

Art

The "Spectacles" of Robert Longo

by Hunter Drohojowska

A policewoman in Miami is watching a violent rape. She screams at the assailant to stop, then draws her gun and fires. She is not shooting at an actual event, however, but at filmed footage of the crime enacted by performers. "I believed I was in that situation," says the officer. "I was all hyped up."

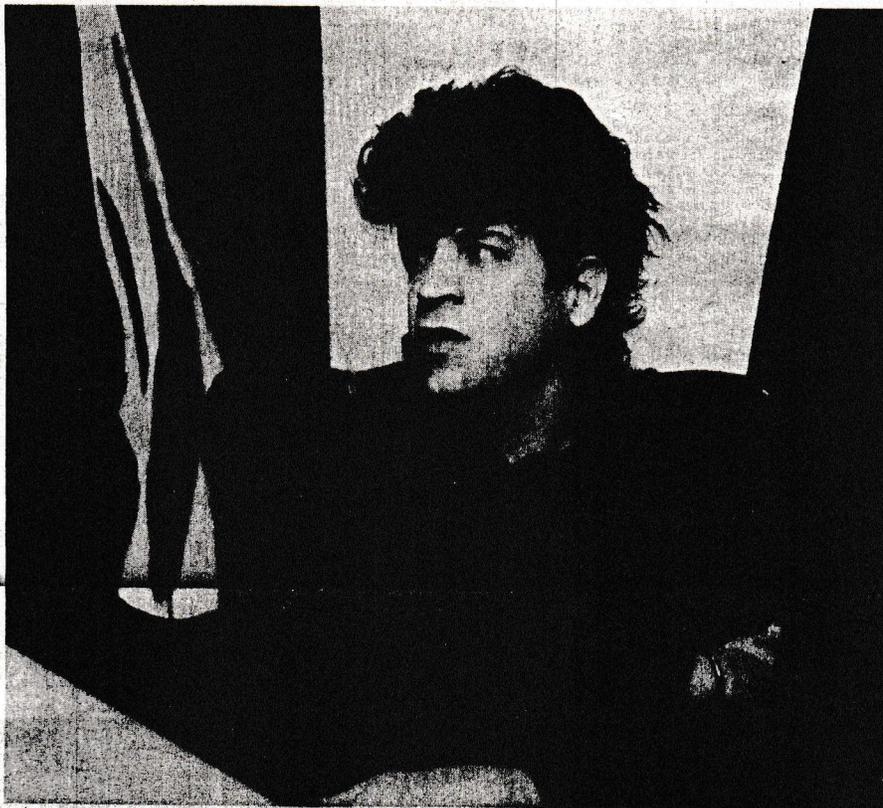
According to the evening news, film situations of violent crime are being used to train the Miami police department. French philosopher Guy Debord would have enjoyed the idea of a critic writing about "spectacle," watching a TV program about filmed simulations of real events. Debord wrote *Society of the Spectacle* in 1967, but the slim volume reads as though tailor-made for today, when the mediated image of an actor may beat a real man to the presidency.

Debord wrote that spectacle "in all its specific forms as information or propaganda, as advertisement or direct entertainment consumption, is the present model of a socially dominant life. It's not interactive life but something separate and autonomous, 'the heart of the unrealism of unreal society.'" To look around and wonder whether image hasn't come to count for more than substance — when the old-fashioned, complicated and difficult truth seems to be losing out to appearances — is to look at the society of the spectacle. "In a world which really is topsy-turvy, the true is a moment of the false," says Debord.

An entire movement of young artists recognizes and analyzes the society of the spectacle. They "re-represent" imagery from the media because it is their, and our, reality. The best of them question this situation and hope their art will reveal the manipulation behind the information. "The Art of Spectacle," a performance art series that has been unfolding these past few weeks, includes artists as varied as Glenn Branca, Lin Hixson, Ping Chong, Remy Charlip, Rachel Rosenthal and Carl Stone, but the one who most fulfills the concept of spectacle is Robert Longo.

Longo selects from the movies, TV, rock & roll, from news and fashion magazines, and recreates these images as drawings and sculptural reliefs. The theme is "spectacle" — figures thrashing in urban desperation, lost in the schism between representation and reality. One of Longo's earliest motifs, a man arched backwards in isolated agony, was drawn from Fassbinder's film *An American Soldier*. His larger-than-life-size prints and drawings of fashionably dressed men and women revealed their appearance to be their content; they had no interior selves, nothing to express.

Perhaps this is what separates Longo and others who re-represent the media from the so-called neo-expressionists,



many of whom are still trying to present their souls. Longo would be more interested in Van Gogh as portrayed by Kirk Douglas in *Lust for Life*, because that film informs the way society now sees the life of that artist. He re-represents the clichés of media to force the viewer to draw conclusions, to think about everyday objects and images, now seen in another context. "I wanted to make art that put the viewer on a tightrope," Longo says, "in the sense that the content became commuted by what [the viewer] wanted to see in it."

Most recently, Longo has been juxtaposing clichés of romance with images of power or destruction. A tableau incorporates enormous, corny, gold-leafed flowers with a collapsed freeway bridge. At the Larry Gagosian Gallery, from November 8, he'll show four new works he describes as the "theoretical whole body of a clown," with head, outstretched arms and crotch. They derive from "Pressure," an image of a clown in white face beneath the obvious weight of a massive group of high rises in relief.

Longo's performances are intentionally non-narrative, like his work, and may best be described as "performance/sculpture/tableaux." Longo actually started in

performance art in the mid-'70s. He stopped because "all you have left is a bunch of black and white photographs. I'm about stuff that stays on the walls forever," he says.

Even in the studio, Longo is more of a producer/director, using a slew of skilled illustrators and technicians to execute his ideas. When he returned to performance in 1978 and '79 — "as a way of paying homage to where I started" — the performances "became real objects, real tableaux." They were conceived along the same ambitious lines, with dancers, musicians, comics, actors, lights, special effects, as though he were the Cecil B. De Mille of the art world.

Longo will be staging the first two segments of his performance trilogy *Empire* this Saturday (Nov. 10), at the James Corcoran Annex, 1625 Electric Ave., Venice. (The series is being produced by UCLA, Some Serious Business, and L.A.C.E. For information call the latter at 620-0104).

Sound Distance of a Good Man, first performed in 1978, opens with dancers Bill T. Jones and Eric Barnes posed as wrestlers moving in erotic slow motion on a revolving turntable on the highest tier of

a raised platform. The music is Brian Eno's version of the Pachelbel *Canon*. On a lower tier, an elegant woman (Longo's sister Peggy Atkinson) in an off-the-shoulder white gown will sing opera. Between them is a black-and-white 16mm film of the Fassbinder still, and another of a carved stone monument of a lion. This vision, enhanced by theatrical music and lighting, may last 14 minutes. It will be followed by *Surrender*, from 1979, featuring Peter Gordon as the saxophonist in black, and a pair of ballroom dancers. The 1981 segment of *Empire*, which concluded the trilogy at the Corcoran Gallery of Art in Washington, D.C., will not be performed here. It included an Albert Speer-like theater of light, smoke and air-raid sirens designed so the audience would walk out to see the White House on the hill.

Says Longo, "I think art is simply a thing that is a monitoring device. High art watches the world and reports back. I'm concerned about history, about reporting about living now." Longo is reporting our spectacles back to us. "How variable is the experience of six million people watching *Three's Company*? It's like zero. The artist has the opportunity to give people back their own personal visions." ■