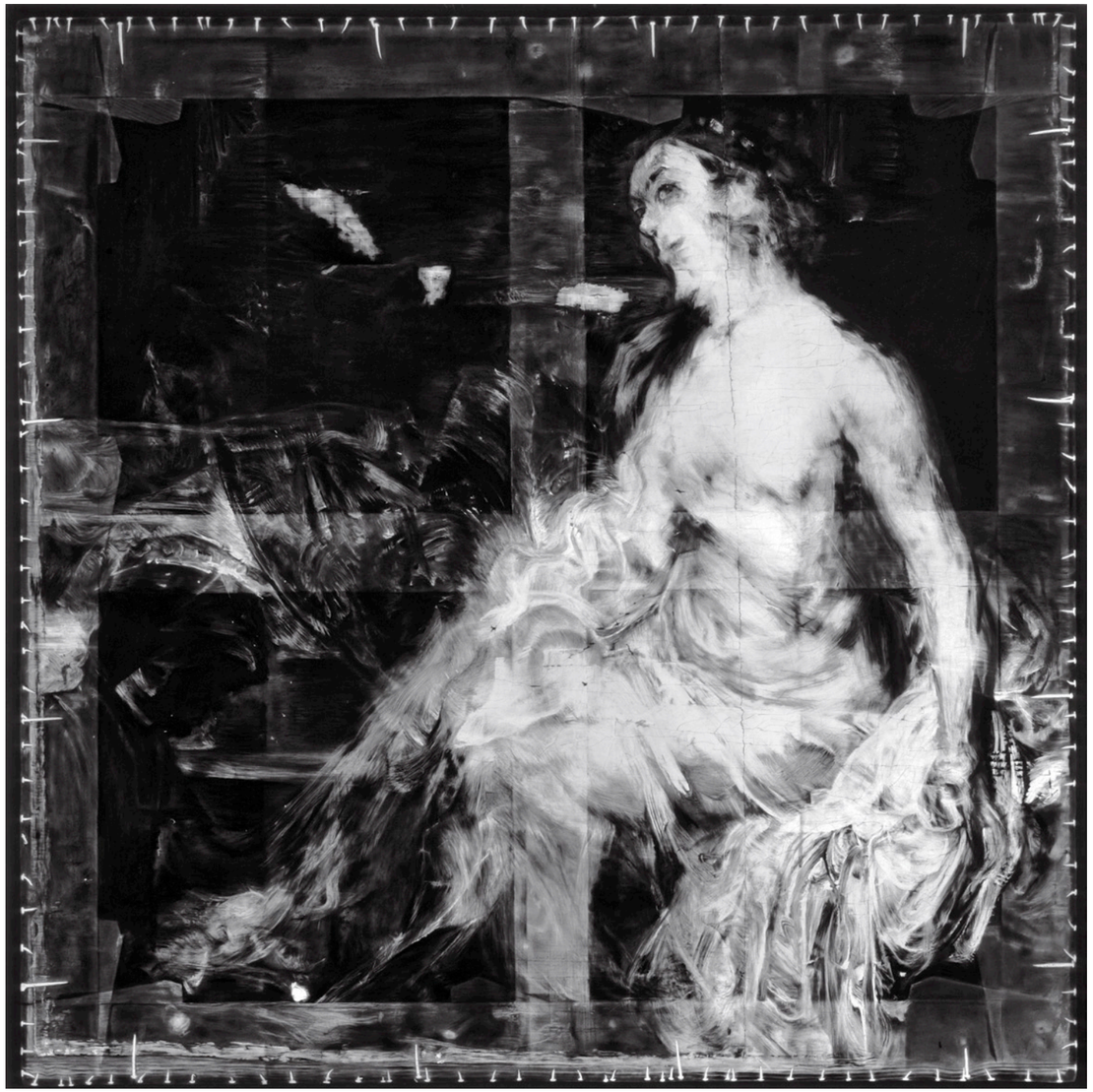
ART *ROBERT LONGO*

Taking a Split-second of Eternity Forever

Interview with Robert Longo

by Marta Gnyp

Robert Longo
Studio view of *Untitled* (X-Ray of Head of Christ, c. 1655, After Rembrandt), 2015
and *Untitled* (X-Ray of Head of Christ, c. 1648-1656, After Rembrandt), 2015
Both works are charcoal on mounted paper, 224.2 cm x 177.8 cm
Courtesy of the artist



