

# METRO PICTURES

519 WEST 24TH STREET NEW YORK 10011 T: 212 206 7100 F: 212 337 0070 GALLERY@METROPICTURESGALLERY.COM

Thomas Kellein, "Between Cinemascope and Monument," **Magellan**, Dumont, Germany, 1997

## 1. Longo's Museum

Robert Longo first came to attention in 1981 with his *Men in the Cities* drawings, an ongoing series of larger-than-life dancing figures on paper, at Metro Pictures in New York. They symbolized individual fates and isolated the figures on white paper sheets - although what Longo had elaborated in all these action shots was movie death. Dancing figures simulated physical falling like a symbolic conflux of ecstasy, great suffering and play acting. The photographic sources had been provided by his friends' dancing to punk music on the roof of his studio.

Besides the *Men in the Cities* series Longo has drawn numerous monumental black flags and pistols on white paper. In the sculpture medium, he has built almost a hundred combines, reliefs and installations using raw and lacquered wood, bronze, steel, aluminum, plexiglass, plaster, hydrocal, marble or lead, with acrylic, charcoal, graphite, diamond dust or oil on canvas or paper. He directed rock videos, and, most recently created much esteemed designs for Mozart's early opera *Lucio Silla* and directed the 98-minute cinema feature *Johnny Mnemonic* (Tristar Pictures, 1995), about a cerebral courier overfed on data from the twenty-first century. It might be called the Longo Museum, this continuing body of art in ever-expanding, ever-combining, ever-inventive media. The common message or the artist's objective becomes evident through an exaggeration of the size and intensity of things. Longo wants to reveal the triviality of monuments and movie-show effects residing everywhere in our surroundings to the extent that we live in big cities, are tv-consumers, music listeners, users of the new media or visitors to movie theaters. Longo aimed to achieve a kind of gripping language that he saw in opening credits at the movies, on billboards, in advertising spots and comic strips. The tide of images that bombard us daily has been a constant preoccupation of his. "All these images are passing silently into you," Longo said after finishing *Magellan*, adding that he felt for a long time unable to turn the stream of these drawings off.

## 2. Links with Architecture and Film

Many of Longo's sculptures of the early 1980's intermeshed individuals with architecture. His later human figures were pressed upon, bound and subdued by built elements that functioned as fragments of our world. Men and a few women suffered, screamed or were struck dumb. Their colors were no longer flesh, yellowish or stony gray besides orange and blue, but black, red or glaring white as on TV. The parataxis of portrait and buildings, occasionally military in its aura in and after 1982, subsequently became more and more theatrical.

In the 1980's, Longo feared and handled his culture like a horror movie. His reliefs and sculptures presented political tableaux with the poster-like message that in our society, the individual's fate is death as a soldier or zombie, his surroundings like steel walls or shining weaponry recalling a fortress and no mistake. Living in self-imposed exile in Paris from 1991, Longo produced the series of all-black bronze versions of the stars and stripes which seemed to flap in the wind as they hung on gallery walls like military shields or pierced out of the floor like spears. The artist confronted his warring people and the American military with a kind of arsenal of his own, refuting the moralistic bravado of his country's national emblem.

## 3. The *Magellan* Drawings

*Magellan* represents in its 366 pieces an artist's calendar of the leap year in which Longo started to draw again. The series began to take shape following a production system on *Johnny Mnemonic* in which up to 230 people had worked for him every day. The *Magellan* project as it had grown at the artist's drawing board over fourteen months shows an unaccustomed intimacy in the sizes of the work. The cycle was begun on January 6, 1996, a few weeks after the Paris premiere of *Johnny Mnemonic*. The title had come courtesy of Hollis Frampton, the teacher of such importance to Longo for having his students watch and discuss movies night after night. He had himself wanted to realize a 24-hour-film project entitled *Magellan*; it was cut short by his early death.

What appears to be the very first drawing in the series is dedicated to Zorro (4), the masked black knight of justice. Second came a clown (12) from an ad for photographic cameras. AIDS (3) how a detail of a dying man, covered in tubes and an oxygen mask, in hospital. Officially, the cycle opens with a face (1) on which effort, pain, struggle and resoluteness, a conscious dedication to

the world outside, is manifest like an existential and civilizing credo of Longo. The face is that of Peter Gabriel, whose photograph has been taken from *Life* magazine.

The first dozen pictures display the overall principle clearly: the world comes to us via rock stars and rock concerts, sports heroes and events, politicians and political gatherings - substantially in the shape of heroic displays and mass meetings. Longo spent years systematically documenting our daily routine of images, and now, in *Magellan*, he offers us the completed survey. The black pen, chalks and charcoal make the pictures intentionally similar and comparable. Besides the heroes and mass events, *Magellan* incorporates motifs from films, advertising and art as the main characters. The series offers up its findings via photographs, movie stills and artistic monuments like a natural order in our surroundings. The sheer quantity of drawn reproductions in black-and-white tells us that without pictures, or more precisely, without the constant editing and publishing of pictures of the individual and mass venues, our notion of culture and the world would not exist.

Many of the political events quoted are world famous, such as the documentary material on the war in Bosnia (37, 45, 156), the shot of a terrorist at the 1972 Olympic Games in Munich (44), the lined-up skulls of victims of the Pol Pot regime (49 and 309), or the pictures of the mysterious crash of a TWA airliner over the Long Island coastline (154, 164, 187) in Spring 1996. Also integrated are close artist friends and pictures of his three sons (81, 346, 365), whilst several dozen sources come from fashion magazines.

Longo's personal environment provides, alongside the heroic and mass, a physical and physiological dichotomy of the public and private. His disregard for conventional distinctions between high and popular culture is very serious.