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National College of Art and Design

Fine Art (Painting)

LONGO'S LOGOS
Policing From The Cell

by

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INTRODUCTION

Twenty years ago, the important functions of "fine art" and "commercial art" had obvious distinctions between the two. As the targets of "fine" and "mass" art began to encroach on each other, those distinctions blurred. Major museums now often exhibit the work of living architects and designers, while artists get involved in the marketing of commercial products. The values that were traditionally used to determine the difference between fine art and graphic art, commercial art or advertising; values such as originality, rareness and timelessness, are inappropriate when applied to the artwork that dominated the New York scene in the 80s. Commercial developments have allowed many young artists to derive a substantial living from the sale of their work. However, can fine art foray into the mass market without being consumed by it ?

In the essay *The Work of art in the age of mechanical Reproduction,* Walter Benjamin evaluates the influence of mass production, consumption and modern technology, upon the status of the work of art, as well as their significance for contemporary forms of popular culture. He argues that the work of art, due to its original involvement in religious ritual and ceremonies, acheived a type of "aura" which added to its authority and uniqueness in time and space. Once embedded in this framework of tradition, art can retain its aura independently of its ritual role in religious ceremonies. This process was pushed forward by the changes associated with the Renaissance which extended secularisation of the work of art and its subject matter. The Renaissance initiated the struggle for artistic autonomy. This struggle involved notions that a work of art was unique in its own right, despite any religious considerations, and that being an artist was a unique vocation, guided by a privileged insight into the truths of human existence, a type of transcendent knowledge established in the aura of a work of art.

The art of New York in the 80s was created by artists who wanted to evaluate the influence of mass production, consumption and modern technology upon society.

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Robert Longo is one of the most prolific artists practising today. Over the past twenty years he has produced hundreds of artworks. It was difficult to choose specific pieces to demonstrate various strands of his practice. The materials he uses are varied and his influences are wide. The basic ideas Longo has developed surround the area of the mass media. His practice is very dubious from the outset due to the fact that although he attempts to criticise the media, he works through the correct channels, accepting sponsorship from very powerful corporate bodies, who in turn control the media. He believes that it is his role as an artist, in todays society, to inform the masses about media deceptions. He attempts to do this by creating images using the visual vocabulary of the media in an inappropriate fashion. He "deconstructs" advertising images in order to neutralise their original influence on our perception of the world. His art reconstitutes the visual and material conceits of the media. Through disordered, confused, displaced juxtaposition and exaggeration of mannerism he attempts to mock the pretensions and reveal the manipulative nature of the message conveyed through advertising. which consists of images which are fed to us through various media and designed to keep us consuming goods, goods produced solely to be consumed. The result is not only an appropriation of imagery, but also an appropriation of the power of that imagery. His concern in subverting the original intention is to ask not just to see but to read the image.

In chapters 2 and 3 I have mentioned specific pieces to outline the various methods he uses to critique the media. I analysed his performance trilogy *Empire*, 1981 in order to demonstrate how Longo has used it to display the seductive and captivating qualities of spectacle. He overturns conventional representations in order to expose the deliberate means by which aesthetic forms are converted into mechanisms of power. The stylised heroic gesture and the general use of "the classic" together form a matrix that resonates with the codes of fascism. In Longo's static work his use of classic imagery resembles the art practised in Germany and Italy in the 30s, with the revival of the vocabulary of the heroic, in that rather than offering any resistance to corporate

culture, it supplies the terms by which that culture renews itself. The value system his

work assumes is collusive with the ideological conditions of the swing to the right. In

1983 Lynn Zelevansky stated that :

> Longo is in a virtuoso, piling one self conscious reference on top of
> another, but his intent is unclear. The work which trades in 're-casting'
> of empty symbols, generates the same melancholy as do the images
> in their original incarnation. Ultimately, these works may only contribute
> to the glut of the kind of imagery they play with. (Zelevansky, 1983, p.153.)

Today, 14 years later, the same statement could be made in relation to Longo's art.

CHAPTER ONE : HISTORICAL OVERVIEW

In the United States in the post-war period a new economic order emerged, multi-national capitalism. It was characterised by new types of consumption and a massive spread of advertising in television and the media.

Pop artists identified the role that mass media images had played in forming contemporary culture by the 50s and 60s. These artists deliberately accepted as their subject matter the low culture tabloid images rejected by modernism. They examined the popular icons of American culture. They were porous to the culture as a whole, soaking up common-place imagery from all over, subverting it and feeding it back into society.

In the 1970s artists and critics mounted an attack on the institutions of the art world. Artists made works that attempted to bypass the market-place, producing art that was temporary, site specific or larger than domestic scale. Artists put new effort into running their own non-profit galleries and studios.

In America in the 1980s everything was based on market values, which controlled both production and consumption. Power emerged from those who had control over production and transmission of information. The latter became the most important commodity which was consumed by the masses every day. This information was largely transmitted through visual images. Most mass culture is the output of cultural industries and businesses owned by powerful individual entrepreneurs, corporations or groups of shareholders. During this period advertising agencies such as Saatchi and Saatchi grew to previously inconceivable levels. Time and Warner Brothers amalgamated to create the biggest information supplying media company. MTV brought an intense bombardment of contemporary images to the video generation.

The moods of the 1980s art was largely influenced by the style and substance of the media and popular culture. The work of artists during this period is directly linked to the decaying conditions, as they see them, in a post-modern world. The overpowering but seductive quality of television, film and commercial photography motivated their choice of imagery and style. Thomas Lawson stated at the exhibition *A Forest of Signs :Art in the Crisis of Representation,* in 1989 that

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> Our daily encounters with one another, and with nature, our gestures, our speech are so thoroughly impregnated with a rhetoric absorbed through the airwaves that we have no certain claim to the originality of any of our actions. Every cigarette, every drink, every love affair echoes down a never-ending passageway of references to advertisements, to television shows to movies, to the point where we no longer know if we mimic or are mimicked.(Drojowska, 1989, p.20)

The art of the 80s was ambitious and grandiose, it anticipated the absorption of that subculture into the mass. The artists of this era did not see themselves as continuing the linear narrative of art history. They borrowed freely from all styles and contents that went against the modernist philosophy.

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The work of artists in New York during this period reflects a diverse visual repertory that includes commercial art and advertising, television, movies, fashion, popular culture, urban graffiti, decorative arts and ancient culture. Both Cindy Sherman and Robert Longo display techniques and compositional devices derived from advertising and cinematic sources. They manipulate responses conditioned by the mass media. The 80s brought a new set of artists who, rather than revolting against the dominant culture or retreating from it, attempted to confront it and question its system of value-allocation. While early modernism fostered antipathy towards the dominant culture, post-modern openly embraced the dominant consumer culture of the west. Contemporary art is part of the continual exchange of images in our society, images that become part of an understanding of the world. The new "spirit"

in art, subjective, intuitive, painterly, romantic and bombastic gradually began to dominate the artworld in America and Europe. This new work often broke conventions and productively used a blurring of the boundaries between "high" and "low" art, the fine arts and mass culture through performance, installations, video, painting and photography.

> A capitalist society requires a culture based on images. It needs to furnish vast amounts of entertainment in order to stimulate buying and to anaesthetise the injuries of class, race and sex. And it needs to gather unlimited amounts of information, the better to exploit natural resources, increase productivity, keep order, make war, give jobs to bureaucrats...The narrowing of free political choice to free economic consumption requires the unlimited production and consumption of images. (Sontag, 1979, p.178-9)

The current range of art engaged consciously with social and political questions is huge. It takes on particular and immediate issues, it explores moral issues to argue against exploitation, national issues to challenge discrimination, social issues to question patriarchal values and economic issues to counter the assumptions of a capitalist system. These artists are not so naive as to think that social and political change can be created simply by exposing these issues in the arena of culture, *or are they?*

The 80s were epitomised by the "yuppie" morality-fast cars, expensive homes and technological gadgetry. The acquirement of certain consumer goods and commodities indicated one's place on the social ladder, and the acquisition of wealth became an important sign of power and control.

The increase of mass culture means that there is less room for any culture which cannot make money or which cannot be mass produced for a mass market, for example, art. The standardised products of mass culture are the result of the manufacture of cultural commodities by means of routine and assembly line forms of
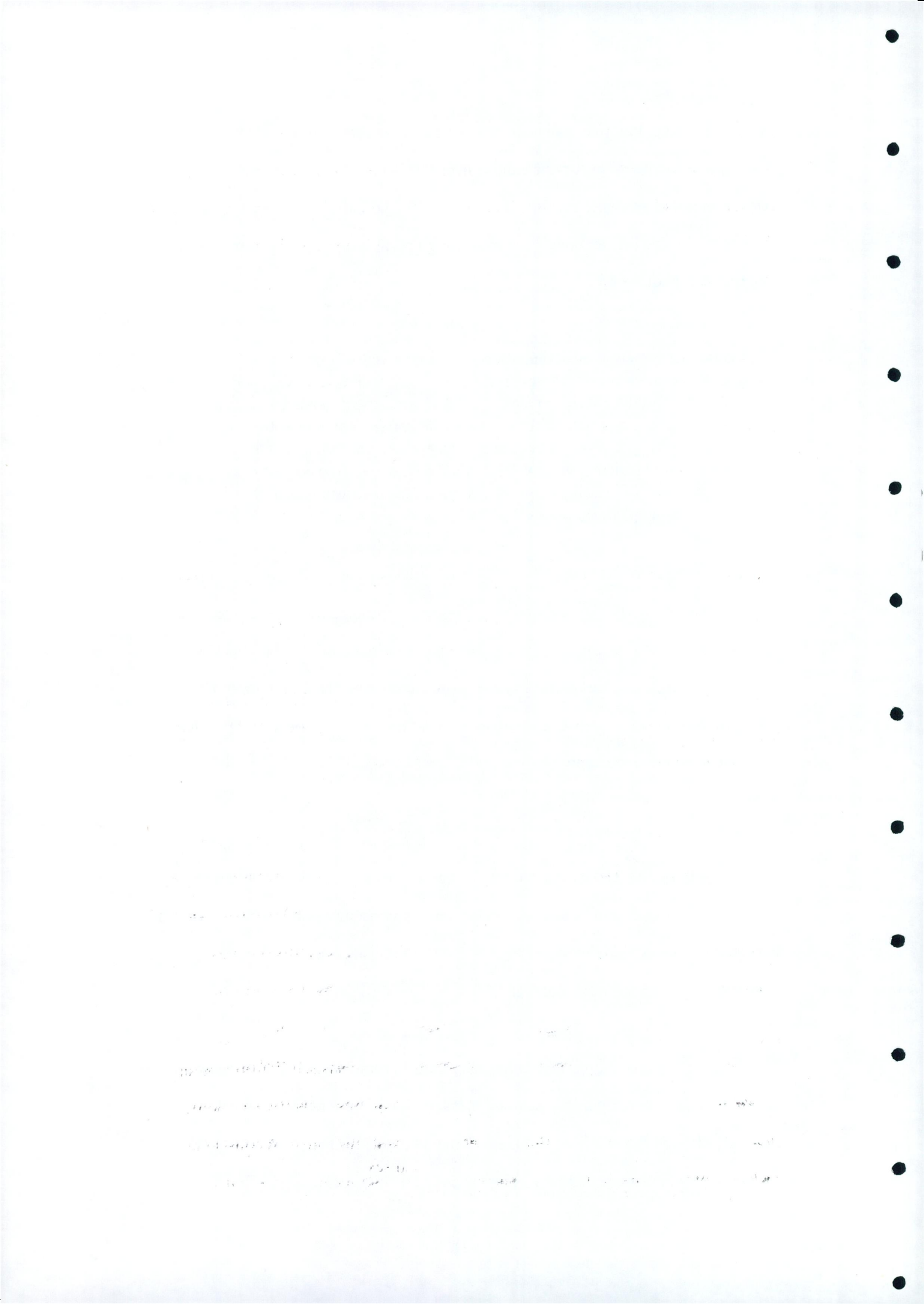
production. Art cannot be produced in this way. The aesthetic intricacy of true art, its creativity, its intellectual challenges and its experiments cannot be accomplished by the techniques which produce mass culture. They rather rely upon the inspired genius of the individual artist working outside the pressures of the commercial market. The market system works to make art "rare" and to keep prices at the highest level. Maximum return is generally produced in a field of low technology by controlling the supply and working to create an excess of demand. The art market trades on exciting a desire for the touch of the original hand. Society has the capacity to assimilate, absorb, neutralise and commodity virtually any practice at all. Many artists find it difficult to avoid making those adjustments and accommodations that will allow their work to be more readily accepted. Art becomes increasingly integrated into the economy, because it is used to encourage people to consume through the expanded role it plays in advertising, and due to the fact that it becomes a commercial good in its own right. The breakdown of the distinction between art and popular culture as well as crossovers between the two became more prevalent in the 80s. There were new crossovers between music and art, art and writing, art and television and art and architecture. These various strands of art and these different ideas of the role of artists had a considerable impact on the contemporary artworld.

This new "post-modernist" art involved the use of various mediums, photography, film, performance, painting, drawing and sculpture. The properties of photographic imagery which have given it high status in post-modern art are exactly those which for generations art photographers have been anxious to ignore. Photography has historically come to mediate if not entirely represent the inhabitants of industrial society. When photography began to be incorporated in the art of the 60s its identity as a multiply reproducible mass medium was instantly emphasised. Art photography raised issues such as authorship, subjectivity, and uniqueness. The use of photography in art or as art brought to the surface entirely new issues and areas of consideration including simulacrum, stereo-types and the social and sexual positioning of the viewing

subject, which is central to the production and functioning of advertising and other forms of mass media photography.

CHAPTER TWO : WHEN LEFT BECOMES RIGHT....................

The power of public images is one of the most significant aspects of the changing world. These images contain an variety of messages, information and ideas. The reproduction of images from person to person, institution to institution and country to country is now taken for granted. With the speed of travel and communications, this saturation of images reinforces the impression that we live in one world. Images are one of the binding forces in a global culture. In contemporary capitalist societies the dominant groups attempt to represent the world in forms that reflect their own interests, the interests of their power, in order to sustain structures of domination.

