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In Black & White

The TV is on mute, and Robert Longo eyes it periodically to catch the score of the basketball game. Inevitably, or by osmosis, sports analogy seeps into our conversation: team America, artist v. artist, more money more problems. But I think my favourite mental picture is the one Longo paints of the early eighties art scene in New York City: 'It was insanely competitive,' he says. 'Insanely. I joke about it, but it was almost as if the galleries should have given all their artists leather jackets with the gallery name on back. There would have been street fights.'

Not that Longo needs a soundtrack to make what he says any more entertaining or dramatic (the artist makes for excellent conversation), but the classical music blasting through his studio is a nice touch as Longo tells me about the secret society that used to toil in this workspace in Little Italy, long before he did. Later he talks of that period in the late eighties when he felt he was being blamed for the eighties; then he tells me about his son's friend, who asked: 'Did you get the idea for *Men in the Cities* from the iPod ads?' We could keep going – our talk is an easy and natural one – but our discussion is interrupted by a phone call so cinematically timed, it makes me wonder if Longo's studio is indeed rigged or haunted. 'No, I haven't been able to channel anything, here,' Longo tells me. Though he's tried. 'We've had weird times here.'

— *How long have you been in this studio?* End of '83, beginning of '84. The building used to be mostly Chinese sweatshops, now it's design firms and film production companies. But I mean, Little Italy is still Little Italy. Actually, when my father came here from Italy, he grew up in this neighbourhood. When I moved back here, he was really upset; I mean, he'd worked very hard to get us out. [Imitates father] 'What do you mean, you're movin' back?'

Anyway, the building's been sold many times. It was built in the 1830s or something like that, and used to be an Odd Fellows Hall with a dome top, like the Pantheon. You ever heard of the Odd Fellows? Really strange, secret society. They're kind of like the Masons. I always had an image of these guys having big, round heads and really weird fingers. Each room had a theme, too: an Egyptian room, a Roman room, a Medieval room.

— Do you still feel that in the air, here? I've tried to, but I haven't channelled any of it. We've had weird times here, though. We used to have a basketball hoop, but now the people downstairs can't handle the noise. Maybe that's for the best; sometimes the basketball would hit the drawings.

A lot of advertising agencies have moved here, recently. But when I was first here, it was a sweatshop. All Chinese ladies, totally illegal, though the labels on the clothing said, 'Made in the U.S.' They would send the clothes down to the trucks from the windows, using strings. It was pretty wild watching them. So it's weird to see the people who are across the hall, now. They're, like, Apple-ites. They all look like Apple people. You know what I mean? They're perky and they wear blue jeans, and look really healthy. They walk down the hallway to talk on their cell phones and we get to listen to their conversations.

I also found out from a couple of tenants that my landlord's been using me as a selling point – which still doesn't give me a discount on my rent! It's a bit ridiculous, now. I've thought about moving, but it's a great studio and it's hard to find something else. I've seen so much come and go here.

— That said, in older interviews, you've spoken of the benefits of having gone outside of New York City to go to school. It's interesting: of the people I know who are successful – at either film or music or art – almost none of them went to school in New York. There's too much distraction, too much scene and activity in New York City for a student here to really develop. Most of the people I know came from *nowhere*. And I mean, I went to school in Buffalo, which is the asshole of the world.

— How do you think you developed as an artist in the 'asshole of the world'? I didn't have the constant openings and clubs to go to, I only knew about the work. The art school I went to in Buffalo was terrible, but it had a really good museum and we used to come down to the city on weekends and knock on artists' doors. Long story short, we started an alternative space in Buffalo called Hallwalls. We ended up getting money from the government and bringing artists up to do installations. In a weird way, we created a graduate school. Which is interesting because I don't teach now. I ventured into teaching just a little bit, with this visiting artist thing I did at Columbia, and I hated it.

Why the hate? Because I realize that I don't get to pick my students. Some of them are late and some of them don't change their work for, like, three months. It's irritating. Then there are the ones who are overtly professional. I mean, they have transparencies! They're talking about galleries, all of a sudden! I think it's very important for a young artist to realize that it's a long distance run. It's not about how *quickly* you can get a gallery. So I'm pretty selective as to the people that work for me. And I teach them, not how to make art, but how to be an artist, which is different. I don't think they teach you that in school.

If you're successful enough with something, it integrates itself so profoundly into the culture that authorship doesn't exist anymore

— I don't really know how you teach 'how to be an artist' at all. Well, you teach them how to deal with everything from shipping to making sure your work's insured, to making sure you get your work back. How to be an artist: it's like 'How to be a parent'. There's no manual, you know what I mean? I think it's important for the guys who work for me to see how I do it.