Robert Longo
Untitled
(X-Ray of Bathsheba at Her Bath, 1654, After Rembrandt), 2015-2016
Charcoal on mounted paper
177,8 cm x 177,8 cm
Courtesy of the artist and
Galerie Thaddaeus Ropac;
London, Paris and Salzburg

Marta Gnyp: 2017 looks like a big year for you. You will have a show in May at Metro Pictures in New York, then in September, *Proof: Francisco Goya, Sergei Eisenstein, Robert Longo,* from the GARAGE Museum in Moscow is coming to the Brooklyn Museum, a week later you will open a show at Galerie Thaddaeus Ropac in London, and then an exhibition at the Sara Hildén Art Museum in Finland.
Robert Longo: I've just been on the phone with New York and felt kind of guilty that I'm here in Berlin with all the work that needs to be done.

MG: What are you doing in Europe?
RL: I've been in touch with a few conservators because I'm very interested in X-rays of paintings. I went to see X-rays of Raphael's *Pope Julius II* in London at the National Gallery and then I went to the Courtauld Gallery to see the X-ray of Manet's *A Bar of the Folies-Bergère.* I realize that conservators don't have contact with living artists.

MG: It is breathtaking what they can do to art.
RL: They are almost like scientists, but also like monks. It is clearly a calling. What they do is miraculous; they are saving art. I have great respect for them. When I was young and I didn't quite have the courage to say that I wanted to be an artist — because everything I did failed — I thought maybe I would become an art historian or an art conservator. I even got a small scholarship to the Academy in Florence to study the restoration of paintings.

MG: How old were you at that time?
RL: It was 1975 so I was twenty-two. I hated it. I watched these guys doing these horrible restorations; until this wonderful woman started the renovation of *The Last Supper* and introduced a new idea of taking the restoration off and showing what's there. The conservators I met recently are pretty amazing.

MG: What is so special about the X-rays of paintings?
RL: Like doctors, they will make an X-ray only when something is wrong and expect that they will need it to take care of the paintings. In his great essay *Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction* Walter Benjamin talks about the loss of aura. But when you see the X-rays, it is the aura! The X-rays show what's invisible. For my first X-ray drawing, I used this really small Rembrandt painting of Jesus, which was based upon a Jewish man living in Amsterdam at that time. The underpaintings, which were made visible thanks to X-rays, are quite extraordinary; they are Semitic while the actual painting looks rather European. The X-rays exposed white lines of the walnut; it looks electric, like a scene from *The Matrix* — the expression on Jesus' face is incredible.

MG: X-rays also enable you to see the changes in paintings.
RL: One painting that I've always loved is Rembrandt's *Bathsheba at Her Bath* showing a woman reading a letter with this incredible resignation in her eyes. She has to contend with the king wanting to bed her; meanwhile her husband is away fighting for the king. In the painting that is underneath, though, the expression on her face is quite different, like she is…

MG: Curious…
RL: Thinking, "maybe it's not going to be that bad".

MG: Will your work for the shows this year be based on the X-rays?
RL: Not exclusively. My work has always had a political edge buried in it, but over the last five to six years it has gotten more aggressive. The drawings in the show at Metro Pictures will be very political in that they come from a place of rage about our current political state.

MG: Could you give me examples?
RL: There is one drawing based on a telescoped, infrared photograph taken at night of prisoners at the Kandahar Airport in Afghanistan. Another one shows the riot police making a wall of shields in Baltimore, Maryland. I've made a 12x30 foot drawing of refugees lost in a massive sea.