Georg Luckacs (1923) was concerned with the reification and fragmentation of the object, especially in assembly line production. Today, in the midst of an advanced capitalism, based on serial consumption, we are witness to a further reification and fragmentation of the sign. The industrial world has produced and distributed not only "industrial objects" but also a new kind of object, a sub-class of simulacra, copies of things. There is a new depthlessness, appearance is everything. Nothing is original or authentic because the world is experienced second-hand. Individuals are involved in a world of commodities, signs, media, spectacles, representations and simulations.

Theodor Adorno and Max Horkheimer, European intellectuals from the Frankfurt School[1], believed that the late 1940s forms of mass entertainment would eventually produce the illusion of an ongoing parallel reality where people would come to judge

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[1] *The Frankfurt School for social research was set up in 1923. Its founders tended to be left-wing Jewish intellectuals drawn from the upper and middle classes of German society. Amongst its functions was the development of critical theory and research. This intellectual work aimed to reveal and interpret the social contradictions underlying the emergent Capitalist societies of the time, and their typical ideological frameworks, in order to construct a theoretical critique of modern capitalism. Adorno and Horkheimer were leading figures in the school.*

their own direct experiences of life. The Frankfurters were also very concerned about the impact of the media on society. They regarded consumers as brainwashed accomplices to the cultural industry's mass seduction project. "...the deceived masses ...insist on the very ideology which enslaves them" (Adorno, 1944/1977 p.353).

The Television Generation

Post-modernism is said to describe the emergence of a social order in which the importance and power of the mass media and popular culture means that they govern and shape all other forms of social relationships. Two very different attitudes arise concerning the mass media. One attitude argues that the media presents an accurate reflection of a wider social reality, while the other insists that the media distorts rather than reflects reality. The idea is that popular cultural signs and media images increasingly dominate our sense of reality and the way we define ourselves and the world around us. Jean Baudrillard (1983) suggests that the media plays some part in constructing our sense of social reality, and our sense of being part of this reality. He sees the function of television and the mass media as prevention of response by isolating and privatising individuals, trapping them in a world of simulacra, where it is impossible to determine the difference between the spectacle and the real. Individuals come to prefer spectacle to reality. What is real, according to Baudrillard, is no longer our direct contact with the world but what we see on television. He perceives the masses as being weak and passive. He suggests that the "loss of the real" is a recent historical event marking a change from industrial to consumer, or modern to post-modern society. However, other critics disagree with Baudrillard. Dean Mac Cannell and Juliet Flower Mac Cannell state that the changes that Baudrillard suggests came with electronic media, in fact arrived with the invention of language.

> No human group have ever lived, as humans, in 'objective reality'.
> To be human means to live in a symbolically mediated fantasy-
> actually to believe in the power of office, the authority of the father
> and the law, the purity of maternal love etc. This is no less true for

the savage or peasant than for the post-modernite and it does not even touch the special circumstances of post-modernity. Technically from any human standpoint, the real is only that which cannot be assimilated. (Mac Cannell)

The concept that the media takes over "reality" clearly exaggerates their influence over society. It overlooks the fact that other elements, such as "work" and the "family", contribute to the construction of "reality". The related idea that popular media culture controls consumption is based upon unsubstantiated assumptions about people's behaviour as consumers. The opinion that "reality" has imploded inside the media is dubious. Most people would probably still be able to ascertain the difference between the "reality" constructed by the media, and that which exists elsewhere.

Art in our time has assumed the logic of spectacle, the transformation of objects, even people into so many capitalised images. The artists of the 80s belonged to the television generation and believed that they were confronted every day with double-speak and simulated reality. Post-modern artists have to come to terms with the variety of images and information in late capitalist society. These artists pervert, subvert and convert the images that have come at them almost from birth. They recast images, imposing symbols, consumer goods and corporate logos by removing them from their original contexts and altering their original scales. They seek to undermine the function of mass media imagery without enhancing the design.

Robert Longo collects masses of media imagery and recasts them in his monumental artworks. He uses an image with no origin except other images, in post-structuralist terms, a signifier in a chain of signifiers along which meaning runs. He uses various mediums to make art; drawing, photography, painting, relief sculpture and performance which include film, dance, voice, music and image projection. According to Longo his intention is

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...to use the visual vocabulary of our culture to talk about how the

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history we know and the time we are living in bear on the future. If there's a message here, its hope. I compete with things basically oppressive, like advertising. I'm like the revenge of the media. My art has accessibility so that the average person can like it."(Arnason, 1988,p.649).

Longo's work serves as a good example of three important aspects of post-modernist art, with his use of appropriation, allegory and spectacle. Appropriation is used by artists in order to loosen the grip which mass media icons have on us. Specific images are not used, instead styles or modes of imagery are employed, they are visual vocabularies that we recognise immediately but now they convey inappropriate messages. The use of allegory in art exploits the instability of signification, the gap between an image (signifier) and its meaning, (signified). The use of spectacle in art engages our contemporary consumption of reality as so many spectacular commodity signs do.

Longo's performances allow us to see how spectacle functions, unlike typical representation, which works through our faith in its realism, spectacle operates through our fascination with the hyperreal, with "perfect" images that make us "whole" at the price of delusion and submission. He first focused on spectacle in his performance piece *Empire* in 1981, where forms of high art and popular culture are taken up, broken down and reframed. *Empire* consists of three sections, *Sound Distance of a Good Man*, 1977; *Surrender*, 1979 and *Empire*, 1981. A fourth section was later added, *Iron Voices*, in 1982. *Sound Distance of a good man, Surrender and Empire* were exhibited for the first time as a complete work in the atrium of the Concoran Gallery in Washington D.C. on April 15, 1981. It is a performance that incorporates dance, music, sculpture, film and expressionist theatre, and uses them to spectacular effect. It overturns conventional representation in order to expose the deliberate means by which aesthetic forms are converted into mechanisms of power. *Sound Distance of a Good Man*, 1977, and *Surrender*, 1979, are both cinematic triptychs. Each consists of three simultaneous tableaux arranged horizontally and spectrally for the audience.

SOUND DISTANCE OF A GOOD MAN (FIG. 1)

It appears as a large projected image in multi-media performance work which involves actors, dance, film and voice, each is stripped of its narrative, leaving only the effects, pose, lighting etc. Each art form is presented in terms of an opposition of "live" elements, (present, active etc) versus "dead" elements, (represented, pre-recorded etc).

Left Tableau

Two wrestlers under spotlights slowly revolve on a pedestal in a way which conflates dance and sculpture and opposes the "live" fact to the aesthetic form of two bodies

Centre Tableau

A fifteen minute film still is projected onto a screen. It displays an image that represents live versus dead, which is echoed by the photograph of a man, back arched as if just shot, in front of a massive statue of a lion. It is not a passive presentation, it involves manipulation and complicity. It is a photograph of a man posing as a Longo relief that was in turn derived from a newspaper image of a fragment of a still from a Fassbinder film, *The American Soldier*, 1970. The specific image used articulates a sense of nostalgia and loss, a business man apparently being shot and a ruined Greek statue. Longo eliminates the use of motion, editing, montage, depth of field and sound image synchronisation, this calls into question their purpose and function in film. The film is a production of images without truth or content, it has no apparent origin or reference." The meaning sought (by Longo) is that images intrinsically possess no meaning except that which we impose upon them. "(Fisher, 1984, p116.)

Right Tableau

A soprano sings in an operatic forte at first, but then against a pre-recorded tape containing music and voice.

Oppositions are posed and broken down, simulations are let loose and the order of things, what is present, what is represented, is confused. The film still in the centre tableau contrasts with the visual style of the performance. The film which is reduced to

a single image without narrative, contrasts with the lure of imagery through the dramatic use of music, gesture and lighting in the performance. The confrontation of these cross purposes creates the principle tension that animates the performance.

In the commodity and spectacle all traces of productive labour and material support are erased, they fascinate us because they exclude us, place us in the passive position of the consumer, spectator. " In the Longo spectacle, we are made aware of this magical manipulation in the very act of consumption. " (Foster, 1985 p. 82)

SURRENDER (FIG. 1)

Consists of two long black runways on either side with three spotlights each, and a movie screen in the centre. A saxophonist plays and walks, from the right a film still of a Greek statue fades and two dancers are revealed on the left. The dancers and the saxophonist move down the runways very slowly. The music changes along with the styles of the dancers, in effect they display a short history of post-war popular dance. All this happens beneath the static film of a Greek athlete, a loaded image which portrays humanist nostalgia and authoritarian power. In *Surrender* we are presented with simulations, popular forms of music and dance, counterparts to the high art forms in *Sound Distance of a Good Man*, and even more manipulative.

EMPIRE (FIG 1)

A horizontal set of spotlights emerges from smoke while brass, string and organ music is performed. The light colonnade and the fanfare music evokes the spectacle at its most explicit. As the set of lights ascend, the music changes and becomes martial, at this point male and female dancers wearing evening dress file in. The lights slowly turn towards the audience, the music changes to a waltz, and the couples dance. The music becomes faster and more dancers appear. Soon the dancers are pressed against the audience in a rhythmic mass. Suddenly an air raid siren sounds, and the performance ends in darkness with a clarion call of trumpets.
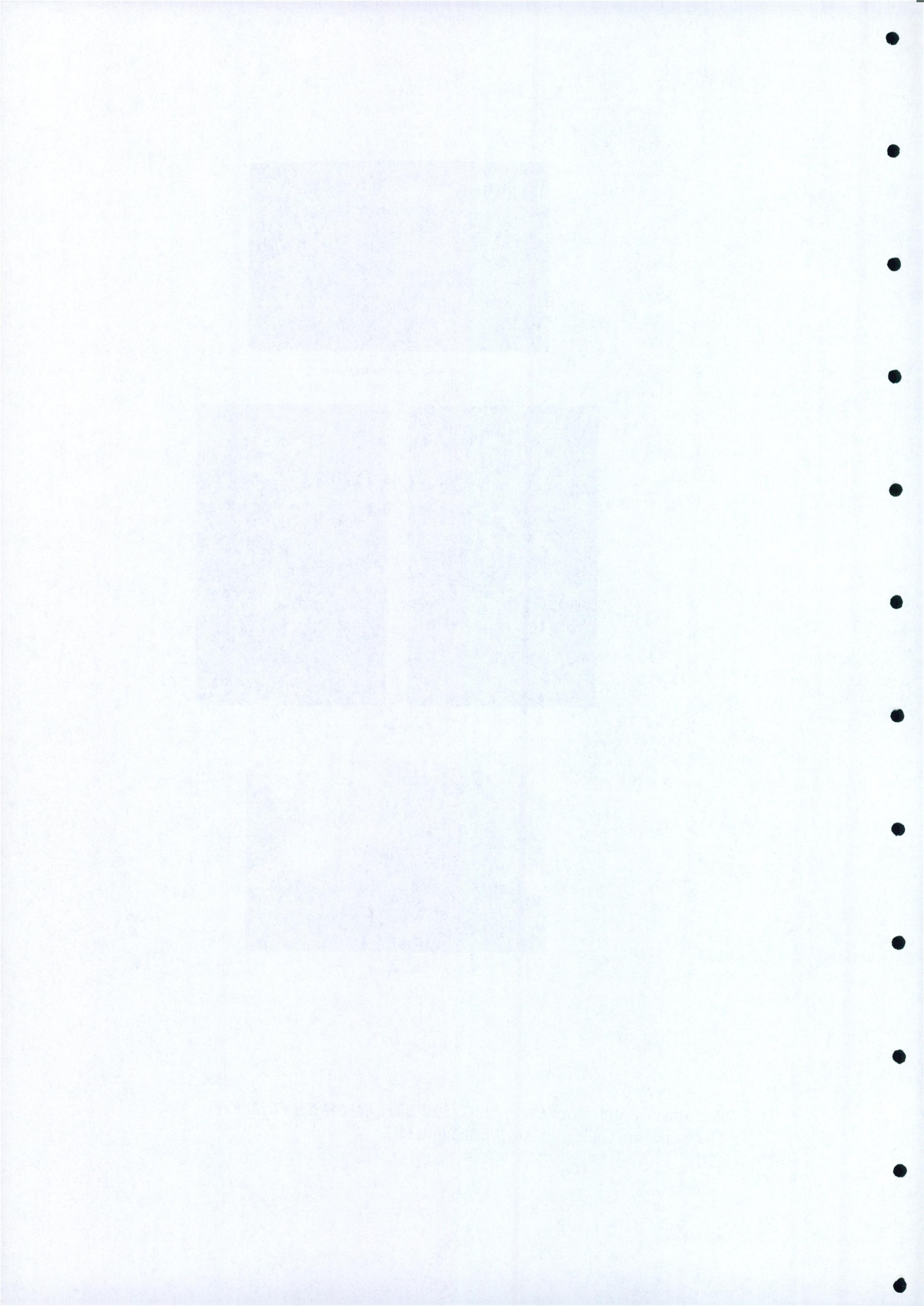
SOUND DISTANCE OF A GOOD MAN, 1978
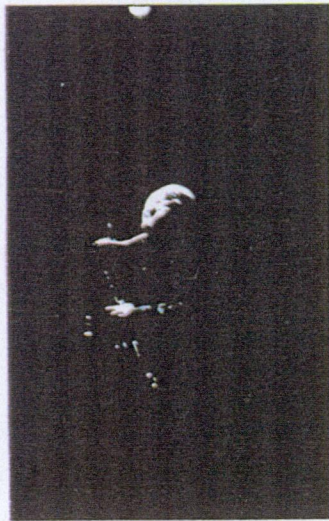
SURRENDER, 1979

EMPIRE, 1981

Fig,! : Performance stills from *EMPIRE (THE PERFORMANCE TRILOGY)*
The Concoran Gallery of Art Washington DC,
1981

In each section of the entire performance components of the arts, popular culture and spectacle are fragmented, stilled and reframed so that we become conscious of our own seduction. This allows us to see how spectacle functions. There is a progression from the beginning scenes of beauty and emotional appeal to the final sequence of mass participation; from personal expression to conformity. As a group the three tableau represent the pattern of manipulation, seduction and conformity. They can also be seen as a temporal sequence. *Sound Distance of a Good Man,* represents the past, memory and nostalgia; *Surrender,* represents the present, decision making, order and action; and *Empire,* represents the future, hope, consequences and contemplation.