I worked for Vito Acconci for a long time, and every exhibition, it was like we were finishing the work the night before. I'm never like that. It's one of the things I teach these guys: If you do exhibitions, make sure you plan ahead. Some of these guys have had offers from gal-





Untitled (Fritz), Men in the Cities, 1980–2000
Charcoal and graphite on paper, 243.8 x 152.4 cm

Opposite: *Untitled (Hercules)*, 2008
Charcoal on mounted paper, 243.8 x 177.8 cm





« *Pressure*, 1982-1983. Lacquer on wood, charcoal, graphite and ink on paper, 258 x 229 x 96 cm



Installation View – Monsters, 2002. Metro Pictures, New York

leries, and I check the galleries out. Sometimes I have to say: 'You should really think about it. It could be a mistake.' In that sense, I wish I had had some of that guidance when I was younger.

But it's a different world now. I mean, when I was growing up as a young artist, I never thought I would make any money. What became the eighties was never on the menu. I thought success meant having a gallery occasionally sell my work – maybe I'd teach, do lectures, and have some shitty part-time job. I drove a taxi for a while. But now you go to Columbia and you realize all these kids are gearing up toward making money. You get the feeling that they really should have become lawyers or doctors or businessmen, but not artists.

– So money has changed the dynamic of being an artist? Sure. I think the fact that you can get rich being an artist changes things. Yeah. Someone told me that Damien Hirst is worth, like $900-million or something like that. I mean, that fantasy belongs to professional athletes. I remember my parents saying, 'Only one in a million can make it as an artist.' I don't say that to my kids. All three of them are creative people, which is a little weird. I don't have any normal children: how about an investment banker? How about a lawyer?

– I wonder how much geography really factors into art. Well, at the end of the eighties – when I felt like I was being blamed for the eighties – I moved to Paris and that saved my life. I became so incredibly aware of how American I was and how American my *art* was. I remember sitting at a dinner table once, and there was only one Parisian there; everyone else was from Russia, Spain, Italy. Expatriates. You realize that you can come to America and become American; but you can't go to France and become French. That became very clear to me.

For good and for bad, America is different from the rest of the world. The good thing is that we actually all co-exist together. Like, I live in Brooklyn near the most multi-racial street in America and everyone gets along. Because America is the only country in the world that's based on the concept of a sports team: we're all together to win. In politics, even, they all talk about how we have to win. Americans are incredibly competitive. I mean, I love sports, but we're sick in the nature of competition; and, in that sense, that's probably our weakest link. Like, when 9/11 happened, there was no attempt to actually try to understand why people did this to us. The mentality here was: they scored a goal, and now we have to win the game. In that sense, I think America's competitiveness could be its downfall.

– Were you working in this studio on 9/11? No, I was actually playing basketball in Brooklyn, on the top floor of a building that has a synagogue on the ground floor. We could see the World Trade Center from where we were playing. All of a sudden, we saw this big black cloud of smoke, and saw the explosion of the second building. I remember running home and telling my wife about it. It was horrible, but there was no attempt to try to understand why. Americans have a hard time realizing that we're capable of causing an enormous amount of pain in the world. We don't understand why people hate us. You know, we still think we're John Wayne.

— Does the John Wayne, competitive mentality factor into the art world here? Someone told me the Greeks were really competitive about aesthetic issues. Like, if you didn't like their plays, they'd kill you. As for me, I think I'm competitive by nature. I've tried very hard to calm my competitiveness. It's really awful. When I was a younger artist, I was quite out of control and basically wanted to bury the generation that was before me, erase them from the face of the earth. Any art I didn't like, I wanted to crush. I'm far more generous now than I was then.

I also think that the early eighties were insanely competitive in New York, in general. Insanely. I joke about it, but it was almost as if the galleries should have given all their artists leather jackets with the gallery name on the back. There would have been street fights. It was competitive to the point of total insanity. Like, I remember reading how [Julian] Schnabel was making more money than I was, and I threatened to kill myself so my work would be worth more. My art dealer said to me: 'It won't work. You really haven't been around long enough. They'd forget you.'

I was, like, 'Okay, fuck it. My revenge will be living longer.'

— Is there such thing as friendly competition? At the end of the day, do you feel you're a part of a community of artists? Jeffrey Deitch told me this really brilliant thing, once: 'If an artist hopes to be successful, he needs a team.' Obviously, you also need some kind of talent and work ethic. But you do need to have other friends who are artists and support you. You also need to have writers and critics who support you, you need to have a gallery, and you need to have collectors. Then you need to have museums show your work. And that's the formula.

The artists I grew up with are still my closest friends; there are a few who aren't as successful, but we try to stay close and I think that's important. They are the people whom I ultimately care about most. You really are part of a generation, in a way, and that's the group you travel with.