MG: Do you always use an existing photograph to make your drawings?
RL: Sometimes I use a couple of photos in a composite. I remember when I saw photographs of the riot cops in Ferguson in a newspaper I was thinking, "where is this? Is it the Ukraine?" Then I saw McDonalds in the background, and I thought, oh my God, this is America! It was outrageous to see these soldiers. Then I wanted to draw the protestors with their hands up. The problem was, I couldn't draw them like it was; it looked as if they were dancing.

MG: How did you add the power to it?
RL: Do you know that photograph taken during the Olympics in 1968 of these two black athletes, Tommie Smith and John Carlos, when they raised their fists in the Black Power salute as protest? I came from the tribe of sports; I played football in college, and sports have always been a part of my life. I remembered when the American football team the St. Louis Rams were introduced in the stadium, they came out with their hands up in solidarity with protestors after the shooting by a police officer of an unarmed teenager, Michael Brown. The equipment that they were wearing was very similar to the equipment the police were wearing.

MG: You combined sports and riot photographs.
RL: I am interested more in the collision of images, rather than pastiche. Michael Brown, the kid that was shot in the street in Ferguson was the size of a football player. He wasn't one, but he could've been. So there is complexity in this image.

MG: How do you make art out of disaster?
RL: By utilizing beauty to communicate issues that are at hand, almost like disarming the viewer, getting them there because something is interesting to look at and at the same time it makes you think of something else.

MG: Lets speak about new and real. In the seventies and eighties you and a few artist friends dismissed the idea of the new by responding to post-structural ideas on authenticity and originality. You, the Picture Generation expressed this.
RL: We didn't know about that; we were a bunch of friends and we were making art. When Cindy Sherman and I moved to New York in 1977, the art world was dead. The most exciting things going on in New York were the punk music scene and movies like *Taxi Driver* and a Fassbinder festival in the city. Emerging art was Schnabel and the transavantgarde bullshit. We were involved in very different art that was all media based. We were doing pictures of pictures. The division was very clear to me. Those guys — Schnabel, Cucchi, Clemente and Chia — were wrong. It was almost like a war. Neo-Expressionism seemed to be about what art was, and my friends and I were interested in what art could be.

MG: Did you feel connected to the conceptual art movement?
RL: Absolutely. Conceptual artists broke down so many things. It was like they built this car and my generation got to drive in it. We had the freedom to do whatever we wanted.

MG: The ideas for your work were informed early on.
RL: There is a primordial time for an artist that occurs somewhere between the seventh and fourteenth year of your life when you go from being a boy to a being a man, or from girl to woman. That period of time is when all the seeds are planted. I can track everything I do to that time. For a boy, when you stop playing and start fighting.

MG: Let's go back to New York in the seventies. How did you start?
RL: There wasn't anybody like Polke or Richter in the US at that time. But we knew about those guys. There was a great bookstore where I saw Richter's work in a book for the first time. The reason I was going to the bookstore was because it was close to a record store. Getting the most recent punk record was far more important than art at the time. What's interesting is that what used to be avant-garde, the white walled art galleries, became black shitty holes where people played music. There was this really interesting integration of artistic disciplines at that time. I played in a band, like a lot of other artists; people were making films and doing performances. Performances are these transient events that happen in real time, they work with the idea of the public, there is no residual artifact.

MG: What kind of performance did you do?
RL: They were more like theater, or a memory of theater.

MG: Did you play yourself?
RL: No! I treated them more like objects. The first one I did was *Sound Distance of a Good Man* at this alternative art space called The Kitchen in New York in 1978. I used a three-tier platform. On the lowest platform, there was an opera singer singing in a white gown. On the middle platform, you could see a grainy black-and-white film about a man arching his back towards a lion statue, a 16mm film of a still image, so the grain was vibrating. At any moment, the protagonist could move. On the highest level, there was a rotating platform on which black and white men were wrestling in a slow motion; it looked like they were having sex. There was no narrative, it was violent, we played with the effects of music

and image. It lasted for five minutes. People were crying.

