountable for. And it's not a moralist point of view at all."

has presented herself in such cliché female roles as victim and 1950s starlet. In a recent sequence she made herself into the dark animae suggested by a number of high fashion outfits. In all her works she plays with reality and illusion. The trick is to discover Cindy Sherman in the new persona recorded in the photograph and then to recognize the persona as the embodiment of a standardized type, a fiction to be documented and also deconstructed by the camera, which until recently has appeared to be capable of only telling the truth.

Cindy Sherman, Untitled, 1981. Color-coupler print, 24 × 48 (61.0 × 121.9). Photo courtesy Metro Pictures, New York.

Painter David Salle has set himself the task of dealing with the fictive illusions of modern abstract painting. Following in the footsteps of the German artist Sigmar Polke, he has attempted to describe the codes of modern art by setting them up as a fluctuant order that constantly oscillates between the sublime and the ridiculous. Some elements such as the grids referring to the late Kandinsky, the unified fields that hark back to Ellsworth Kelly, and the realistic scenes that suggest the art of Reginald Marsh are made absurdly pompous and abstruse by being connected in the same works with magazine illustrations and cartoons. Nothing is sacred in this art, and nothing is really funny. Salle's art is deeply philosophical in its intent to question the meaning of meaning and the codes for signifying it in twentieth-century art.

Robert Longo, *Love Will Tear Us Up (The Sleep)*, 1982. Cast aluminum, 47¾ × 66 × 7¼ (121.3 × 167.6 × 18.4). Commissioned by the Federal Building Post Office, Iowa City, under the General Services Administration Art in Architecture Program. Photo by Pelka/Noble, courtesy Metro Pictures.



David Salle, *The Happy Writers*, 1981. Acrylic, 72 × 110 (182.9 × 279.4). Photo by Zindman/Fremont, courtesy Mary Boone Gallery, New York.

Julian Schnabel found a means to place in question all meaning and abstraction when he replaced canvas with velvet and transformed the traditional matte background of modernist painting into a shiny and flamboyant stage set that has had the distinct advantage of appearing both tacky and majestic at the same time. When he is not painting on velvet, Schnabel glues shards of cheap plates and bowls to the surface of his painting. He creates an uneasy conflation of figure and field when he covers the surface of his work with images of figures which have nothing to do with broken crockery. Looking as if they have fallen onto the surface of a canvas spread on the floor, these shards become elements in the quicksand of painting, which serves to entomb imagery and meaning and to give only a few clues to its intent in an offhand manner. And when these shards defy gravity as they stick uneasily out of a hung painting, they

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**(Robert Longo, from interview with Maurice Berger, "The Dynamics of Power.")**

**Located in the Iowa City Post Office, *Love Will Tear Us Up (The Sleep)* serves as a public reminder of the positive and negative uses of public images. The relief continues to recall Jonestown, and it only indirectly refers to the *New York Times* ad for sportswear referred to by Longo. What the relief does communicate is the disorientation at the core of modern life: although the peaceful sleeping family is pictured from above, they are positioned vertically, causing viewers to hover in an indeterminate space and feel that they are looking down at an image when they are actually looking at a wall relief across from them.**



***Culture, Culture***

*Culture, Culture* juxtaposes two images: one is the equestrian portrait of Simon Bolivar, father of South American freedom, located in New York City in Central Park West; the other is the artist's own father. The equestrian portrait is painted on wood in the finished piece, and the artist's father is drawn but placed under red plexiglass which reminds the artist of the red "hold" button of a telephone. The equestrian is headless, resembling the headless horseman of Washington Irving's short story about Ichabod Crane and suggesting the inexorable march of doom. Even though Bolivar may be revered as the father of freedom, he actually is an empty symbol since most South American countries have not yet experienced freedom. The headless figure, a meaningless cultural symbol, is paralleled by a meaningful personal symbol for Longo, his own father, a thinking and listening figure which opposes the headless body on the left in orientation and in its way of reacting to the world. Both fathers, representing for the artist generalized and personal culture, respond to the world differently. One faces left, a sinister direction, and attempts to impose a little-understood idea on the world, while the other seeks to understand and has enough sense to remain on hold and wait.

*Culture, Culture* also permits another reading that differs from the one already elaborated. The piece refers to problems of a totalitarian culture in which everything is precarious because it is

Robert Longo, Study for *Culture, Culture*, 1982-83. Mixed media, 22 × 30 (55.9 × 76.2). Lent by Roger Longo. Photo by Pelka/Noble, courtesy Metro Pictures, New York.

**legislated from the top. The horse has been tilted at an angle like the sculpture appearing in Eisenstein's "Battleship Potemkin" and the head of Longo's father strangely resembles Yuri Andropov and also Menachem Begin.**

suggest to viewers that they are really not looking directly out of a painting but that they are instead somehow suspended in air and gazing down at it. The illusions, then, are compounded so that one struggles to make sense of this suspended tableau and at the same time one works to find the message, the illusion which rambles over the shards and then recedes into the surface of the painting. Rather than breaking apart illusions, Schnabel uses them as a means to force his viewers to make sense of a weltering confusion of signs and objects.

One might be wondering if these artists have truly rejected the academic avant-garde since their work displays a similar standardized vanguard use of strategies for challenging traditional looking. And I would be hard-pressed to argue that they are indeed not avant-garde works of art, except that the term "vanguard" has become bankrupt. I would say, however, that these postmodernists are part of the academic avant-garde, that they are an extremely sophisticated young group of artists who are well trained in the techniques of the vanguard. The main problem I have with them is that they are attempting to be radical when they are in fact conservative: they don't venture far from an art-for-art's-sake attitude. Salle does attempt to shock viewers with references to women being humiliated or with explicit views of genitalia; however, sex in 1985 is no longer a controversial subject. And Sherman does instruct when she suggests that the artist is always central to the work; however, her work continues, in a new fashion, the old ego-inspired art, and it continues to pander to the voyeuristic elements in our society which want to view other people's private fantasies. And Schnabel is really only updating Jackson Pollock's drip paintings, even though he is reassessing them in such a manner that questions of figure versus field and gravitational flow versus the illusion of weightlessness seem new and relevant. The problem with these artists is that they are offering an art which provides critiques of other art in terms of taste, an art which in the end can only be personal and at best arbitrary. They look radical, and yet they are essentially updating Salvador Dali's fantasies in terms of feminism and photography, modern art in terms of the seemingly alien techniques of the illustration and the cartoon, and the modernist painting in terms of the opulence of baroque art and the tackiness of commercial paintings on velvet.