I also like having younger artists working for me. They're a great input. A lot of the artists who'd asked to work for me, had only known my work from the last ten years. One guy said, 'Oh, *you're* the guy who made those *Men In The Cities* drawings.' He'd only connected to the last ten years of my work, which I thought was actually kind of cool because the hardest thing about being an artist and getting older is staying relevant. I actually think I'm doing some of the best stuff I've ever done, now.

— So you took it as a compliment? Yeah. He didn't know who I was; it was really great. I have to admit that on the inside, I went, 'What? You don't know who I am?' But, on the other hand, the fact that he only knew what I'd done recently validated what I've been doing.

— You talk about being part of a 'generation'. Do you find there's a tendency to romanticize an 'old New York' and the art scene inherent to it? It was pretty wild, for sure. But the future changes the past. Every week, there's a new article about the eighties, and I'm reading it going: 'This did *not* happen.' It's interesting to be part of history, and then to see history rewritten. You know, drugs and art and opportunity and money: that stuff made for a pretty wild situation. But I still can't believe that I do what I do. I definitely see being an artist as a privilege; I'm really lucky.

— How many hours do you typically spend in the studio? I'm usually here from 10am to 7pm. Sometimes later, sometimes earlier, sometimes on the weekends; it depends on the workload. I have a family, and I really like my wife and

Style can be disastrous for an artist; it can turn you into a brand





actually like going home. Sometimes I have to sleep here, but I don't do that so much, anymore. For somebody as erratic and fucked up as me, it's important to have structure.

— Have you always been able to create structure? No. No, I used to wake up in the morning and work, and then get fucked up enough to pass out and go to sleep. That's what the eighties were. You would go out to see bands or meet people for dinner. I remember when I saw Hanne Darboven's work the first time and realized that she was right, with all that counting and numbers and stuff. It was basically: 'I'm alive, I'm alive, I'm really alive. I'm alive. I'm breathing. I'm alive.' It was an attempt to acknowledge your existence, because you had such reservations about actually being there.

My brain is constantly working. I think it's important for me to find ways to turn it off. I don't meditate or anything, but I play basketball pretty much every day and that's the only time I don't think about anything else. Otherwise, I'm constantly thinking four steps ahead: Where the work is going, where it might go, where I want it to go. I'm never satisfied. I'm always seeing my mistakes and trying to correct them.

— You think that's a motivating factor of your personality? I'm getting better at enjoying the work. But I always see what could have been done better. What' s difficult about me is that, the more my work gets accepted and acknowledged, the more I want to change it. I feel a bit trapped right now, in relationship to black and white drawings and big scale drawings: I'm already thinking of my exit strategy. Sometimes I fantasize about becoming a big abstract expressionist painter again.

But I've come to terms with why I've chosen black and white. Growing up in the late fifties, early sixties, all those magazines like *Time* and *Newsweek* and particularly *Life* magazine were my guides. I was dyslexic, so I didn't read much, but I paid close attention to the pictures. The front covers – usually of someone like Marilyn Monroe – were always in colour, and so were photos of Las Vegas and the president. All in colour. But then you came to the pictures of the Vietnam War, nuclear tests, or prostitutes in Calcutta—and they were all in black and white. Maybe I associate black and white with the truth; somehow, that's my language.

I've also come to realize that I've run away from having a style. *Men in the Cities* was an iconic image, but I didn't realize what I was doing at the time. Now the ownership of it isn't mine anymore. My son's younger friend said to me, 'Did you get the idea from the iPod ads?' If you're successful enough with something, it integrates itself so profoundly into the culture that authorship doesn't exist anymore. That's why I think the idea of running away from a specific style has always been important to me. Style can be disastrous for an artist – it can turn you into a brand.

— How do you deal with a retrospective of your own work? When I did my first retrospective at the end of the eighties, it was really heavy, I almost felt, like, 'Okay, I can die now.' But, again, I see the mistakes. I just had a retrospective in Nice recently, then in Portugal; and I did have that 'get me out of here' feeling. 'I've got to get back to the studio so I can work.'

Still, I do think that I am in need of a serious retrospective at some point soon because it's disturbing to me that people are starting to see me as just 'black and white artist guy'; there's a whole bunch of work that doesn't exist in that category. And there's a whole bunch of physical sculptural work that doesn't seem to be on the radar at all. When you get old enough, you start to see the light at the end of the tunnel. When you're younger, you're indestructible and you don't even see where the tunnel is. Now, I'm fifty-eight, and counting how many more summers I have left, how many more Christmases. What's that saying? 'Everyone knows they're going to die, but nobody actually believes it.' Yeah, well, I actually believe I'm going to die. [Phone rings.]

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Untitled (The Sound of Speed and Light), 2009, charcoal on mounted paper, 191.8 x 242.6 cm