MG: Was it meant to be a unique performance or did you re-enact this?
RL: We did it three times. It became quite well known. It has been restaged in subsequent years.

MG: How did you like playing in a band?
RL: The problem about playing in a band is you have to practice. I would rather be in my studio. This period between 1977 and 1981 was very important. I did the performance in 1978, I did many small shows, it was slowly happening and then it exploded.

MG: The breakthrough moment for you was the series *Men in the Cities.*
RL: If anything, I will probably be remembered for this. I did this series for a short period of time.

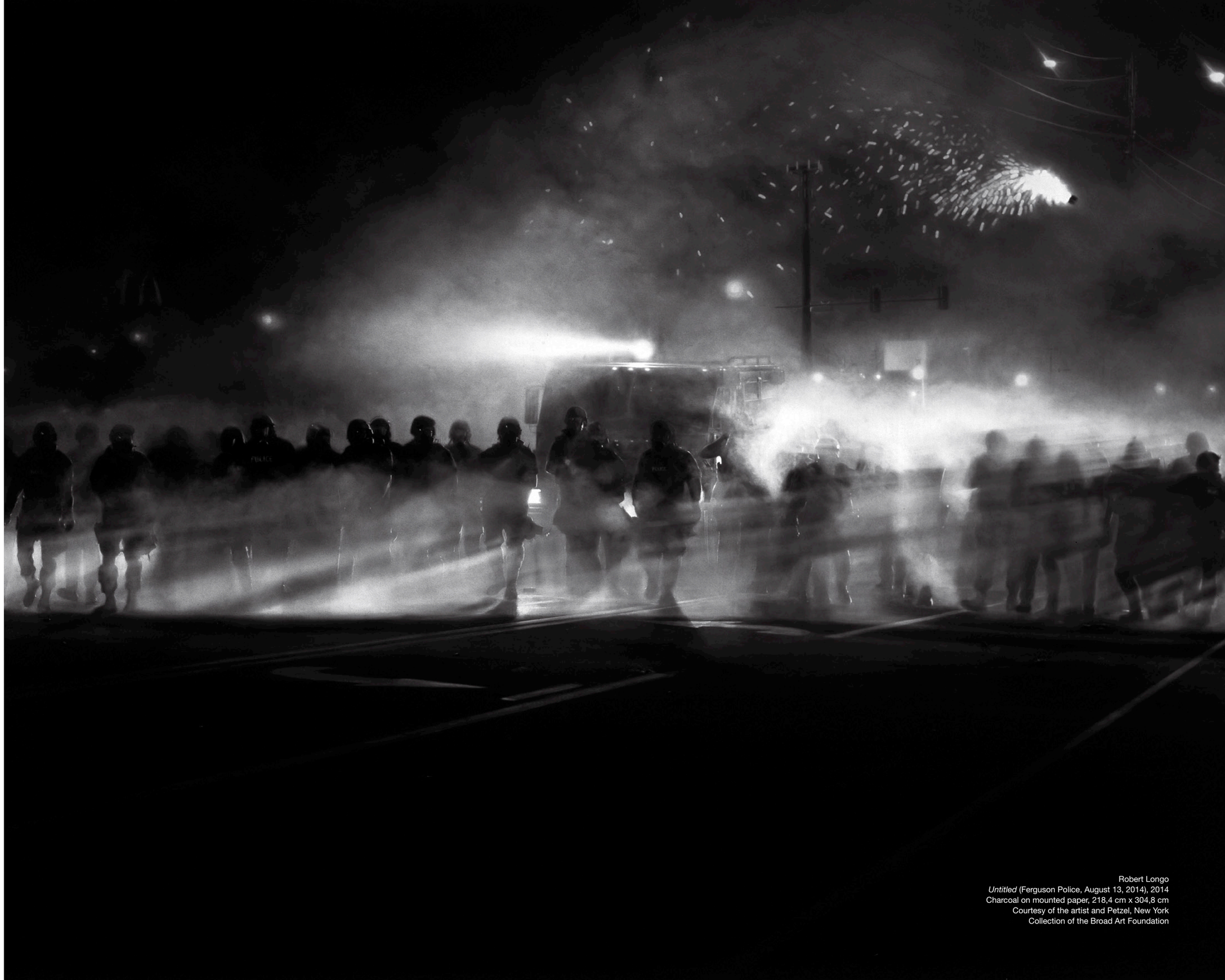
MG: Why did you call it *Men in the Cities?*
RL: You mean there were women in it? I remember in elementary school being told you can say "men" to refer to both men and women. The title referred actually to two things that somehow came together: Wim Wenders's movie *Alice in the Cities* and the record *In the City* from this really great punk band called The Jam. The first *Man in the City* was a man trapped with his feet in a fall and trying to escape. It was based on a dream I had. But the whole series is based on high impact moments and violence.