None of these artists admit straightforwardly that they are retrograde or that art has truly approached the level of criticism whereby it evaluates other art and other sensibilities. If the role of art is primarily a critical one, then it should somehow not attempt to maintain the absolutist

Julian Schnabel, *Cookie's Doll*, 1984. Oil with bondo and plates on wood, 9½ × 10 (24.1 × 25.4). Photo courtesy The Pace Gallery, New York.



***Love Police: Engine Within Us (The Doors)***

Longo regards this relief as an updated version of Rodin's *Gates of Hell*. Instead of presenting mythological figures floating in an indeterminate space, he presents a graveyard of brand-name cars which are piled one on top of another to provide an image of planned obsolescence, a predetermined Hades, and an ironic picture of modern humanity as mechanized viscera. On top of the doors (which also refer to a 1960s musical group), Longo has created monumental bust portraits of a man and woman whom he refers to as a modern-day Adam and Eve. The models for this relief are Gretchen Bender, the video artist, and her brother Jonathan. Covered in a red that recalls the color used in billboard advertising as well as blood, the figures are both engaging and disturbing: the woman laughs and screams at the same time.

Originally, large colored drawings which the artist has termed "children of disaster" accompanied the relief. Of different nationalities, which seemed to Longo to connote the internationalism of Coke commercials, the children were colored yellow, a warning signal, that contrasts with the red of the male and female in the relief. In this work Longo combines the banality of advertising with the profundity of art. The conflict between the two gives the work its power: it seems to say so little, and then it seems to say too much!

posture of modernist painting which attempts to deal only with universals. Perhaps, of the three, Cindy Sherman is the least guilty of an absolutist stance since she uses photographs, and photographs, by their very nature, are located in a very specific time and place. Salle and Schnabel create post-modernist works which strangely still perpetuate some of the absolutist aspects of modernism—namely, its belief that form justifies itself. On the positive side, the confluences of signs in their art manifest a quivering indecisiveness which resembles the tentativeness of thought.

Differing from these three artists, Robert Longo, their close contemporary, has found a way to avoid the conservatism of an academic vanguard by pointing out that there is an academic vanguard. He has taken on one of the unquestioned truisms of modern art—its interest in the rights of the individual and its seeming inability to be used effectively by any totalitarian regime—and proven it false. Starting in the late 1970s and continuing into the present, Longo has shown that modernist elements have been used effectively by fascist regimes. The primary focus of Longo's art has been the conquest of fascist modernism and the recycling of its imagery in a modified form to show how elements of it still exist in corporate America. An artistic interest in fascist sensibilities had appeared as early in the United States as the late 1950s. At that time, Frank Stella created his black paintings, particularly *Die Fahne hoch*, which provided a new abstract outlet for the streamlining and the absolute belief in purity of form which had characterized the buildings of Hitler's favored architect Albert Speer. While the fascist element is implicit in Stella's abstract art, it has become explicit in the overtly political works of Longo, which intend to formalize already highly charged contents.

Robert Longo's art represents an important new departure. It acknowledges the poverty of images and the normalization of modern art as the academic art of our time. His art is filled with unquestioning acceptance of the fact that the artist is no longer a high priest or inspired visionary and consequently is no longer privy to specialized and little-understood information. Longo's acceptances are unsettling: he takes commonplace but not ubiquitous images; he strips them of their context and reveals the way that power—both

Robert Longo, *Love Police: Engines in Us (The Doors)* with *The Golden Children*, as installed at Leo Castelli Gallery, New York, February 1983. Photo by Pelka/Noble, courtesy Metro Pictures, New York. The installation at The University of Iowa Museum of Art consists of *Love Police: Engines in Us (The Doors)*. Lacquer and fiberglass on aluminum bonding; cast bronze, 140 × 87 × 24 (355.6 × 221.0 × 60.9). Lent by Mr. and Mrs. Sidney Kahn.

Frank Stella, *Die Fahne hoch*, 1959. Black enamel on canvas, 121½ × 73 (308.6 × 185.4). Collection of Whitney Museum of American Art. Gift of Mr. and Mrs. Eugene M. Schwartz and purchase through the generosity of the John I. H. Baur Purchase Fund, Charles and Anita Blatt Fund, Peter M. Brant, B. H. Friedman, Gilman Foundation, Inc., Susan Morse Hilles, The Lauder Foundation, Frances and Sydney Lewis, Albert A. List Fund, National Endowment for the Arts, Sandra Payson, Philip Morris Incorporated, Mr. and Mrs. Albrecht Saalfield, Mrs. Percy Uris and Wartner Communications, Inc. Photo by Geoffrey Clements.



Robert Longo, Model for *Body of a Comic*, 1984. Acrylic on cardboard and color photography, 10½ by 10 (26.7 × 25). Photo courtesy Metro Pictures, New York.

