Smithsonian
Archives of American Art

Oral history interview with Robert Longo, 2009 January 30-31

Funding for the digital preservation of this interview was provided by a grant from the Save America's Treasures Program of the National Park Service.

Contact Information
Reference Department
Archives of American Art
Smithsonian Institution
Washington. D.C. 20560
www.aaa.si.edu/askus

Transcript

Preface

The following oral history transcript is the result of a recorded interview with Robert Longo on 2009 January 30 and 31. The interview took place in New York, NY, and was conducted by Judith Olch Richards for the Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution.

Judith Olch Richards has reviewed the transcript and has made corrections and emendations. The reader should bear in mind that they are reading a transcript of spoken, rather than written, prose.

Interview

JUDITH RICHARDS: This is Judith Richards interviewing Robert Longo [in] Manhattan on Friday, January 30, 2009 for the Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution, disc number one.

Okay. Robert, so let's start with your family and even maybe your grandparents, as far back you want to—who were they—

ROBERT LONGO: I don't know their—all I know is my grandparents came over from Italy.

JUDITH RICHARDS: Your—

ROBERT LONGO: Grandparents.

JUDITH RICHARDS: —paternal or both?

ROBERT LONGO: Both, both. And they both arrived—my father—it's always been a bit confusing to me whether he was actually born in Italy or born here in New York. I never could figure this one thing out. He's the oldest of his family. The rest of his family was born here, brothers. He had three brothers and a sister.

JUDITH RICHARDS: What was your father's name?

ROBERT LONGO: Sam, Samuel. Then my mother's—and they came from around Naples, outside of Naples.

JUDITH RICHARDS: Did you say when?

ROBERT LONGO: I have no idea. Sometime like 1915. My mother's family came to New York from Sicily around 19, probably 16. Her brother was born was born in Italy. He's, like, a year older then her. She was born here.

My family came and lived actually really close to where my studio is now, and my grandfather had a—my father's family I don't know a whole—his father—it's kind of a shady story where it seems that apparently my father's father was killed in kind of a mysterious way. They all think it might have to do with the Mafia, and stuff like that. I never knew what he did actually.

So my father was raised by his mother and four brothers and a sister. My mother's family, my grandfather was a tailor and he started working with—he became friends—they were living in the Lower East side around here, like near here, and they became—he became friends with a Jewish man and I can't remember the guy's name. Together they opened a tailoring shop. The shop that they opened is a big green building on Chatham Square [New York, New York]. That's where their tailoring shop was.

They became actually quite successful because of the—I think right around—they were making equipment, they were making uniforms for the Army.

JUDITH RICHARDS: Just a pause.

[AUDIO BREAK.]

ROBERT LONGO: So they were making uniforms for the military and—

JUDITH RICHARDS: American military?

ROBERT LONGO: Yeah. I think it was a little rough, they had a little rough time during the depression, but I think after the depression they made money, especially during the war, and stuff like that.

So my mother was, like, the boss's daughter. She was—you know, I have these photographs of them at employee meetings—

JUDITH RICHARDS: Wait. Your grandfather—

ROBERT LONGO: On my mother's side.

JUDITH RICHARDS: On your mother's side owned the store.

ROBERT LONGO: Owned this factory.

JUDITH RICHARDS: I see. So your mother was the boss's daughter?

ROBERT LONGO: Yeah.

JUDITH RICHARDS: Okay.

ROBERT LONGO: So I've seen all these photographs of it. They had hundreds of employees I guess. It was a big employer.

My father's family struggled. My father had to leave school when he was very young and support the family because he was the oldest one. But he went to school at night and got a college degree and became an accountant.

JUDITH RICHARDS: Where did he go to school?

ROBERT LONGO: CCNY [The City College of New York]. He made all his other brothers go to college. The story is that when my father met my mother they couldn't get married until his sister was married, you know, the Italian way. So she had like—she eventually got married and then my parents got married. I think they got married, like, in 1930 or something like that, '33 maybe. But I think—

JUDITH RICHARDS: Wait, wait '33. Your mother was born in '15, '16?

ROBERT LONGO: My mother was born in like, maybe like, '19, or something like that.

JUDITH RICHARDS: Oh, wait a second. So—if she's born in 1919 she couldn't have been married when she was—in 1933?

ROBERT LONGO: She was older. I never did the math.

JUDITH RICHARDS: Okay.

ROBERT LONGO: She was born—I'm pretty sure she was born, like, in the 30s.

JUDITH RICHARDS: She was married—

ROBERT LONGO: '33 sounds like the number.

JUDITH RICHARDS: Oh, wait, I'm forgetting your grandparents. Okay, she was born in '33.

ROBERT LONGO: So my father's family and my mother's family, and so my father's family—so my father's family, my father quit school, went to school at night to support his family. My mother's father became quite successful in business and then eventually after the '40s I think his business fell apart.

My father became an accountant and eventually he became a CPA and worked for a corporation here in the city. But my father was—my father could—my father was incredibly musical and very, very talented in drawing, and things like that, but he had to become an accountant to support the family. So he was really important.

My mother was—I think my mother was actually pretty smart but, you know, women couldn't do anything. What was interesting is my mother had lots of jobs. When her father's company fell apart she started working and she really liked working. She worked in all these different places. She worked at a gym where they had—then she worked for, she worked for all these different things. So it was really interesting to see that.

My uncle, my favorite uncle, was her older brother. He was, like, the playboy of the family. He didn't get married until he was much older, but eventually because of the father, his father, my mother's father's company falling apart he eventually just became a cutter, kind of like, you know, middle, lower class guy who just cut materials for suits. But the thing I remember the most about my uncle was that my uncle was this incredibly imaginative man. He would just always tell these elaborate stories and he's—he was just always interested in all the most extreme things, telling these elaborate stories all the time. When he would describe where he worked—I knew he worked in, like, a shit hole but, you know—and he went to work every day and came home really tired, but the thing is he would always talk about how when he cut the material for the suits like, you know—and you had

to match up the pinstripes for a suit. My uncle took this immense pride in his work, which was really kind of amazing. It was, like, that he—it was, like, the idea of loving your job, you know. I saw that in him and I think that really stuck in me that even though it was a shitty job he really loved his job, which I thought was really interesting. It still strikes me today.

My father on the other hand was, like, a workaholic and he worked at this corporation, and because he had gone through the depression when money was really tight my father was tight about money. He was always really tight about money. I remember as a kid like, you know, wanting to go on the horsie ride, like the electronic horsie ride that costs, like, ten cents, or something like that and I could only go on it once, and things like that.

So my parents got married and they had two—they had the first two kids. I think my brother was born in like—he's like—he's ten years older so he's 67 now. My sister who passed away two years ago, she was a year younger. They lived in Brooklyn on Beverly Road.

JUDITH RICHARDS: Your—

ROBERT LONGO: My mother and father lived in Brooklyn.

JUDITH RICHARDS: What part of Brooklyn?

ROBERT LONGO: In—I guess, what it's called, what's it called now? It's, like, called—on Coney Island, near Coney Island Avenue. Prospect Park South, or something like that, now, that's what it's called.

The irony of it all is I actually now live around the corner from where I was born basically. But when I was born my mother—my brother and my sister are 10 and 11 years older than I am. They lived in this house, this two family house with my mother's father and mother.

JUDITH RICHARDS: Who at that point—his business had fallen apart?

ROBERT LONGO: Right, and he was just doing some tailoring work, and stuff like that. Meanwhile my mother had, like, I think three or four miscarriages and then I was born. It was always—kind of the un-discussed thing in my family was that basically my mother actually tried to abort me a bunch of times because she just didn't want to have any—she just thought it wasn't going to work out.

Then we moved to—when I was two years old we moved to Long Island. We moved to Plainview, Long Island [New York], a suburb of Long Island. My uncle shortly afterwards followed.

JUDITH RICHARDS: The playboy uncle?

ROBERT LONGO: Yeah. He finally got married and he moved—we moved to Plainview, to, like, a split-level house. My uncle moved to Hicksville [New York], which was—Plainview was a more up and coming middle class family. Hicksville was more working class family and he moved there. He had a child that was born 28 days after I was, but she was born retarded. She was, like, a—I don't remember—retarded sounds terrible. There was something wrong with her. It was like—she was like—my mother had complications when I was born. I was a blue baby or something, whatever that means. But my cousin had more complications and she for most of her life was quite slow and had problems. But she was, like, my sister and—

JUDITH RICHARDS: Because your other—your brother and sister are so much older than you.

ROBERT LONGO: Yeah. So my brother and sister—yeah. So we lived in Plainview and it was a bit like Ozzie and Harriet, you know. It was like those TV shows, you know. My father went to work in the morning on the train and he came home at night.

JUDITH RICHARDS: You said that your father really was—would have rather be involved with music and he drew. What—did you ever find out what his aspirations were if he could have done anything else?

ROBERT LONGO: You know—no, I—he died before we ever kind of really got—I mean, well, you know, my father seemed so dedicated to his work that that's what he seemed like. What you asked is a very valid question and it's—because when I decided to become an artist my father just, he just couldn't get it, you know. His whole thing was you had to make money, you had to be able to stay alive, you know.

JUDITH RICHARDS: So it seemed irresponsible?

ROBERT LONGO: Well, the irony of it was my sister became an opera singer. So it was like, you know—so my older brother he went into the military. He went to NYU and then went into the military and then moved away actually and had kids, which was really crushing to my mother because the fact that the oldest son moves away, has a family and is actually living, like, in Texas or something at the time. So that was really a difficult thing. I

mean, my brother and sister left home and left me at home with these two crazy people, you know.

JUDITH RICHARDS: Why do you say that they're crazy?

ROBERT LONGO: My mother and father were both somewhat rage-aholics. You know, I'm a recovering addict and I have somewhat tools now to deal with stuff and I kind of understand, you know, my parents. When you're a parent nobody gives you instructions. There's no instruction manual. I think my parents once all the kids were out of the house they were really happy with each other, but when there was a kid caught in between it all and—the problem that happened with me growing up was that my parents left—my brother and sister left home in the mid-60s, early-mid-60s, and I was at home during a period of real great cultural transition and my parents—they were parents in the 50s with my kids, you know. They went through the whole kind of beach blanket bingo world with those kids and then they had to deal with the hippies, and the pot, and, you know, protesting and all that stuff. So it was really—so it was a struggle for them.

My sister and brother lived—my father was a great provider. He bought a summer house for our family out on Long Island, a place called Peconic, and he bought the house from these two little old ladies—now I think back now they must have been gay—that lived in this house. They had stayed in the house during the hurricane of 1953 and they wanted to sell the house immediately afterwards, so my father got a great deal on the house. It was on the beach, on the North Shore. Every summer of my life we would pack up and go to the beach and my father would come out on the weekends.

So, I mean, that was—and then my father also put my brother and my sister through—you know, one went to NYU and one went to Ithaca [Ithaca College]. So it was quite an amazing task that now that I am an adult look back on and think, wow, it was pretty amazing.

But it was difficult for them—remembering my brother and sister they grew up in this world that was really, like, the Annette Funicello and what was it Tommy—

JUDITH RICHARDS: Yeah, the *Three Musketeers*, the Disney.

ROBERT LONGO: Avalon, or something like that.

JUDITH RICHARDS: Frankie Avalon.

ROBERT LONGO: Frankie Avalon, yeah. They really—they had these beach parties all the time.

JUDITH RICHARDS: Annette Funicello.

ROBERT LONGO: Right. And some of their friends had hot rod cars. There was this whole gang of kids that they hung out with. I mean, it was like—

JUDITH RICHARDS: The Mouseketeers.

ROBERT LONGO: Yeah, except growing up—and they used to have these—and then in Plainview where we grew up we had a finished basement. My father finished the basement with, like, pine, knotty pine, and stuff like that. There was a TV down there and a stereo. They used to have parties down there and I always used to try to sneak down there and watch what was going on. I was always good at that.

I still remember those things very, very vividly. But—

JUDITH RICHARDS: When you said they were rage-aholics, were they also—were there other problems?

ROBERT LONGO: You know, I think my parents—I think my parents drank, but I don't think—you know, I think they just had—

JUDITH RICHARDS: It was the uncontrolled anger that had the impact.

ROBERT LONGO: Yeah. I mean, I think my father—I look back now and I don't think my father was like—he drank, as soon as he came home he drank, but I don't think they were alcoholics.

JUDITH RICHARDS: That was the 50s culture.

ROBERT LONGO: Yeah, yeah, exactly. So it was—but—yeah, I mean, I don't—I mean, I see it in my brother. My brother only recently finally started drinking. He would, like, come home from work and just open a bottle of wine and drink it.

JUDITH RICHARDS: So your sister became an opera singer?

ROBERT LONGO: Yeah. My sister went to Ithaca for music. My sister was, like, the star of the family. Wherever we went—I mean, she had this great voice. My uncles—my Uncle Al's wife was—had been an aspiring opera singer, but she just didn't make it so she became a voice teacher. She was my sister's teacher. My sister really blossomed and she became, like, this champion singer where we had to travel all around the East Coast and sometimes I think she went to California for these choral contests and singing contests. She was quite—she was quite good at singing.

She wanted to do opera. She went to Ithaca. It became evident that she didn't have the chops for opera. She tried—when she got out of Ithaca she tried and she got into, like, the chorus at the Met [The Metropolitan Opera, New York] and nothing else. Then she went to get a masters degree and she—a friend of hers had her try out for musical theater. My sister started, got into *Fiddler on the Roof*. She became the third—did you ever see *Fiddler on the Roof*? She becomes the daughter who marries the Russian guy. She was, like, the second wave of*Fiddler*. There was like—first there was Zero Mostel when it first opened and then the next one had Herschel Bernardi. That was my sister's group.

My sister ends up marrying the guy that she marries in *Fiddler on the Roof*, which is pretty wild. But my sister becomes like—if you remember Marlo Thomas in *That Girl* kind of, my sister becomes, like, this kind of, like, mod, you know, go-go girl. She has her own little motorcycle and she had a little dog. She was quite beautiful. She had long black hair and she's—but my—and my sister was this person who through my whole life, Christmases, she always gave me books. She always gave me picture books, like—I still have them all—but picture books, like, American Heritage books like, you know, the Civil War, or the Revolutionary War, or, you know, baseball. I realized that as an artist that the seeds of my sensibility are sown at that transitional moment of puberty, of, like, boy to man. That's really, like, where everything I do comes from. It's just basically—it's—I think my work is really about how to navigate the world as a man in a sense.

The major influences visually on me were television, not so much movies because, you know, I would go to movies occasionally but it wasn't like I—television, *Life* magazine, and the books that my sister gave me.

JUDITH RICHARDS: How old were you when your family got a TV? Does that stand out in your mind?