The rigid structuring of the performance acts as a restraint to the intense emotionality promoted by the music and gesture, and it is calming in its reassurance of resolution. The tableaux are in separate areas of the atrium, which requires the audience to participate in the structure, moving from location to location, thus physically yielding to the involvement in the illusions of the performance. By scattering his meaning, by making the images ambiguous, and by focusing on the authoritarian structure of the spectacle, rather than on the climaxes, Longo forces the responsibility for the performance on the audience.

Longo develops his critical position by employing the representational forms he means to criticise. He challenges the autonomy of narrative and the way it structures meaning through inference and false association. By isolating images and accentuating their artificiality, he begins the process of deconstruction. He does not quote directly film but reinvents images in a way that makes them seem familiar by reproducing the style and rhythm of film. His interest in film stems from the fact that it is one of the most powerful structures in the 20th century. It is a public medium, thus it has provided the perfect forum for the gentle shaping of ideological and social attitudes. Film's basis in photography gives a special credibility to the images which, even if constructed appear

real. The surfeit of factual information in film, both in quantity and heightened quality, prompts an easy acceptance of its fiction over an impoverished reality. This allows film to be overlaid with connotations posing as "generally accepted" values. It promotes certain attitudes; domesticity, patriarchal order, democracy; and deviants from the norm are marginalised.

Longo's Fascination with Fascism

Longo is very interested by the power represented in public monuments and reliefs. Many of his artworks have comprised reframed archaic and authoritarian forms. Many states, fascist, communist, democratic and capitalist invest in the same type of representation. The main public representation in the 20th century is film, not architecture or sculpture. By using old forms like the statue and archaic media like relief, Longo is not celebrating state power nor is nostalgic for its representations. He is interested in the illusions at work in both discourses. It is this fetishism of the real as well as of commodity image, that Longo explores in his simulations. In the authority of these representations is concealed a fear about lack of authority and perhaps a loss of reality. Faced with this loss our culture morbidly resurrects archaic forms in order to regain at least the image of authority or a sense of the real. According to Baudrillard (1983) we suffer from a "loss of the real" and in order to compensate we have made a fetish of the period prior to this loss, the period of fascism. Freud stated that the fetish is a substitute which blocks or displaces a traumatic discovery of loss (castration), it is often the last thing experienced before the event. Therefore if the trauma of post-war consumer society is the "loss of the real", fascism might well be our fetish period.

Fascism is a period that is famous for its irrationality, this paradox is fascinating because it is in fascism that one sees a culture struggle with the "loss of the real". Adorno and Horkheimer linked the total culture of Nazi Germany with the culture industry of America. Hitler's grasp of the power of mass persuasion was mainly instinctive. Experiences at the front line in World War I had convinced him that

propaganda was a weapon like any other, to be used as a means to a desired end. The more skilful its administrator the more powerful a weapon it became. Mass media like radio and film transmitted and inculcated the official ideology of the fascist state because they could be controlled centrally. The mass media was used to create mass propaganda which led to mass repression. The Nazi party in Germany in the 1930s used it to establish official Nazi ideology in all areas of culture and art, and to eradicate alternative political and aesthetic ideologies. The aim was to enlist the help of intellectuals and architects in order to ensure that the Nazi ideology prevailed as Nazi aesthetics. A Lot had been learned from the cinema, every year some new device of lighting and illusion was incorporated into productions. It was very important to the party that any film records of the events should be as strictly stage managed and controlled as the spectacle themselves. In 1935 Leni Riefenstahl made a documentary of the Nazi Rally at Nuremberg. There, architecture becomes purely scenographic. Albert Speer designed the stadium essentially as a set for a cinematic event. We see how spectacle works as a simulated reality, a total illusion, a set of effects that consumes primary events. Robert Longo sees his role as an artist in modern society similar to the role of a policeman :

> I watch the visual mechanisms of culture, which are so sophisticated
> -the way the Nazi's turned Germany into a Nazi state, for example. That
> is like child's play compared to the mechanisms that exist now to turn
> this country into something quite horrific. So one of the things about the
> artist, what the artist has to do, is that he has to be like a policeman. A
> great deal of my art, particularly the relief *The Sleep* is about blowing
> the whistle on society. (Berger, 1988, p.206)

The potential for elites to use the mass media to manipulate, persuade and exploit the people in more systematic and all pervasive ways than had been possible before. What happens is that those who control the institutions of power pander to the tastes mass in order to control them. The individual is open to the persuasive, manipulative and coercive force exercised by the joint or autonomous powers of capitalism

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No Big Truths

Post-modernism does not simply discard developments, allowing for indiscriminate resurrection of the past, it promotes critical re-examination of this past, especially of the artistic icons that have signified the tenets of modernism. Post-modernism is in effect a revolution, but it is not a revolt. It overturns the old order by stripping that order of its authority. In this course of action it uses the distance created by time and change of social context to demonstrate how that orders icons and ideas functioned as its propaganda and what by contrast they mean to us in our changed context. Art of any era viewed out of context enables us to understand the art, the context and our relationship to it. Everything old is "new" again. When it reappears it is not new, the context in which it turns up is.

It is difficult today to image forth our present reality, of world banks, electronic information etc. It is dangerous that we rely on archaic representations. Longo participates in this archaism deliberately, as if to rehearse the obsolesce of our thought and the inadequacy of our representations. If Longo quotes from past art it is only to collide it with contemporary form, a movie or magazine image. In his quotations there is no truth value, his is a mystification so outrageous as to demystify, as to provoke us to think about the uses of public representations past and present.

In 1983 Longo exhibited three large multi-part works, *Corporate Wars : Walls of Influence,* 1982; *Love Police : Engines in us (The Doors),* 1982; and *Now Everybody (for R. W. Fassbinder),* 1982-3. These three works, based like all Longo images, on photographs, can be read individually or as an ensemble, a procession of public representations.

CORPORATE WARS : WALLS of INFLUENCE (FIG. 2 & 3)

This a relief triptych. Its central panel contains an image of a dozen figures, six men and six women, rendered in cast aluminium, locked in gladiatorial battle. The panels on

either side of the relief are two skyscrapers in high wood relief. The centre relief is a mockery of corporate order, it is also a parody of conventional historical representations. Its purpose is to expose a present form of power and to explode an ideological medium of history. The relief form is used perversely in order to expose what such history usually conceals, interclass conflict. To depict such struggle in mythic form is to render it absurd. The two buildings on either side of the central panel mime the classic syndrome of modern city life, oppression and vertigo. Longo also recognises these as symbols of consolidated power and its influence over the economy, the political system and American values generally. Longo's metropolis trades in seduction and thrill, not estrangement and fear.

NOW EVERYBODY (for R. W. Fassbinder),(FIG. 4)

This is a four panel drawing of a rubble-strewn street with a contorted bronze figure set out from the left panel. Fassbinder is a major influence on Longo, they share a cult of style, a fascination with fascism and an interest in nostalgia and melodrama. The image explores the contradictions of public representations today. The public representation in *Now Everybody* is not the traditional statue or relief, but a documentary image of Beirut. This is equivalent to the status of public representation today, a diffuse mass mediated by time and television images. The "documentary" image of Beirut is not documentary at all. Longo based the charcoal drawing on four different photographs. The image clearly points to the inadequacy of our historical representations and the impossibility of capturing through images the unreal present, the modern city which is surrounded by consumer capitalism. The title suggests an apocalypse in which everyone is represented, but the image is of a public evacuated, if not destroyed. The only figure in the work is a bronze statue posed in violent contrapposto and set out in the viewers space. Longo plays with the hierarchy of representations, the historical scene, a devastated Beirut in a charcoal drawing and the anonymous man in fine bronze. It is difficult today to specify what site or space this is, real, aesthetic, simulated or all three.
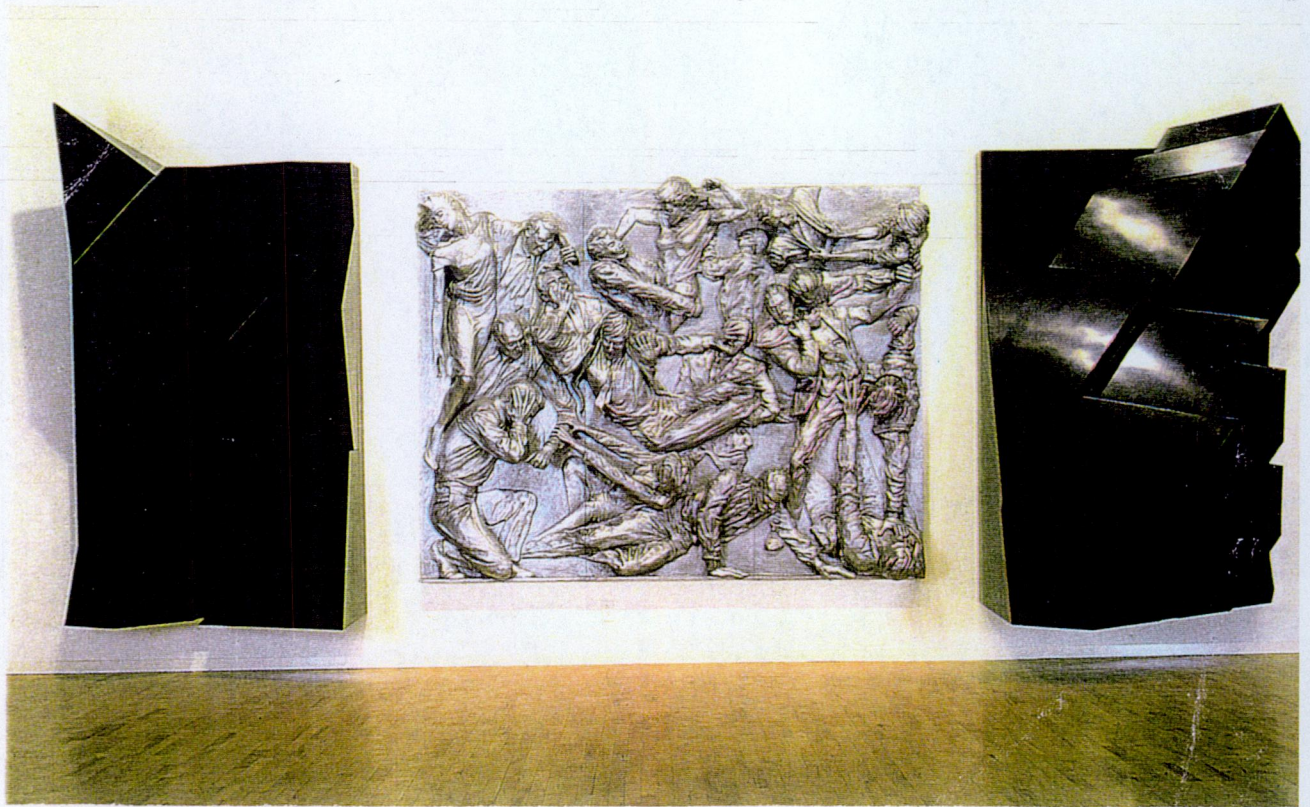
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Fig. 2 *CORPORATE WARS : WALLS of INFLUENCE,*
Lacquer on wood and steel; cast aluminium
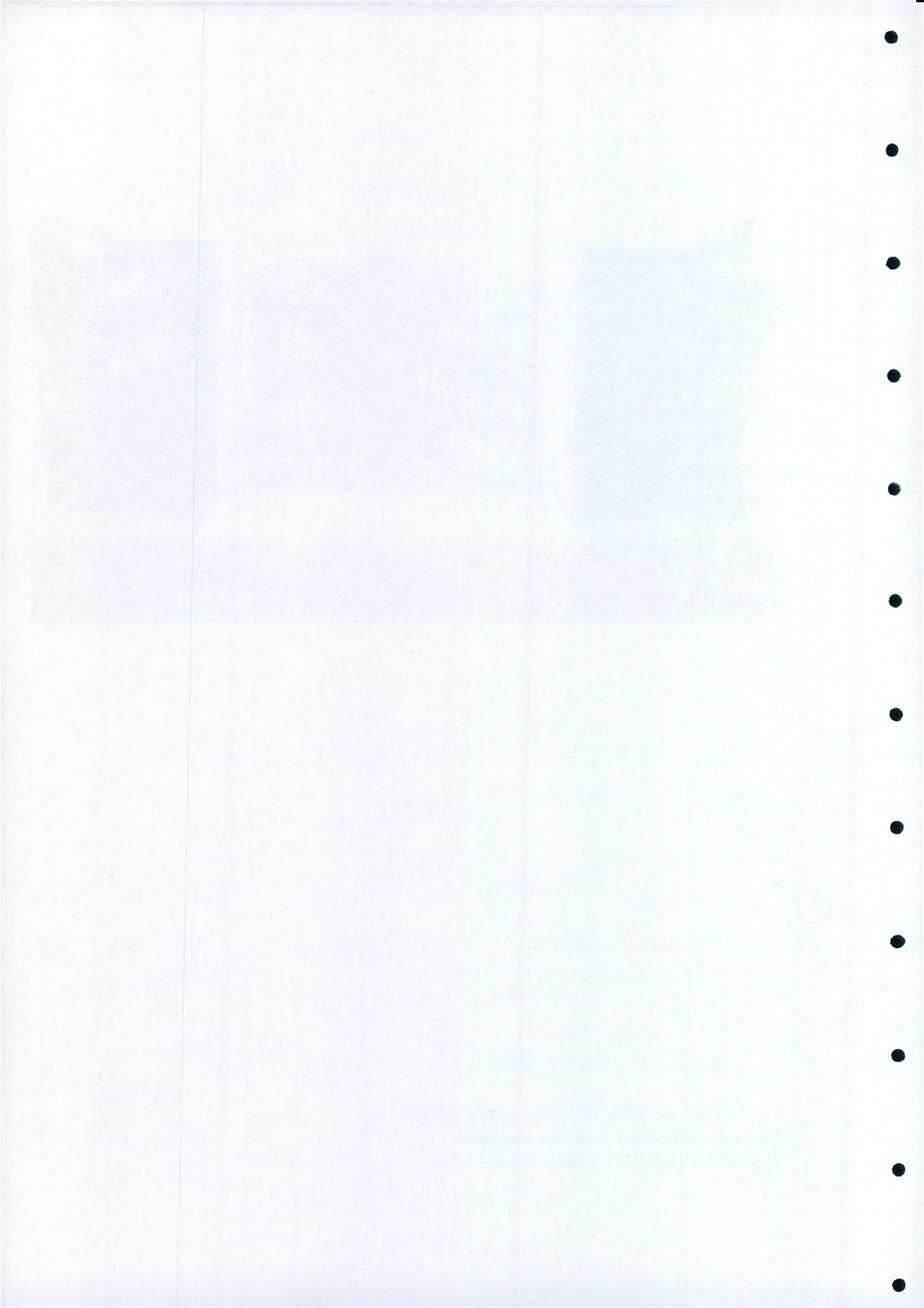108 x 302 x 48 in, (274 x 765 x 122 cm)