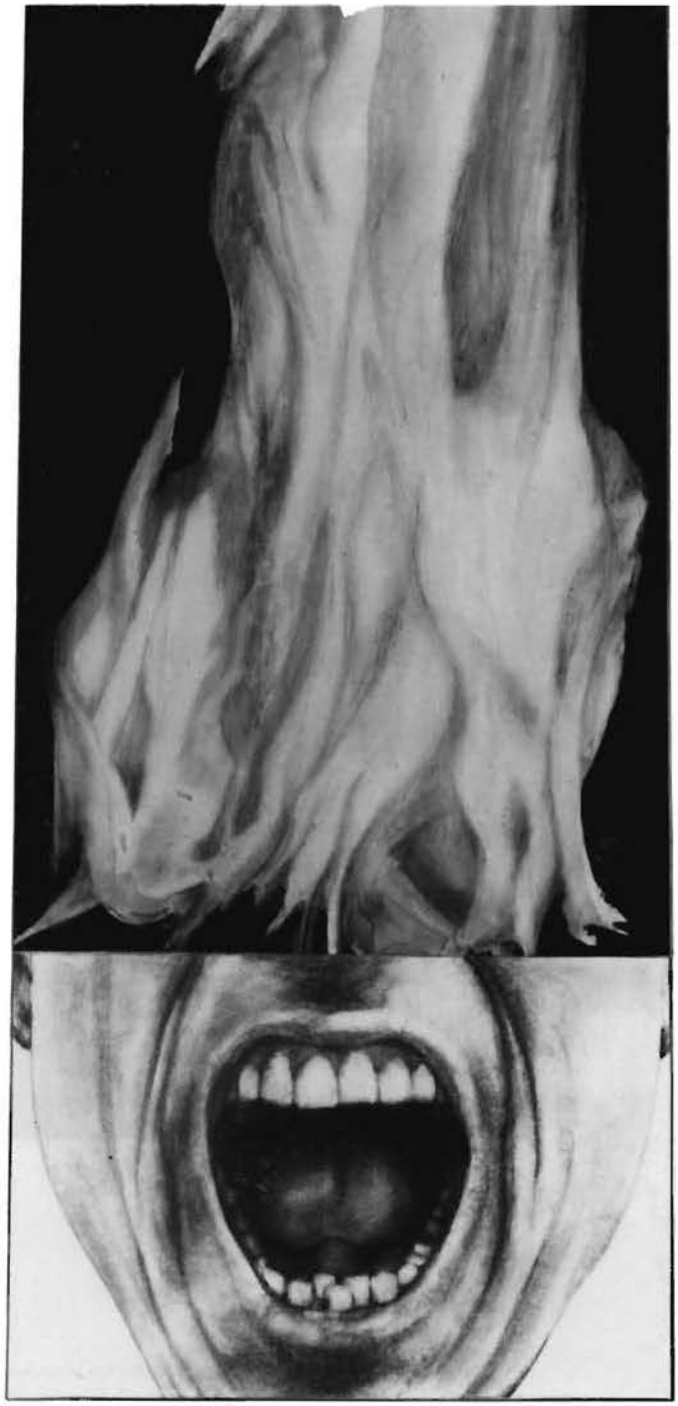
Robert Longo, Study for *Arena Brain I*, 1984. Charcoal, graphite and watercolor, 44 × 30 (111.8 × 76.2). Lent by the artist. Photo by Pelka/Noble, courtesy Metro Pictures, New York.

### *Body of a Comic/Clown Bank*

The entire piece *Body of a Comic/Clown Bank* may well refer to the film "Empire" that Longo is conceiving with Eric Bogosian. In the film Bogosian goes beyond Lenny Bruce in telling the truth. "The comedian is forced to live out the ramifications of his jokes. It's his attempt to maintain his integrity when the system wants to abort it," Longo has related. "He flirts with it and basically gets kicked in the face and freaks out. He then tries to go a very practical route by running a night club. He acquires all the regular things in life and then gets mugged. But the way he gets out of being mugged is by turning back into the old comedian. The movie ends with his going back and putting on all his old clothes and getting all his old equipment out. It's like the gunslinger trying to go right, hanging up his guns, and then getting kicked in the face—forced to put his guns back on."

### *Body of a Comic (for Andy Kaufman)*

In *Body of a Comic (for Andy Kaufman)* from *Body of a Comic/Clown Bank,* Longo provides a picture of the clown's diaphragm in the form of drums which are placed beneath great turning gear shafts, which the artist has referred to as the great machinery of God. Both instruments follow different rhythms: the drums are pounded and the gear shafts turn inexorably. Neither one is synchronized with the other. The work takes the radical juxtaposition of collage and transforms it into an image of unconscious conflict.





The body is compelled by automatic and sympathetic systems which can work in accord, but which often adhere to different forms of logic. In an interview with Richard Price, Longo related, "I'm real interested in that feeling that happens when someone you love leaves you, that kind of feeling pushing up under your diaphragm. I want a gasp or almost a cry. To find that kind of joy and sadness, it's a weird desire, a longing." In *Body of a Comic (for Andy Kaufman),* he comes close to finding it. He creates a conflict, an absurd joke which the leading character of his proposed film, "Empire," a stand-up comedian, must endure.

***Arena Brain* (from *Body of a Comic/Clown Bank*)**

*Arena Brain* (from *Body of a Comic/Clown Bank)* is a picture of rubber cement on fire which is positioned above the lower section of a head. Thought, the glue of life, is self-consuming in this raging portrait of the insanity of modern life. *Body of a Comic/Clown Bank* is a repository of images signifying clichéd ways of looking at actions. Each cliché is held up for scrutiny and then deconstructed, as in this work in which glue serves as the fuel with which thought consumes itself rather than the medium for piecing together modern life.



***Still* (from *Body of a Comic/Clown Bank*)**

Conceived as part of the monumental work *Body of a Comic/Clown Bank, Still* represents the upper torso, which is indicated on the left by a hand holding a heart and by the back of a human being.