ROBERT LONGO: I always remember us having it, but we were one of the last ones to get a color TV, hence the black and white drawings. But, you know, I mean—and *Life* magazine became, like, this thing I would come home from school and, you know, I would sit at the kitchen table and I would have, like, cookies and milk and look at *Life* magazine. I would just really get, suck it up, and also *National Geographic* peripherally.

But my sister's books were really important. My sister also—my draft number was -

JUDITH RICHARDS: Let me ask you your brother and sister's names.

ROBERT LONGO: Oh, Roger and Peggy. Her real name was Margaret but she—her nickname was Peggy. My brother and I are named after the Norman kings of Sicily, which I think is kind of ironic because it's like—the idea of like—I never wanted to date Italian girls. I always seemed to gravitate towards Northern Europeans, which is, like, really weird. Anyway, that's a whole other story.

JUDITH RICHARDS: So your sister gave you these picture books?

ROBERT LONGO: Yeah, and my sister was always incredibly supportive of me. My brother was gone but my sister was always incredibly supportive of me. When I was growing up in Plainview I had this kind of weird evolution as a teenager that I was a super jock but I also played in a rock and roll band, which is—

JUDITH RICHARDS: Going back to elementary school, did you show any initial talents or interest in art?

ROBERT LONGO: I could always draw, I could always draw. That was like—

JUDITH RICHARDS: Were you considered the class artist or given recognition by your teachers for your artistic ability?

ROBERT LONGO: I always thought it was kind of uncool to be an artist, you know. I—

JUDITH RICHARDS: So your friends didn't—

ROBERT LONGO: No. Whenever we had to draw posters for the sports teams, or something like that, I got the call. I didn't want to do it. I always thought the artist thing was so icky.

JUDITH RICHARDS: Your father and mother, did they take you to museums when you were a kid?

ROBERT LONGO: No.

JUDITH RICHARDS: You stayed on Long Island.

ROBERT LONGO: My father and mother, I didn't see my father and mother read a book. My father came home and watched TV and then my mother and father usually argued. That was it. That was like—but, yeah, I don't remember ever going to any museums with my family.

JUDITH RICHARDS: So in your—

ROBERT LONGO: Oh, no, I went to the Baseball Hall of Fame.

JUDITH RICHARDS: So you didn't have any sense of what an artist was either?

ROBERT LONGO: Well, but you know, we were Italians, you know. So it's, like, opera, you know, or Leonardo DaVinci, Michelangelo. You know, had—those terminologies existed. You had this historical context, you know. When I was a kid I was really interested because of all the gladiator movies like *Ben Hur* and all that I was—I was interested in all that sort of stuff. There were two—if you put into that mix there are two other things that are quite critical and that was the Roman Empire stuff was really interesting to me. I was just fascinated by all that mythology of, you know, those movies, the [Ray] Harryhausen movies with the special effects, and stuff like that. So those movies are really—

JUDITH RICHARDS: Let me just get that, Harry—

ROBERT LONGO: Harryhausen.

JUDITH RICHARDS: Harryhausen.

ROBERT LONGO: He made like—

JUDITH RICHARDS: Do you know how to spell Hausen?

ROBERT LONGO: H-a-u-s-m-a-n? It's something like that. I know that's not—anyway. He's real famous. He did *King Kong*, he made *King Kong*. But the thing that's interesting is that there are things that are also important ingredients in the artist recipe and that was the Rome, the influence of the Roman thing was really a big influence. The influence of cars was also a real big influence, the car culture that we lived in. The other one that was really, really big is the Bicentennial of the Civil War. It was really—it was a really huge influence on me. I mean, I was really obsessed by the 1960, 1961.

JUDITH RICHARDS: The Centennial?

ROBERT LONGO: Yeah, the Centennial, right. Then the other thing is, like, the atomic age was, like, a real—the thing of, like, having to hide under your desk, and the Bay of Pigs, and all that sort of stuff, living with that kind of incredible fear, you know, of what was going on. Life seemed incredibly gray but at the same time there was, like, this ominous thing of, like, the atomic bomb coming.

I saved a lot of the *Life* magazines that I had when I was a kid. It was real interesting when I started doing the bombs that I took those magazines home and I was looking at them. I remember them. I had this real heavy flashback. I remember asking—one of my kids walked by and I remember asking one of the kids what they thought they were and my kids thought they were hurricanes, things like that, which is a whole other story for later.

But—so it's, like, you see this, kind of, like, ingredients that contribute to, like, the make-up of who and what you become as an artist. It's really interesting because I think that a lot of times my work gets criticized for being not personal, or something like that, and it's incredibly personal. It's just the world that I grew up in. You know, it's—I grew up in a highly aggressive, where violence was just—violence was becoming, like, a marketing technique, like Sam Peckinpah movies. You know, I distinctly remember as a kid there was a game that we used to play as a kid called "who could fall dead the best." It was like—there were two games that were similar.

JUDITH RICHARDS: Like cowboys and Indians in those days.

ROBERT LONGO: Well, yeah, in those days. Cowboys and Indians stopped happening. What became was—because people in movies started dying differently. All of a sudden they were flying through the air and they, you know, chests would explode. You know, if you think of the difference of the way James Cagney would die, he would get shot and fall over versus, like, Sam Peckinpah where a guy would get blown through the wall, or something like that.

So "who could fall dead the best" was based on a game that I played younger called catch – "catch a fly up," where one guy had the bat and two guys would go out in the field. The guy with the bat hit the ball and whoever

caught the ball got to be, hit the ball and you had to—and so whoever was batting had to go back out into the field. So if the none of the guys could catch the ball you would sit there and hit the ball all day. It would be fun.

So "who could fall dead the best" was a game that required again at least three people. One person had a gun, or a fake gun, and then the other guys had to, like, charge at him and he would shoot them and they would pretend to die. Whoever died best became the person with the gun. So a little bit like—

JUDITH RICHARDS: So this isn't a game you invented?

ROBERT LONGO: Well, it was a game—I don't know whether it was a game we invented it or not. I don't know where it came from. But this is, like, where basically *Men in the Cities*, which is pretty bizarre.

But I remember behind our house was a schoolyard and we played football there and baseball there and we played these games there. It was—

JUDITH RICHARDS: And this is in high school?

ROBERT LONGO: Yeah. Well, in elementary school.

JUDITH RICHARDS: Oh, okay.

ROBERT LONGO: High school became, everything became organized, organized football, organized, you know, baseball, organized things, and girls. That's, like, a whole—the other thing is girls were the other big influence.

But—so—but high school, somewhere in high school, towards the end of my high school career, I had this wonderful teacher who discovered that I was dyslexic.

JUDITH RICHARDS: What's his name or her name?

ROBERT LONGO: I can't remember. I think her name was Miss Wool.

JUDITH RICHARDS: Wool, like—

ROBERT LONGO: Wool, like just W-o-o-l. Because when I was—my mother—I was born in '53 but my mother—the kids on my block were all born in '52. My mother wanted me to start school then. I had a really hard time reading when I was a little kid. I mean, it was really just horrible. I mean, I was just—everybody else was, like, reading like, you know, I don't know, *The Three Musketeers*, and I was reading, like, "see Dick and Jane go get water." It was horrible. It was really—and I think because of that dyslexic problem I developed all these alternative ways of dealing with reality, which again contributed to being an artist.

When I was I think a senior in high school this teacher figured it out. It was, like, great, you know. I was, like, you're finally going to help me now. Like I remember saying things—I mean, you don't say the words in your head when you read them? What do you mean say the words in my head, you know what I mean? It's like—or the idea of sounding out words, I distinctly remember, like, the idea of, like—you just sound out the word and if you don't know how to spell the word look it up in the dictionary. If you don't know how to spell a word you can't look the word up in a dictionary because you have to know how to spell it to look it up in the dictionary.

I remember looking up the word "enough" under "I". You know, it was just like—it was just—it was really quite frustrating as a kid growing up. It was just really—I hated school immensely, but I did have a few good teachers and they were—history seemed to be something I was always interested in. I always loved—I always loved the presence of the past, of the fact that the past was always present somehow. I always liked to feel the ghosts of places. When I finally had a chance to go some places, like, to go to Gettysburg or to go to Rome I really felt very eerily connected to what had happened there, kind of, like, a psychic feeling, which is really kind of cool.

But—so high school I went to Long Island. Everyone was going—it was a very strong academic school and I was kind of like, there was like, the A track, the B track and the C track. I was in the B track. Most of my friends were in the A track, and then I had a lot of friends in the C track because I played sports but also I played music. I was in a rock and roll band. When it came to going, time to go to college, it was—my grades were terrible. My SATs were terrible, although I managed to cheat on my SAT the second time—the first time I took it I cheated. My girlfriend was, like, a valedictorian of the school, so one of the—what's the—what's after valedictorian?

JUDITH RICHARDS: Salutatorian?

ROBERT LONGO: Yeah, something like that. I remember, like, watching her test and, like, sketching the pattern on her test, you know.

JUDITH RICHARDS: A visual person.

ROBERT LONGO: And I got—I actually got, you know, I think 900 or something on it. It was really quite amazing. But I distinctly remember following the pattern of her paper like, you know, it was really—

JUDITH RICHARDS: So no one really ever understood that you had this reading problem so that it could be addressed?

ROBERT LONGO: No. I was a disciplinary problem.

JUDITH RICHARDS: Well, they could probably go hand-in-hand.

ROBERT LONGO: I had this thing where I had a book—my parents, my mother started working for the school system, so she knew everybody in the schools, and stuff like that. She helped run the adult education program and the adult education program was run by the physical education director of all the—he was the director of all the physical education. So he knew me and my mother, like, always would say I give permission to all the teachers to hit Robert if he's really out of control, you know that sort of stuff. Of course they never did, but I got roughed up by a couple of teachers.

The thing was is that they gave me this kind of Steno book and the Steno book had lines drawn in it. Everyday in class I had to write down my homework assignment and then my teacher had to write down whether I did my homework and then he had to write down my conduct in class. I had to show it to my parents when I got home. Then parents, I had to do—

[Audio Break.]

JUDITH RICHARDS: So you had this Steno book.

ROBERT LONGO: Right, yeah, with these things. Then I would have to go home and show my parents this and then they would—you know, if I got, like, a bad thing for my behavior in class they would give me shit. Then and I had to do—they would see my homework. But the thing was is my parents, I would fool my parents with the homework all the time. I would just make up homework, you know. I mean, I basically just figured out a way of how to get by by not doing the stuff I was supposed to do, like, reading books or something. I would figure out how to get, like, somebody else's book report, or something like that. I mean, it was just—

JUDITH RICHARDS: And were you spending—at that point you were playing sports. You also said you were in a band, bands.

ROBERT LONGO: Yeah. But the other thing was girls became, like, a huge, huge, huge issue. I mean—because the thing was is that the kind of insecurity of not having self-love that you end up looking for validation in someone else. That's what that became. The girls became really, really important to me, really important to me, and sex and the whole bit became really important.

But—you know, and the thing was is I was—I was part of, like, this kind of like, the upper, the upper elite of my high school. I mean, we kind of like ruled our school, like the jocks, but it was combined with the jocks and the smart kids, and stuff like that. So we were, like—we thought we were, like, hot shit, you know. You know, we were, like, the—and at the same time I was like, you know, getting shitty grades and everybody else was getting good grades, which was really weird.

Yeah, so the thing is is that—

JUDITH RICHARDS: Very difficult for any kind, especially a smart one.

ROBERT LONGO: Yeah. Well, that was—the thing was that I knew that I was smart, I just didn't—I couldn't—I couldn't read for long periods of time. It was really—you know, it was, like, that feeling of feeling stupid but not knowing—but knowing you're not stupid. It was really horrible. It was like—

JUDITH RICHARDS: And it wasn't until you were a senior that you found a teacher who understood.

ROBERT LONGO: It wasn't until I was, like, 30 years old or so when I was asked by this German filmmaker to play a part in a movie, where I played the Angel of Understanding and Reasoning, and it had this long huge text that I had to speak about life and all this other crap. I thought—I asked my sister to help me with it. My sister—I said, "I've never been able to memorize anything in my life, like school and things. I mean, how can I memorize this, it's a huge text?"

My sister said something to me that just, like, blew my brains. She said, "Before you can memorize something you have to understand it. If you understand it then you can memorize it. But you can't memorize it unless you understand it." Like, boom, like a bullet in my head. It was just like, why didn't they say that in school? You know, first you have to understand something before you memorize it, and that was, like, a really big awakening

for me. That was a really big awakening for me.

But the other thing that also helped me with learning was that I started using, later on in life I started using a typewriter and using both sides of my brain. That was really quite helpful. But anyway—

JUDITH RICHARDS: So girls and music.

ROBERT LONGO: And sports. I had the fantasy of, like, either—the Beatles were, like, a really huge influence. But my basement where I lived was basically where I—I was in the basement all the time with the TV, my toys, the record player, the band, and just a complete imaginary world, you know. It was, like, I pretended, like, I was a rock star, I pretended I was a superstar football player, I pretended I was a soldier or whatever. It was all totally imaginary in this world, the basement. It was really like, really the critical point for me.

I got—I used to—I got into a lot of fights, but the fights were always because I was trying to hide the intellectual stuff and the school stuff. But there were some parts that were really interesting because they were parts where we were vying for friends in this block where I was growing up. Like the kid next-door to me and the kid across the street, and there were three. Three is always difficult. We were vying for the friendship of this kid next to us, Lennie. I just wasn't winning and I just became—it became—there were chunks of real loneliness that occurred, and that's where the basement comes in.

But what happened was is that as I got older, around 13 probably when the sports thing really kicked in, I found friends in other neighborhoods and things really kind of exploded and things got more exciting. The sports stuff was—I was really good at football and I was pretty good at lacrosse. I had these fantasies of getting college scholarships and that was like—but then when I was—because when I was in tenth grade I was playing on the varsity football team. You know, it was, like, a big deal, you know.

Then I remember meeting guys from colleges, and stuff like that, because of recruiters and they just said, well, you know, you're really good for tenth grade, and stuff like that, but, you know, you've got to grow. I was like—so now I have this new pressure, you know. "Oh, fuck, I have to grow." And I didn't. I basically stayed the same size I am now, about 5'6".

I got some offers from colleges to play football, and that was pretty funny, but they were like, you know, totally abominable. Like one was Hiram Scott in Nebraska. It had just—I think it was on the verge of becoming an accredited college. I don't know if you remember a guy named Lyle Alzado. He was a football player who died of a brain tumor from steroids. He went to that school. Hold on.

[Audio break.]

ROBERT LONGO: Where was I?

JUDITH RICHARDS: Well, when you—the football recruiters. When you were in high school and you were thinking about what to do after you graduated, so what do you think—what were your options in your mind? And there was music.

