THE BROOKLYN RAIL
CRITICAL PERSPECTIVES ON ARTS, POLITICS, AND CULTURE

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Proof: Francisco Goya, Sergei Eisenstein, Robert Longo

by Louis Block

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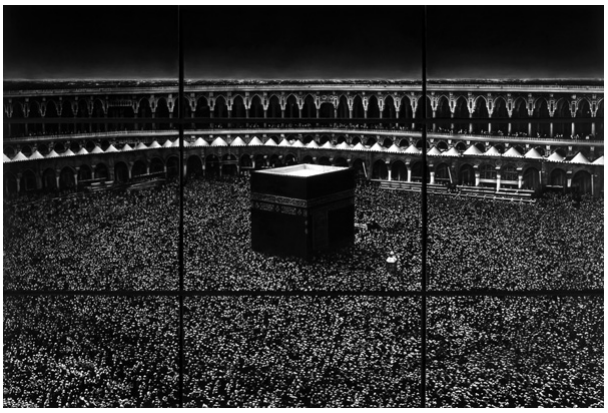
Where does an image begin? Standing beneath Robert Longo's *Untitled (Mecca)* (2010), this question seems impossible to answer. It is as if all power has been stripped from the Kaaba and transmuted to dust. The thousands of pilgrims in the image are now misshapen, combined into shimmers and flares through an aperture—created by no God other than the camera. With painstaking precision, Longo renders all artifacts of his photographic sources in rich multi-toned charcoal. This is either his greatest strength or weakness: all subjects, sacred or profane, receive the same treatment under his democratizing hand.



Robert Longo, *Untitled (Mecca)*, 2010. Charcoal on mounted paper, 166 × 252 in. © Robert Longo, Private Collection. Courtesy the artist and Galerie Thaddaeus Ropac; London, Paris, Salzburg.

Proof, curated by Kate Fowle and Longo himself, presents the draughtsman's work in relation to two other masters of black and white: Francisco Goya and Sergei Eisenstein, artists that Longo admits were deeply influential to his practice. Goya's prints and Eisenstein's 35mm films serve as an introduction to Longo's massive charcoal drawings. The premise of suggesting parallels between three artists from different eras initially seems at odds with the segmented curation: why choose these specific artists if their works will be viewed in separate rooms and not in direct conversation with each other? Fortunately, this format avoids being overly didactic and allows for multiple paths of interpretation.

Entering the exhibition, the viewer is immediately confronted with seven screens arranged in a semi-circle, simultaneously playing different selections from Eisenstein's filmography at one percent of their original running speed. Surrounding the viewer, these concurrent screens tick and tock, one frame every few seconds. These are no longer Eisenstein's films, but a clever curatorial intervention akin to Douglas Gordon's *24 Hour Psycho* (1993). This is a new piece with infinite permutations—Ivan the Terrible blinks and flickers, dust runs slowly across his cheek. To his left, knights run past; it seems they will never reach their destination. It is impossible to take it all in at once—in Don DeLillo's words, it is "to feel time passing,

to be alive to what is happening in the smallest registers of motion."[1] Taken as a singular installation, this room asks many questions of the viewer. How slowly can we look at an image? How much can we take in before our perception shifts? What happens at the peripheries?

This is a show that not only rewards close looking, but necessitates it. These images deal with systems of power and unrest, tradition and revolution; chiaroscuro is used both for drama and symbolism. Consider Longo's two recent protest drawings—*Untitled (Black Pussy Hat in Women's March)* (2017) and *Untitled (Ferguson Police, August 13, 2014)* (2014)—in the former, the viewer looks out from within the crowd towards a horizon glowing with hopeful light; in the latter, headlights silhouette riot police, indicating menace, danger. The white of Longo's page is equally potent in its symbolic roles as power or resistance. Critical to both Goya and Longo's work is an ambivalence rooted in the still frame of motion. Is Goya's *Where There's a Will There's a Way* (1813–1820) a celebration of man's ability to innovate to realize his dreams, or a nightmarish depiction of what we will become in the future? Is Kenny Britt's hand gesture in Longo's *Untitled (St. Louis Rams/Hands Up)* (2015) a signal of celebration or solidarity?

A dichotomy of violence and jubilance manifests in scenes of national fervor, and the most successful pieces in the show are those that present this problem most clearly. The Odessa massacre scene from *Battleship Potemkin* (1925) loses all its horror in the extreme slow-motion in which it is presented. The violence almost seems to vanish with the removal of speed from the scene. On the other hand, Goya's *Tauromaquía* etchings, excited portrayals of national sport by an enthusiast, appear gleefully violent in this context. It is hard to imagine that Longo's *Untitled (American Bald Eagle)* (2017) was approached with a patriotic impulse—its scarred beak betrays the notion of an infallible national symbol—yet consider the care with which each gleaming white feather was drawn. There is a tenderness here that moves past representation. Longo's process requires of him an extreme intimacy with the subjects he encounters photographically—inherent in their creation is a transformation: do Longo's subjects corrupt him, or do these images become corrupted by his preconceptions? In either case, it is imperative that we are able to participate in this transformation.

Robert Longo, *Untitled (X-Ray of Venus with a Mirror, 1555, After Titian)*, 2016-17. Charcoal on mounted paper, 110 × 92 in. © Robert Longo, Courtesy the artist, Metro Pictures, New York, and Galerie Thaddaeus Ropac; London, Paris, Salzburg.

One drawing in particular offers an opening: *Untitled (X-Ray of Venus with a Mirror, 1555, After Titian)* (2016–2017) reveals a former work painted over with the image of Venus—two horizontal figures are hidden among ghost traces of nails, stretcher bars, and cracks in the painting's surface. Centuries of history are compressed and flattened here; the subject of the iconic painting becomes merely a veil covering up past conditions and truths.

It is moments like this and in the Mecca drawing where the eye can't differentiate between paper texture and charcoal marks, or between reflected light and highly rendered lens flares, that allow the drawings to

transcend their appropriated subjects. Up close, these stills shiver and glisten—glimpses of color dance between blinks. It is as if we are seeing these images for the first time again.

Notes

Don Delillo, *Point Omega* (2010), Charles Scribner's Sons, p.6

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