*Still* is a pun referring to movie stills and also to death. The bleeding heart on the left suggests death in a very clinical albeit gruesome manner. The back becomes a sign of sensuality and lust, but since the gender of the figure is left ambiguous, viewers do not know how to react and are thus left to consider an empty sign. To the right of center, Longo has had a black mirror created of polished granite. The mirror absorbs reflections and in the process entombs them. On the right Rudolf Otto's *Armor,* a painting from Nazi Germany, has been recreated as a lead relief. The medieval knight of the painting, the traditional image of chivalry, the man of true heart willing to do battle for justice and honor, becomes in lead an ironic symbol. Situated in the center of the work, the eagle ties together all the elements of *Still* and unifies them: they become metaphysical extensions of the bird's wings. The bird gives a clue to the meaning of the piece since it is an image of nationalism. Ironically it could symbolize the United States as well as Nazi Germany, which also used the eagle as a national emblem, and it could indicate Longo's concerns about fascist elements in corporate America. When he was making *Still,* Longo kept thinking of Prince's lyrics for "When Doves Cry,"

Robert Longo, *Still*, 1984. Mixed media on wood, paper and metal, 96 × 288 × 4 (243.8 × 731.5 × 10.2). Lent by the Edward R. Broida Trust, Los Angeles.

a song about problems of love, which could be amplified to suggest problems of sustaining peace. Also, the artist remembers that the song "When Will It End" from Joy Division's album "Still" was important to him.

From bleeding heart to lusting heart to patriotic heart and finally to a questionable pure-of-heart knight from Nazi Germany, *Still* suspends clichés for feeling in a set of images resembling stills from five different films. In this post-modernist work, images are stilled and buried; illusions are broken apart to become dis-illusions; and in the process, art becomes a haunting graveyard of images.

Robert Longo, *Twins*, 1984. Lacquer and formica on wood; charcoal and graphite drawing, 59 × 76 × 21½ (149.9 × 193.0 × 54.6). Private collection. Photo by Pelka/Noble, courtesy Metro Pictures, New York.

Robert Longo, Study for *Black Palms I*, 1983. Charcoal, watercolor, dye and graphite, 44 × 30 (111.8 × 76.2). Lent by Jane Holzer, Chicago. Photo by Pelka/Noble, courtesy Metro Pictures, New York.

### *Twins*

Robert Longo has long been fascinated with Earth Artist Robert Smithson's dry sense of humor, particularly his statement comparing laughter to forms of crystals elaborated in "Entropy and the New Monuments":

> Let us now define the different types of generalized laughter, according to the six main crystal systems: the ordinary laugh is cubic or square (Isometric), the chuckle is a triangle or pyramid (Tetragonal), the giggle is a hexagon or rhomboid (Hexagonal), the titter is prismatic (Orthorhombic), the guffaw is asymmetric (Triclinic).... From here on in, we must not think of laughter as a laughing matter, but rather as the "matter which laughs."

In *Twins* Longo begins with the idea of Smithson's solid-state hilarity. But he joins it with the Platonic concept of universals which sometimes assume the character of solid geometric forms. And then he elaborates this very dry brand of humor by giving it a political dimension—the great *moderne* skyscrapers, which, according to Longo, dominate not only the skyline of big cities but also the people on the streets beneath them. The twins who are shaking their heads in refusal of the so-called universals embodied by the large corporate skyscrapers are Longo's dealers Janelle Reiring and Helene Winer. The piece compliments them, and it also points to the ways that ideas become objects and even overwhelming corporate enterprises which seek to domi-



nate and control. Sometimes, according to the artist, the only way to have an idea is to say "no" to those concepts which are forced on contemporary society. The humor in *Twins* is definitely ironic: a pencil drawing attempts to negate the force of an indomitable relief.

***Black Palms***

*Black Palms* is one of Longo's first nonfigurative works. The top portion of the work represents a factory; its reflection is a temple in Italy painted by the German Romantic artist Kaspar David Friedrich. In the finished work the temple is carved in intaglio, "as if someone stole the temple," Longo once stated. The sky is painted in impasto, and the upside-down temple suggests the spaceship in *Star Wars*. This work is concerned with reality and the contradictory fictions which it endures. Industrialization and Romanticism were part of the same historic era; together they added up to the same set of problems: the industrialists who wrecked nature in order to dominate it, and the romantic poets and artists who savored fantasies about merging again with nature and who reminisced about the passage of time, the indomitable qualities of nature, and the ephemerality of culture.

*Black Palms* was made soon after Longo returned from Munich. Throughout the making of the piece, he had an image in his mind of a German industrialist calmly seated in a walnut-paneled library reading poetry after he had ordered numerous tanks to be built.



***Remember the Government—Vote 1984***

*Remember the Government—Vote 1984* is concerned with blind devotion to political ideals. A racing quadriga with a standing winged victory replaces the brain of this figure, which has its eyes closed and its mouth replaced with an aerial view of small figures connoting the words of the nameless and faceless masses. *Remember the Government* projects radical analogies which are then juxtaposed. It is a type of rebus forming a picture of blind allegiance to an antiquated system of political glory. And it strongly suggests that the United States has become another great and blind empire on a par with Rome. In the finished work the barely opened eyes are cast in relief to provide a realistic picture of the solid state of nonseeing.

the desire for power and the fear of it—is operative in our society.

In his art Longo has managed to rekindle some of the fire of a militant vanguard. He dares to make moral comments in his work, and most of the time he succeeds in intriguing his audience without belaboring the obvious. In his early series *Men in the Cities*, he uses the ambiguity of abstract imagery to great advantage because the figures are poised between dancing and dying. Influenced by a still from Rainer Werner Fassbinder's *The American Soldier* that pictures an assassin's victim reaching to the bullet wound in his violently arching back, Longo took pictures of friends who were dodging the objects he threw at them and used these shots as subjects for his monumental drawings. In these works the violence is strategically transferred from the image to viewers who metaphorically take (steal) or shoot (assassinate) the drawings each time they look at them as photographic images. The monumentality of these works transform an intimate medium, drawings, into a strangely public one and in the process give new meaning to the photographic term "exposure." The image may then be the victim, but the public is placed in the role of an assassin, or even worse, an uncommitted bystander.