ROBERT LONGO: There was music—I though music but—

JUDITH RICHARDS: Was that also—

ROBERT LONGO: —the thing is I couldn't read music. I could play—I could play trumpet, I could play it a little bit. I played guitar, I could play trumpet, I could play a little bit of violin, I even could play saxophone, I could play the drums, maybe a little bit of piano.

JUDITH RICHARDS: Without reading music?

ROBERT LONGO: Without reading music. I did, like, what my father—my father couldn't read music either because he never had any—he played music, piano by ear. My sister could read music, but I couldn't. But the thing was—yeah, no, what to do was really—when I was—and I had fantasies I was going to become a marine biologist because I loved surfing. I used to surf when I was a kid.

There's, like, these identity—it's, like, you realize that in your lifetime you become and are all these different people, you know. As an adolescent I tried on so many different personas. I was a greaser when I was, like, in sixth grade. Then I became a collegiate kid because of the girlfriend. Then I became a surfer, then I became, like, a jock, then I became, like, a hippie. You know, it's like—all before I was like, you know, 17 years old. It was, like, really weird, these, like, mutations of, like, existence.

I remember we used to go surfing before we would go to school in the morning. It wasn't really so much that we went surfing in the morning, it's just that we could say we went surfing in the morning so we could park our cars

in the lot of the school with the surfboards on top of it so you could see it outside the window. You know, it was, like, a big status thing.

But, yeah—but, you know, I don't know where the history thing came from but I always—the history thing was always interesting, a profound experience for me and I was always curious about it.

JUDITH RICHARDS: So then what did you end up doing after you graduated?

ROBERT LONGO: Well, the only school that accepted me was a school near where my brother was living in Texas called North Texas State [University of North Texas, Denton, Texas].

JUDITH RICHARDS: In Denton?

ROBERT LONGO: In Denton. I didn't want to go to college. My parents—I wanted to go tour with my band. So I left school—I left school before I graduated.

JUDITH RICHARDS: Left high school?

ROBERT LONGO: Yeah, but I mean I still graduated high school. I left, like, the last month of school and I went with this band and then the band fell apart and I came back home. They went out to San Francisco and then they all ended up going to, like, Berkeley and Antioch, you know. They weren't going to go out—they were just—they were older than I was, but they were all—

Anyway, so I was completely lost and my brother said why don't you just come down and go to Texas. My brother—my brother was, like, my idol for a brief period of time and then he went away. I always was resentful of the fact that I had this older brother and then he was not there. I still give him shit about it because, you know, every kid wants an older brother. I made sure that—he had a lot of the teachers that I had, and my brother played sports, and stuff like that, but my brother was nowhere near as good as I was. It was, like, I was basically just there to destroy my brother's myth, you know. [Laughs.]

But I went to Texas and I went to Denton in 1970. Right before that, in high school, the last year of high school, the hippie thing really kicked in. It was a conflict because to be a hippie and be a jock was kind of like—

And myself and the other captain of the football team, I was captain of the football team, we grew our hair long and we—I had, like, I wore double zero, you know, which is really funny because Matthew Barney ends up using this in his work. There was a football player that wore double zero.

JUDITH RICHARDS: Oh, as a shirt, as a number on a jersey?

ROBERT LONGO: As a jersey, yeah, as a jersey. It was really kind of like, a kind of "fuck you" statement to, like, the system, and to have long hair and a double zero and, you know, we had white shoes. It was like—and we had a really good football team, which allowed us to be able to do what we were doing. But what was weird is that spring I hurt my knee playing lacrosse and whatever fantasies of doing stuff kind of faded very, very quickly. It's really interesting how all of a sudden sports just like, that was so much a part of my life disappeared for a period of time.

So I went to Texas. I tried out for the football team there and it was just way too serious, way too serious. I mean, I thought it was crazy. I could have had—I probably could have played there, but it was—they were still a Division II school at the time. Now they're a Division I school. But they were like—it was just—they were just out of their minds. I mean, it was, like, hurt people and just—it was horrible.

I wanted to smoke pot and hang out and do stuff. So I went to Texas, and also being a hippie in Texas was kind of cool because it—oh, to back up. My last year in high school the hippie thing really blossomed and a kid that I knew—because a lot of kids from my high school went to Kent State. A kid that I vaguely knew, I mean I knew him a little bit, he was a sweet kid, he was one of the kids that got shot at Kent State. That was, like, really—that—my high school went berserk. There were riots and, you know, and I was, like, one of the—because I was this—I worked the ground between, like, all the different kids, like, the greaser kids, the hippie kids, the jocks, that somehow I ended up becoming, like, this weird mediator.

Then I got in trouble with the school because I ended up siding with the kids, because we had actually got them to close the school. It was during the period of time when people at Columbia were rioting and all that sort of stuff. We were all concerned, also everyone was concerned about what was going to happen with the draft, and things like that.

So—I'm leaving so much shit out but that's okay, it's not important. But anyway, so I go to Texas. I go to Texas and in Texas I thought maybe—North Texas State has this incredible jazz program, music program. I thought maybe I could try to learn how to read music, which of course didn't work. So that—

JUDITH RICHARDS: Why was—was it linked to not being able to read?

ROBERT LONGO: Yeah, absolutely. Music is reading, it's totally reading. So then I thought, okay, I'm going to major in marine biology because I always liked ocean, the ocean, and stuff like that. I couldn't deal with the classes. So two semesters I'm on the verge of flunking out. I'm taking tons of LSD and going out into the country. It's also, like, hippies and, kind of like, country, like, the bands like Grateful Dead, and Poco, and The Allman Brothers. It became like a countryish kind of thing, hippies. And also Texas was, like, *Easy Rider* was happening and, you know—

JUDITH RICHARDS: Janis Joplin was from Texas.

ROBERT LONGO: Right. So you had all that stuff going on and we would go—we would take acid and go out into the woods and, you know, people would drop us off in the woods, you know, and they would come get us the next day, or something like that.

So the last semester I was on academic probation and I decided, okay, I could always draw. I might as well become an artist. They were on the verge of building a new big art building that was an incredibly spectacular art building, but they hadn't built it then. I became friends with this other guy. Up until that point my name was —my name was Robert and then this girl had changed it to Bobby. Then it was Bob. And then—

JUDITH RICHARDS: You had no control over this?

ROBERT LONGO: No. It was like—

JUDITH RICHARDS: You didn't choose to have any control?

ROBERT LONGO: Well, I never liked Robert so much. It was like—but Bobby seemed okay and then, you know, Bob seemed okay. But I started really hating it. It just always sounded like some weird object, you know, or something. I met a guy in Texas whose name was Robert and he was really tall and long blonde hair. The two of us started a band in Texas. We had a bunch of us and we had a pretty good band there. I had this last semester of academic probation and I majored in art and I flunked out and I got kicked out of school.

But the thing that was really funny about Robert is Robert was also an art major. I could draw really well with lines, you know, but I never had taken any art classes, so I had no idea how to shade.

JUDITH RICHARDS: And they weren't teaching you?

ROBERT LONGO: No. You know, you have drawing classes and then you're supposed to draw the model.

JUDITH RICHARDS: The teacher is supposed to teach you how to draw.

ROBERT LONGO: Well, they're expecting that you have some basic, you know, things. So what Robert and I would so is I would do the drawing, I would do the line drawings and Robert would do the shadings. He would shade in the drawing, he would fill in the drawing.

JUDITH RICHARDS: Did he pass?

ROBERT LONGO: We both passed, we both did okay.

JUDITH RICHARDS: But you said—

ROBERT LONGO: No, but one class is not enough. I had to have a certain average. You had to have, like, a 2.0 average, 2.0 average, or something like that, right, to graduate—

JUDITH RICHARDS: That's a C.

ROBERT LONGO: —I mean not to graduate, to stay in the—academic—like my grade point up to that point were, like, 1.2 or something. They were horrible. I was flunking everything. I mean, I never got out of bed. But he was a good friend. Once I left I never saw him again.

JUDITH RICHARDS: But did he have something to do with your liking to be Robert?

ROBERT LONGO: Yeah. I kind of—like when I left Texas I took his name. So he was really he was really smart and sharp. He wasn't a jock. He was an interesting guy and we did a lot of acid together and he turned me onto, like, books and things. He was an interesting influence in that sense. I mean—and I later found out that he got into—he's become, like, a Jesus freak, which is kind of disappointing but—

And I had—what's happened is at some point in high school there was a girl that I was madly in love with that I was dating called Claudia, I think her name is Corkey actually, and she was really smart and wanted to become a nurse or a doctor. She went to Maine. So we were trying to keep this relationship while I was in Texas. I remember going to see her one time and we were—I snuck in and spent the night in her room and she called me by some other guy's name, which was quite crushing. Then from there on, that point on, I had all these disastrous relationships with women. It was just, like, horrible. It was just, like, one after another.

JUDITH RICHARDS: This is while you were in Denton?

ROBERT LONGO: In Denton, yeah. Denton was really, really rough. It was rough. I would have these, like, fall in love and then it would fall apart, fall in love, fall apart. There was always some other guy, there was always some other guy. He's in Austin, or he's there.

So I leave Texas.

JUDITH RICHARDS: You spent a year there?

ROBERT LONGO: I spent a year-and-a-half there. I leave—I have a Volkswagen van. I was a real hippie, totally, a Volkswagen van. I pack up the van and I had—

JUDITH RICHARDS: Did you work at all? Did you father buy that van for you?

ROBERT LONGO: No, no. I had summer jobs. I worked at Sears changing tires. I worked as a lifeguard. Up until that point the jobs I had, I worked in a factory, I worked as a lifeguard, I worked in Sears. What other job did I have? Up until that point that was it. I think those are the major jobs that I had.

Yeah, I bought my own car. My parents were really tight about money, so it was like—it was—I was always—I tried to sell pot once and I felt really creepy about it, so I just ended up smoking all of it. But I lived a pretty sparse life, which was okay. Money never seemed, like, to be the object in a way or possessions.

JUDITH RICHARDS: Luckily the culture supported that viewpoint.

ROBERT LONGO: Yeah, absolutely, yeah. And, yeah, you used to buy your clothes at, like, the Salvation Army, and stuff like that. So on the way back I thought I had this romantic idea that I would get, like, some, you know, beautiful girl that would take, like, a ride with me who's also leaving school, or something like that. Instead it was, like, this huge fat guy with, like, horrible acne and he was only a guy that needed a ride to, like, Tennessee, or something like that.

But anyway, I took a bunch of amphetamines with me to stay awake. That drive back was, like, some really weird rite of passage. It was just one hallucination after another. I went to Gettysburg and I got to Gettysburg and it was in I guess December, or something like that, so it was pretty horrible weather. I hadn't slept in, like, two days and I was smoking pot too. I walked around Gettysburg and I just saw the whole thing. It was just hallucinating.

Then I went to see a friend of mine who went to college at Lehigh, which around—in Pennsylvania, right. It was around Christmastime and I walked in and I was just so wrecked. There were all these Ivy League kind of guys sitting there all freaked out of their minds. I was like going, "What's wrong?" They had gone out that night, the night before, to get a Christmas tree, to cut down a Christmas tree, and they just went out to some property and cut down a Christmas tree. It turned out the Christmas tree that they had cut down was owned by, like, this well-known doctor who collects, like, rare trees, and things like that. They were all freaking out that they had to, like, pay for the tree. But it was, like, this real bizarre image. It was all—it was in a frat, kind of like frat—yeah, like, in a frat house, all wood stuff and the lights were all real low. All these guys were all sitting around. It looked like—later on whenever I saw Rembrandt paintings they always reminded me of like—

JUDITH RICHARDS: And yet it wasn't about anything really bad.

ROBERT LONGO: No, no. One of these guys, though, in that group that wasn't a friend of mine but I kind of knew peripherally was a guy who had, must have had—now that I think of it must have had Tourette syndrome. He had, like, all these, kind of like—he wanted to be accepted really badly and he went and bought—he went to Kansas and bought, like, a bunch of pot and drove back. What he bought actually wasn't pot. It was, like, this, you know—

JUDITH RICHARDS: Oregano?

ROBERT LONGO: No, just junk. He killed himself in that room, that same room. So I always it's really kind of a weird image in my mind, that room.

I get home. I go home and I don't know what I'm going to do.

JUDITH RICHARDS: Your family must be upset?

ROBERT LONGO: Yeah. We were having a hard time to begin with and it was rough. So I started living with my sister in the city. My sister, realizing that I was interested in art, she started giving me art books. Meanwhile my sister had taken me to all these Broadway shows, and things like that. I went to see her in *Fiddler*. I had seen a bunch of shows, and things like that, through her. I had even seen some operas because of her.

I worked in a warehouse, like, on 23rd Street, like, packing boxes, and stuff like that, and worked my way up to doing, like, traffic. But I wanted to go back to school, so I enrolled in Nassau Community College.

JUDITH RICHARDS: Why did you want to go back to school?

ROBERT LONGO: Because I didn't want to do this, you know.

JUDITH RICHARDS: So you—

ROBERT LONGO: I figured if I could go back to school I could get some financial support from my parents, you know, and this is not where I wanted to be. I wasn't meeting—I didn't know—I mean, I was really lonely then. I didn't know anybody. I mean, the guys who I worked with were all idiots, you know.

So I started going to night school at Nassau Community College. That was, like, the moment when I went from being the kid who used to sit in the back of the class to the kid who sat in the front of the class. I was going to do —I was going to do good. And I got done with my prerequisites. I got pretty good grades. Then the next semester I took electives and I took art classes. I met this really wonderful teacher named Leonora Fink. She was, like, a drawing teacher. She was really quite extraordinary. She was really great. She was kind of like Käthe Kollwtiz. Do you know that artist?

JUDITH RICHARDS: Käthe Kollwitz? Yeah, Kollwitz, in Germany.

ROBERT LONGO: Yeah. She was like that. She was like a version of that. She made sculptures and drawings.

JUDITH RICHARDS: In terms of the imagery that she—

ROBERT LONGO: Yeah,

JUDITH RICHARDS: —not her history or anything?

ROBERT LONGO: No, no, her drawing, her work.

JUDITH RICHARDS: Expressionist.

ROBERT LONGO: And it was really—

JUDITH RICHARDS: In black and white?

ROBERT LONGO: Yeah. But she made these bronzes, and stuff like that, sculptures. She was really incredibly helpful. There were a couple other good teachers. There was a guy named Reiner. I don't remember. But they all were really incredibly supportive. So I wanted—I still wasn't quite sure I wanted to be an artist, so I thought maybe I could learn restorations of paintings, or something like that, because I heard—I had read some articles about Florence and they were restoring all their work after the floods and all that sort of stuff. So I decide to go through a friend of this woman—she's somehow connected to the Academy in Florence. She said she can help me get into school there, you know. My grades are good and ya di ya di ya dah.