As kids, we used to play this very stupid game: "who could fall to their death best?" It was like a ballet. Do you know Robert Smithson's idea about entropy? I wanted to do something anti-Robert Smithson, the moment between moments. If I want to stop time, I want to take a split-second of eternity forever. I also realized that my art history background came back. I really love Michelangelo's *Slaves* at the Academy, caught in the moment before death. I stripped away the background and I put my figures in a situation where you are not sure whether they are dying or dancing.

MG: Why has this series of images become so relevant? They seem to capture the zeitgeist of the eighties.
RL: You got me. I don't know. I started to run away from this work because the images became misunderstood. People kept calling them "yuppies," although the people I drew were my friends wearing punk clothes from a free shop: skinny ties, pony shoes, narrow pants. But my studio was down by Wall Street so I knew what yuppies looked like. These people were to me like collapsing buildings.

MG: Almost visionary...
RL: Recently after the shooting of the Russian ambassador to Turkey, people sent me images saying it looked like my work. I got freaked out. Forget about my work, this young guy shot this poor guy and now he is dead. At the same time, I realized that the guy was about the age of my models; he could be in one of my drawings.

MG: Did you dress your friends for the photo shoots?



Robert Longo
Untitled (Ferguson Police, August 13, 2014), 2014
Charcoal on mounted paper, 218,4 cm x 304,8 cm
Courtesy of the artist and Petzel, New York
Collection of the Broad Art Foundation

Robert Longo
Untitled (Jules),
from the series *Men in the Cities,* 1979-1983
Charcoal and graphite on paper, 243,8 cm x 152,4 cm
Courtesy of the artist and Metro Pictures, New York
Collection of Centre Georges Pompidou

“Deep inside I’m a sculptor. The drawing process is more like sculpting than drawing. […] I want people to look at my work closely enough so they can see the hand, but I don’t want the hand to be a part of the work. I love to see the brushstroke, the evidence of expression, but in drawing it’s overly sentimental.”

RL: There was a very clear delineation of how to get dressed. Men always wore a tie; it was like an urban uniform. Women were in skirts and on high heels. I would take my first models, like Gretchen (Bender), Cindy (Sherman) and Troy (Brauntuch) up on the roof and torture them. I threw tennis balls at them; sometimes I would put a rope around the entire group and another person would pull them. It was pretty funny.

MG: Cindy was your partner at that time. Did you exchange ideas about each other’s works?
RL: When Cindy took the first couple of her photographs in the studio I was really excited about them, I thought they were really cool. We had all these film books in the studio with the films of people like Godard; we had all kinds of books. I was watching movies all the time to steal and to make my drawings from. When she developed her first photographs in her apartment with cold water; they came out really grainy so they looked like film stills. Then she wanted to go out into the world. We had a Volkswagen van so she would change in the back of the van, we would drive around and I took the photographs. For both Cindy and I, we were leaving behind appropriation and, instead, choosing to generate our own images in the spirit of appropriation. The images obtained ghosts of images that existed.

