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# Robert Longo

## Performance into Film

**Vera Dika**

The work of Robert Longo usually begins with a photographic image that is subsequently transformed into drawing, sculpture, film, performance or dance. The sense of longing in his work is inseparable from its photographic source. Human figures halted in their movements, moments taken out of sequence, events without captions, are all suspended in terms of time and memory. These are images from the past, absences which promise, but never fully realize, a vivid, ongoing reality.

The two most popular explanations of Longo's work, however, regard the photographic source of these images only as given, or a device for examining larger issues. Douglas Crimp, for example, sees Longo's work as an investigation of representation itself,<sup>1</sup> while Hal Foster discusses it in terms of the spectacle,<sup>2</sup> as a set of manipulations alluding to the 'loss of the real' in our image-dominated society.

The fact remains, however, that if only because of its extensive, even exclusive use, the photographic source of Longo's work is more adequately understood as commenting on a *specific* type of representation rather than on representation in general, that is to say, on representation that is photographically derived rather than manually formulated. The two have significant differences, not only in their means of production and their system for creating meaning, but also in their usage.<sup>3</sup> In the photograph, for example, the image is created by an indexical process, an actual imprinting of light from the object photographed onto the film's emulsion. Extracted as it is from its immediate context, the resulting image becomes ambiguous in terms of meaning and so needs a caption to ground it adequately. And, although photography has had a substantial personal use in family life, it has also exerted a powerful impact in its cultural form: as advertising, news or reportage.

But while these are satisfactory observations when discussing a single image in isolation of others, the images in Longo's work almost never appear alone. Instead, they are juxtaposed in an attempt that at once implies meaning and blocks it. By denying them this usual meaningful juncture, the photographically derived images imply, now by an inverse process, the sequencing of shots in the cinema and their attendant system of montage. But the cinematic reading of Longo's work becomes of special interest when his photographically derived images are transformed onto the spatio-temporal plane of his performance works. Here the images are afforded a fuller range of expression and of possible inversion, ones

which ultimately serve to define film and the film experience with each permutation. In this way, the formal aspects of the film medium are foregrounded, as are their semiological and cultural components.

The discussion of Longo's performance work, however, must begin with one of his early static pieces which, ironically, is presented as a single image. *The American Soldier and the Quiet Schoolboy* (1977) is a small relief of a man, his body arched backward in an ambiguous pose. The source material of this piece is a production still from the film *The American Soldier* by R.W. Fassbinder which depicts a man at the moment of death, his body recoiling from a penetrating bullet. In Longo's work, however, the figure (made by an imprint to mimic the indexical process of photography) is removed both from its original background and from the caption that had accompanied it. The result is a figure whose meaning is not readily identifiable. In this way *The American Soldier* is a 'quotation', one excerpted from its original context, much as the production still had been from Fassbinder's film and as a photograph is from the continuous flow of time.

Next *The American Soldier* is subjected to a process of 'rotation', as Longo calls it,<sup>4</sup> in that it re-appears in one of his later performance works. In *Sound Distance of a Good Man* (1978) Longo transforms *The American Soldier* back into film, but not without the necessary manipulations, and then only as a portion of the performance, not its entirety. For the eventual film, Longo dressed an actor to resemble *The American Soldier* and then photographed him in a fragmentary re-creation of the original image. The resulting black and white still consisted of the man seen in medium shot, his head pulled back forcibly. Behind him, in a novel intra-image juxtaposition, was the majestic image of a stone lion (an often used symbol for the New York Public Library). Both of these images were then set against an otherwise empty background.

In the performance of *Sound Distance*, Longo presents this photograph on film, a transformation which adds the dimension of time to the image. As a film of a photograph, the subliminal flickering light quality from the projector ironically suggests the still images at the basis of every film experience, while also bestowing a present tense quality on the image, a time-frame characteristic of the film and not of photography. Both the stone lion and Longo's aluminium figure, as sculptures and as metaphors for the still, even



past quality of the photograph (a connotation derived primarily from the archaic form of both the stone lion and the relief) had been frozen in time. Now by virtue of the film the existence of these photographs can more accurately be described as 'timed', since even at this moment of death they have been infused with an ironic sense of life.