So I go there. First I go to Milan, I fly into—because I got cheap tickets to Milan. I go—my sister gives me this incredible book on the history of art, which becomes, like, this book that I basically use as a checkbook to go follow. So I go see all this work that I found interesting in there.

JUDITH RICHARDS: Do you remember what book it was? Was it Janson or was it—

ROBERT LONGO: No, it wasn't as big as Janson.

JUDITH RICHARDS: Italian, was it focused on Italian art?

ROBERT LONGO: I still have the book. No, European art., but it was heavy on Italian art for sure. But it was a book about that big and I still have it someplace.

I went and I remember seeing—I would look at the pieces that I wanted to see and then I would go find them, you know. By the time I got to Florence the house that I was supposed to say in in Florence, the apartment I was supposed to stay in in Florence, there had been a murder and it was closed. So all of a sudden I had to find my way, you know. So I ended up working. I became friends with a guy who worked in the flea market there.

JUDITH RICHARDS: You didn't speak any Italian?

ROBERT LONGO: I spoke a little bit.

JUDITH RICHARDS: Because of your family?

ROBERT LONGO: But the problem is my parents spoke, my mother spoke Sicilian and my father spoke Napolitano, so it was like, it was useless in Florence, you know. It was, like, if I opened my mouth and said, spoke Sicilian, it was, like, you were treated horribly. So I had to, kind of like, learn it a little bit.

But anyway, what I decided—so at that point I decided what I was going to do was I was going to use this book and I was going to go see all this art and then I was going to go back to the United States and try to get, like, a college credit for what I had done; do you know what I mean? So I started using Florence as my base and I would make some money. So now at this point now my parents and I are kind of, like, disconnected. They don't really know where I am at this point, so occasionally I send them a postcard or something.

So I would go and I would go check out—you know, I would go to Rome, or I would go to Padu, or I would go to Bologna, or I would go to Paris. I would do these like—and I would accumulate that. Then at one point it seemed like there was a possibility that I could go to the school. They let me into the school but you have to work with the restorers and it was—when I walked in there it was horrible. I mean, they were just ruining history. It was just, like, get me out of here. This is ridiculous.

JUDITH RICHARDS: You mean the restoration?

ROBERT LONGO: The guys who were restoring it, yeah.

JUDITH RICHARDS: They were destroying the work?

ROBERT LONGO: Yeah, they were, like, changing the way the paintings looked, you know what I mean. It was like—it was—at that point I don't think conservation really—it was still that thing of painting over, you know. But what was really interesting is that woman that's in, that did *the Last Supper*, I can't remember her name, but I met her there. I remember having a conversation with her about it because I met her later on in my life. What's her name? I can't remember her name. Anyway, she was just so appalled by what she was seeing and I remember her having a big argument with somebody, a hysterical argument about it, and I was, like, You're right, it's, like, horrible what's going on.

Anyway, to make a long story short, I go traveling around and finally I contact my parents to let them know where I am. My mother said, "Well, you should go see my family in Naples—I mean in Sicily."

So I said, okay, I'm going to go to Sicily. So I go to—my mother writes a letter to her, like, her stepsister who lives outside of Catania in a place called Acireale.

JUDITH RICHARDS: Can you spell that?

ROBERT LONGO: I have no idea. A-C-I, and capital R-E-A-L-E. It's near Catania. So my mother says make sure when you go there you go on the weekends because on the weekends Neda's daughter-in-law teaches English and she only comes home on the weekends, so you can speak because Neda doesn't speak, nobody speaks English.

So I had met Neda because she actually lived in the United States for a brief period of time and she had a younger daughter that was, like, maybe I think 15 or 20 years older than I was named Pina, who I thought was the most beautiful woman in the world and I was madly in love with her when I was a little kid. So I knew them, you know.

JUDITH RICHARDS: How do you spell Pina?

ROBERT LONGO: P-I-N-A, I guess. So I really wasn't planning on going to Sicily but, what the fuck, so I go.

So I arrive in town on a weekend. I'm, like, this ratty hippie, like, you know, ripped up clothes, long hair, sandals and stuff. I call from the train station to say I'm here and can I talk to Catia, who was, like, that daughter-in-law. She can barely speak English. It was just—

JUDITH RICHARDS: The one who is supposed to be teaching English?

ROBERT LONGO: And they're saying who are you? Who do you know? Because Neda, my aunt's son, lives in New York and I keep on saying Joe Grasso. We're not communicating. So finally someone comes to pick me up who I've never seen before. It's a Sunday afternoon. You know, Sunday afternoons for Italians are, like, after church, big Sunday dinners. It was, like, right out of a scene out of Fellini. So my aunt is sitting at the very end of the table, she's a big woman.

JUDITH RICHARDS: They pick you up and they brought you to this dinner?

ROBERT LONGO: Right. Because he's an American he knows Joe is basically all they knew, you know. So she's sitting at the very end of the table and she's a big woman like, you know, just huge breasts and she's at the end. They put me at the end of the table here and everyone is beautifully dressed and I'm just a slob. They're eating and all of a sudden I realize these people have no idea who I am and I'm not—I'm having a hard time communicating who I am, so I better leave. So I'm trying to figure out, trying to find out when the next train is to get out of town.

Then my aunt, like, all of a sudden—because I recognized her, but all of a sudden my aunt, like, something clicks in aunt's head, and she jumps up and her pasta plate falls all over the place and she comes up and grabs me. She starts speaking a little bit of English and she remembers me. I don't leave for, like, four weeks. I live there, but what is amazing is that through there—Pina had a daughter, a very pretty daughter, and her name was Ariel, or something like that, who was an art history major. She took me all around Sicily. Then she went off to school. I saw the most amazing things in Sicily. It was incredible.

Then I remember at one point—this is, like, a really decisive moment—I go to Agrigento where they have all these temples. I have my sleeping bag with me and stuff. You know how you look out onto the Mediterranean, the Temple of Zeus is, like, almost a completely intact temple, right. It's made out of limestone and it has this gold color, and nobody destroyed it because it wasn't made out of marble, it was painted with marble dust. So I sit there and I'm about to—I realize, fuck history, you know. I've had enough of seeing it. It's, like, they have enough people taking care of it, you know. I want to make art. I don't want to do this anymore. I don't want to see any more art, you know. I love it, everything I've seen, but I think I want to become an artist and I'm going to sleep here and it's going to be, like, my moment.

JUDITH RICHARDS: Until you have your vision.

ROBERT LONGO: I remember rolling out my sleeping bag. The rocks have these big huge holes them, this limestone from, like, stones being in them, and out from this hole crawls this gigantic lizard, you know. Like the head of the lizard is like, you know—

JUDITH RICHARDS: As big as your hand.

ROBERT LONGO: Yeah. It's huge. I remember just packing up my stuff and running down the road to, like, the first *pensione*. But I didn't use it—I kept on thinking, like, why—maybe that was a sign. Maybe I shouldn't become an artist.

Then I moved back to New York—and then I come back, shortly after that I come back to New York. But I had these—even in Europe I had these failures with women. There was a woman in Paris who I fell in love with but then she was, like, hooking up with some rich American banker. She was a Scottish woman who was a nanny. I remember being completely crushed by her, but it happened at the Rodin Museum. It's really weird. I remember the room it was in and the room that it took place in is the room that has one of the—there was a cabinet and on the cabinet is a sculpture that is not a very well-known Rodin piece. It's the one of the woman with the temple on the head.

JUDITH RICHARDS: Okay.

ROBERT LONGO: It's like, you know, it's—it's like, kind of like a Doric Temple, right, like this, and it's on top of, like, this woman's head, you know. She's like—it's like that, you know what I mean, like that, something like that.

And I realized this becomes pressure, the modern almost, like the building on top of the clown's head. It's like the same piece. It's really weird. So the Rodin Museum had this huge impact on me because I went—I would go back—after the whole thing happened with her I kept on going back to the museum to kind of, like, somehow, you know, suck it up. But it was really—it was a good thing.

JUDITH RICHARDS: We'll go to the next disc.

[END OF DISC 1.]

JUDITH RICHARDS: This is Judith Richards with Robert Longo, January 30, 2009, session one, disc two.

ROBERT LONGO: The Vietnam War thing is also interesting because—

JUDITH RICHARDS: Yeah, you mentioned the draft.

ROBERT LONGO: —because I had—I think I had a relatively—I don't even remember what number it was I had. I had a relatively high number.

JUDITH RICHARDS: High is good, right?

ROBERT LONGO: No, a bad number, and I'm flunking out of college. My sister was ready to send me to Canada but my—but she married a very cool man who also happened to be from Ohio. He had a kind of very conservative idea about it and he thought maybe going into the military, I should enlist in the military. I remember this big argument that we had.

But my sister was—but the war ended fortunately in '75, or something like that. So that was like—

JUDITH RICHARDS: But you could have been drafted.

ROBERT LONGO: Yeah. Well, it ended before—I reported for the draft, I reported. I went and reported for it. But the thing was that if I actually got called my sister would have gotten me tickets to leave, you know. So that was like—I mean, it was—all I know is I wasn't going. There was no way I was going because I had had friends that I met in Texas that had been there. It just—aside from the amount of dope that they smoked over there it just sounded fucking horrible. I mean, it was just—and the daily report when you're going to high school, the daily reports like—the death rate was just unbelievable. "Today 62 Americans died."

It was just—it's amazing that we think that, you know, as hippies we grew up in this world and then we were the people that put George Bush into office. It's really, I mean, embarrassing historically is what it is.

JUDITH RICHARDS: So you were saying that you in Sicily and had this moment where you decided that you would really be an artist.

ROBERT LONGO: So anyway, I come back to the United States and I go back to Nassau Community College to see Leonora.

JUDITH RICHARDS: How long were you gone all total?

ROBERT LONGO: About a year.

JUDITH RICHARDS: Oh, a long time.

ROBERT LONGO: Yeah. I saw a lot of art. I mean, it was really—I mean, I really fell—

JUDITH RICHARDS: Did you develop any real passions for a certain period during those travels in Europe, whether it was more the Renaissance, or Italian, or Baroque or whatever?

ROBERT LONGO: You know, it was all—there were favorites. I didn't realize it then but the guy that I ended up really, really liking while I was there was Caravaggio. He became, like—I kept on thinking this guy is, like, painting movie stills, you know what I mean. They look like movie stills.

JUDITH RICHARDS: So it was the drama?

ROBERT LONGO: Yeah. And I really—

JUDITH RICHARDS: Or the realism?

ROBERT LONGO: —and I also really liked Rembrandt. Rembrandt—

JUDITH RICHARDS: Which is also the chiaroscuro, the light thing.

ROBERT LONGO: But it was interesting because in a weird way even at that early, even, like, kind of like that ignorant age that I had back then I had made this theory that Rembrandt was more cinema and that Caravaggio was more theater in a weird way, do you know what I mean. But I also loved the fact that Caravaggio's paintings had no space. There was nothing—you know, because after looking at all the painting you see, like, the evolution of perspective and, you know, location. Even DaVinci put likes the little mountains and shit in the background with, like, *Mona Lisa*. Caravaggio's paintings are like—there's no place.

JUDITH RICHARDS: Right. It's very theatrical.

ROBERT LONGO: Yeah. I thought—I mean, that was—

JUDITH RICHARDS: Shallow space.

ROBERT LONGO: But I really loved the Prado, I really loved Velázquez. But, I mean, also smoking a lot of pot. Bosch was always great. But, I mean, yeah, I—Rodin was really important, Caravaggio was really important. Going to Pompeii was really important, seeing those castings of those people in the ground. Velázquez is—

JUDITH RICHARDS: Goya?

ROBERT LONGO: Yeah, yeah, yeah, very much so. But even the—what else was there? I mean, even Amsterdam, you know, definitely Rembrandt, but those altarpieces, those really weird—

JUDITH RICHARDS: Ghent?

ROBERT LONGO: Yeah. All those weird things. I mean, DaVinci for sure. Michelangelo, I mean how cliché can you get. But, I mean, I remember, like, going and being in the Sistine Chapel and going like, wait a minute. There's something really wrong here. Like—because I remember standing, like, in the middle of it. It was, like, this really weird thing. It was like—I didn't know who I could talk to about it because it was, like, this side here is bigger than that side, like, the figures are bigger here than they are over there. But when I walked in, when I walked in over there everything looked like they were the right size. I was like—and then not until years later did I find out that he stopped, like, halfway through it because the Pope wanted to see the ceiling. Then when he looked up he realized it was too small and so then he made everything bigger.

But it was just—and I think Michelangelo and the *Slaves* were really important to me. They were like—I overheard a woman giving a lecture once explaining some of the things about them, which were interesting. One of the things she talked about that was real interesting is the—it's not the *Palestrina Madonna*. It's one of the Madonnas that's in Florence. I know it's one of the *Pietas* that's in Florence. She was explaining that the way—the way that the figure was that the chest of Jesus was—the chest of Jesus was more in focus, was more finished than the rest of his body, you know, and that Michelangelo later was using a depth of field. So what was closest to you was in focus and as it went back it became rougher and rougher. I was like, wow, that's deep.

And I came back. I had a fairly good grade point average and I started thinking about applying to school. Then I met this woman Betsy who was a home economics major, but God she was incredibly beautiful. She said, "Oh, I think they have a really good art school in Buffalo."

[They laugh.]

ROBERT LONGO: "Really? Wow. Where are you going to school?"

"Oh, I'm going to school in Buffalo."

So I only applied to one school.

[They laugh.]

ROBERT LONGO: [Laughs.] And I went to Buffalo.

JUDITH RICHARDS: That's SUNY Buffalo?

ROBERT LONGO: Not SUNY, Buffalo State College.

JUDITH RICHARDS: Oh, Buffalo State.

ROBERT LONGO: The state college. I mean, I could have gone to, like, other—I could have gone to some good schools. I mean, I had—I think I had, like, a three point something grade point average. I had great recommendations from teachers. I had done really good in English and math and all that shit. I mean, I really worked hard on that stuff and I ended up going to Buffalo State College because of Betsy.

The guy that I become roommates with is this hippie kind of artist/jeweler guy that I meet at this college and we become roommates.

JUDITH RICHARDS: Is this roommates off campus or—

ROBERT LONGO: Yeah, off campus, yeah. And it's the first time I'm living with other guys. I mean, I've always

been kind of either on my own or, you know, I was living like, you know—when I was in Europe I slept anywhere, you know. I could sleep under a stairwell, or something like that.

So I move in there and he—and there's two other roommates, this guy Doug Sloane and this guy Matt. Doug Sloane is still my friend today. The other guys I don't know where they are. So I go there and Betsy is a very troubled—actually I later find out that she's actually a very troubled kind of psychotic girl and really kind of tortures me in a way. So I'm kind of majoring in art now, all right, at school. I realize this is a really shitty art school. These teachers—this is really awful.