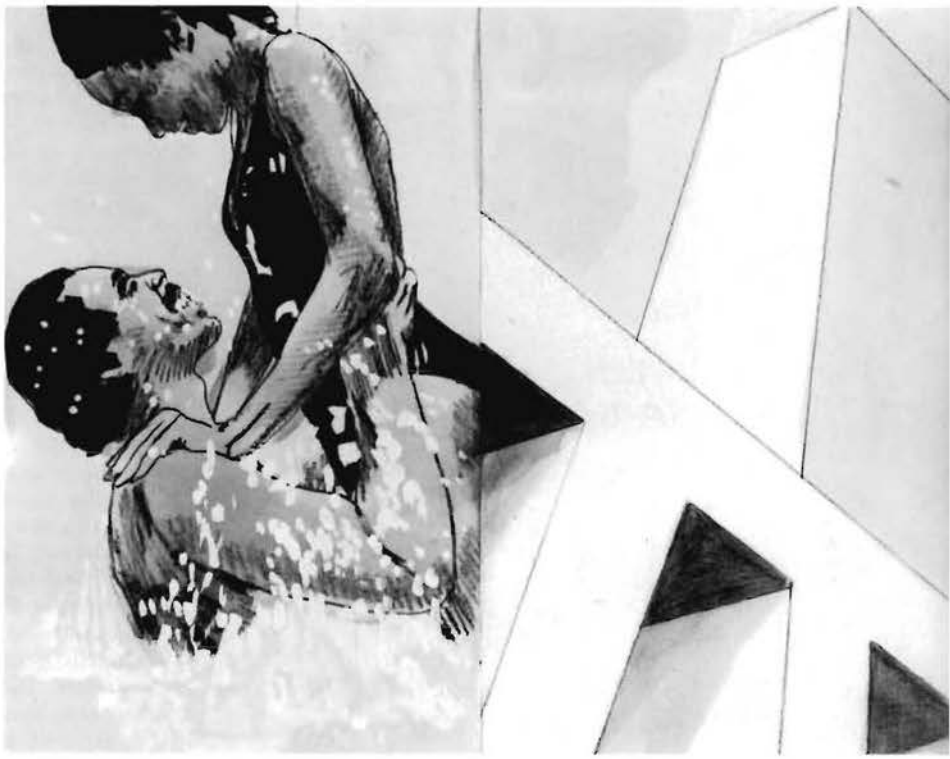
At times Longo comes close to propaganda in works such as *We Want God*, a retitling of *Imitate Your Past*, a combine of marble, wood, and aluminum picturing a child looking at German officers and also at a dead Tree of Life. What saves the work from mere narrative and the simplistic morality of propaganda is the fact that its materials poignantly and trenchantly underscore its meaning. The invading Germans are conceived in sandblasted green marble, a material associated with both fascist and Art Deco architecture; the tree is carved in intaglio in planks of pine glued together—a sort of "apology" to the material according to the artist—and the child's head is rendered in paint and sanded aluminum, a bright, shiny, thin material which is flexible and easily susceptible to bends and scratches. The special use of the marble, wood, and aluminum, then, manifests the meaning of the piece on a deeper level. In keeping with one of the main dicta of modernism which the French symbolist poet Stéphane Mallarmé was among the first to elaborate, the meaning of *We Want God* inheres in its chosen media.

Except for the German artist Anselm Kiefer, Longo goes further than any other post-World War II artist in seeking to underscore the political basis of art. Recognizing that every important dictator has destroyed the art of former regimes and attempted to institute a style that manifests and glorifies his attitudes, both Longo and Kiefer have

Robert Longo, Study for *Remember the Government, Vote*, 1984. Acrylic, dye and pencil, 44 × 30 (111.8 × 76.2). Lent by and photo courtesy Metro Pictures. Photo by Pelka/Noble.

Anselm Kiefer, *Des Malers Atelier*, 1983. Pigment and graphite on photographic paper, 23 × 30½ (59 × 78). Photo courtesy Marian Goodman Gallery, New York.

appreciated fully the fact that art is not always mindless decoration, that sometimes it is an important and persuasive instrument of power. Both artists have been influenced, directly or indirectly, with the thought of the Frankfurt





***Rock for Light***

Longo is fond of pointing out that his work represents three things he would like to believe in: "black people on vacation, the government, and outer space." The work in fact deals with three types of understanding: interpersonal relationships, courts of justice, and exploration of outer space. But the work also deals with inabilities to ever really understand anything: the couple on the left are taken from a travel poster of a couple on vacation in Jamaica (they are a constructed fantasy); the government building is blocky, inhuman, and assaultive (the stolidity and unyieldingness of bureaucracy), and the astronaut carries into outer space the badge of a no-longer-relevant nationalism in the form of the American flag on his left arm. *Rock for Light* continues the artist's *Men in the Cities* series, which is concerned with the dance of life which also becomes a dance of death.