MG: You did.
RL: Yes, those outside, not in the studio. This was what we were all doing: she was my model, I took her photos. We were helping each other. It’s incredible that Cindy became the most famous artist in the post-war period. I think her work is really great. She consistently amazes me.

MG: You two still have very good contact.
RL: Very good. She is the godmother of my son. When we started to get successful, we were no longer living together, but we were calling each other on the phone, saying: “I bought a TV today! I bought a stereo today! Wow.”

MG: The moment of experiencing success must have been fantastic.
RL: It was really great because I could quit other jobs. Making art as a job was pretty amazing. I haven’t done anything except making art since 1979. I’m really lucky. If there is a God, he is the one who gives out luck. When younger artists ask me, “How do I make it?” I always say: you have to create the vibe for luck to have a chance to visit you. It is like making a net, which is made out of other friends who are artists, people you talk to, writers, musicians, and this net is the thing that catches luck. You have to amplify the possibility of luck happening. If you are at home in your studio all by yourself, there is little chance that somebody is going to discover you. But it’s not a hassle. A lot of artists think that they need to go to the openings, they schmooze with collectors, they schmooze with art dealers; that’s all bullshit. You have to have a community that is the genuine zeitgeist. Artists must pursue truth, not fashion the truth.

MG: In 1977 you participated in the seminal exhibition *Pictures.* Did you and your artist friends realize the importance of this show?
RL: One of the greatest gifts we could get was to have a man like Doug Crimp [the art critic] to look at our work and translate it into words. As an artist, I couldn’t articulate the work in the way Doug could.

MG: Such an interpretation is not the task of the artist.
RL: This is why the artist makes art. You make art because words are not enough. All of the people in the *Pictures* show were friends. I was very close to Jack Goldstein and Troy Brauntuch. I knew Sherrie Levine, it was an exciting moment because we thought, “Wow, this is our time!” Then, nobody sold anything from this show, nothing really happened, although the show travelled around the country. Then Doug expanded the essay to include Cindy, Louise Lawler, Richard Prince, and a few other people; the press started covering us. Metro Pictures opened in 1980, and then it all started.

MG: You were known as the first post-war generation of artists who profited financially from their art.
RL: When people become critical about the art market, they go back to the first group of artists who started to make money. There was this horrible article in 1989 titled “Four Artists of the Apocalypse,” featuring Julian Schnabel, David Salle, Eric Fischl, and me. The irony is that the money that we made compared to artists like Koons and others after us is like pocket money. But we are the guys who perpetrated the original sin of the art market.

MG: Did the financial success surprise you?
RL: When we first moved to New York, we never thought that we could make money. Never. The plan was, “maybe I will do a show, maybe I will sell some art, maybe I will teach at a college”. There were few artists and maybe five small galleries. The idea of money was never on the agenda. I’m glad that people are interested in my work but the idea has always been to make money in order to *make* the work.

MG: Do you remember the feeling when you sold your work for the first time?
RL: I sold my first piece for twenty-five dollars. It feels like someone is taking your children away from you. Later on, when I signed with the gallery, the gallery became an adoption agency and their job was to find the right parents.

MG: At a certain moment, the dream ended.
RL: I remember my show *Black Flags* in New York with bronze castings of American flags. There were reserves on the pieces, like usual; I thought everything would be fine, and all of the sudden, the art market crashed. I sold only three of them. Then I did something that saved my life: I became involved with a French woman and I just moved to Paris.

MG: You escaped New York.
RL: And saved my life by doing it. If I’d stayed in New York I would have become really bitter. No one was buying my work at the time. Europe helped me a lot. I did some big amazing works when I was in Europe. I met my wife [actress Barbara Sukowa] in Europe.

MG: Why did you go back to New York?
RL: I remember Robert Wilson told me once, "You have to go back to New York. Don't do what I did. Don't leave and do your work elsewhere. You'll always want to go back." I lived two and half years in Paris and went back in 1992 and slightly later got involved in making a movie, which was such torture. I couldn't make the movie I wanted to make.