JUDITH RICHARDS: Yeah, you had developed a much more sophisticated eye.

ROBERT LONGO: Yeah. And I tried to get credits for what—I could not find anyone who even wanted to talk to me about it. Anyway, the first semester I'm there I go to visit a friend of mine from high school who is going to school at Buffalo State University because we were going to play football in the snow. I go over to his house to pick him up that morning, a Sunday morning, and I'm sitting there in his living room waiting for him to come down or he's making some coffee. Down the stairs comes one of his roommates, I don't know the guy's name, and behind the stairs, coming down the stairs, is Betsy. She's like, "Grr." I was just like, oh.

So it's another kind of blow. But what happened is I remember after playing football that day I went the Albright-Knox Art Gallery [Buffalo, New York]. I hadn't gone there since the whole time I was there. It was like, whoa, this is an incredible museum. This was like—it had one of everything and then it had, like, an incredible Jackson Pollock painting. It had this Clyfford Still paintings. It was really—

JUDITH RICHARDS: You were talking about having had familiarity with abstract expressionism. Was that when you were living with your sister in New York or had you seen that in Europe?

ROBERT LONGO: Well, I had seen—I had gone to the Met, and stuff like that. I had gone to the Met and familiarized myself. When I was living in New York I had gone to the Met because there was—

JUDITH RICHARDS: And MoMA?

ROBERT LONGO: Yeah, I had gone to all those places. But I wasn't—I needed the history to substantiate all that stuff. It just—you know, I would look at that stuff and go, "Oh, it looks so easy." Like, what's the point of it? I remember how I became really fascinated with Donald Judd. All it was was a bunch of boxes on a wall.

JUDITH RICHARDS: Were you reading, I think at that time, *ArtForum* and—

ROBERT LONGO: I hadn't gotten—I hadn't gotten—that's further down the line. This was just my first introduction to, like, looking at kind of the 20th century art more seriously.

JUDITH RICHARDS: This is '76, '77?

ROBERT LONGO: '75.

JUDITH RICHARDS: '75?

ROBERT LONGO: No, no. Probably '74. Yeah, '74. But the escalation of what happens from that point on in my life is really quite extraordinary. Then I'm trying to make art and I don't know what I'm doing.

JUDITH RICHARDS: When you went to Buffalo, what's the name of the school again?

ROBERT LONGO: State College.

JUDITH RICHARDS: State College, what were you considered, a junior or what level were you considered?

ROBERT LONGO: I was a junior, yeah, I was a junior.

JUDITH RICHARDS: Okay. So you basically had two years?

ROBERT LONGO: Yeah. And that first semester I was quite lost academically, but I fell in love with this girl Elizabeth after Betsy dumped me. It was, like, this incredible perfect romance. Then I hooked up with these two other guys, Phil Malkin and Rick Zucker who were other art students. We hooked up and we met, we became friends with Les Krims, the photographer. We started going to the museum and we started looking at art magazines.

JUDITH RICHARDS: Is Krims spelled with a "C" or a "K"?

ROBERT LONGO: "K", "K". Anyway, we started exposing ourselves to stuff and just trying to educate ourselves.

JUDITH RICHARDS: Were they fellow students at the same school?

ROBERT LONGO: Yeah. But the thing was the school was not providing information about contemporary art. They weren't providing any really. But then we met this eccentric guy named Rothlein, this gay art history teacher, that helped me get a lot of my history credit, art history credits, by taking an oral exam with him. It was incredible. He was, like, this incredibly eccentric guy who knew Frank Stella. He was, like, the guy, like, the guiding light. It was incredible.

So the three of us became, like, this art gang at school and we would constantly—

JUDITH RICHARDS: Malkin, Zucker, and Les Krims.

ROBERT LONGO: Yeah. And we were pushing everybody around and pushing the teachers around. So meanwhile—so again, so this girl dumps me.

JUDITH RICHARDS: Betsy?

ROBERT LONGO: No, this is Elizabeth.

JUDITH RICHARDS: Elizabeth dumped you.

ROBERT LONGO: Elizabeth runs off with the star printmaker. I always hated fucking printmakers. I thought it was, like, the stupidest thing. Why do I have to learn how to work this fucking machine? I mean, really. So what if it makes a perfect copy. I've got to figure out what it is I'm going to make a picture of first before I make a picture of it.

"Well, you have to."

So I remember, like, my first print was, like—I did a thing where I covered—

JUDITH RICHARDS: Printmaking was a requirement?

ROBERT LONGO: Yeah. I covered, like, a piece of a paper. I said, I'm going to stay here for, like, one hour, you know, and I covered, like, one of those metals plates with, like, an lito crayon. That was, like, my print, you know. My teacher—I said, "That's it. It's one hour, you know."

He said, "Well, now you have to make it"—anyway, I got back at him later on in life. I—revenge is always a really great thing. But anyway, but when Elizabeth split with me it was, like, the moment of self-love occurred because it was, like, the moment I dove into the art. The thing with art really clicked. It was like—I don't know how to explain it, but it was, like, all of a sudden I became, like, I had super powers. It was, like, the art thing completely made sense to me, and the searching, and the desire, and the necessity to make, it was just—all of a sudden it was just like, bang.

I knew that there was a place called the Ashford Hollow Foundation, which—

JUDITH RICHARDS: Ashford Hollow?

ROBERT LONGO: Ashford Hollow Foundation where this rich guy who wanted to be an artist had bought an old ice factory and turning into artists studios and potters studios. I went over there and I met this incredible guy named Charlie Clough who was an artist there, who had a studio there, who lived there in the most barebones way, and there just happened to be an extra studio space available. So I took the studio space.

Charlie was a dropout from school, I think he went to SVA [School of Visual Arts] for a brief time, but he was a real artist. He was, like, the first real contemporary artist I met. His room was—he slept in this shit hole of a bed and his room was just filled with art magazines, and books, and paintings, and sculptures. He was, like, my teacher, you know. Because at the school there wasn't anyone teaching you contemporary art. There really wasn't anyone.

I was in the fine arts program. I was having a rough time there because every—I was trying out really crazy stuff. I put barbed wire in front of the entrance to the school one day at night or I pulled my car into, like, the sculpture studio. You know, I managed to figure out a way how to get the doors to open so when the teachers came in the next day my car—I had moved all the desks so my van was, like, in the middle of the—you know, I had done all these, like, really stupid things. I didn't know why I was doing them. I did, like, fake jug pieces. I did an installation, I did, like, a hallway, like a Nauman hallway. I was just imitating all the people that were interesting to me. I was just basically processing all my heroes, just trying them on, you know, like when I was a teenager.

Charlie was just amazing because Charlie was—Charlie's work was really incredible. I mean, he's one of the forgotten heroes. He's still around. He's really—I own a bunch of his work. I think he's really great.

But anyway, so it's at the Ashford Hollow Foundation. So where my studio is—so my studio is—it's—the ice factory also has a foundry in it where they teach juvenile delinquents how to cast. They cast—this guy who owns the foundation, which is his name was Griffith or something, they cast his sculptures, which were horrible. He has his own Griffith Sculpture Park, and stuff like that.

So anyway, so the Foundation is set up like, here is the foundry building, and there's a foundry right here, and then there's this other part of the building like this, and then there's this other building here. So in—I'm sorry, this building—in this building, like, here, these are all potter's studios. This is, like, the foundry and the Griffith Studio. Then in this section here where they really stored the ice is a space, like, this that's divided like this.

JUDITH RICHARDS: You have an amazing memory for this.

ROBERT LONGO: Oh, it's incredibly clear. Like this. So Charlie's studio is here, my studio is over here. Michael Zwack's studio is here. The potters are over here. Another potter was over here. Oh, no, here was, like, this Persian guy who was, like, an incredibly technically great academic sculptor but a real moron who, like, always had girls, a different girl every night. It was, like, really—he was, like, this kind of suave guy but he always had the—it was always—and then another potter was here.

So there's this hallway that was between Charlie's space and my space. So Charlie and I, we would go—on weekends I would go with Charlie and we would hitchhike to New York and just go look at galleries, and stuff like that.

JUDITH RICHARDS: That's an eight-hour—

ROBERT LONGO: Yeah. Well, we would figure out—we would either hitchhike or we would take the bus depending on—none of us had money. So we went to Artists Space [in New York] and then we went to Toronto and we saw a place called A Space and we thought we had this great idea, why don't we start our own alternative space and you just make it in the halls. So hence this place called Hallwalls starts. In this building over here, on the ground floor of this building, lives this eccentric brother of this guy, Jack Griffith, who was a model. He's kind of a dumb, almost, like, mentally challenged guy, but he has a little bit of culture to him. So he—he's also a tragic alcoholic. He hooks up with us to smoke pot, drink, and he gives us some money to start doing this.

What slowly happens—

JUDITH RICHARDS: This is on the second floor?

ROBERT LONGO: This was the ground floor.

JUDITH RICHARDS: Oh, Hallwalls is on the ground floor?

ROBERT LONGO: Yeah. This building over here is another part of the factory, this ice factory, where he has an apartment on the ground floor. It's the second floor above. This comes into the story later. So this hallway between Charlie's studio and my studio and Michael Zwack's studio becomes the beginning of Hallwalls. He, Jack, convinces his brother to give him these other—throw the potters out, move the potters into another—

JUDITH RICHARDS: And the Iranian?

ROBERT LONGO: The Persian guy is already kind of gone now. What happens is that all of a sudden we have a gallery space here. This is the gallery space and this room becomes a gallery space. So all of a sudden we have a gallery. I'm trying to remember all this in chronological order.

So I've been doing, like, kind all this kind of stupid spatial stuff, you know, with scrims, and things like that, and someone tells me, you know, have you ever seen Robert Irwin's work. I'm like, No, you know? So I look him up on the Internet, you know.

JUDITH RICHARDS: The Internet?

ROBERT LONGO: I mean, I look up in the library—fuck—the library.

JUDITH RICHARDS: [Laughs.]

ROBERT LONGO: I look him up in the library and I check out his work and a lot of it is really cool work. Then I see in a magazine that he's going to have a show at Pace. I've jumped ahead. Cindy comes into here, comes into

this mix.

JUDITH RICHARDS: Cindy Sherman?

ROBERT LONGO: Right. So Cindy—so I'm now living here.

JUDITH RICHARDS: Now Michael Zwack and Charlie Clough are not in school anymore but you are?

ROBERT LONGO: No, no. I am, yeah. So I'm here, I'm living here now. I've moved out of the—

JUDITH RICHARDS: Charlie lives there. Does Michael live there too?

ROBERT LONGO: Charlie lives here. Michael lives here too. No, Michael lives with his wife on the other side of town.

JUDITH RICHARDS: Okay.

ROBERT LONGO: This is 1975 now. So Phil and Rick and I are, like, these like—

JUDITH RICHARDS: This is?

ROBERT LONGO: Rick Zucker—

JUDITH RICHARDS: Who is Phil and Rick?

ROBERT LONGO: Phil Malkin and Rick Zucker.

JUDITH RICHARDS: Oh, sorry.

ROBERT LONGO: Yeah, we're, like, these kind of like, storm trooper art guys at our college, you know. We just think we know everything and they're all stupid. The photography department is kind of, like, a hip thing but, you know, still Krims is cool but the rest of them are all idiots, you know. So I go this party, I think it's, like, in April or May, and—

JUDITH RICHARDS: Of your junior year?

ROBERT LONGO: Yeah. And there's this cute girl sitting on a couch there with glasses on and I start talking to her. It turns out she's the girlfriend of the guy who's giving the party who is—he's one of these photography guys that I always hated, the guys that wear those jackets with the pockets, and stuff like that. You know, they wore those, like, aviator glasses and shit like that. It turns out that that's Cindy. I, like, just attack Cindy with the art stuff, you know, about art. I mean, like, I know everything about art now. You know, it's just like—this is like my—and I'm just, like, obsessed about art.

Now Cindy is an art education major. She doesn't really care about art. She's doesn't care about art. It's like—anyway—

JUDITH RICHARDS: The same school?

ROBERT LONGO: At the same school. She's an art education major. She just thinks I'm out of my mind and she doesn't get high or do anything, you know. But somehow we hit it off and I think we ended up spending the night together shortly after that. Our dates would be—I would take her to the museum, take her to the Albright-Knox, and I would make her, like, learn paintings. I would just say, okay, who painted that, who painted that. It was like—

JUDITH RICHARDS: It's like your little sister.

ROBERT LONGO: Yeah. Well, it was like I became the teacher, you know. I didn't really care about the relationship. I was really obsessed with the art stuff. I remember that we were spending nights in my studio, and stuff like that, and she had never been into anything like before, an art studio. She was just like, "Whoa, this is, like, bizarre." So I really impressed her.

But—and then we decided we were going to live together, but we realized we couldn't live together here, so we rented an apartment around the corner from there. That summer she stayed in Buffalo to do a work-study thing and I went back to New York because my mom was sick, and stuff like that. I got a job. My parents were registered Republicans and they got me a job because Nassau County was all Republican at the time. They got me a job working in the parks department. I taught kids art in the classroom, I mean, like, in the parks, which was, like, horrible. It was just a totally horrible experience but hysterical.

The big moment of my thing was a kid wanted to know how to draw this, giving someone the finger. So I said it's really easy, you know, you just like—you just do, like, that and then one goes up like this, and then one like that, and like that, and then you put one across here like this, you know. It's really easy. So he took it home to his mother and I got in trouble with the parks department. It was like, "You're teaching our kids how to draw a fuck you finger." It was just like—anyway—

JUDITH RICHARDS: But basically, though, just to digress for a second, your parents were I suppose relieved that you were doing well in school and all that even though you were becoming an artist, which they might not have been—

ROBERT LONGO: Well, they would try to help whatever they felt—you know, if I went home on vacations and showed up I would get some money and they would be supportive, but basically I had—you know, I had picked up work here and there. They were supportive but not—I didn't want to get supported.

JUDITH RICHARDS: I don't mean financially actually. I mean, were they—

ROBERT LONGO: I didn't really—they were happy I was in school and I was doing really well in school. My grades were, like, really great.

JUDITH RICHARDS: So they—it wasn't an issue about whether you were an artist or not, just that you were—

ROBERT LONGO: No. The horrible thing was, the horrible thing is I made a huge mistake and that was I graduated, like, cumma cum laude—what is that called?

JUDITH RICHARDS: Well, there's summa cum laude.

ROBERT LONGO: Not the highest one.

JUDITH RICHARDS: Magna.

ROBERT LONGO: The second one, and I didn't go to my graduation. My mother was really crushed by that. It was like—that was the biggest mistake I ever made, that I didn't do that for my parents. It was absolutely horrible. I felt really bad about that.

JUDITH RICHARDS: We look back. As a parent you know—

ROBERT LONGO: Yeah.