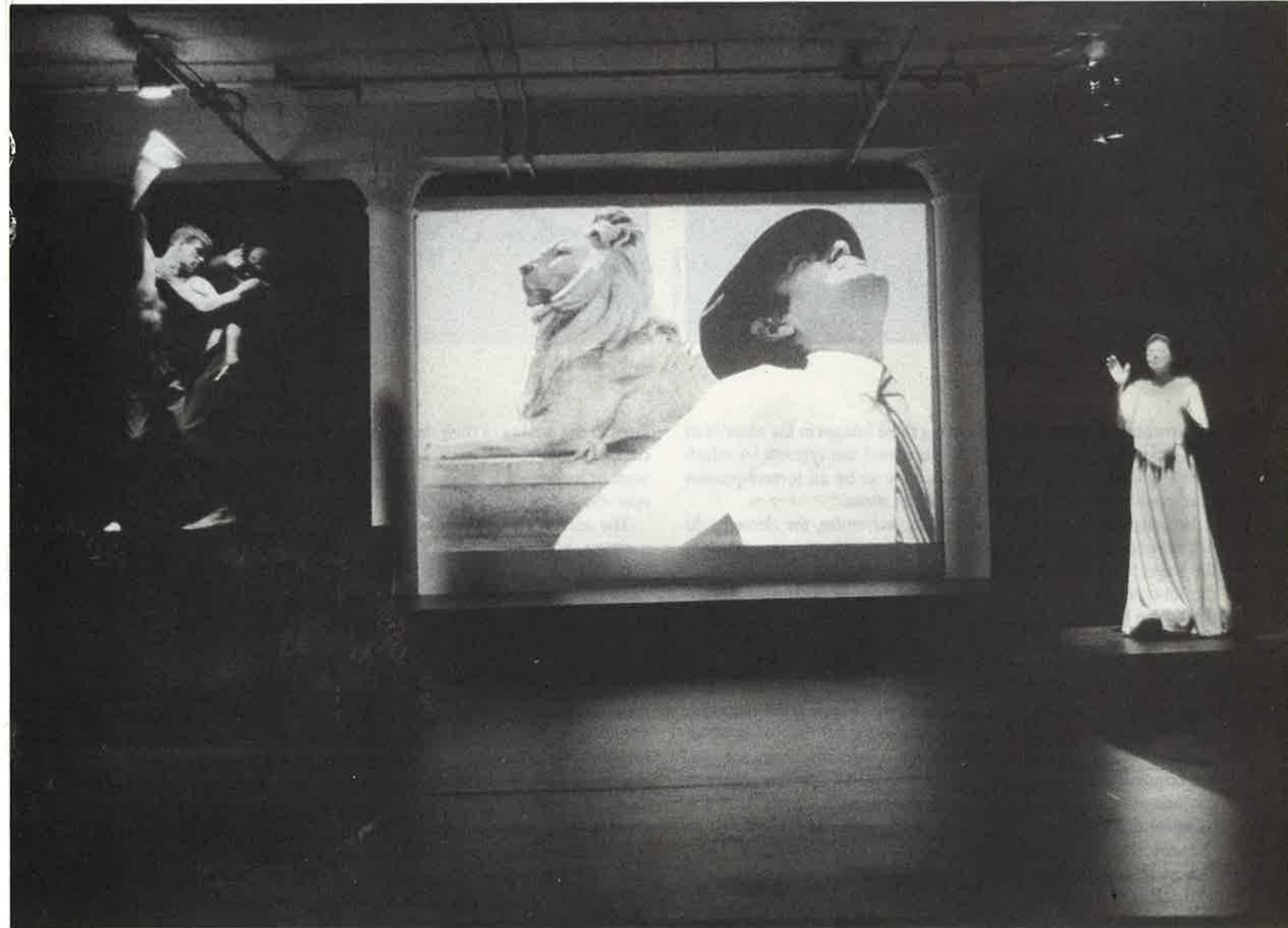
In the actual performance of *Sound Distance*, however, this film is situated at the centre of a horizontally descending three-tiered platform flanked on either side by a set of 'living pictures', in the shape of live performers presented in actions or poses which underline their quality as representations, and/or reproductions. To the left are two 'wrestlers', wearing karate pants. Stripped to the waist, so as to recall images of Bruce Lee, they are locked in an extreme slow motion embrace which, complete with amber lighting, was taken from the wrestling sequence of *Women in Love*. Their actions, however, have been choreographed to recall the succession of distinct still frames that make up the illusion of movement on film, and then have been placed on a revolving disc which further alludes to their status as film images by literalizing the function of a 360° dolly shot around the object. To the right of this centre screen, then, is a woman, elegantly dressed in a flowing white gown, and holding a gesture which has been stopped, as in a

photograph, in the middle of a movement. Maintaining this pose she sings sounds, not words, to the operatic score which is then echoed by two recordings of the same piece. In addition both sets of performers are lit so as to create deep shadows on their bodies and emphasizing them as sculptural forms and so living metaphors for the still, past quality of the photograph.