MG: Did you go to Hollywood?
RL: Hollywood came to me. I met Keanu [Reeves] a few years before and I wanted to make this small, weird, arty sci-fi movie with him. I couldn't raise two million dollars, unfortunately. In the meantime, Keanu got big, so they finally gave us about twenty-six million dollars instead, but tried to turn the film into an action movie. *Johnny Mnemonic* opened the same day as *Batman* and *Die Hard*. It was number four for many months; it wasn't very successful initially but then actually made a lot of money. Now it's like a cult movie to a lot of people.

MG: What did you do after this experience?
RL: I felt lost. I went back to the studio but I didn't know what to do. I had no assistants. My wife said, "Why don't you start drawing again?" And then the only question was what to draw. My wife, who is European, helped me to see things very differently.

MG: In what way?
RL: I used to watch two TVs simultaneously, with the stereo on and look at magazines, all at the same time. I became numb to this kind of media assault. She made me aware of this. Having children made me think of the consequences of images. In a weird way, I got back to the beginning, when I was looking at images in the media, and realizing the number of images that pass through you everyday. You have no idea what they do to you. My youngest son had just been born and I didn't want to travel anymore. I decided to stay in one place and do one drawing a day — an image that I would pick out of the media or choose because I felt I had to.

When you render an image, you take it into yourself and process it on a molecular level; you own that image. It becomes a part of you. I created 366 images, one each day. It was a leap year. I titled the series *Magellan* after a 24-hour film made by a friend. When I showed *Magellan* in 1996/97 at Metro in New York, they covered the whole gallery. I think we sold two of the 366 drawings.

MG: You didn't consider it as one work?
RL: I did! But I needed money. So people were saying: "I really like the dog, can we have that dog?" *Magellan* broke up in the beginning, but slowly twenty-five were sold here, fifteen were sold there, then somebody bought a hundred — eventually they were all gone. *Magellan* has become a lexicon for everything that followed.

MG: Was this the moment when you understood the impact an image could have?
RL: *Men in the Cities* were works that looked at you as much as you looked at them. It was an image that happened in a split second, so you got it. It's not something that asked that you sit and look at it for a very long time.

MG: A very quick look.
RL: Then I started to go back to history. I tried to comprehend how things are put together, what makes a good image and composition. A friend in Paris gave me a book and said: "One day you will find it interesting." It was a book with photographs of Freud's apartment, taken a few days before he left because of the Nazis. For some reason the images of his apartment reminded me of my family's doctor's office in the Bronx. It was really an old office. My father and I used to go to because of his heart condition. Each time it felt like waiting for my father to die.

To me, Freud's apartment looked similar. Here is Freud, trying to understand the deep, dark secrets of the mind while Nazis are on the street actually acting out that very darkness. I did a series of drawings called *The Freud Cycle* based on the photographs in his apartment. One of my main goals of this series was to attempt to draw absence.

MG: Why did you make the wave series?
RL: I was teaching my middle son to surf. I was sitting in the water pushing him into waves and then looked at the waves closely for the first time. I had studied waves in order to know how to surf them before, but never really looked at them. I became really fascinated by their autonomy and power, and I started the wave drawings. The series was self-propellant.

MG: What has become the greatest challenge for you?
RL: To stay relevant. I feel that I'm making the best work I've made in my life now. I'm very happy about it.

MG: From a skills point of view?
RL: To do what I do requires assistants. For many years, I was the assistant of Vito Acconci and Dennis Oppenheim. Hiring assistants is like being a parent; I want to be better than my father, which, in this case, means I want to be better than Vito. I treat my assistants with great respect. I create a situation where they work reasonable hours, they get paid really well, and I expect them to do an excellent job.

MG: Isn't it complicated to work with assistants?
RL: When I made something all by myself, it was very difficult for me to be self-critical. It was like masturbation. I was so in love with what I made. But if you have somebody working with you, it's not a big deal to just destroy it, erase it. I am able to detach myself, and have a more critical eye. I have certain assistant who are really good at details, certain guys who are really good filling in areas. I can work on a couple of drawings simultaneously, and then ultimately, there is a moment when I have to finish them. That's when I become the person who brings it to life.

