

The Combines

By Alycia Gaunt

A 1977 photograph of Robert Longo's studio, awash in cool aquarium-blue light, captures the artist's *Men in the Cities* drawings. Unframed and not yet barred by plexiglass, they are hung evenly upon the walls. These figures, individual men and women clad in film noir armour, twisting as they fall against blank, empty backgrounds, have transcended Longo's authorship to become iconic symbols of his oeuvre. Initially sold separately, they were always intended to be shown together, forming a rhythmic, continuous sequence—like “power chords” in a guitar riff. Venting his frustration in part over the commercial separation of the *Men in the Cities* drawings, Longo began creating the Combines: singular, monumental works, sometimes stretching up to twenty-five feet long.

Longo's Combines are powered by rules. Each one adheres to a formula with variations: a head, a chest, a gut, feet, sometimes a bodily inversion with internal organs exposed, or the visualisation of a scream. They are always composed of at least three of the following: a drawing, a photograph, an element of sculpture or relief, a painting, and, most recently, a film. This solicitation to different ways of seeing is jarring, yet not unfamiliar to the modern eye. Appropriated from television, movies, newspapers, and Longo's personal photographs, their imagery is fragmented, their scale cinematic. Together, they eschew narrative cohesion; individually, they extend a magnetic invitation to look more closely.

Their title appropriated from Robert Rauschenberg's hybrid works from more than two decades earlier (and originally coined by Jasper Johns), the Combines are more than images. Like their agricultural counterparts, they function as machines driven by an internal engine—sometimes literally, as in *Body of a Comic* (1984) with its flickering light box and diaphragmic, revolving steel drums. In this regard, they are both corporeal and mechanical. Composed of cleaved and manipulated images, their content is inextricably linked to the materiality of their medium (steel, wood, graphite, oil, ink, marble, diamond dust), and thus becomes, and does, more than their own two-dimensionality. Visually, they might seem to represent a departure from *Men in the Cities*, yet the Combines reveal and bring to a crescendo the intensity of feeling that informs all of Longo's work. They are allegories of the individual's place in the world.

In Sergei Eisenstein's 1925 film *Battleship Potemkin*, a rapid montage of three still images: a monumental stone-carved lion asleep, then awakening, and finally, mid-roar, captures the emotional intensity of a people realising their own oppression. It is Eisenstein's theory of montage—the deliberate disruption of sequence and chronology to create and amplify emotional affect—that informs Longo's concept of ‘collision’. In Longo's work, it is the collision of monumental images, each an archetype extracted from the vocabulary of media culture, along with the materials and the viewer's own interpretations, that fuels the moment of visual impact, akin to two cars colliding in one violent crash.

Throughout his career, Longo has presaged much of postmodernist theory, especially that of the spectacle and the role of images in a post-industrial world. Despite—or perhaps because of—the acceleration of change in the past three decades, his works remain strikingly familiar and visionary. At a time when Western power seemed invulnerable to toppling, Longo's violently cropped rendering of the equestrian statue of Simón Bolívar in *Culture, Culture* (1982-83) suggested its own instability. Now, as equestrian statues literally fall around the world, Longo's image seems like a prophetic vision realised.

With two new Combines, *Untitled (Hunter)* and *Untitled (Pilgrim)* (both 2024), Longo has expanded the boundaries of his earlier work, pushing them into the realm of meta-Combines. In the 1980s, he crafted a fragmented, imperfect, and incomplete allegory for the modern condition. Four decades later, his rage is tighter, more complete, and laced with irony. Now, the images mimic the visual logic of the smartphone, merging physical and digital gestures into a single, fluid motion—our daily scroll through social media. In this familiar but invisible format, Longo arranges our shared icons of systemic shock with meticulous precision: not to make sense of them, but to invite the viewer into his confrontation with the unrelenting flow of modern imagery.