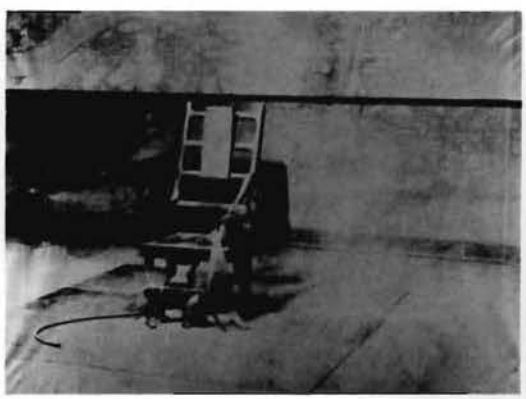
School, particularly the writings of Theodor Adorno and Walter Benjamin, who have viewed art as an indispensable mirror for reflecting the major sources of power in a given society. Both Longo and Kiefer have found Nazism and Hitler to be fascinating subjects. Longo has referred to Hitler as one of the century's greatest filmmakers, who staged World War II as a huge performance piece. He has said cryptically and ominously that Hitler beat the United States to becoming fascists. He points to Leni Riefenstahl's *Triumph of the Will*, her film about the 1934 Nuremberg rally, which Hitler had staged for her cameras as a great, decadent work of art, a testament to the true power of art in the modern world. And Kiefer has developed an entire series of paintings on the artist's studio and has pointed out in many of his works that the huge World War II bunkers that lined German-occupied territory constitute Hitler's true artistic studios. The fascination of both artists with the styles of fascism have a source in the Nazis' own realization of art's ability to manifest a new form of life. "Politics is the highest and most comprehensive art there is," Goebbels said in 1933, "and we who shape modern German policy feel ourselves to be artists . . . the task of art and the artist [being] to form, to give shape, to remove the diseased and create freedom for the healthy."

Longo believes that Nazi Germany initiated the advertising age and also first comprehended the importance of propaganda. Advertising as well as propaganda distances and diminishes its audiences, transforming them from thinking individuals to masses who must be tantalized, persuaded, led, and even coerced to buy a product, whether it be a political idea or a laundry product. Both Nazi Germany and capitalist America intend to turn people into eager consumers, to tantalize them with a superficial glamour that mystifies at the same time that it dehumanizes the individuals portrayed: Who remembers the features of a storm trooper? Who would recognize a specific cover girl if she were to walk down the street? Both adhere to standards; both become types, new norms that disdain differences, that uphold party lines and that do not permit the conflicts inherent in true individuality.

In his art Longo updates Pop artist Andy Warhol's basic humanism with a new political impetus. Instead of belaboring modern humanity's emptiness and continuing Warhol's conformity to brand name products with a feigned resignation that still bespeaks the outrage of a beleaguered humanist, Longo uses superficiality as a weapon. In *Love Police: Engines With Us (The Doors)*, he positions a young woman and man—the typical ebullient images of many commercials that emphasize banality and the good life—above a trash heap of wrecked automobiles. *The*

Robert Longo, Study for *Rock for Light*, 1983. Charcoal, watercolor, dye and graphite, 38 × 50 (96.5 × 127.0). Lent by John Sacchi. Photo by Pelka/Noble, courtesy Metro Pictures, New York.





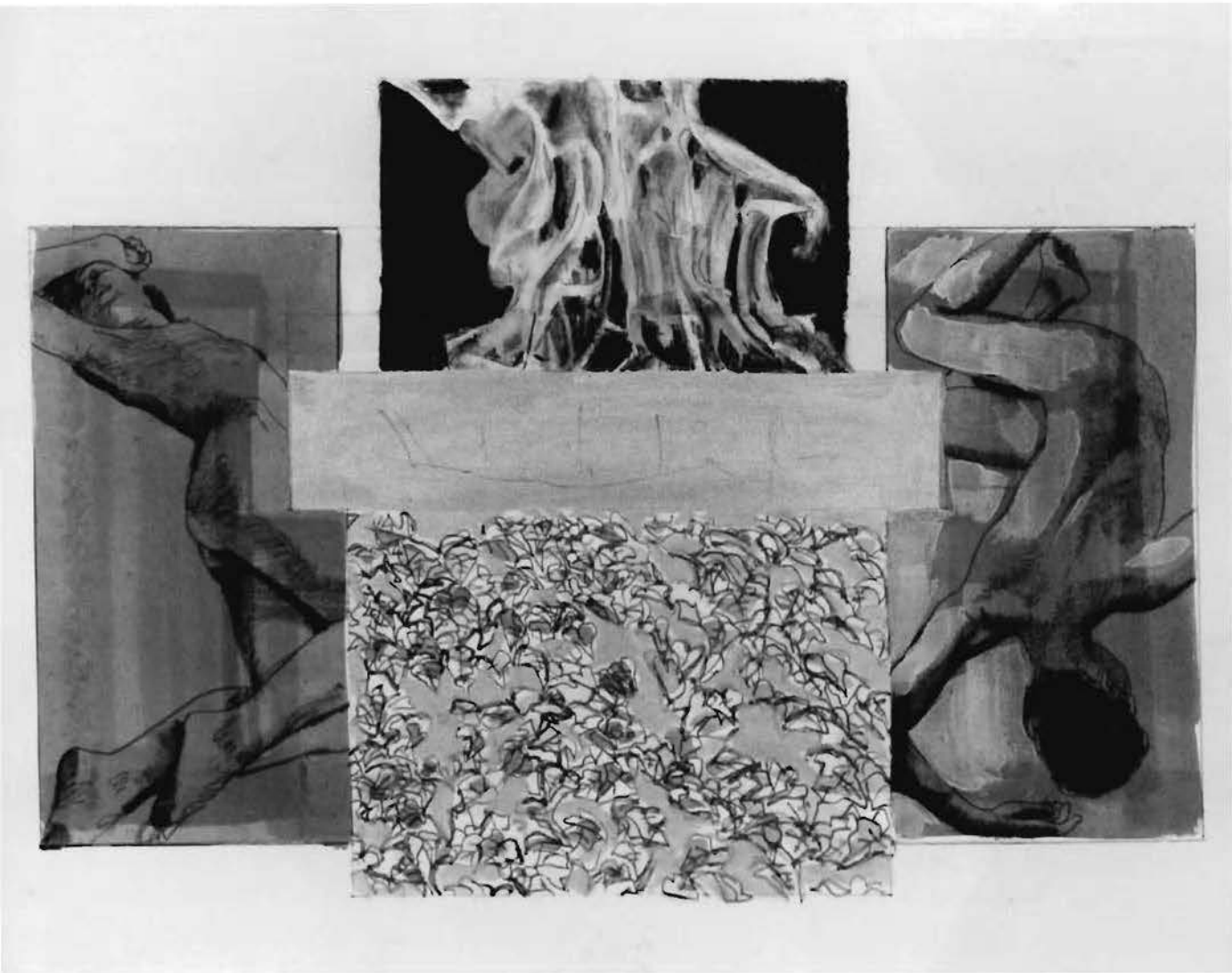
Andy Warhol, *Electric Chair*, 1967. Acrylic and silkscreen enamel, 54 × 73 (137.2 × 185.4). Photo courtesy Leo Castelli Gallery, New York.