But in that these 'pictures' refer to other 'pictures' (that is, to Fassbinder's film, to the logo for the Public Library, to *Women in Love*, or even to wrestling itself, a practice which, as Roland Barthes has noted, is almost always a spectacle rather than a real event),<sup>5</sup> they underline their status, and metaphorically that of film, as signs,<sup>6</sup> in other words as units that are cultural rather than natural, whose meaning is derived primarily not from their analogical relationship to reality but from their combination within a given text. The film image, then, as a sign, is a fragment that can be recombined almost as an arbitrary unit in the creation of meaning.

***Sound Distance of a Good Man  
At the Kitchen N.Y.C. 1982***

PHOTO: PAULA COURT



Longo articulates this principle of film editing, or perhaps more accurately, of montage, first by the physical placement of his pictures within the performance space. Here (on a descending 3-tiered platform that may suggest a left to right reading) they are arranged in sequence and result in a translation of the usual temporal sequence of film shots onto the spatial plane of the performance space. Performance too, of course, is a temporal form, but here this characteristic has been purposefully inverted, and instead the spatial continuity afforded by the performance has been used to present these three 'shots', not consecutively, but simultaneously, holding them for anywhere from five to fifteen minutes. The effect is of a single, suspended moment, one created not only by the non-progressive quality both of the images and of the soaring music, but ultimately because of the redoubled but essentially inconclusive meaning generated by this combination of images. Although film bears an analogical relationship to reality (it answers the question 'What is it?' readily, e.g. a man, a lion, etc.) and the sequence of the film defines a physical action (thus answering the question: 'Is he dancing, or is he dying?') the *meaning* of a cinematic shot or a group of shots is determined by its narrative or

this piece, however, is missing as are the hands of the statue, his arms extended upward in an ambiguous pose that looks as much like surrender as victory and may allude to the sadness inherent in both.

To the left of this central screen, then, are a man and a woman who proceed through a slow motion rock 'n' roll dance, with each stage of their action being a visual analogue to the sequence of individual static frames that make up the illusory flow of movement on film. Here, as opposed to the central image of the statue, time, space, and movement have been reconstituted to occupy an actualized presence. Punning on the film experience, these dancers literalize its quality of an on-going present tense, but also carry with them the time-frame of its essential 'pastness', Susan Sontag described this as film's status as a 'time machine', a preserver of past styles, ideas, and values.<sup>7</sup> To embody it, the dancers are dressed in a stylised manner, that connotes a time, an era, though not any *specific* era. The man wears a black suit, tie and a white shirt, and the woman is wearing a short black dress, both in a style reminiscent of early New Wave, as well as the '50s and early '60s from which it was gleaned. This ambiguity of style is also articu-



PHOTO: ROBERT LONGO

**Sound Distance of a Good Man 1978**

PHOTO: ROBERT LONGO

**Surrender 1979**

documentary context. By juxtaposing these images in the absence of that defining context, Longo has elucidated the systems by which meaning is created on film, but has done so by an inverse process that ironically has barred meaning from them.

In Longo's subsequent performance, *Surrender*, the elements do not translate into a literal transposition of a montage sequence onto the stage, but rather enact the time/movement potential inherent in the juncture between photography and film. In *Surrender*, Longo presents a three-part stage arranged in an extended 'U' formation, one meant to surround the audience with 'objects'. A film screen is situated in the centre, and two runways, one on either side, extend from it. The actors performing on each of these platforms begin simultaneously as a saxophonist enters the theatre from the right. Standing briefly at the door (before beginning his slow walk down the runway), the saxophonist is back-lit, his shadow projected onto the opposite wall as he plays a plaintive, bluesy riff. The source of the image here is unknown, but the moment resonates with the memory of scenes from past films which range from *film noir*, to '50s musicals, to Martin Scorsese's *New York, New York*. Then, almost in counterpoint to the richness of association, sound and movement of this figure, is the film at the centre of the performance space which is mute, silent, and still: of a Grecian statue entitled *Victorious Young Athlete Attaching a Filet to his Head*. The title of

lated in the quality of their dance, one that moves across a history of dance forms from '50s, to '60s, to disco. In short, this image (at each of its stages) is like watching an old rock 'n' roll movie, only now the movie is made to 'live'.

The archaic form of the Grecian statue in the film also connotes pastness, but now it is like the 'past remote' tense utilized by such languages as French or Italian, one that indicates an event that is dead or permanently gone. This is the time frame of the photograph, in this case put on film in a futile attempt to revive it. But unlike *Sound Distance*, whose emotional tone had been somewhat suspended or removed, *Surrender* is pervaded by nostalgia, created by qualities of pastness inscribed in the performance, but also by the melancholy wail of a saxophone. In this way the central emotion attached to the essence of photography and of film, has been foregrounded by Longo's transformations. But the easy seduction of this feeling is eroded by the saxophonist, his music also moving through a number of different styles, then becoming a series of screeching discords. A kind of distance from the images is thus created, one from which the viewer can now examine his/her own desire for seduction.