JUDITH RICHARDS: —now you know.

ROBERT LONGO: Well, no, my middle kid tried to do that to me. He tried not to, go to his high school graduation. I was like—I said, Uh-uh, no way.

So Cindy, we set up house here around the corner and Hallwalls started. Cindy became, like, the fourth musketeer in this.

JUDITH RICHARDS: I'm sorry, so you went to New York that summer and worked in the park department and then you came back to school for your senior year.

ROBERT LONGO: I actually broke—just for a month. I came back in August. Phil and Rick were still there, so Cindy became, like, the fourth musketeer in this group of guys. We would do all these—we would go look at art. We went to, we would go into New York. We had a car at that point, so we would go back and forth to New York, and things like that.

We invented—I invented this character called Rose Skalisie [ph]. Now this was really interesting. I had no idea about Rose Skalisie [ph], which is really weird. We were going to enroll an imaginary art student in the art school. You know, we had this whole—

JUDITH RICHARDS: In Buffalo?

ROBERT LONGO: In Buffalo.

JUDITH RICHARDS: As a conceptual art project?

ROBERT LONGO: Yeah, yeah. And the thing was—

[Audio break.]

ROBERT LONGO: Okay. So the Cindy thing. So then the three of us did this—I had done all these crazy exhibitions at the art, at my art school. What had I done is I became a member of the art club at the school and what I managed to do is I managed to take the money from the art club to invite artists from New York to come up. I would use the money from the school to then have them, pay them to do exhibitions at Hallwalls. But the thing—

JUDITH RICHARDS: Wait, you said you did exhibitions at the school, so there was a gallery?

ROBERT LONGO: Yeah, a little gallery there. But I'm running ahead of myself here. So we had this idea about starting this gallery at Hallwalls, okay. The Robert Irwin thing happened. So Cindy and I are living together at that time and she has a car that I destroy it by accident. I don't know what happened. Oh, no, I parked it someplace and somebody crashed into it. My Volkswagen van is not running anymore.

Anyway, I send a note to Robert Irwin at Pace Gallery telling him I'm really, really interested in work and I would really like to—if there's ever a chance could I ever meet him, or something like that. So I get a phone call from Robert Irwin and he says, "You know, it sounds great. Why don't you come down to New York and help me install my show?"

I was like, holy shit. So I go to start the Volkswagen van and the engine just did not go and we can't go. So I call Irwin up and I'm, like, crushed. You know, Cindy and I were all ready to go to New York. Cindy really liked the idea of going to New York, like, she liked New York. I said, "I can't come."

So Irwin said, "Okay, I'll come to Buffalo." So Robert Irwin comes to Buffalo on his own money to come up to see an art student. Little does that guy know what he was walking into because he becomes the first Hallwalls event. We have a big dinner for him, you know, spaghetti and potatoes and orange juice. He was, like, fucking Joseph Beuys. He was like having the American version—he just stayed there for, like, a day-and-a-half, talked to us about art. It was just, like, mind blowing. It was just mind blowing because he was on his way to Toronto, or something like that.

And we told him what we wanted to do with Hallwalls and he said, "Yeah, and this is what you can do. You can apply for the National Endowment," dah, dah, dah, you know. He was just, like, a miracle. You know, it was incredible.

So what happens is he starts it by being our first official visitor, and then whenever someone came—so then the next person we knew was coming into town—there was a thing in Buffalo called media studies, it was run by a guy named Jerry O'Grady, that was involved with structural film makers, like Hollis Frampton and Paul Sherrod and those guys. Michael Snow was in Toronto. Michael Snow was coming down to media studies to do—show a film and do a lecture. We had Michael Snow come up to Hallwalls and do a talk, and stuff like that.

Jack gave us some money and gave us some money and we made a newsletter. We made our manifesto, what we intended to do, as we were going to bring artists to Buffalo that can do exhibitions here and—

JUDITH RICHARDS: There was no connection with SUNY Buffalo's art department, nothing?

ROBERT LONGO: The SUNY art department was run by a guy named Dwayne Hatchet and Dwayne Hatchet was kind of, like, a pre-minimalist geographic, geometric sculptor and he hated us. There were clearly people in Buffalo that hated us. What we were starting to do we were, like, the new kids on the block. We were also representing, like, a total different point of view. The guy who ran this place thought we were crazy. Buffalo University, Hatchet, thought we were idiots. My school didn't, couldn't stand us. The media studies was supportive, and it turns out there were some curators that later on come into, at the Albright Knox that look up to us.

So what happens is we start applying for grants and we get them. We get grants to run the place, to renovate the place. What happens is that Cindy and I move from this little apartment. The upstairs loft in this other part of the factory becomes available, so Cindy and I move into this place along with Charlie and his girlfriend. The four of us live together. This also becomes, like, the Hallwalls meeting room, where we have these meetings.

Charlie and I go to New York and we knock on people's doors and we say we want to do a show with you, can you come to do it. Some did and some didn't. It became, like, this incredible—like we want to see Sol LeWitt. Sol LeWitt said, "I can't come. I'm really, really busy. But I'll give you a wall drawing." I was like—

We went and saw De Maria. De Maria said, "I can't come, but I'll give you this film. You can show it as many times as you want." We used to show films back here.

It was just—Vito Acconci came up and spent like four days there, did an incredible installation. We just had like—we just went through the art magazines and said, okay, this guy. You know, Jon Borofsky came up, did a whole

bunch of wall drawings and got snowed in and spent like almost a week-and-a-half with us, you know.

It was just—it was, like, my graduate school, you know. It was really weird because, like, Cindy coming out of, like, the art education school she didn't—she really didn't know much about art, and stuff like that, and she was actually kind of turned off by a lot of it. I showed her Vito Acconci, and things like that, and she was really freaked out to meet Vito, you know.

But the irony of it all is that Cindy while we were there had—we were all trying to figure out what art we were going to make, you know. Cindy wasn't quite sure what she should do and she took a photography class. She could actually paint realistically really, really well. She was, like, the art kid in her school. She was, like, the kid who went to the art classes, so she had all that kind of, like, fucked up history of being in those academic art classes where they don't teach you anything about art, they teach you a little bit about your skills, and stuff like that, but it's all the wrong the stuff. You know, you can't—

[END OF DISC 2.]

[PERSONAL CONVERSATION.]

ROBERT LONGO: So anyway, I remember she was really, really afraid that if she had to go—there was this one photography teacher who kind of thought he was kind of cool that the first—whenever you take beginning photography at one point in time they would all go out into nature and they would all take off their clothes and take pictures. I knew Cindy was just totally terrified of this idea, you know.

I remember like, it was like—

JUDITH RICHARDS: Most people might.

ROBERT LONGO: Yeah, I know. And it was just—I remember somehow—what was really interesting is what Charlie had done to me, it helped me. Cindy was, like, I did to—I was able to do to her. What was really great with Cindy is I would talk to her about stuff and through hearing her story about her life, and stuff like that, it seemed like I could see—there were these great senses by Sol LeWitt conceptual senses, conceptual art senses, and one of them is, like, another artist can see another artist's work clear at times than the artist can. With Cindy when she was talking about her life, and stuff like that, it was really interesting because she would say how she got dressed up, and stuff like that, and things like that.

It was like I was looking at—I was about to go do an exhibition in Montreal at a place called Vehicle Art, they do performances. I was doing these performances then. The woman who ran the place was a woman called Suzie Lake. Suzy Lake did—on the cover of this book called *Camera Art* she did a series of photographs of herself sitting at a table putting make up on. By the end of the photograph series she was, like, this kind of bougie woman. It was like—I remember kind of saying, you know, look at this photograph, you know. Why don't you just take pictures of yourself, you know. It's just like—you have all this shit. Get dressed up and—it was like—because I was—everything she was saying was right there. It was really quite amazing, you know.

She went off and started doing stuff on her own in our bedroom, and stuff like that. She made some of the most incredible stuff at that period with the photographs. I mean, they were just mind blowing, they were mind blowing. I was still stumbling along with—I mean, what I was doing I was—I was drawing cowboys and this and that, and doing performances, and working out my ideas in public. Charlie was already way ahead of us. Charlie was complete, defined real artist completely.

So we did more and more exhibitions and at the same time used Hallwalls to propel ourselves to do exchange shows at other places, and things like that. We did a show at Artists Space and then Artists Space sent a show to us. We met a lot of—Avalanche was incredibly important. They were incredibly—they helped—

JUDITH RICHARDS: Vito Acconci was part of that.

ROBERT LONGO: Yeah, and Lawrence Weiner and all those people. And Richard Serra came up and was with us. Serra spent like four days with us. It was like—I mean, it was, like, an incredible experience that we had. It was, like, a core group of people that—because of the ones that lived here. We had about 20 artists, but the core group was Charlie and me, we were running the place, Zwack, Cindy, Nancy Dwyer, Diane Bertola. That was basically kind of, like, the core group, and this crazy guy Jack Griffith.

But the thing was is that we kept on getting more money from the National Endowment and the New York State Council [on the Arts] and we were able to pay people to come up, you know. When I went to graduate I had to go before a committee to graduate, to show them my work, and stuff like that. There were teachers that didn't want to let me graduate because of what I was doing. I was doing performances, and weird objects, and things like that. There was a photography teacher named Barbara Jo Revel who actually was one of Cindy's teachers.

She was kind of a little smart and hip and she actually kind of helped me graduate.

JUDITH RICHARDS: Do you know how to spell her Revel?

ROBERT LONGO: I think it's R-E-V-E-L. But it turned out that one of the—aside from Rothlein at that school there was this really great art education teacher that Cindy I don't think ever had that became friends with us. His name is Joe Pacillo. He knew everything about contemporary art too, and so he became, like, our ally. So we had picked up allies.

Then there was this young curator who had arrived at the Albright Knox called Linda Cathcart. She became our best friend. So we started doing things like Nauman would come to the Albright Knox and he did something there. So we set up this network where we used the school and we used the museum, and it was really—it's kind of a great connection.

JUDITH RICHARDS: So during your senior year it sounds like your work was mostly performance?

ROBERT LONGO: Performance and objects, yeah. What I would do is—I did like a performance at Artists Space I guess—I don't know what year it was. Artists Space did this big, huge series of performances and I did this performance where we all came down from Buffalo. We slept in the gallery. We set the thing up and at the end—the performance transpires and at the end of the performance it ends with all these objects on the floor and it's, like, an installation. There were cast objects, and things like that.

Now Albright Knox had this show called the *Western New York Art Show*, and it was a show that was usually a juried show at the museum. None of us ever got in it. Always like the schmos, like the artists from, like, you know, Buffalo State University got into it, but none of us ever got into it. That year Cathcart was going to select the work, and this was, like, a really big deal. She selected me, and Cindy, and Charlie, and Michael, and Nancy. We were all of a sudden now in the museum, you know.

We all had—so what I was starting to do now is I was starting to make objects. I started to actually make cast objects.

JUDITH RICHARDS: Cast with what?

ROBERT LONGO: Cast aluminum, aluminum objects.

JUDITH RICHARDS: Cast aluminum.

ROBERT LONGO: I made this piece called *Seven Seals from Missouri Breaks* [1976]. It's this big piece with these guys on horses. Anyway, the thing was we had become—we started to have a dialogue with Helen Weiner at Metro [Metro Pictures]—at Artists Space, and one of the—we started to become friends with the CalArts kids, like Troy, and Jack Goldstein, and Paul McMann, David Salle, and stuff like that. One of the last shows that I organized was a show that had David Salle in it, Troy Brauntuch, Jack Goldstein, Paul McMann, Matt Mullican in it. The thing that was interesting is that those guys coming up was like—it was like it was this immediate connection with these guys.

JUDITH RICHARDS: Who did you say between Jack Goldstein and Matt Mullican? You said it fast.

ROBERT LONGO: Troy Brauntuch?

JUDITH RICHARDS: No, I got that.

ROBERT LONGO: David Salle?

JUDITH RICHARDS: Yeah.

ROBERT LONGO: Paul McMann?

JUDITH RICHARDS: Paul McMann.

ROBERT LONGO: And the thing that was really great about it was it was, like, meeting my—it was meeting real—guys that were really being artists in New York. They all lived—

JUDITH RICHARDS: Who were your peers.

ROBERT LONGO: They were my peers. It wasn't like I was looking up at anybody anymore. I was in the process of casting that piece in the foundry and it was real interesting. They said, "Why don't you try this, why don't you do that, you know." It was, like, a dialogue and exchange.

And then a few months later at the Western Europe Art Show, Colleen comes up to—comes up to Buffalo with Doug Crimp who is doing the pictures exhibition, looking for artists for the show. They see the Western New York Show and I get picked to be in the picture show. Cindy has, in the *Western New York Show* she has the transformation of these little small, like, tiny photographs that go from, like, blah to, like, makeup like a harlot, you know, kind of thing. Charlie had some really great paintings in it. We had already done an exchange show where we all had shows. We had a show, a group show in Hallwalls in our space.

So now I have a show in New York, in September of '77, yeah, '76 or '77, a picture show. Cindy gets a small CAPS [Creative Arts Public Service] grant. I said, "Let's go to New York, let's move to New York."

"No, I don't' want to go. I hate New York."

JUDITH RICHARDS: That was, like, $2,500 or something?

ROBERT LONGO: Yeah. I was like, "Let's go, let's move to New York." I said, "I have the show, you have the money, let's go, you know."

"No, I don't want to go to New York. I don't like New York."

"Come on, really, you know, let's go."

Troy—and I had become really quickly friends with Troy and Jack. Troy and Jack ever summer would go back to California for the summer. So Troy's apartment was free, so I could sublet Troy's apartment. I finally twisted Cindy's arm and we moved to, we moved into Troy's apartment.

JUDITH RICHARDS: Which was where?

ROBERT LONGO: On Fulton Street, Fulton and Gold, down by South Street. That summer I saw all these Fassbinder movies. They were at the New York theater. I made this piece called *The American Soldier* [1977], it's a small relief, while I was there. I had already made some other pieces that were going to be in the picture show, but it this was, like, the last piece I was trying to squeeze in before the show opened.

It was really—that summer was really an incredibly exciting time because it was, like, we—Cindy and I—Michael and Nancy already lived in New York at that time. I found a replacement for me in Buffalo, which was kind of—I felt horrible I had left Buffalo.

JUDITH RICHARDS: A replacement in Hallwalls?

ROBERT LONGO: Yeah, for my—I felt horrible.

JUDITH RICHARDS: You graduated, that's the graduation you didn't go to?

ROBERT LONGO: Right. Then we ran Hallwalls for another year and then I left Charlie with Hallwalls, now a fully running funded place, with another guy. But the guy who I left him with was a bit of a nut, but that doesn't matter. I felt bad about it, but it was time to go, you know.