*Engines Within Us* becomes a new updated version of Rodin's *Gates of Hell*, and the couple take on a strange spectral quality when we recognize that the lacquered red paint could signify blood and that the woman may be

Robert Longo, Study for *Kill Your Darling*, 1983. Charcoal, watercolor, dye and graphite, 30 × 43 (76.2 × 109.2). Lent by Ken Goldglit. Photo by Pelka/Noble, courtesy Metro Pictures, New York.

### *Kill Your Darlings*

According to Longo, *Kill Your Darlings* is about Europe. The eagle in this combine refers to Nazi power and also to American fascist tendencies abroad, particularly fascism in the dictionary sense as a regime that exalts nation and race above the individual and that stands for a centralized autocratic government headed by a dictatorial leader and that enforces severe economic and social regimentation. Although the United States tries to uphold the rights of the individual within its boundaries, it often acts as a giant corporation or as a facist nation abroad. In *Kill Your Darlings* the eagle head projects out of a group of three images which include a giant archway or gate of Cor-Ten steel, a panel with a woman in tears, and a painted field of flowers taken from a Dutch postcard that is partially covered with silkscreen (the gloss of advertising). Politics (the eagle), a classical heritage (the gateway), war or sorrow (the woman in tears) and travel ads (the bright fields that look like a display of canned goods in an American supermarket) add up to a composite picture of modern Europe from the American point of view. The entire piece forms the body of an eagle in profile (our national emblem): the arch becomes the wings, the woman the breast, and the field of flowers the tail feathers.





***Friends I***

*Friends I* is a complex work and a new departure for Longo. Monumental figures (one upright and one upside-down) serve as caryatids for a central section consisting of an image of burning rubber cement (thought, the glue of life, consuming itself?) which is perched above a wall of painted plaster ivy leaves that were cast from plastic leaves (suggesting possibly the Ivy League? the slow growth and entanglement of thought?). In the center the word "value" serves as a question as well as a statement.

screaming instead of laughing.

Scale plays a tremendous role in Longo's art because it is enlarged to proportions that go beyond the monumental, that border on the cinematic, and that in the end become unsettling because they are so unreal and implausible. Like the sculpture of Arno Breker, the architecture of Albert Speer, and the posters of Nazi Germany and the Soviet Union, they dwarf the human and make the personal and the intimate seem inconsequential and unworthy of respect or comment. In his most successful work Longo turns this cinematic condition against itself. In *Love Police* the figures are so large that they dwarf even the stacked automobiles, causing them to seem unimportant in relation to this couple, which in turn serves as a deeply ironic advertisement of destruction. While Warhol created a disaster series of empty electric chairs in pastel shades to emphasize our unconcern with such subjects as capital punishment, Longo intensifies his subjects, using the techniques of advertising to hype death. Warhol keeps his commercial images low-key and utterly banal; Longo, on the other hand, courts the glamour, the violence, and the hard sell of giant billboards and slick magazine ads.

Warhol is an artist who has commented effectively on rampant materialism in the United States in the late fifties and early sixties and also on the planned obsolescence that seemed so much a part of the booming post-war economy. Warhol is still emotionally attached to the idea of the United States as an overgrown republic which must be chastened and reminded of its true nature. Longo, however, is an artist picturing the United States' disillusionment over the Vietnam war, its loss of idealism, and its realization that it constitutes at times a decadent empire.

In a performance piece entitled *Empire: A Performance Trilogy* which was presented in the atrium of the Corcoran Gallery of Art, Washington, D.C., April 15-16, 1981, Longo emphasized the elegant and frozen character of the American Empire. Fully aware that he was creating a work which would be performed in a museum directly across from the White House, he orchestrated his performance so that it pictured constrained violence. Told in a disjointed form, this performance begins with entwined wrestlers, a film of an immobile man whose body is arching in convulsion, and a metaphorical alarm, a siren in the form of an operatic singer. It continues with a story told in the manner of Rod Serling; it is sustained through a second act consisting of a saxophone player and a couple dressed in fifties clothing going slowly through a history of fifties and sixties dances. And it concludes with couples enacting a regimented waltz until an air raid siren (a poetic transformation of the opera singer) cuts through the music before becoming the clarion call of trumpets which turn the ballroom into a battlefield. The audience then exits the Corcoran to a view of the White House. Except for the undercurrents of violence—frozen wrestlers, Rod Serling's *Twilight Zone*-type of story, and air raid sirens—the performance is clothed in tradition. At times it harks back to the formality of White House security guards which Nixon briefly had outfitted in white uniforms complete with gold epaulettes, which reminded newscasters of the unreality of the operatic stage and particularly of *The Student Prince*.

Working at a time when the United States has become aware of some of its mistakes and also working when the limits of modernism are clearly established, when the avant-garde has become at best a formalist exercise and at worst rote method, Longo creates dis-illusions rather than mere illusions. He shows that modern art and the United States both exhibit fascist strains: their so-called unlimited freedom is illusory. His dis-illusions are deconstructions; in his words, they are efforts to "isolate the act of believing" and to show "how images think," how, in other words, art fully participates in the power struggles of the present day.

Robert Longo, Study for *Friends I*, 1984. Acrylic, dye and pencil, 27 × 29½ (68.6 × 74.9). Lent by and photo courtesy Metro Pictures. Photo by Pelka/Noble.