Fig. 3.: Centre panel of *CORPORATE WARS : WALLS of INFLUENCE*,
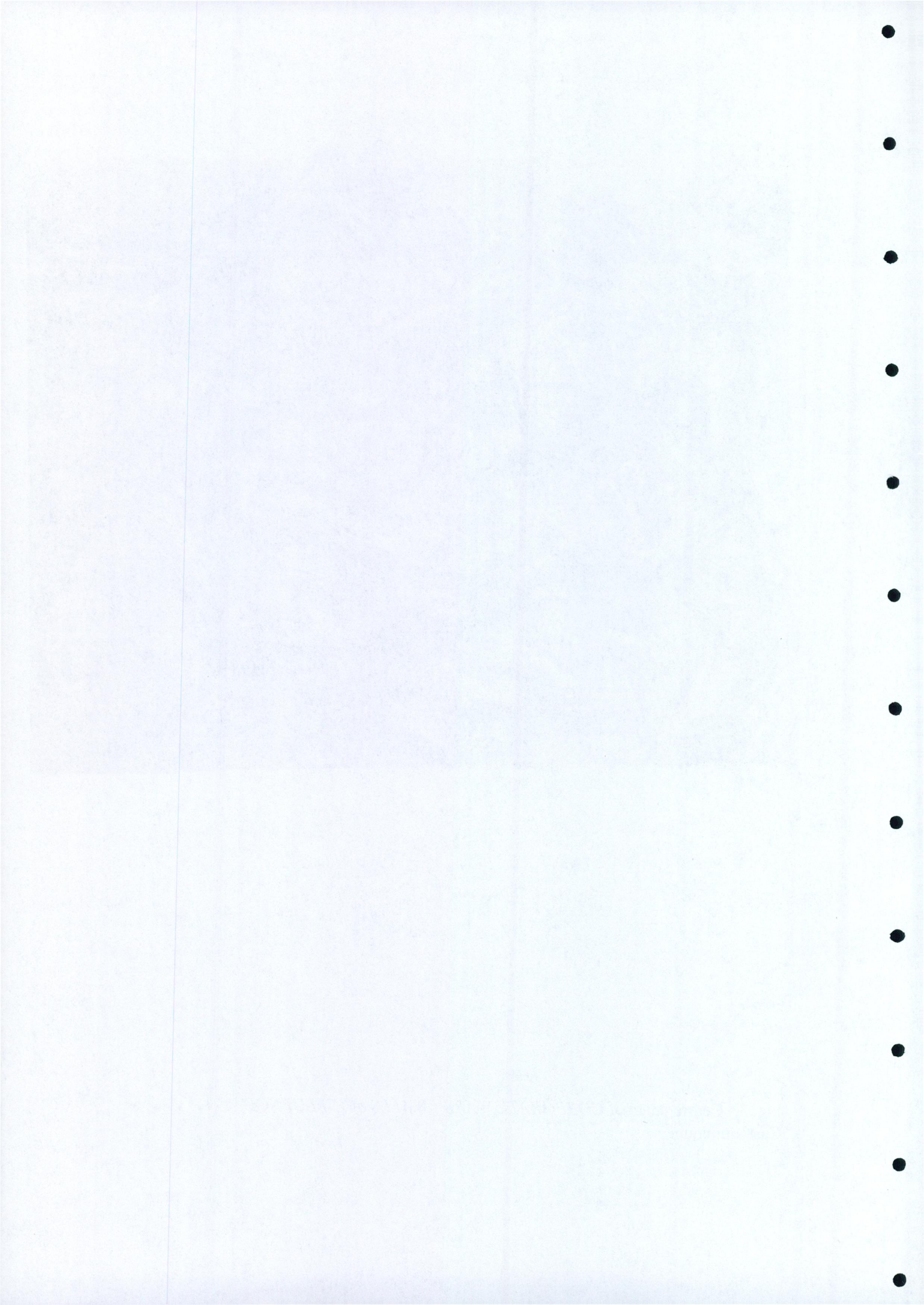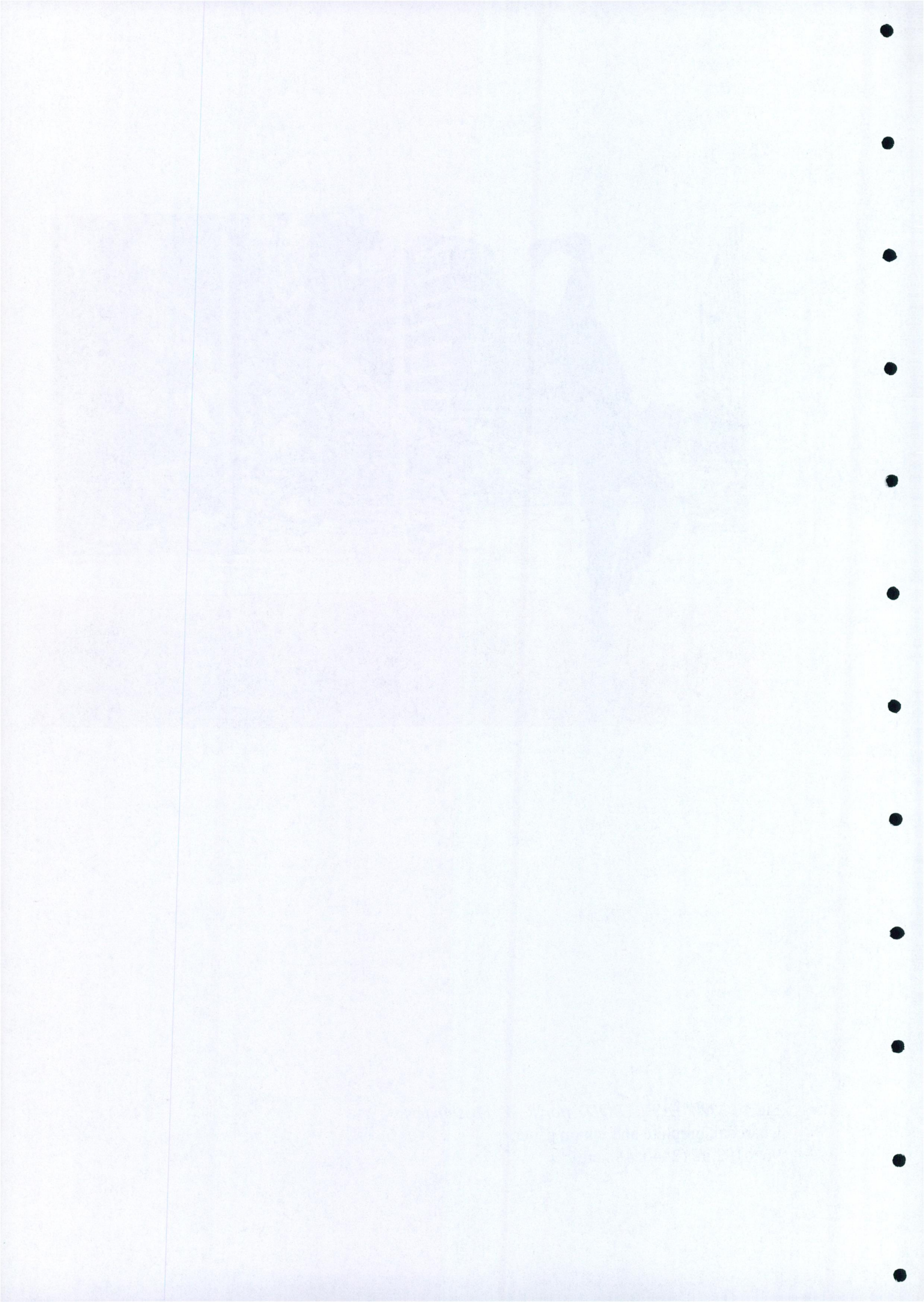Cast aluminum.

Fig 4 : *NOW EVERYBODY (for R. W. Fassbinder)*,
Charcoal, graphite and ink on paper,
96 x 192 in, (244 x 488 cm)

CHAPTER THREE : POWER AND ITS ABUSE

The basic every day culture of signs, commodities and images that have supported structures for accumulating power and wealth, is challenged by many contemporary artists. Power and its abuse is a subject for artists. They want to reveal society's contradictions and the methods used to cover them. This process of art-production requires the re-use and subversion of traditional forms to decentre and reveal the structure of advertisements and representational films. The artist has to use presentation and demonstration as opposed to expression and personal gestures. Power is always held through communication more effectively than through force. Robert Longo challenges the autonomy of narrative and the way it structures meaning through inference and false association. By isolating images and accentuating their artificiality, he begins the process of deconstruction.

Robert Longo is a crossover artist. He makes his subject matter from image crossovers. He juxtaposes various incongruous images of different scale, texture and colour. Longo's early images reveal one of his primary interests, the impact of the media on society. They simulate the discontinuity and disjunction of television, mimicking its uncanny juxtapositions of the most incompatible images. Television is a constant display of popular culture's conceits and a non-stop register of the happenings and realities in our world. His work is a parody of the presents institutional structure. The objects lose their narrative by rejecting the representational means that narrative employs.

Longo uses representation against representation in order to displace our naive belief in its referential truth. Representation of old forms of culture and monumental images of power in *Empire*, 1981,(fig. 1), disrupts our fascination with such institutional power. The form and content of his work is dominated by processes of image production and reception.

MEN IN THE CITIES, 1979-87,

Longo gained initial recognition with these large black and white charcoal drawings in the early 80s. He photographed single figures dressed in sober business suits in positions of either agony or ecstasy, dying or dancing. The images contain figures in stark isolation, away from their urban surroundings. The apparent distress of the figures is ambiguous, but their look is corporate. The faces of the figures are obscured and twisted away from the viewer by contorted body postures. The figures have an air of powerlessness and dislocation. He equates our artificial identities with the outer shell of clothing, he reduces all possible identities to a general one. He leaves only the distinction between male and female. They count as non-persons, an institutionalised selves, representatives of some larger enveloping non-person, a corporate entity. His men and women are logos in the flesh. A logo is the amalgamation of an advertising image and a brand name, it is a brand name which has been converted into an image or sign which embodies the memory of the entire tradition of earlier advertisements. Such logos can be visual, auditory and musical. Cultural signs do not exist in isolation, they are the association of signs. Most of his protagonists are passive subjects performing roles imposed upon them. They are the identifying symbol of a corporation. The performing figure is an allegorical image of vulnerability and submission to cultural roles and conventions of the self. Masculinity, aggression and violence are linked to power structures. Strength is represented as hostile and violent. He never portrays strength as a sustaining value or as a source of hope. The strange contorted figures in *Men in the Cities* (fig.6&7)are instinctual reactions to external forces that they do not control or initiate. His infringements on the freedom of his figures point to his main interest which is to expose the larger machinations, the governing powers and forces that they obey.