So we dropped in and Cindy and I plugged pretty much into the CalArts gang people. We just kind of—it was, like, a whole group of artists that we just, like, locked into. They were all living downtown, down in that Seaport area, you know, in that area. It was really extraordinary. It was—and we were artists, you know. We had to find a—Cindy did not, could not leave the apartment. It was really weird when we first were there. She was so terrified of the city. She would, like, get made up, and stuff like that, get ready to go out, and she would not leave. It would be like—

I remember making a bunch of, like, short videos while we were there. I—what was I doing for work? I was working with Michael Zwack. I was doing wallboard and just picking up jobs here and there. I was supposed to, I was scheduled to do a performance at The Kitchen in September and—

JUDITH RICHARDS: The same month as the other show.

ROBERT LONGO: Yeah. And it turns out that the woman who runs The Kitchen ran the performance and video section.

Oh, that's Troy.

[Audio break.]

ROBERT LONGO: She was going to—

JUDITH RICHARDS: If you could move that a little bit further—yeah, yeah, good. There was just—

ROBERT LONGO: She was going to India for two months, so she wanted—

JUDITH RICHARDS: Who was?

ROBERT LONGO: Carlotta Schoolman was.

JUDITH RICHARDS: Carlotta?

ROBERT LONGO: Who ran the video and performance.

JUDITH RICHARDS: What's her last name?

ROBERT LONGO: Schoolman. So she said to me, look, would I mind if—because I had this experience at Hallwalls, would I take over what she did at The Kitchen. "You don't have to do anything, everything is scheduled, the performances are set, everything was scheduled, and when I come back you can do your performance. Would you mind doing that?"

And I just said, "Well, how much does the job pay?" And it was like, you know, $300 a week or something. Oh, fuck, money. So—because Cindy wasn't working at the time.

Then we found a loft, I don't know how we found it, on South Street. So we were literally around the corner from Troy, and David lived on Nassau Street. Tom Lawson lived on Anne Street. So it was like he was also now connected.

[Audio break.]

ROBERT LONGO: So anyway—

JUDITH RICHARDS: David Salle you mean?

ROBERT LONGO: David Salle. So we were all, kind of like, in the same area. We all saw each other regularly. *Pictures*, the *Pictures* show opened in September. It was kind of—

JUDITH RICHARDS: At that point SoHo was too expensive to live in?

ROBERT LONGO: Yeah, yeah.

JUDITH RICHARDS: Okay.

ROBERT LONGO: I mean—

JUDITH RICHARDS: And Tribeca wasn't really—

ROBERT LONGO: Yeah. I used to work—I worked for like—before I had The Kitchen job one of my big jobs was working for Vito Acconci. This is a story I've told many times and it's always been a hysterical story. Vito was getting, things were getting more and more elaborate, you know. I remember always telling Vito you should get, like, real people to do this and not artists, you know. So one time we're doing this installation he was doing at the clock tower where it was this cables that went through the whole space, like, opening the windows and going. Eventually it goes out the window, the broken clock tower window. The clock tower was broken. Out hangs, like, a 100 pound—do you remember those dumbbells that they use in cartoons, like, its little brown balls?

JUDITH RICHARDS: Yeah.

ROBERT LONGO: They still—they actually have those kind of dumbbells. We cut off one end of a dumbbell and threaded it so you could actually hang this big round ball. So I needed people to help me and the only people I knew in New York to help me were Jack, and Troy, and David. It was just, like, the fucking three stooges. It was, like, us doing these things with come-alongs, like, they taut the cables and we're afraid they were going to snap in our faces. Then the icing on the cake is, like, we're about to—Jack has been the one who's gotten the ball from Jim in Brooklyn because he had a car. We were lowering this ball out the window, you know, this, like, 175 pound ball out the window with no gloves on, on steel cables, and all of a sudden David like, who's, like, in the back. I don't think David ever had, like, a manual job in his life. He's going like, "I don't think this is attached to anything." It was just like—it was just like—we're about to lower this over the street.

Anyway, that was, like, one of the last—I mean, working—Vito was really great. Vito was, like, a huge influence. I

mean, he was also an influence as to how not to be an artist, how not to leave shit to the very last end, to really plan your stuff out.

But I helped do some—I did, like, the Sonnabend piece, where he built the table that went out the window. I did some really great pieces with him. He was incredibly generous in talking to us, but I realized he was incredibly generous in getting stuff from us. Because the irony was, and I think about that now, is like, I just did a show at Rental Gallery. Do you know this gallery called Rental? Of all the guys that worked for me for the last ten years, you know. I did another show, like, about five years ago with art. I realize that the few artists that I worked for that none of them ever did anything for me. I worked for them but they—you know, collectors or art museum people come, they never—I never got introduced. It was, you know—it always struck me as kind of like, pissed me off a little bit. It was like—

JUDITH RICHARDS: There are some artists who do introduce their—

ROBERT LONGO: Yeah, but the one—I just didn't have—so I made it a point for myself that I know that I am—I get a lot from the guys that work for me, you know, and I know they get a lot from me, but at the same time it's like I want to make sure that I give back to them. So that's a really important thing I learned from Vito because Vito never—he was—he was helpful, but I realized Vito got a lot more from us than we got from him in a weird way—the music we were listening to, what we were thinking about, images. I mean, he's a sweet man but I thought about that a lot. But anyway—

JUDITH RICHARDS: Speaking of music, were you—in those years were you involved with music still?

ROBERT LONGO: Yeah, that was the other thing is the music scene was really, really happening then. It was, like, an artist—what happened is like music—things go through a kind of strange cycle. They go through this cycle and it's hard to explain. It's like—

JUDITH RICHARDS: We're still talking about the late-70s?

ROBERT LONGO: Yeah, but this is, like, a generalized thing. It pertains to everything. As a straight line, which is time, and a straight line if time and if culture, or individual, or history is a circle that, kind of like, rolls on this line, so where the circle touches the line at that moment is what is happening. You have—and I think in art, and in politics, and in—you have, like, formal, romantic, and mannerism. Formalism when it touches as it's rolling is the moment when things are really raw, when you're just trying to express yourself, you're just trying to get out there, you know what I mean. You don't know really what it is that you're doing, but you just want to express yourself.

As this starts to rotate and gets to romanticism and romanticism is touching, this is when you really know what you're doing and you can actually load it with content. You fill it with what you want to do. As this starts to roll you get into mannerism, where you're incredibly good at what you're doing but you forget about why you're doing it in the first place. So it's all, it's all skill and craft.

So music, when it happened in music, music had gotten to the point where all those guys are playing that, lots of fancy guitar licks and, you know. Punk rock was a formal mechanism. It was—you didn't have to be able to play a guitar. So anybody who could make noise on a guitar, drums, all of a sudden bands were created not because of the musical ability of people, but because people wanted to make music.

New York I think was different than a lot of other cities because the music scene, the downtown music scene, was connected to the art scene. A lot of artists were in bands and vice-a-versa. It was incredibly vital in that sense. We were always going at it. What was interesting when we—

JUDITH RICHARDS: It was incredibly violent?

ROBERT LONGO: Vital.

JUDITH RICHARDS: Vital.

ROBERT LONGO: When we first moved to New York I remember we used to go all the time to the Bleecker Street Cinema or the Carnegie Theater to see all, like, the, you know, Truffaut and Godard, and all that stuff. What's interesting is, like, the world that you came to New York to see originally, the Gibson Gallery and the Castelli Gallery, it was, like, as if that world was dying and the world that was emerging was—from the white galleries, the bright white galleries and the wooden floors it went to the movie theaters and the rock clubs. It switched. You know, daytime wasn't valid anymore. It was, like, more now the night and the dark. It was interesting that what happened is that the music replaced the art galleries for a period of time. It was more interesting to go see music and performances than it was go to see—

JUDITH RICHARDS: In clubs.

ROBERT LONGO: —than it was to go see. CBGB, these tier three hurrahs. There were all these places that things were happening. Every night you would go out, you know. And even The Kitchen was like that.

So what happened at The Kitchen what was interesting is that The Kitchen—Carlotta got sick in India and couldn't come back for, like, almost a year. I was left there with this job and no schedule, which immediately meant I could put all my friends on the schedule. Immediately David, I had David Salle do installation. Troy did a show, Cindy did a show, Jack [Goldstein] did an incredible installation. It was like we used The Kitchen as a vehicle for bands and for performances, and stuff like that. So it was a way of taking advantage of the situation.

There was, like, so much shit going on, happening. But anyway, so where am I now?

JUDITH RICHARDS: You're—well, you're at The Kitchen, but I guess go back to what you were doing, what your work was in addition to the music.

ROBERT LONGO: Oh, right, Artists Space, Artists Space. So the Artists Space *Pictures* show [1977] happened. So Sherrie Levine was in that show and she—I remember that night of the dinner we were all around and everyone thought, "God, our careers are going to take off now, you know. I'm going, God, how lucky can I be. I got to be in the show and move to New York and now I'm going to be an instant artist."

I thought being successful as an artist basically meant that I would be able to get some stipends from the gallery. I would go do some lectures and maybe I would get to sleep with some art students or something. You know, it was like—you know, it didn't—the idea of actually making a living selling art was just, like, never in the picture, never, never, never. Selling art, making money? It was like—you know, it was like having assistance, maybe, to help you do things but making money was, like, never—

And what happened after the *Pictures* show is nothing, nothing happened. We were all, like, dead in the water. It was instead that messy, gooky shit started, like, you know, Schnabel, and painting and all that crap became really important, like, neo-expression. I remember meeting Schnabel the first time at a bar with—

JUDITH RICHARDS: What year would you say this is?

ROBERT LONGO: '77. I mean, he was like—he was just, like, this bigger than life character. He was, like, buying drinks and, dah, dah, dah, you know? He bought some of Troy's work early on, which made me think he's a really smart guy, because Troy [Brauntuch]—Troy and Charlie [Clough] are two artists that I think of my generation are the really incredibly important and just not, don't get enough credit, really, I think really important.

So, you know, I struggled along at The Kitchen, made some money, and Cindy tried to get jobs, but she couldn't get any jobs. Finally she got this job with, she was going to be an assistant buyer to some woman at A&S [*Abraham* & *Straus*] for lingerie. The woman sounded like the commandant in *Seven Beauties*. I remember like—oh, and the other thing is so I'm living on South Street in this loft and our building goes into vacate order and they turn off the electricity in our building. So I have to climb out of the window of my building and climb in, out like three stories. I would climb into this other building and plug into like the exit light of this warehouse so we had some electricity and a heater, and stuff like that.

JUDITH RICHARDS: Did Joel Shapiro have a studio down there at that point or was it later?

ROBERT LONGO: No.

JUDITH RICHARDS: No, okay.

ROBERT LONGO: And I remember we had no telephone. I remember that night Cindy was, like, crying. I remember calling Helene [Winer] up and saying, "Helene, you know, I've got to get a job for Cindy. Is there something you can do?"

She says, "Well, maybe she can work at Artists Space." So she starts working at Artists Space. So now that Cindy's working, now I see maybe I can finally get out of The Kitchen because I don't want to be the bureaucrat and there were a few real asshole artists that treated me like a bureaucrat. They were—they didn't want to let me become an artist I felt. They wanted they were real happy I was a bureaucrat. They wanted me to get them shows, but if I was going to do something it didn't matter.

I did this performance, which was—I was really—it turned out to be really, it really—it was really quite good. I was very surprised. I mean, to me everything I do could always have been better. I always see the mistakes in it. But this was like—there are moments that are just, that things come together and just really work. I did this performance at the old Franklin Furnace and it was called *Sound Distance of a Good Man* [1978], and it was this

performance—

JUDITH RICHARDS: *Sound Distance*—?

ROBERT LONGO: —*Distance of a Good Man*.

JUDITH RICHARDS: And Martha Wilson invited you to do this?

ROBERT LONGO: Right, and this is 1978. It's a performance on a platform. Michael helped me, Zwack helped me build it and I borrowed some money from somebody. I needed to get a revolving, electronic revolving platform. My sister was the opera singer in it.

JUDITH RICHARDS: This is '78?

ROBERT LONGO: Yeah.

JUDITH RICHARDS: So you're still only 25.

ROBERT LONGO: Yeah.

JUDITH RICHARDS: You did a lot by the time you were 25.

ROBERT LONGO: And the thing was this performance was like, it was so beautiful. No one had ever seen something like this. It was only ten minutes long and it had these two guys wrestle in slow motion on this revolving platform, and then there was a projection of a film that had a man in it who was Bernard Tschumi, you know, the architect guy. He was the only kind of European guy, looking guy in there. He's in this picture imitating the guy who I used for the sculpture of *American Soldier*, in the Fassbinder film.

Then—but it's a still image that's on film, so the image is stilled but the film is moving. So the film has grain and things. So it's, like, alive and then my sister sings this made up aria. The music is a Brian Eno, "Pachelbel's Cannon" slowed down. These guys—did you ever see the movie *Women in Love* [1969]? It's like, you know, when the men wrestle, it's kind of like they're wrestling or fucking. It's, like, kind of really kind of, really kind of weird androgynous. They wear, like, Kung Fu pants and stuff. They revolve. There's this film and then this opera singer, and it's, like, ten minutes. When it was over, like, people were crying and stuff. It was like—and it was really—I wanted to believe that I could change mediums, that I didn't want to be, like, a painter or a sculptor, I wanted to be an artist.

So I made these reliefs. So now I'm going to take that idea and I'm going to transfer it to performance. What was ironic was is I was working with video and other things, but when I got to New York a lot of the equipment that you could get from Merck was it called, I think it was called Merck. It was, like, a place where you could get non-profits, where you can get, like, video equipment. There were these—the establishment video artists had, like, a stranglehold on, like, all the equipment and I could never get anything. The Kitchen only had, like, a video monitor I could steal and take home, or something like that. So that's how we had TV at home.

So I didn't have anything to work with. I had no money, I couldn't rent the video equipment I wanted to, so I took home some backdrop paper from The Kitchen and I started drawing. The first two drawings I made were based off of—I mean, the real beginning of these drawings are based off of stills from two Warhol movies. I think one was called *Cowboy*. Oh, no, one was *The Cowboy* [*Loansome Cowboys*, 1968] and the other one was from a *Wages of Fear* [1953] film. Kind of that's where the drawing started. I mean, drawing was basically because there wasn't anything else to do. I couldn't—you know, I didn't have enough money to paint.

The irony of it all is I remember I wanted to use grease pencils. I remember going to Pearl Paint to go buy grease pencils and they said Serra bought them all. Now fast forward this like 20 years later and there's an assistant that comes to work for me and I said, "Why do you want to work with me?" And he says, "Because I went to Pearl Paint to buy charcoal and they said you bought up all the charcoal." It was like, wait a minute, I've heard that before, you know. It was like—it was this certain kind of charcoal that I use and it was just really funny. I was like, "Well, okay, I'll give you a job just for saying that." I thought it was so great.