***Heads Will Roll***

In *Heads Will Roll* houses in suburbia, a Cor-Ten Sputnik, and David Byrne are all presented. *Heads Will Roll* is a reference to impending doom and also to the musical group The Talking Heads, of which David Byrne is a member. The work captures the flavor of The Talking Heads' songs which deal with violence, pollution, and disaster. An example is "Life During Wartime":

Heard of a van that is loaded with weapons,
Packed up and ready to go
Heard of some gravesites, out by the highway,
A place where nobody knows
The sound of gunfire, off in the distance,
I'm getting used to it now
Lived in a brownstone, lived in the ghetto
I've lived all over this town
This ain't no party, this ain't no disco,
This ain't no foolin' around
No time for dancing, or lovey dovey,
I got no time for that now.

This work testifies to Longo's great interest in music (he has played guitar with rock groups such as The Rhys Chatham Band and Menthol Wars). The piece is a collage, or, to use contemporary musical terminology, it is a mix from different areas, an appropriation of different realities.

Longo regarded the tract housing in *Heads Will Roll* as an American equivalent to the burning wheatfields that occur in the work of German

Robert Longo, Study for *Heads Will Roll I*, 1984. Acrylic, dye and pencil, 20½ × 34 (52.1 × 86.4). Lent by the artist. Photo by Pelka/Noble, courtesy Metro Pictures, New York.

artist Anselm Kiefer. In the finished piece Pollock-like drips, an American field painting technique (pun fully intended) and a sign of existential angst, covers the tract housing shown in relief. David Byrne is a painted steel plate silhouette which is raised off the surface of the work to cast a shadow. The overall implication of the piece is that everything (houses, people, and aspirations to outer space) ultimately functions like a machine. The image of Sputnik is very important to the artist: it carries with it numerous associations. Of particular importance is a video made by his friend Gretchen Bender who has played with an AT & T television logo which resembles a satellite and which indicates with amazing clarity the power modern corporations have for controlling thought. The artist has stated that Lou Reed's song "Satellite of Love" kept coming to him as he was making this piece, particularly the lyrics, "I watched it for a little while/I love to watch things on TV." A child during the Cold War and the advent of Sputnik, Longo is part of a generation raised on fear of the apocalypse which now appears a ridiculous cliché and at the same time a terrifying reality.



***Solid Vision***

Until recently people assumed that modern art was dedicated to the freedoms of the individual. It was inconceivable that modern art could be used as propaganda to embody the ideas of a totalitarian regime, but Robert Hughes in *Shock of the New* showed how German and Italian fascists incorporated in their buildings aspects of modern architecture, including its utopian bias, and used it to glorify their regimes. In this work Longo followed Hughes's line of reasoning. He presents both a two-dimensional and a three-dimensional rendition of the portrait which Arno Breker, Hitler's favorite sculptor, made of the Japanese-American vanguard sculptor Isamu Noguchi in 1939. *Solid Vision* is about seeing perceptually in terms of drawing and relief, and it is also about seeing politically, about the ways that such seemingly separate individuals as Breker and Noguchi and such ideas as fascism and modern art have at times come together. The work is also concerned with the artist having a Cassandra curse, an ability to foretell the future to a group of people who don't believe the prophecies. The eyes of Noguchi are respectfully lowered; they don't seem to dare to gaze directly out at the viewer. The eyes, in Longo's words, are conceived in relief because he wished to underscore the "weight of vision." The title *Solid Vision* is a play on *New York Times Magazine* ads featuring "solid photography," sculptures mechanically reproduced from photographs.

## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

Exhibitions are of necessity collaborative events and *Robert Longo: Dis-Illusions* is no exception. The following people of Metro Pictures have given generously of their time: Janelle Reiring, Helene Winer, Doug Meyer, and Jim Shepherd; also, Ted Bonin of Brooke Alexander, Inc. has been most helpful. Without the expert help of Jo-Ann Conklin, Nancy DeDakis, David Dennis, James Lindell, Judy McTammany, Jean Schroeder, Jami Spittler, and Gail Zlatnik, all members of the Museum of Art staff, this exhibition would never have become a reality.

I would like to thank the committees responsible for selecting a work of art by Robert Longo for the Iowa City Post Office and the General Services Administration for making innovative public art available. Members of the national committee included Marilyn Farley and Thomas Crawford of the General Services Administration, and Byron Burford, Bruce Chambers, Thomas Garver, Suzanne Ghez, and Dorothy Schramm. Members of the Iowa committee were Bruce Chambers, Richard Hanson, Byron Ross, Dorothy Schramm, Nancy Seiberling, and Richard Summerwill. This exhibition honors their choice.

Robert Longo. Study for *Solid Vision*, 1983. Charcoal, watercolor and graphite, 30 × 22 (76.2 × 55.9). Lent by the artist. Photo by Pelka/Noble, courtesy Metro Pictures.

(continued from inside front cover)
civilization's victims.

I believe that Longo in this drawing played on the double meanings of the phrase "to draw," which indicates an artistic process and also reaching for a weapon. The subjects of this work, the dead figures, are validated through the process of their own making, and the artist has symbolically killed his subjects with his pencil in the process of drawing them. The art is then an act of creation and destruction. And the work of art becomes a national symbol, another form of national trust, and a repository for images which are both created and destroyed. When he drew figures inspired by photographs, Longo was also playing with the phrase "shooting a photograph," taking it literally and indicating its implicit violence.

Both Longo and Cindy Sherman, with whom he was close during his *Men in the Cities* period, were concerned with the viewer as voyeur, with the viewer as someone who automatically shoots or takes the photograph each time he or she looks at it. (In her photographs of the early eighties, Cindy Sherman frequently presented herself in the role of the victimized woman, the personification of the photograph which is "shot" or "taken.") *National Trust* is a collection of stills, of images shot, drawn, and preserved in the graveyard of images that constitutes art.