His earlier images are like film stills, disjointed and isolated from their contexts. They provide fragmentary information and influence through suggestion. The conflict and tension raised in Longo's art became more abstract in the mid 80s. The figurative components of his earlier work have disappeared and so have all traces of emotional
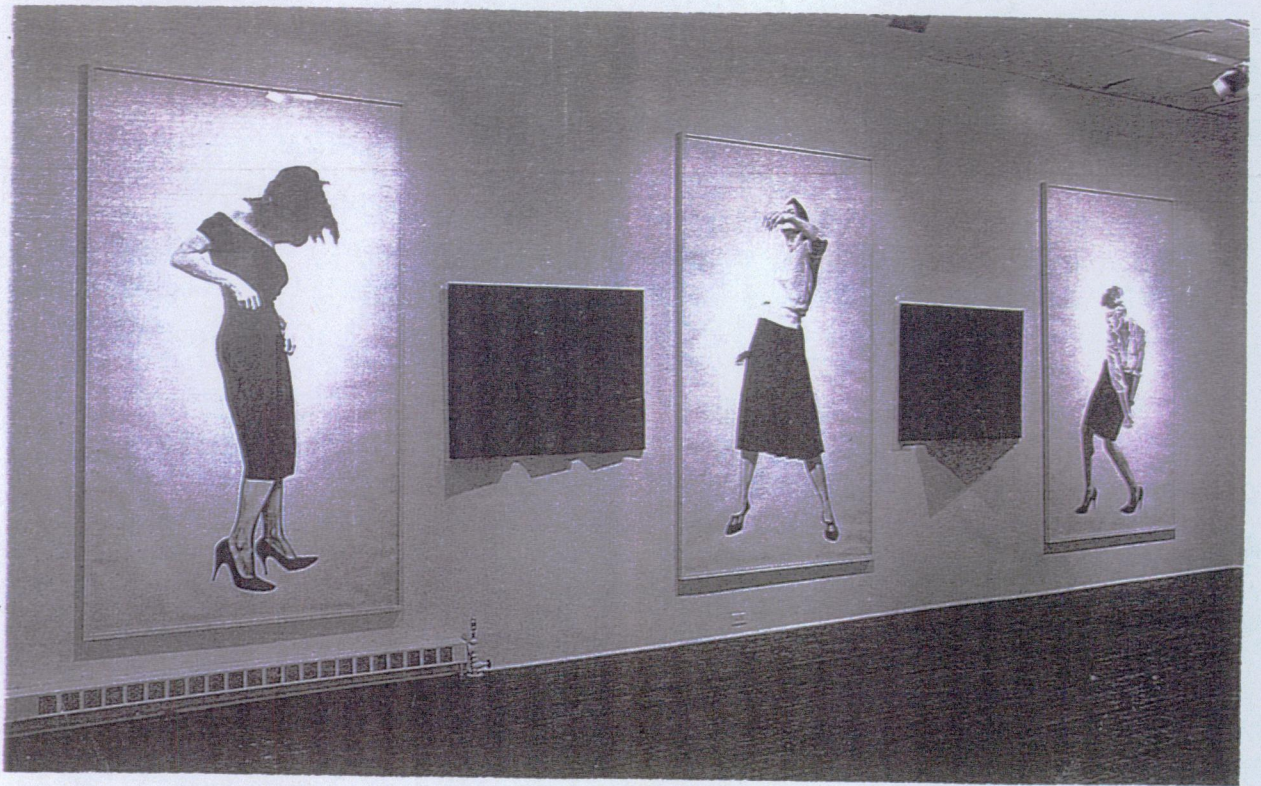
Fig 5 Installation views of *MEN IN THE CITIES*,
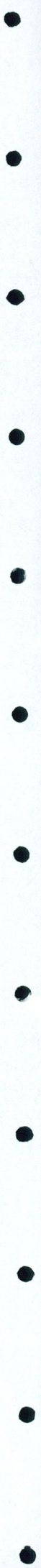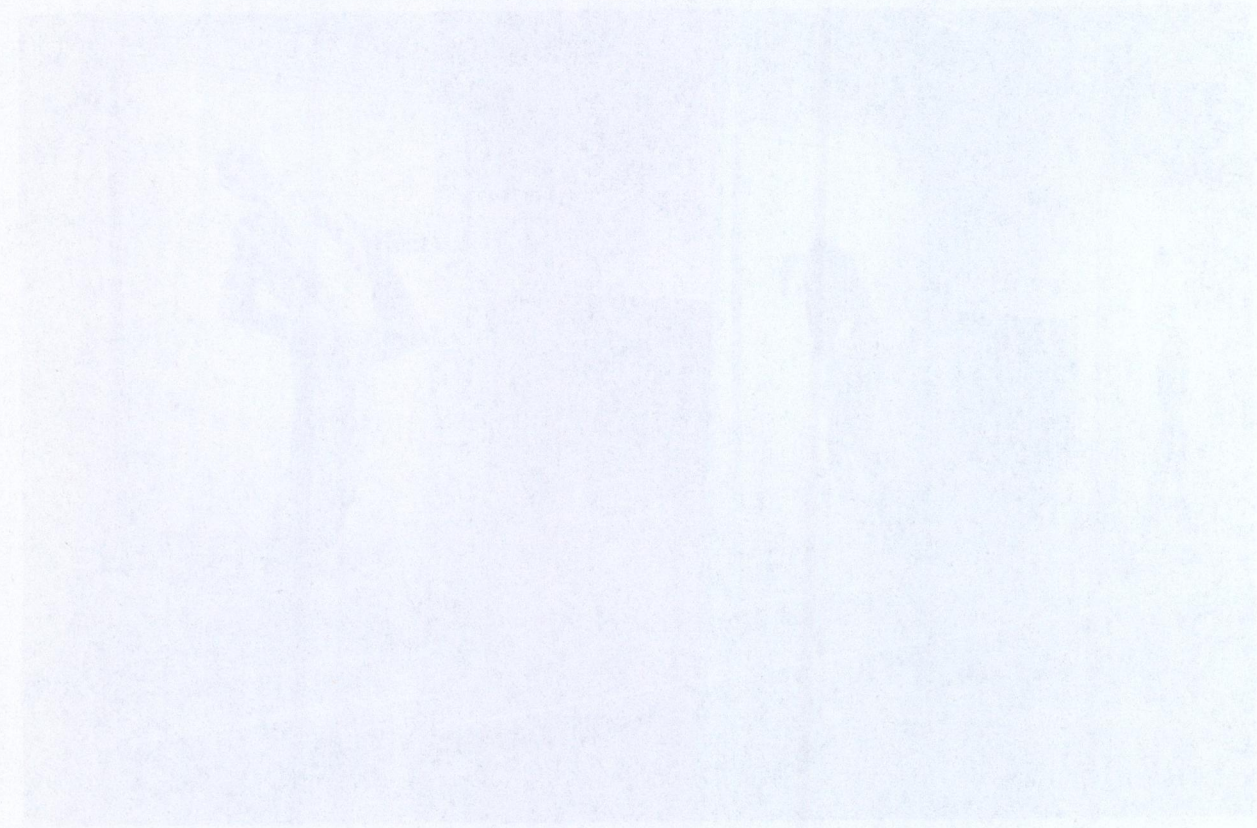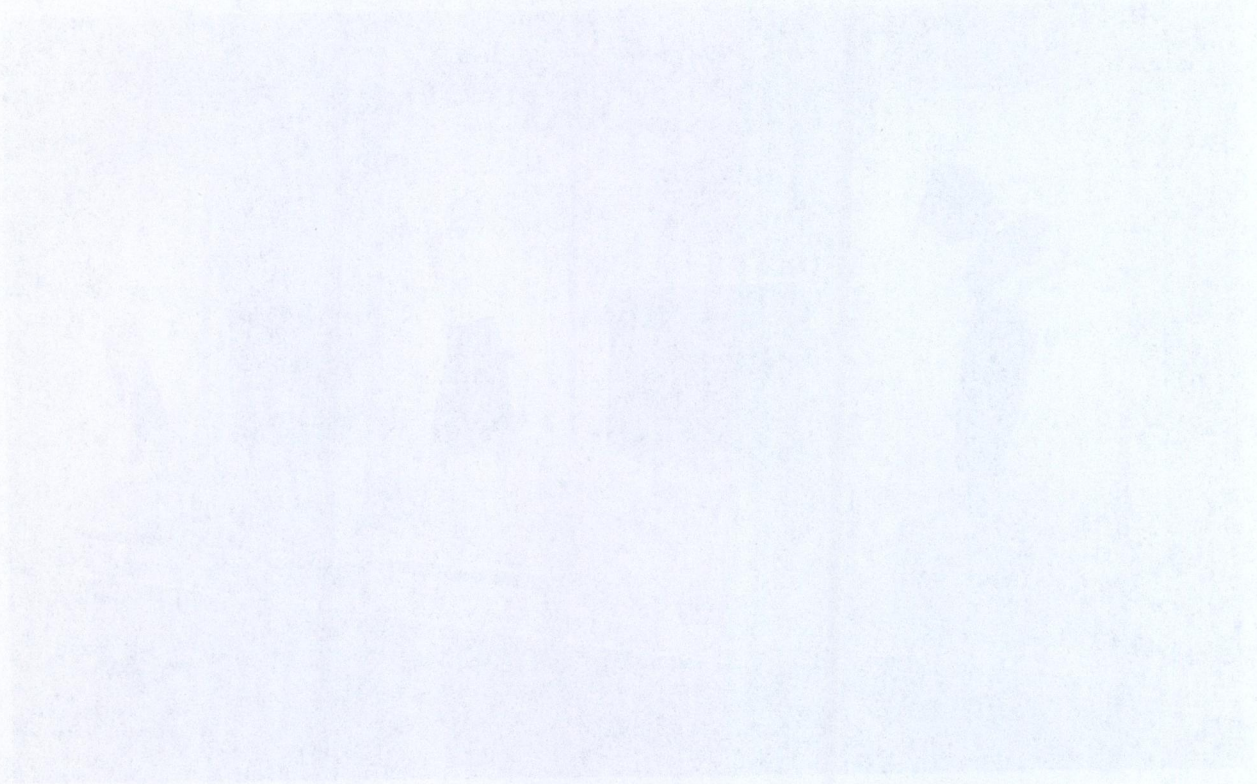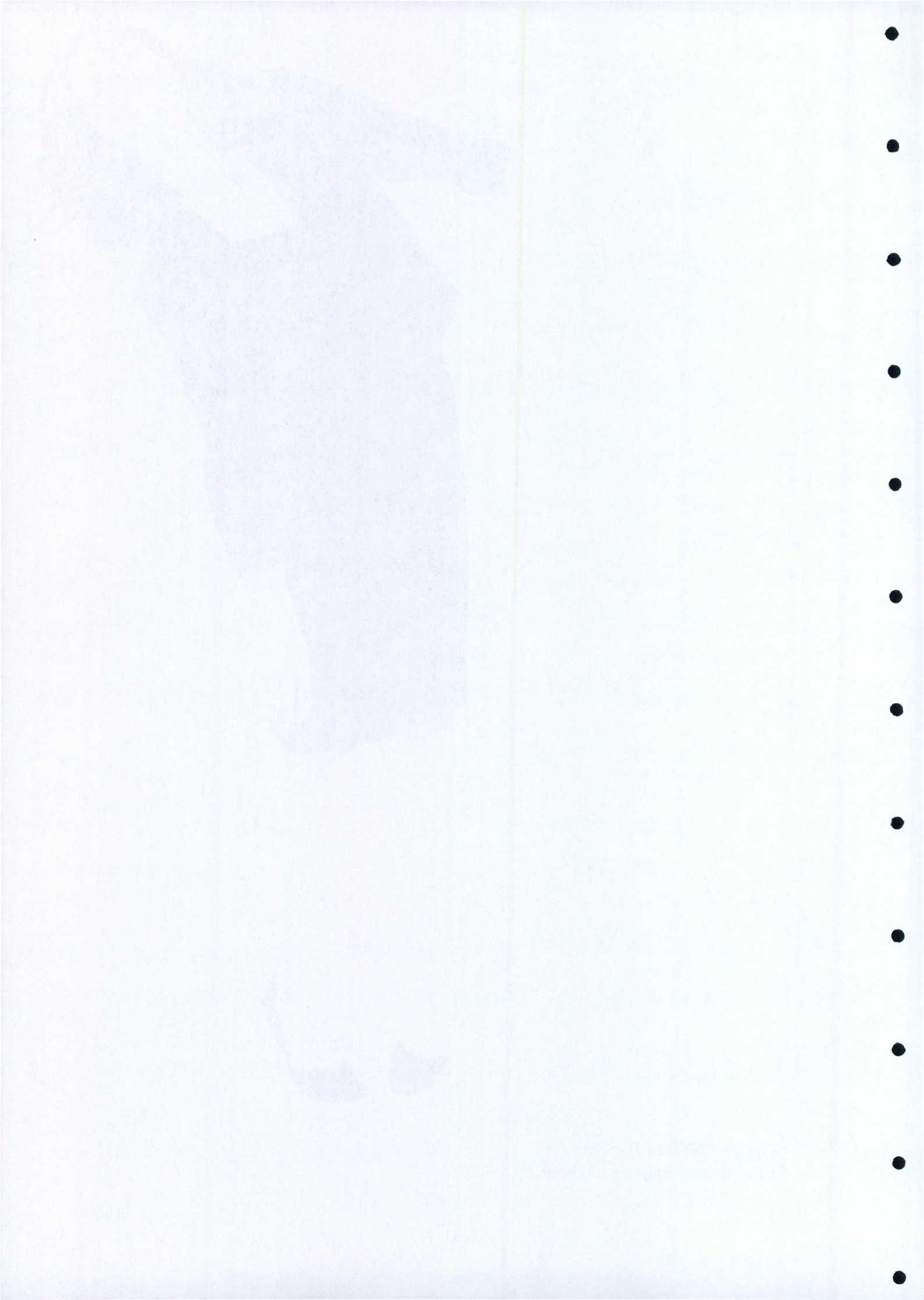Metro Pictures, New York, 1981.

Fig. 6 : *UNTITLED*, 1981
Charcoal and graphite on paper, 96 x 60 in.

Fig. 7 : *UNTITLED*, 1981
Charcoal and graphite on paper, 96 x 60 in.

content or cultural comment. His descriptive pictorial imagery is replaced by a darker, more disciplined vision, characterised by hard geometry's and tense shapes. Narrative is sublimated, the figures are abandoned, so are all direct responses to time and place and any reflection of how our culture is presented in the mass media. In its place is work concerned only with iconography, that suggests pure forces at work. In 1988 he created a series of large abstract wall pieces made from lead, copper, wax, rubber and gold leaf.

DUMB RUNNING : THE THEORY OF THE BRAKE, (FIG. 8)

This is an image of four cylinders covered in gold leaf, spinning periodically at bone-crushing velocity. It suggests an absolute power that exists to serve itself and operate on all things external with equal indifference. It serves as a metaphor for the structural nature of capitalism : the dumb running of a system, crushing humanity in its quest for profit. The obvious distress of the figures in his earlier *Men in the Cities* images might well have been pressed through such an infernal machine as this.

BLACK PLANET (for A. Z.),(FIG.9)

It is a piece dedicated by Longo to his friend, the performance artist Arnie Zane, who died of A.I.D.S. Mounted on the wall is a massive spherical shape covered in black oil paint. In its lower left section exudes a mass of rubber cables. It is a visual allegory about the loss of power and vitality. It is a depiction of a lifeless world spilling its guts. It could be seen as a comment on the slow death of Western civilisation.