The sense of past pervades Longo's subsequent performance, *Empire* (1980), no longer as nostalgia, but as death and aggression. Performed only once at the Corcoran Gallery in Washington, D.C.



as part of a trilogy which included both *Sound Distance of a Good Man* and *Surrender, Empire*, unlike Longo's earlier performances, consists of a single image that recalls a long-take shot from a movie, or perhaps a single photograph made to move. The latter reading comes from the light quality presented in the image, one that gives the impression of a photograph in negative, and from the movements presented there, ones that in their slowness and deliberateness extend a single action into a fifteen minute performance. Unlike Longo's earlier performances, *Empire* provides transformations, less to elucidate the formal and structural properties of film than to distinguish those systems of seduction possible in film as well as in other spectacles.<sup>8</sup>

As *Empire* begins, a row of floor-level lights fade slowly in to illuminate the rear of the blackened space with separate white beams. The music accompanying their appearance becomes fuller and rises in grandeur and intensity as the lights slowly lift from the floor, and turn a full 90° to 'shoot' out into the audience, and so form a ceiling of lights above their heads. From the blackened space formed beneath the lights there emerges, imperceptibly at first, a profusion of dancing couples, moving and turning to the music that



**Empire 1981**

has now become a waltz, and approaching the audience in a seemingly endless flow of bodies. The visual effect of this image is then advanced by a dry mist which envelops the space, rising to the beams of light above, diffusing them into an eerie glow, and so creating the effect of a photograph in negative: the dancers as blackened figures silhouetted against a diaphanous white field. The action here is suddenly disrupted by the wail of an air-raid siren. The music stops, a military trumpet is heard and the dancers exit, as will the audience, to the streets of Washington, D.C. and the White House beyond.

The strongest allusion made by *Empire* is to the style and grandeur of Fascism, with the reference to the Nuremberg lights grounding it specifically in Nazi Germany. But since few viewers of *Empire* have actually experienced Nazism firsthand, Longo here acknowledges the history of photography and film in the creation of this meaning. Similarly, the sequence of events prescribed by *Empire* – a crowded ballroom, a siren, a trumpet sound – is understandable as a 'Call to arms' largely because it comprises a cliché presented in many Hollywood war movies. But perhaps most importantly, in using the reference and the style of Fascism, Longo has turned its aggression against the audience, making them participants in a spectacle they find repellent because of its historical source, yet attractive because of the level of its seduction. This then

makes their exit onto the streets of Washington, D.C. problematic. Here the monumentality of the government buildings, the lights that illuminate these structures, and the use of space, lose their 'innocence' and are experienced as structures of reified power, both seductive and potentially threatening.

But in that *Empire* refers both to a Fascist spectacle and to Hollywood movies, it disrupts the easy assumption that the style of Fascism is reserved only for government display. The openly manipulative play of light, sound, and image is also possible in films (as the monuments of our time) and has been used without restraint in many contemporary works. In fact, *Empire* draws as much from Steven Spielberg's *Close Encounters of the Third Kind* as it does from Leni Riefensthal's *Triumph of the Will* and Nazi rallies. The landing scene in Spielberg's film, with its blinding shafts of light, intense music, not to speak of the 70mm scale of the image, seduces the viewers by its gigantism. Presented in close-up, Spielberg's characters watch the arrival of the spacecraft with a deep sense of awe, a loss of self similar both to the responses of the German people watching Hitler's arrival in Riefensthal's film and in some important ways to the responses of the audience itself to these *types*



**Marble Fog 1984**

of films.

Of course, the audience for films like *Close Encounters* is submitting to an ideologically determined system of form and content which it then consumes without the necessary level of rational thought. In *Marble Fog* (1985) Longo attempts to dislodge the audience from this complacency with his most technically elaborate performance. Here he utilizes dance, music, slides, written and spoken text, painting, computer images, and so on to defamiliarize, and in this case to decompose the film image into its constituent parts, as well as into its component art forms. But in *Marble Fog* Longo's emphasis is particularly on the 'movies', that is, on the fiction film in its mass media form.

*Marble Fog* opens with a number of slides projected onto a gigantic horizontal screen at the topmost portion of the performance space. With almost technicolour intensity these images of a landscape and then of an indigo blue sky appear and then dissolve into each other, as a romantic score adds to their sensuality. But while these images dwarf the viewer, both by their height and their allure, they are nonetheless extraordinarily conventional images, reminiscent of Kodak advertising light boxes and also of the cinemascope shots from narrative films. But these images fade, and beneath them appear three vertical screens onto which are projected images of skyscrapers (architectural metaphors for film, a construc-