MG: It is a very traditional artist's studio like Rembrandt's.
RL: When I was doing the show in Russia last year, I flew my assistants to Moscow as well. A young curator, Vika Dushkina, curated a show with them. So they came to Moscow not as assistants but as artists.

MG: The focus of your work in the last several years has become drawing.
RL: Deep inside, I'm a sculptor. The drawing process is more like sculpting than drawing. It's not the academic rendering like Rembrandt. The white that you always see is the untouched surface of the paper. I've worked on this very special paper for the past thirty years. The paper has just enough grain to look like a photograph. I use a lot of different color charcoals. Usually the last step is the erasing which is the carving. It is all very physical. I want people to look at my work closely enough so they can see the hand, but I don't want the hand to be a part of the work. I love to see the brushstroke, the evidence of expression, but in drawing it's overly sentimental. There is a precise balance between illustration and photo-realism. I want to make images hyperreal.

MG: Do you speak to your collectors?
RL: A few.

MG: Do you like it?
RL: A few, I do. Part of the problem is that I'm not terribly social. I can't go to their houses and schmooze with them; I'm not like that. I always feel when I go there that I'm supposed to steal something. I'm incredibly grateful that people like my work.

MG: Do you feel uneasy when other people own your work?
RL: When you buy an artwork, you don't actually own it. You own the right to look at it for as long as you want. The responsibility is much greater; you become a caretaker of this work, which is an interesting privilege. I, myself, have no problem with people who resell work. Collectors take a risk by buying art..

MG: No irritations regarding people who own your work?
RL: Very rarely, people call me to say that the work needs to be fixed. When I investigate it, it's usually something that they did. Like somebody has a drawing of mine in their beach house on the wall facing the ocean. What do you want me to do?

MG: You mentioned how greatly you appreciated Douglas Crimp because of defining what you and your friends were doing. What do you think about current art criticism and theory?
RL: If someone writes about you critically, it's really a gift. Hal Foster, who is one of my great friends, has written a lot about my work. Recently the writing of Kate Fowle, the chief curator of The Garage Museum, has been very informative for me.

MG: Have you noticed a difference in art criticism?
RL: Honestly, I don't read it. Criticism seems to be an objectified art form unto itself. What I have noticed is the enormous wave of curators that

Robert Longo
Untitled (Exterior Street Door, Berggasse 19, Vienna 1938), 2000
Charcoal on mounted paper, 243,8 cm x 152,4 cm
Courtesy of the artist and Galerie Hans Mayer, Düsseldorf

now exist. It's become different. There are star curators, where artists function as illustrators to the curators' theories. Crimp and Foster were writing close to the first-person perspective. It was not that they were writing about art, but rather, they were using art to talk about the ideas that were in the work. When we did the show in Moscow, Kate Fowle asked me who I wanted to ask to write for the catalogue other than her. I said Chris Hedges. He's a Pulitzer-prize winning journalist. I thought we'd never get him, but we did. I thought it would be great to have someone with a different, political perspective, a perspective outside of the art world. I am very proud of the *Proof* catalogue.

MG: What is a recipe for good art?
RL: You can compare making art to tuning a radio. Do you remember the old radios when you had to turn a knob? If you go too much in this direction or too much the other way, you will lose it. Making art is about this kind of balance between the personal and the socially relevant. I think that balance is really crucial.

Robert Longo
Untitled (Hellion), 2011
Charcoal on mounted paper, 176,2 cm x 303,2 cm
Courtesy of the artist and Metro Pictures, New York

Robert Longo
Studio view of *Untitled* (Pentecost), 2016
Charcoal on mounted paper, 5 panels
Overall Dimensions: 304,8 cm x 609,6 cm
Courtesy of the artist and Metro Pictures, New York