JOKER : FORCE OF CHOICE (FIG.10)

This is a steel wool sculpture measuring over nine feet long. The negative space between its four parts is easily recognisable as the cross of Christianity. The parts themselves compose a four pointed star. Each point is cut short abruptly. The *Joker* seems mutilated, but its symmetries and geometry's make it look whole. It looks unstable and induces uneasiness. It has the presence of a monumental figure, although
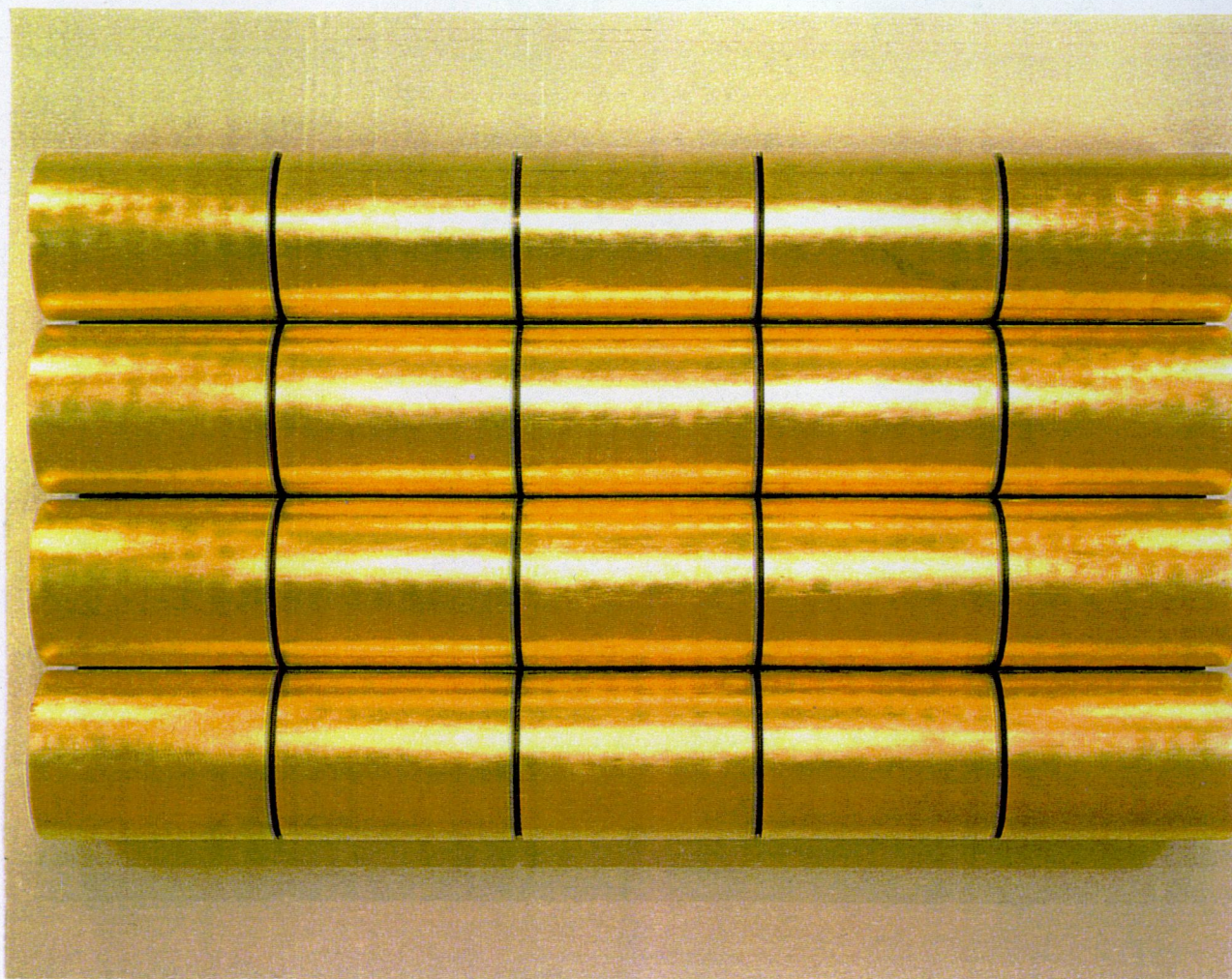
Fig. 8 : *DUMB RUNNING : THE THEORY OF THE BRAKE,*
Gold leaf on steel, mounted on recessed steel support, with motor and timer.
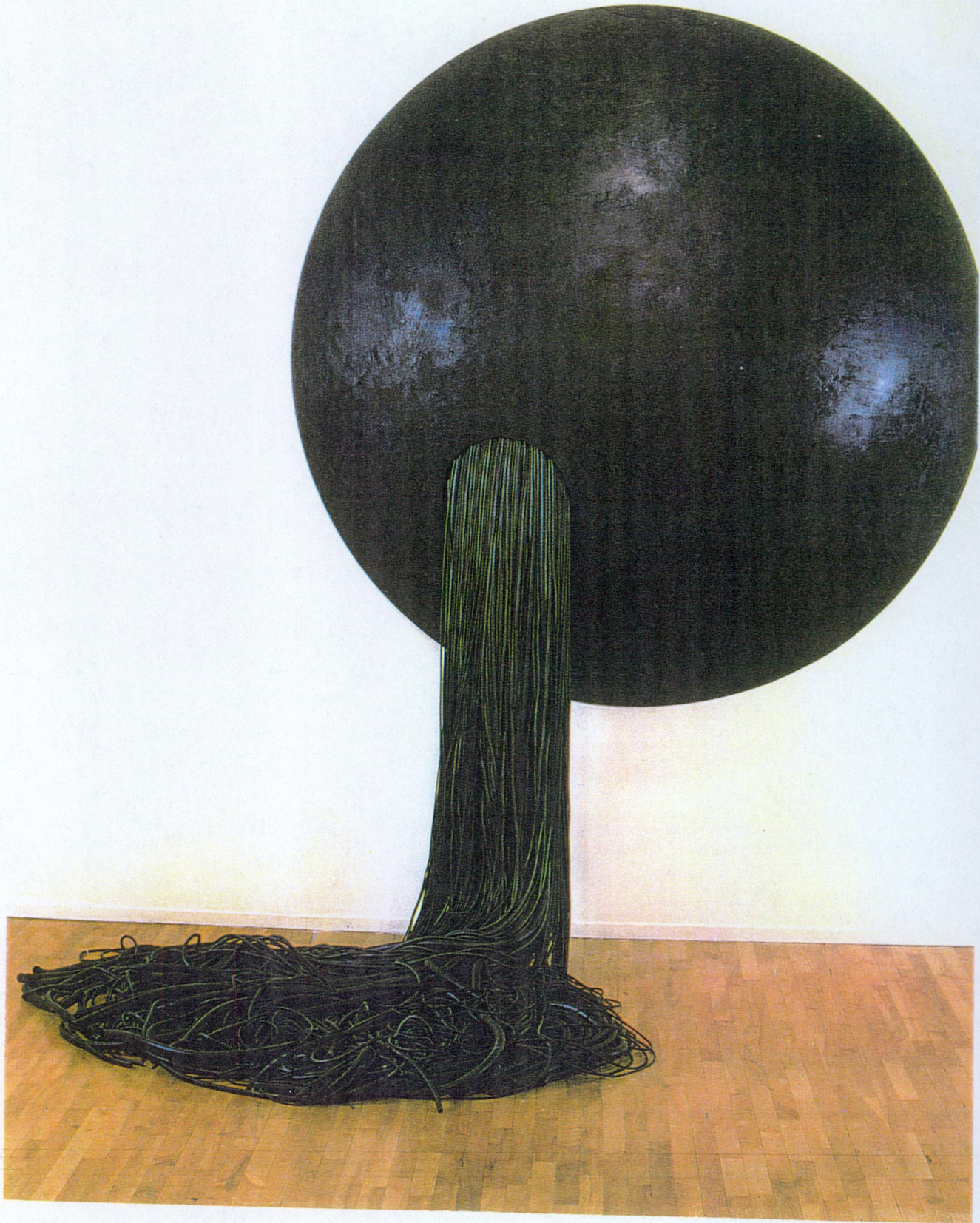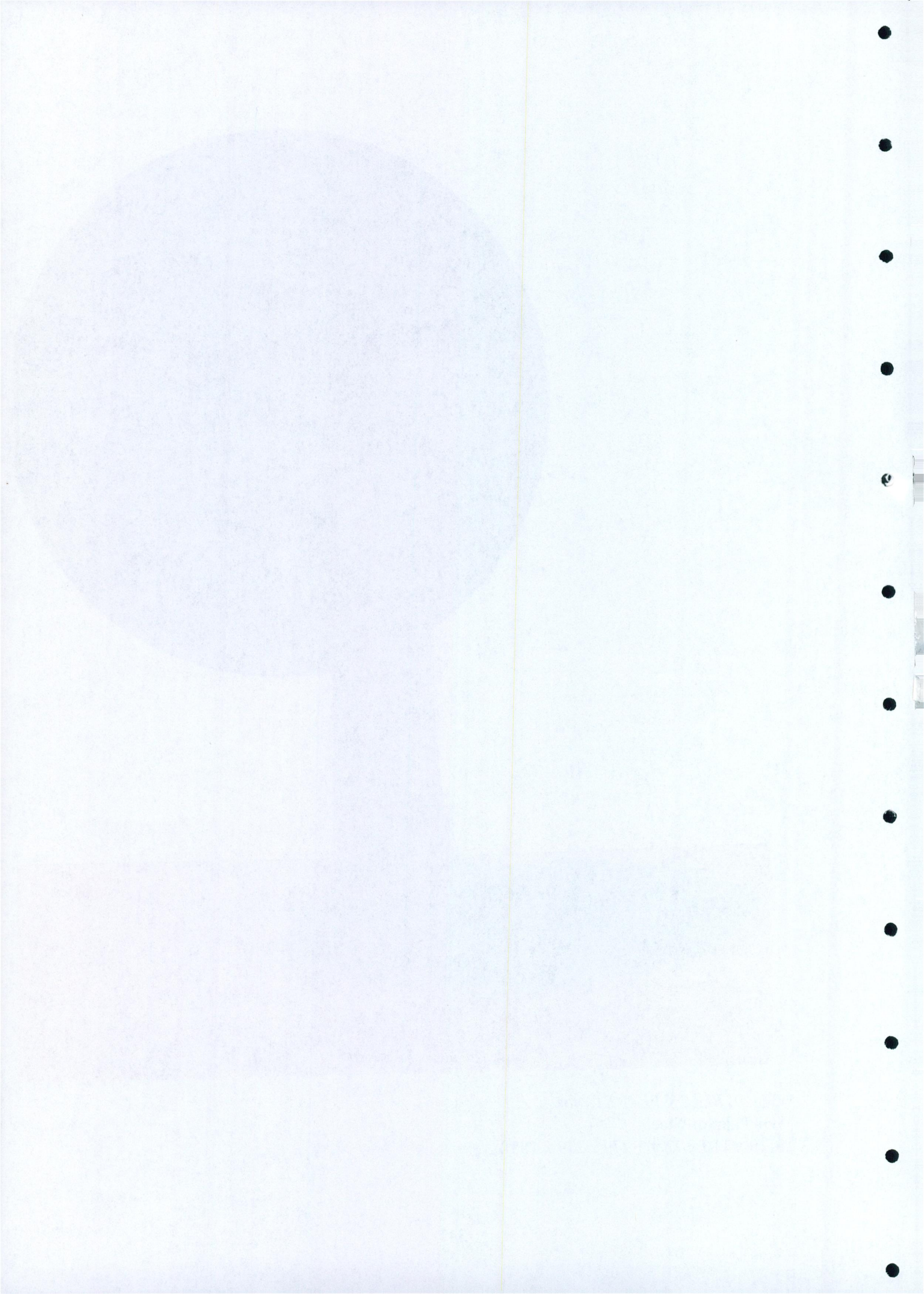73 x 126 x 18.75 in (185 x 320 x 47 cm)..

Fig. 9. *BLACK PLANET (for A. Z.)*
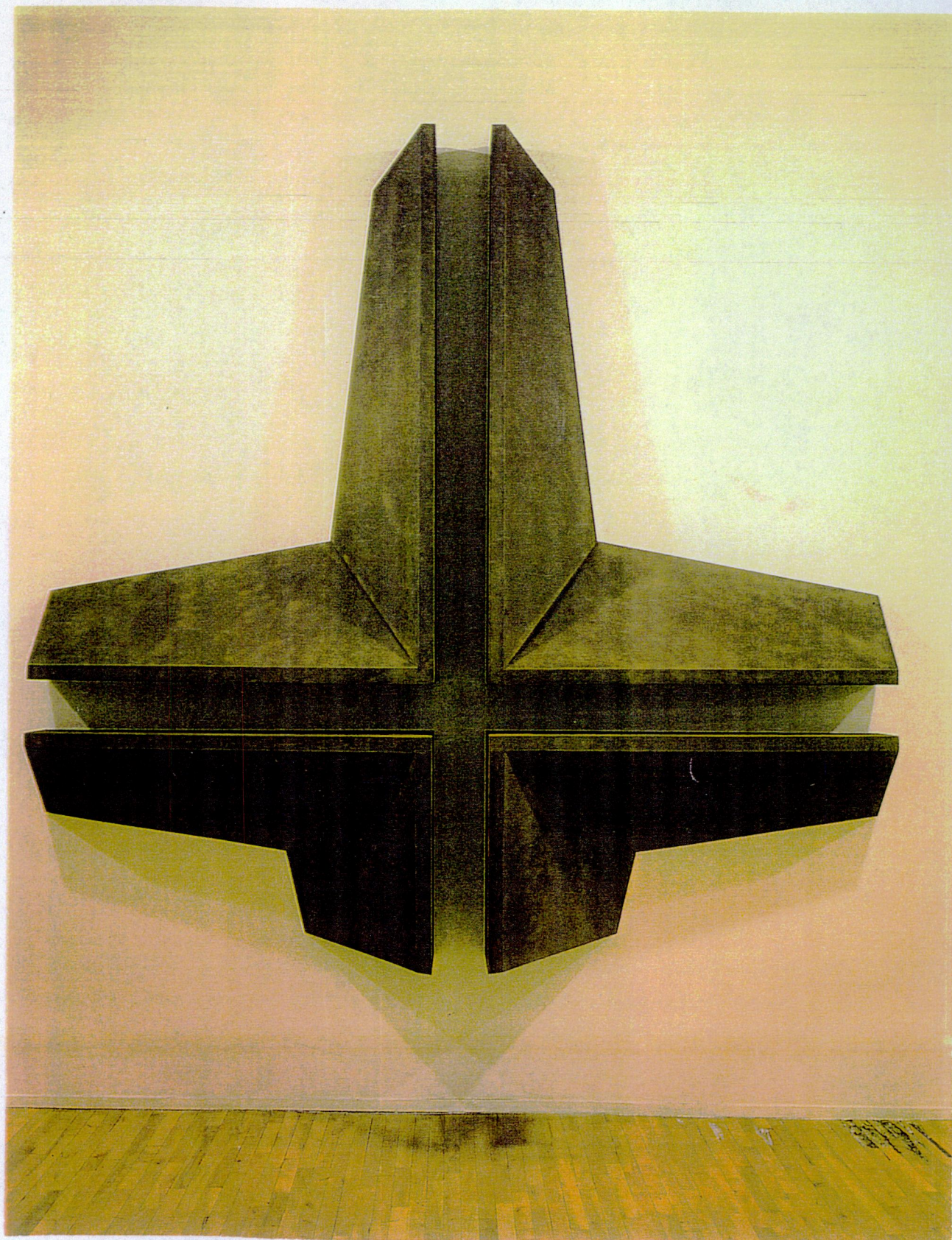Oil Paint on Steel
110 x 110 x 72 in (279 x 279 x 183)

Fig. 10 *JOKER : FORCE of CHOICE*,
Steel wool sculpture,
112.5 x 115.5 x 18.5in., (286 x 293 x 45.7 cm

it is non figurative. It has the air of a logo, an emblem of a corporation that inspires a mix of respect and distrust. The negative space symbolises an absence and what is absent is usually the larger governing force. It represents an emblem of an institution that understands power as the ability to seduce and intimidate people. The irony is that the oppressive presence of the piece eliminates any possibility of choice whatsoever.

Director, Editor and Critic

Longo believes that is his purpose as an artist to reveal and interpret the values and ideals of contemporary culture and to reflect how we, the public experience that culture and ourselves in it. According to Longo " To be an artist now is not simply to be an isolated being in your studio. Its to have a real serious awareness of all the activities in the world "(Welzenbach, 1984, p.41) Throughout his career Longo has adopted the pose of the outside observer, chronicling the inhumanity of society.

Longo's images are assaults on institutional power, but they do not threaten the efficient workings of institutions in the art world or outside it. The images do not directly carry out an attack because the means by which they represent an institution are institutionally approved. Every artist who has come to our attention is to some degree an institutional figure. When an artist achieves institutional status, his/her-self aggrandises its scale and takes on the impersonality of an emblem. The successful artist is a public figure, an institution involved with other institutions. Artists such as Longo operate as collaborators trying to sabotage from within. They openly address the influence of market forces, denying the more romantic view that art is free from the taint of money. Art must find an audience to have an effect. It must collaborate with artworld institutions to get an audience. However, by collaborating with the most powerful institutions, it compromises its attack on the institutions of the larger society.

Longo acknowledges his institutional status openly. His large works need many collaborators. He lists their names on gallery walls in a format similar to that of movie

credits. He invites us to see him as an artworld equivalent to a Hollywood director, or music producer. By advertising his institutional power instead of suppressing it, he has undermined institutional assumptions more successfully. Longo sees himself as a movie director, he discusses this in an interview with Barry Blinderman:

> I've taken this tradition of working for the artist and turned it into the movie production theory. I want to make art that extends beyond the notion of an individual's effort. The more people that are invited the better...Its important for me to acknowledge the people that I work with because they play a real integral part in it. (Blinderman, 1988, p.204)

In 1989 Longo's work was chosen for an advertisement for an AT&T funded show at the Museum of Modern Art (Fig.11). The spectacle of artist, corporation and museum all working together is an occasion to think about the relations between culture, institutions and individuals, even before Longo's symbols insist on it. The fiction created is of master-auteur / producer using the strategies of artists who fuse the terms of their art with that of the media environment, he brings to this practice a kind of parodic hypermasculinity. The attempt to rationalise the aggressive and domineering images as a critique of those forces seems to flatten the work still further. The inflation of its aggressiveness, the themes of fear, authority and mastery make it now an emblem of the super-ego for which Longo and his corporate sponsors are guardians. According to Lawrence Chua (1989) Longo's work shares the same aura as monuments, commenting on faceless dictatorship, on the surface; however, on closer inspection they begin to resemble cartoons or empty caricatures rather than critiques with any meaning. Longo uses fascist imagery, but his true intentions are unclear, the work is very confusing. "Some fault Longo as the consummate corporation age packager, profiteering from the fascist codes against which he preaches. " (Clothier, 1990, p.175)

LONGO

It's a collision of media. An explosion of imagery. A blast of expression. Robert Longo brings together drawing, painting and sculpture with the power of pure inspiration. AT&T brings audiences and art together with the same impact. At the Los Angeles County Museum of Art, we're sponsoring a retrospective of Longo's convention-breaking works, including mixed-media "combines" like this one. Working with the UCLA Center for the Performing Arts, AT&T: *OnStage*, our national theater program, recently presented the world premiere of his "DREAM JUMBO: working the absolutes"—art performed, not merely perceived. At AT&T, we appreciate the force of Robert Longo's work. He has made it his business to redefine communication. And so have we.
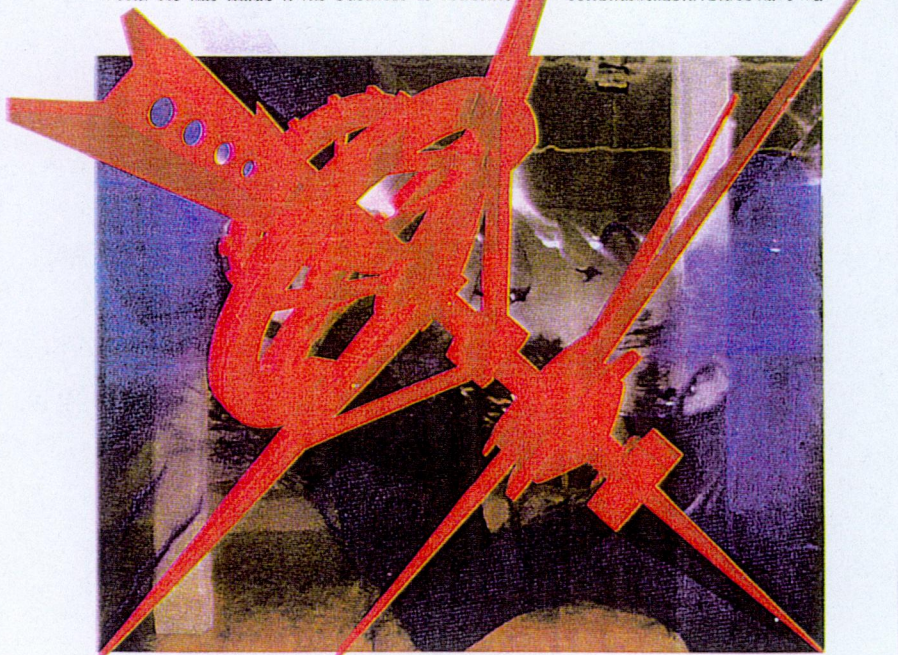
Robert Longo. MACHINES IN LOVE, 1986
146 x 133 x 65½." enamel on aluminum; acrylic and oil on wood.

ROBERT LONGO.
Organized by the Los Angeles County Museum of Art.

Los Angeles County Museum of Art, Los Angeles.
Now through December 31, 1989.
Museum of Contemporary Art, Chicago.
February 17–April 11, 1990.
Wadsworth Atheneum, Hartford, Connecticut.
June 9–September 2, 1990.
© 1989 AT&T

AT&T
The right choice.

Fig. 11 Longo's work was used as an advertisement for AT&T, in Artnews, 88 December 1989.

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Longo and his generation of artists began paying less attention to the formal innovations that had dominated modernism, and concentrated more on the social and political effects various formal manipulation would have. Longo's art is a very good example of this, it doesn't matter if its components cancel out one another , he promotes the dissonance and collision that result. The manipulation to which these artists subject such images empties them of their meaning and significance. The strong formal relations between the different images force the viewer to seek a connection. Longo, himself, has insisted that his images force responsibility of interpretation of them upon the viewer, thus making the viewer become actively involved in the process. Through the various models of representation, ranging from allegory to picture to spectacle, Longo's images are active at once, through the literal collision of image and meaning. In chronological order, he has offered recurrent images of tanks, men locked in physical combat, alien cyberpunks and civil war. His huge multi-part canvases contain juxtapositions of disconnected pictures, a couple kissing, contorted figures writhing in blank spaces, gilt roses, rubble-strewn urban landscapes and oppressive, enormous, anonymous architectural forms. These jolt us out of a neutralised response to love, violence and death.

Longo's images are very striking. It is easy to ignore the larger moral questions which they are apparently intended to raise. Pure simulacrum is pushing the allegorical project to the limit, it exemplifies the paradox of contemporary art which, as Baudrillard has it, keeps creating " a profusion of images where there's literally nothing to be seen." (Lotringer, 1985, p.96)

Reappropriationists saved semiotics from linguistic fetishization. By using words as images, manipulating objects as signs, decoding social systems through distinct visual and verbal strategies, they actually opened up prospects for the old science of signs. For Baudrillard, contemporary art has in fact lost its autonomous status and functions to become just another value sign.

Reappropriationists claimed to be in a position to 'demystify' the media
and consumer society by taking away their most cherished icons : logos
ads, consumer items etc. But if the myth is a disease of the code, an
ideological 'virus' turning the original context into a meaningful mummy,
is it really possible to exorcise the fascination of the code - the black
hole of the media - simply by exposing it 'critically'? (Lotringer, 1985, p.101)

Johnny Mnemonic, 1995

Robert Longo directed *Johnny mnemonic,* a big budget (26 million) studio produced
movie. The screenplay was written by William Gibson and very loosely based on his
story of the same title. When Longo first met Gibson in 1989, he was struck by the
interests they shared, economics, pharmaceuticals and the repressive side of
technology. *Johnny Mnemonic* tells a cautionary tale about the costs of reckless
modernisation. The film is set in a dystopic near-future. Keanu Reeves plays the
character *Johnny* (Fig. 12) a courier, whose "wet-wired" implants allow him to upload
computerised information into his own brain. He takes on a bigger consignment than
he's equipped to handle, which threatens death by "synaptic leakage" if he doesn't
download within twenty four hours. The code required to trigger downloading has
been destroyed. Then he finds out that he's loaded with secret data (the cure for
N.A.S., Neural Attentuation Syndrome), that certain powerful interests (a drug
corporation and the Yakuza) don't want revealed. So *Johnny* is hunted by nasty
assassins and protected by underground types.

Johnny Mnemonic has the biggest budget of the artist / director films, it is also perhaps
the most ambitious, because Longo set out to make a Hollywood movie instead of an
auteur film. The film does not portray a visually distinctive future. High-rise offices,
hotel lobbies and post-apocalyptic streets of Newark all appear little different from the
ways things look today. Longo stated that : "One of the things that we (himself and
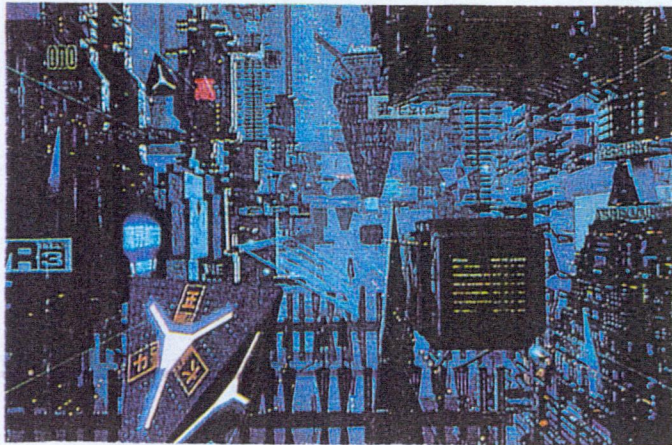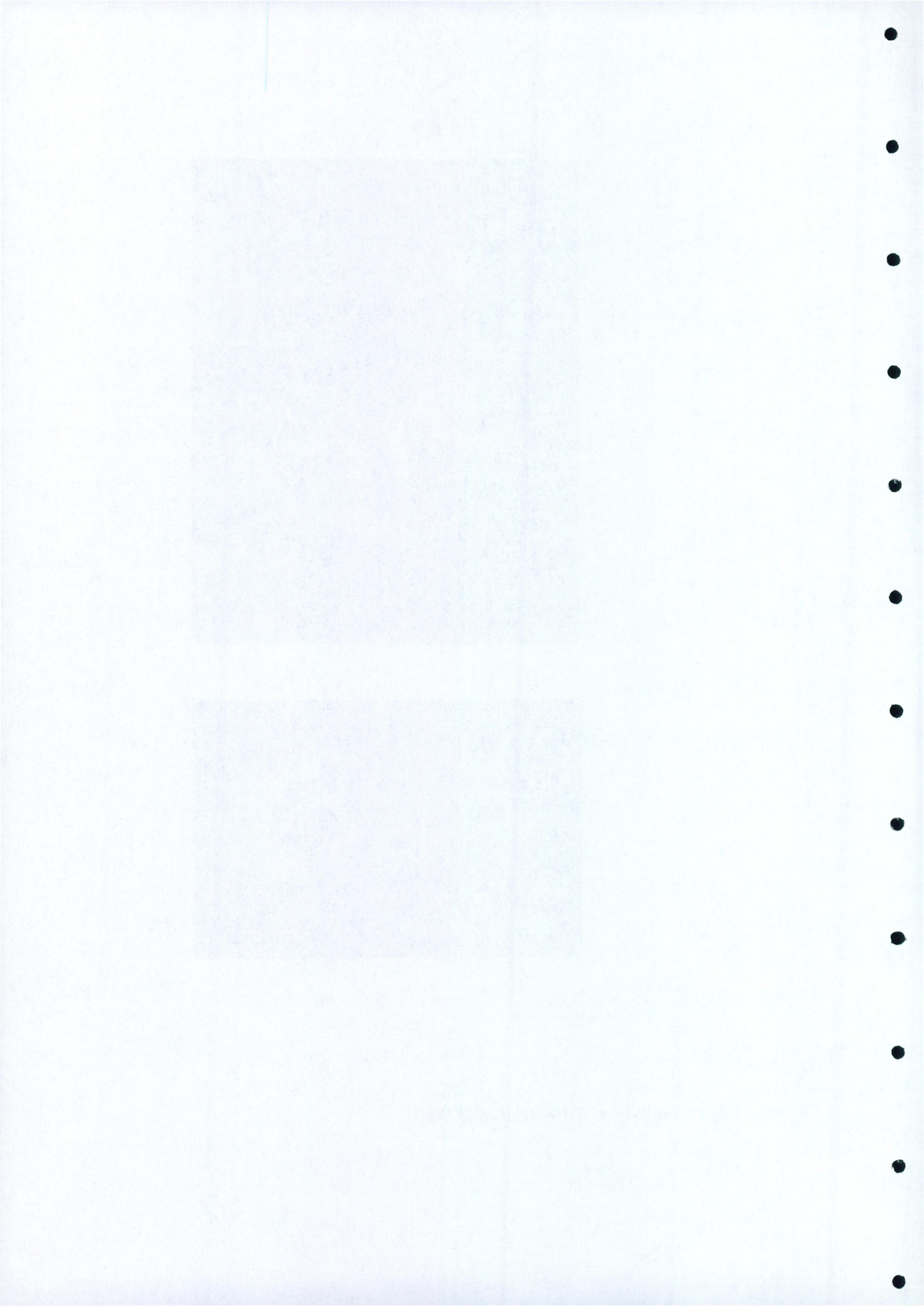Gibson) decided is that we're nostalgic for the future". (Dargis, 1995,p.7.)

Fig. 12 : Film stills from *JOHNNY MNEMONIC*.

From the early *Men in the Cities* series, crafted from photographs by a professional illustrator, to his huge installations with their long movie like lists of credits press-typed on the walls, Longo has always been concerned not to show too much of his own hand in his work. Some images in *Johnny Mnemonic* recall Longo's art. At the beginning of the film *Johnny*, dressed in a dark suit, white shirt and tie, looks as if he had stepped out of one of Longo's drawings from the *Men in the Cities* series. There are also images similar to other artists work, in the heart of Lotek headquarters, a dolphin in a tank recalls Damien Hirsts Shark, a tower of television monitors looks like a messy Nam Jun Paik, as well as samplings of films like *Touch of Evil, Blade Runner, Total Recall* and *2001*. Even the computer graphics scenes don't separate from the body of the film the way that animated sequences often do, Longo got a different company to do each one, so that there would not be any definite style. Longo's static work has always referenced Popular Culture. The scale of his creations, his signature in the art world, are the norm in almost any Hollywood production. He is preoccupied with scale and media dynamics in the film and in his art.

In our electronic age everyone is potentially a participant. This creates more need for directors and editors. Robert Longo and other artists, David Salle and Larry Clark have assumed roles of director, editor and critic. It is common for an artist to have an assembly of collaborators for the production of their works. Directing crews, and managing the production and distribution of their work has replaced much of the craft formerly associated with art making. Editing groups of images, pre-existing or not, is as important as the making of single images. Since what Longo, Salle and Clark have been doing all along in the artworld is equivalent to the role of the auteur film-maker, it is pertinent that they finally get to direct movies.

Longo at first wanted to make a low budget film, but Gibsons participation attracted alot more funding. With all the money invested into the production he had to compromise to deliver the kind of film the sponsors wanted. The irony is that Longo

once was an artist who manipulated public-domain imagery in order to force critical consciousness between viewers and the dominant cultures representation of truth. With *Johnny Mnemonic*, it seems that he subordinated his own critically or aesthetically challenging purposes to the demands of the dominant system to try for a multiplex hit. Longo feels that his decision to make an entertaining action movie instead of an art house film has a certain integrity. In an interview with D'Amato, he explained " Its the snakebite principle - you have to become it to criticise it " (D'Amato, 1995,p.24.) In the end the film is a success by studio standards and even though it deserved the bad reviews, Longo did succeed in making a major film that played to a mainstream audience. This film was produced by the film industry instead of the artist and was made for release to the general public. It constitutes a new relationship between the artist, the audience and the medium.

CONCLUSION

Longo and all the theorists I have mentioned seem to conceive the audience as a mass of passive consumers, subjected to the manipulative persuasions of the mass media, and open to commercial exploitation. Culture has to be mass produced for this audience in order for it to be profitable. To sell to this mass consuming public, the standardised formulas of mass culture are cultivated because they can be made to appeal to everyone, since everyone is open to manipulation. Consequently there is no point in challenging the audience in the way art might do, or drawing it into authentic forms of communal participation, since their conditions can no longer be guaranteed. Instead the mass audience is there to have its emotions manipulated for the sake of consumption by the false dreams of mass culture. Robert Longo intends to enlighten this passive consuming audience about the conceits of the media. His intentions are to make art that has accessibility so that the average person can like it. However, in the age of consumerism and mass media, artists such as Longo, rely on advertising just like other products, so work is often complicit with the art market rather than critical of it.

The argument in chapter two is that we increasingly consume images and signs for their own sake rather than for their usefulness or for deeper values they may symbolise. This is evident in popular culture itself where surface and style, what things look like are said to predominate at the expense of content, substance and meaning. Intellectual depth and strong narratives tend to be undermined. Advertising has always been seen as a superficial exercise, more involved with surface and style rather than anything else. Longo use the style and imagery of advertising and recasts them as art, in order to force the viewers to re-evaluate their original contexts and original messages. His art is that which emphasises style and spectacle at the expense of content, substance and narrative. His art parodies the style of advertising in order to compete with it. Why fragment the (false) totality of spectacle only to assemble another? Why does he not simply deconstruct these media myths?

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Susan Sontag's description of the fascist aesthetic, though essentially derived from Leo Lowenthal, can also apply to Robert Longo. She argues,

> ...a preoccupation with situations of control submissive behaviour
> and extravagant effort (and) relations of domination and enslavement,
> the turning of people into things...its choreography alternates between
> ceaseless motion and a congealed static, 'virile' posing. Fascist art
> glorifies surrender, it exalts mindlessness, it glamorises death. (James, 1985, p.7)

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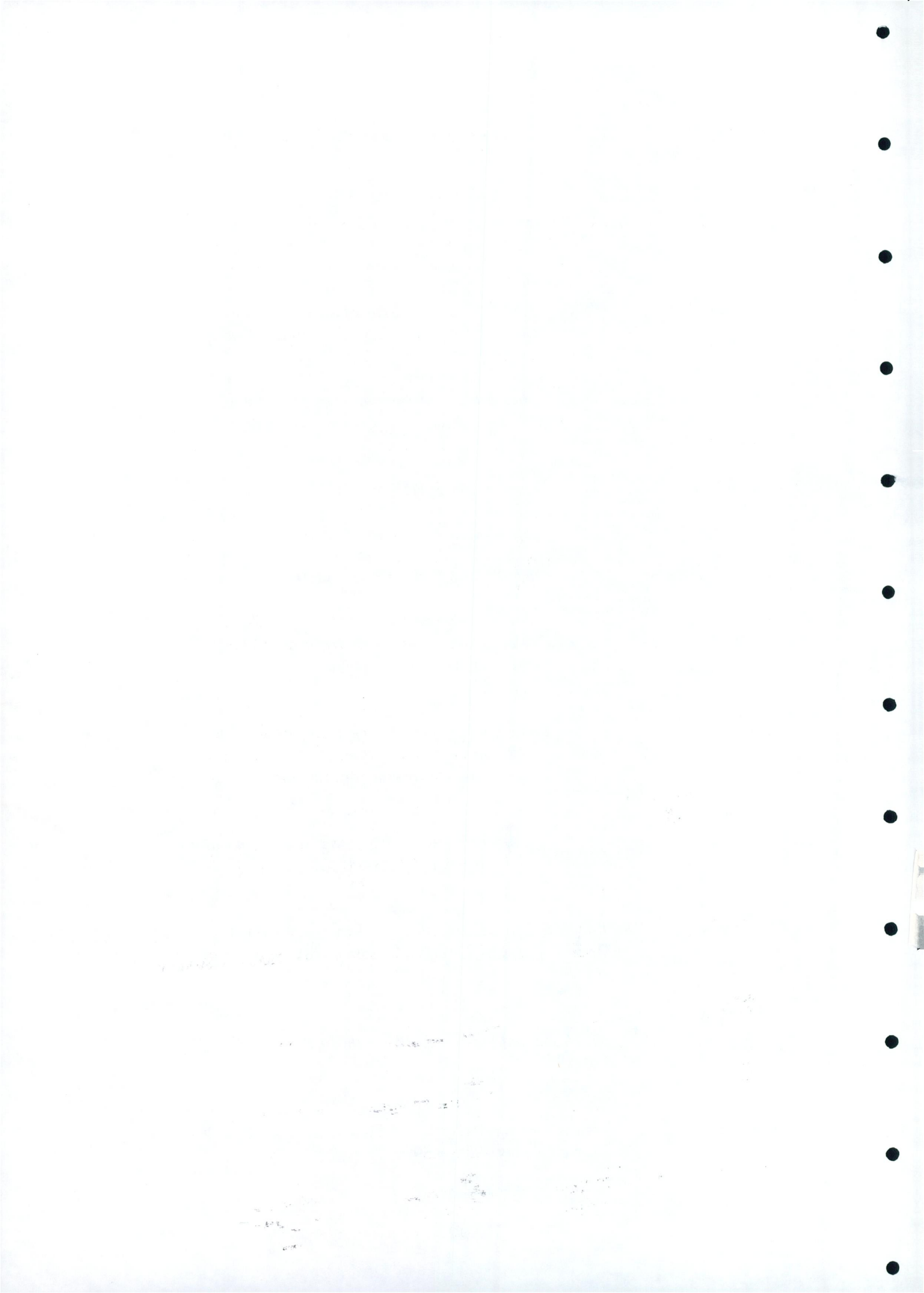
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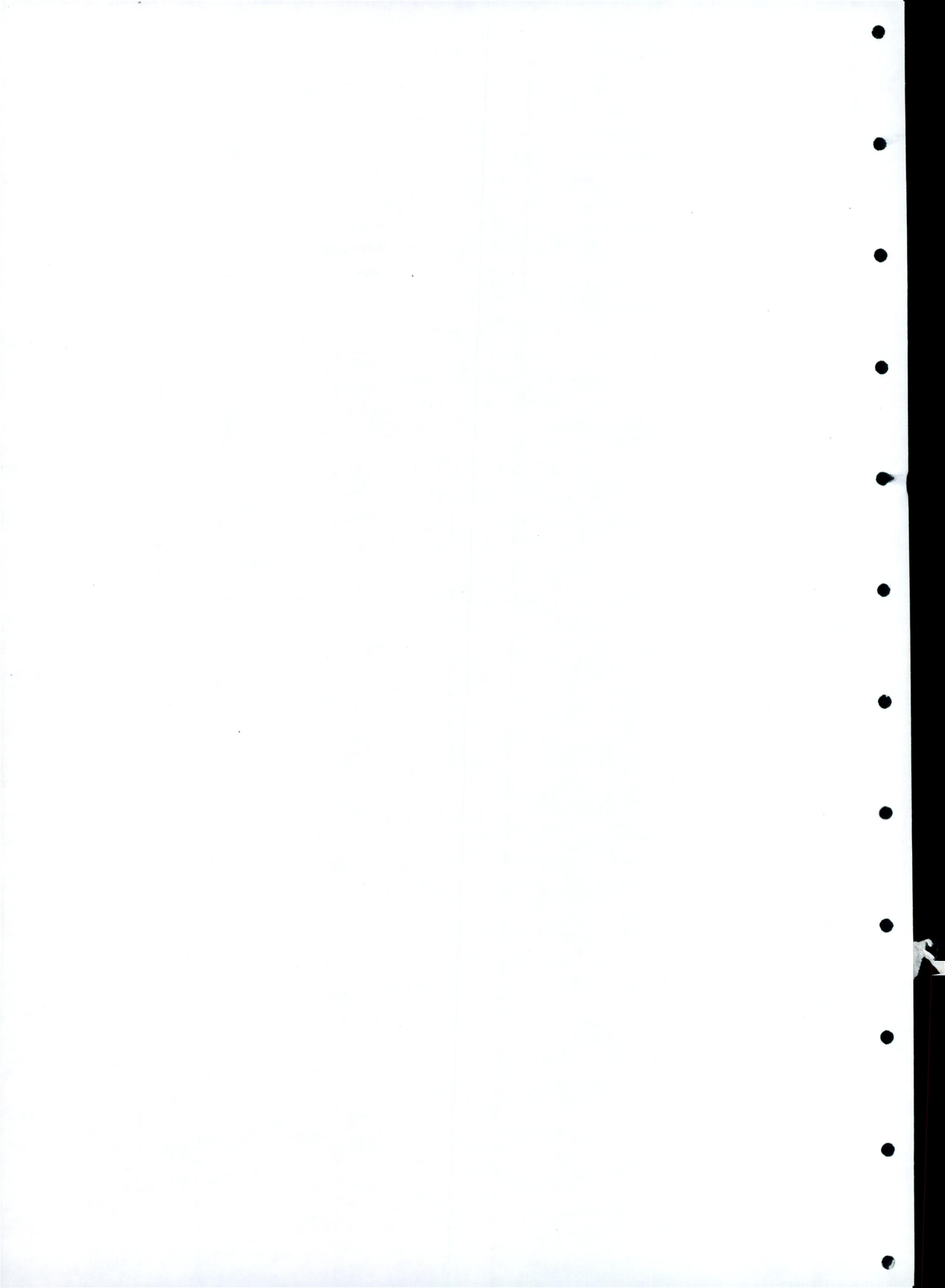
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