But, yeah, so, I mean—

JUDITH RICHARDS: But you never looked for grease pencils again and used them, you really immediately realized charcoal was a much better medium for you?

ROBERT LONGO: Yeah. Well, you know what it was, is I had, like, an art kit, you know. I think I got it for Christmas, or something like that. It had, like, charcoal in it. It's, like, that was the only thing that was there. I had—you know, everybody has pencils, so I had some pencils and charcoal. It was just, duh.

JUDITH RICHARDS: I guess one—from the very beginning you were incredibly talented at drawing in your work. Was that something you were self-taught or were there people along the way who guided you in that?

ROBERT LONGO: You know what, the thing is with the drawing, and stuff like that, I could always, like, I could always draw. I didn't—

JUDITH RICHARDS: You had the eye/hand coordination, you could draw what you saw.

ROBERT LONGO: Yeah. The thing was is that for me I wasn't, like, the natural, I wasn't, like, the genius drawing guy, the guy that could draw, you know. A perfect example about drawing is, like, the idea that when—I remember whenever I would draw a cup, and I first would draw the cup, it was always like this, you know, like that. Then I remember that woman Leonara Fink saying, "When was the last time you looked at a cup?"

I said, "What do you mean?"

She said, "Cups don't have these corners like that. It's round."

I realized drawing was about looking, you know. The thing is that for me I have people work for me now that do my drawings for me and work with me. I have this incredible luxury of being, like, the makeup man. I'm, like, the mortician who finishes things off. You know, I monitor everything, I touch everything while it's going on, but I—the nuts and bolts of doing it, I don't have to do that shit anymore. It's like I developed my techniques and my techniques are, kind of like, bastardized versions of traditional techniques that I just stumble on. No one taught me how to do what I'm doing. The charcoal, particularly the charcoal drawings—the *Men in the Cities* drawings are much more conventional in their evolution. They're graphite and even there I even kind of stumbled upon, like, the fact that graphite and charcoal don't merge, they don't mix together, so what they do is they create actually kind of almost, like, a bit of a photographic grain at times.

But the irony is that with the charcoal it was just—it's ironic for me that every year of my life, it seems like, when I'm about to change work around New Years it's, like, unbelievable. It happens every—I just went through it this past year. I went through, like, a whole kind of, well, what I am doing. The thing is that the charcoal stuff was just—I had charcoal and powder laying around the studio that I had never used before. I just—that Christmas vacation nobody was in the studio and I just went to work and I tried to figure it out, you know. Once I figured the technique out then I could show it to my assistants and they can, and then they can kind of, like, learn from that. That's, like, the—

What's very clear is I'm not—I've tried to paint, I've tried to teach myself to paint. I can do it but I don't like it.

JUDITH RICHARDS: Well, when you first went to Pearl Paint, which was '78, '79?

ROBERT LONGO: Yeah, '77, '76.

JUDITH RICHARDS: '77. How did—did you say—oh, yes, because you have this backdrop paper.

ROBERT LONGO: Yeah.

JUDITH RICHARDS: You felt that that was the only thing you could do?

ROBERT LONGO: Yeah.

JUDITH RICHARDS: How did you decide what you were going to draw? Where did that imagery come from?

ROBERT LONGO: Oh, that was easy because the thing was is that in the performances and in the reliefs, and things like that, it all seemed to be appropriation. It all seemed to be taking, reprocessing the images of our world. It's like taking, making representations of representations. Somehow—what's interesting is that that small relief, *American Soldier*, becomes the whole body of work of *Men in the Cities*, which goes back to "who can fall dead best", you what I mean?

But there's so many things that—art has to function, art has to function in two coordinates. One of them is like a personal and one of them is a social. So somehow something has to have some really profound personal connection to you. But the other thing is that it has to be able to exist independently in the world. If something is way too personal I don't care about it. If something is way too politically or socially motivated who cares about it. It's like the old fashioned radio stations when you tune in the radio, well do you remember how you could physically feel it come in? That's what making art is like. It's you have to find that balance between those two things, you know what I mean.

At the same time as an artist you have, like, antennas, you know, you're feeling what's going on out in the world. I mean, there was this incredible band called The Contortions where the guy, the lead singer of the band moved

around in the most spasmatic motions. Then I remember that night somehow I was reading something, some like, one of the psychology, one of those art book things, you know, I don't remember it, the name of it. They were talking about psychotic impulses and about the difference between you reach for a cup of coffee, what they were talking about was the space between reaching for the cup of coffee, you know.

I was thinking Robert Smithson and how Smithson was—he was a big hero of mine, I loved his work, and how he was about how you can't stop anything, change is always happening. *Men in the Cities* was all about stopping. It was all about like, kind of like, fighting against my teacher in that sense, like, I could stop time. I could take a split second and turn it into forever.

But then again *Men in the Cities,* I photographed them from really low angles and I photographed them in such a way that they became, like, sculptures. I always think about those statutes in Florence, the *Slaves*. I mean, they're very much like those *Slaves*. But I remember, like, when I made one of the drawings of Gretchen [Bender]. I made her hands, like, really big and muscular, you know, like, she was almost a transvestite. But it clearly came out of seeing those Michelangelo paintings, you know. In those sculptures the hands were really big.

So it's like—it's really like, you know, this incredible primordial muck. It's always prevalent in everything and it's very—if that shit wasn't there in the work I would quit, you know. It has to—you have to have this honesty in your work. It has to be—you have to say to yourself, yes, I'm telling the truth, because I really do believe that art is, like, the only story around where truth and justice prevail, do you know what I mean. It's like—we're, like, making commercials where nobody is sponsoring us. Do you know what I mean it that sense? So I think it's really kind of important in a sense.

It's unfortunate that it's a highly subjective thing and, you know—well, it is fortunate that it's subjective. It's unfortunate that its subjectivity can be manipulated and in that sense get very confused, you know. But you—somehow I do believe that in the art world there is a judicious angel that exists and allows good shit to somehow surface, do you know what I mean.

A perfect example is Cindy. I mean, Cindy is fucking great. I don't necessarily know if she's as good as Troy or Charlie. Cindy is fucking great and she's honest. That she's gotten to where she's gotten I think is fucking great. There aren't enough mediocre women artists. That's the problem. There should be as many mediocre women artists as there are mediocre men artists. Do you know what I mean? It's, like, a weird thing. But it's, like, a dilemma. With art you have to really be able to tell the truth with what you're doing and how you find that is that balance between that social and that personal. You have to say, "What am I making? Is it really, really important to be? Is it really, really about what I'm"—because the other thing is, like, making art is like being a reporter. It's like I'm telling you what it's like to be alive now even though you don't know. It's like I'm trying to give you some kind of, like, report of what it is. I think that's a really important thing. But it really is like—you know, when I did, like, this Nice [France] show and I look back, I look back at all that work, it's like it makes a lot of sense of how things transpire, this very kind of bombastic, you know, bull shit in the beginning and then the work kind of gets more, you know, in a weird way kind of violent aggressive and then it kind of gets kind of serene. It takes this natural thing.

I've been very reluctant to get messy with my work. That's the thing I realize.

JUDITH RICHARDS: We'll take that up tomorrow.

ROBERT LONGO: Yeah. Because I always think it seems like—every artist I've seen starts off, like, tight and then gets messy. It seems like that's what you're supposed to do but—

JUDITH RICHARDS: Okay. We'll—

[END OF DISC 3.]

JUDITH RICHARDS: This is Judith Richards interviewing Robert Longo in New York on January 31, 2009 for the Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution, disc number one.

So we'll start where we left off yesterday.

ROBERT LONGO: I think we ended with the performances, and that the performance, the center image in the performance is a film projection of head and shoulders.

JUDITH RICHARDS: Yes, that was at The Kitchen.

ROBERT LONGO: No, at the Franklin Furnace, head and shoulders above—it was above—the head and shoulders above a man that looked like the film still called *The American Soldier* by Fassbinder that I based—

[PAUSE.]

JUDITH RICHARDS: Okay, that was an interruption. I hope the last ten minutes recorded. We'll just—

ROBERT LONGO: There's no way of checking to see it was recorded?

JUDITH RICHARDS: Not—we'll just continue. It looks like it's working properly. I guess I'll just assume that it was recording. It just started flashing. I usually look over. It was—the mike was working. I usually look over and it's going along like it is now, by the second, but when I looked over it was at 56 seconds and it was flashing.

ROBERT LONGO: You can't play that back? You're not sure how?

JUDITH RICHARDS: I think we should continue—

ROBERT LONGO: All right, fine.

JUDITH RICHARDS: —then—

ROBERT LONGO: So I found this foundry that could cast this piece that I had sculpted and it was sand casted, but it was actually a quite brutal system and what it did is it actually, when they did they pounded it and it totally destroyed all the detail in the piece, which was crushing because I had to get this piece done, like, in two weeks for the show.

Anyway to make a long story short—

JUDITH RICHARDS: I'm sorry, what year was this?

ROBERT LONGO: This is '77.

JUDITH RICHARDS: Okay.

ROBERT LONGO: And to make a long story short, the piece actually turned out okay. I mean, it's brutal in the way it was done. But this piece attracted the most attention in the show and particularly in my group of work. It seemed to, like, all of a sudden become—

JUDITH RICHARDS: Let me just get—what's the title of it?

ROBERT LONGO: *American Soldier*. It seemed to be the most—actually Tom Lawson wrote a pretty good review about it and focused on that. Like—and I think maybe he was the first one to say that it was, like, either dying or dancing in the picture.

So now I'm scheduled now to do a show at The Kitchen. I've done the performance at—I've now done the performance at—

JUDITH RICHARDS: Franklin Furnace.

ROBERT LONGO: —Franklin Furnace. I finally get—I finally quit working at The Kitchen. I get Rosalee Goldberg—I kind of feel like I trick Rosalee Goldberg—I tricked the people at The Kitchen to take Rosalee Goldberg as my replacement. Rosalee is great but she didn't really know how to run a program, but it was a whole—I mean, she's wonderful but the thing is is that—

So now I had to do a show at The Kitchen. So the show at The Kitchen I had just seen—a lot of the movies that I saw at that time kind of influenced the way I thought about the color palette and images, and stuff like that. I had seen *The Conformist*, Bertolucci's *The Conformist*. I don't know why—I left that movie thinking about off white, green, black, gold and red.

Anyway, so I did a show at The Kitchen called *Boys Slow Dance*, [1979] and what it was was—there was another thing that was happening in New York at that time and that was the gay scene. It seemed like real guys were gay guys, like, the real muscular, strong, macho looking guys were gay guys. The rest of us straight guys were, kind of like, theatrical girls, which then became the name of a band actually which I thought was really great. But it was a really weird thing and violence and men together seemed to be a dubious question. That's why in the performance the two men fighting on the revolving platform was erotic at the same time as it was violent, and I thought that was kind of an interesting thing because I was pretty—I'm going, am I gay? Am I not gay? I go, no, I'm not gay, although I kept on saying, well, maybe it would be really good if I was gay. All the guys in the art world are gay, you know, like that kind of naïve mentality about, like, the art world.

But anyway, so this *Boys Slow Dance* was three reliefs on a gray wall. One was white, one was black, one was

green, and they were all from—they were all reliefs of men fighting and they were all installed into the wall. So they were very much, like, flat to the wall. One came from a Sam Fuller movie called *Pickup on South Street* [1953]. Another one came from a stupid movie Spielberg did called *1941* [1979]. It was two airplane pilots fighting, which I thought was ironic. The idea of airplane pilots fighting, physically fighting—guys that shoot each other down in the air were actually fighting physically. And then the other one was from, like, a Steve Reeves *Hercules* movie of one guy lifting up the other guy, very much like Hercules and Antaeus, or something like that.

When you walked into the entry hall of the exhibition there was a huge eight by eight foot drawing from a film still based on Erich Rohmer's movie *Perceval* [1979], a young knight in chain mail but not armor sitting on a white horse. But it was all kind of like—it was kind of like, duh. He was like—the story of Perceval is kind of duh, you know. So he's kind of sitting there.

To execute this drawing I hired—because Jack and Troy at that time were both employing, like, people outside to do their work.

JUDITH RICHARDS: This is Jack Goldstein and Troy Brauntach?

ROBERT LONGO: Yeah, and Troy Brauntach. It seemed, like, a really cool idea to like—because virtuosity of technique always seemed suspicious to me. This is something that became very, very clear to me and that was that. When I actually made something all myself and I liked it I was just madly in love with it. I had no self-criticism of it. It was just like—

JUDITH RICHARDS: And that was a negative?

ROBERT LONGO: It was—I was just suspicious of it. I was suspicious of craft and of skill, even though I'm a great advocate of it and I think kids should learn skill. I think that skill can be damaging. I remember meeting some jerk at school who was like criticizing what I was doing and he was so proud of the fact that he was, like, mixing his own paint with egg, you know, egg tempera and all that. You know, I looked back at the guy's painting and they were fucking horrible. I mean, the idea that those paintings will last forever doesn't mean anything. I mean, they were terrible paintings. I mean, it was—

So the idea of executing your idea—this is where the evolution of, like, this third, the third mode of representation comes in, where you have—you have traditional representation and you have traditional abstraction, and then you have this thing in the middle, which is I think where I exist and a lot of my generation exists, and that is it's, kind of like, representational images that are conceptually drive or something. They are basically abstract in their nature. There's that great line I remember reading, at one point in the late-80s reading Barnett Newman's interviews and Barnett Newman said he thought that abstract expressionists were representational artists working abstractly. I went, well, that makes sense because I think I'm an abstract artist working representationally. You know, it kind of made sense to me because, like, the *Men in the Cities* drawings when you see those figures and shapes, and stuff like that, that they were never figures. I was always irritated when people wanted me to put my work in figurative shows because I thought they were—they were more like calligraphy, or symbols, or notations, or musical notes, you know, gestural—they were, like, gestural acts. They were more like Pollock, you know, like Pollock throwing paint than they were like Philip Pearlstein, or somebody like that.

So anyway, so this show—the beginning of the show, what started my working relationship with Diane Shea. I hired Diane—I met this girl at a party. Cindy and I were just starting to break up. We had been living together since, like, I guess, '75 and now it's kind of like, 1979 or something, 1980. Anyway, so Diane and I become lovers and at the same time she's working for me and we're doing these drawings. It was really great to have this person who had all this technical ability. She didn't care about making art. She was just a professional illustrator. She did books, and things like that. I had to teach her how to work and bigger and bigger and bigger.

Then I had this dream—oh, in the meantime I was driving a taxi at night. That was another thing. I had to figure out how to employ myself. God, it's like there's so much happening right after this and it's hard to remember all of it. So I was driving a taxi at night and I had this dream about men trapped in ice, which were these—which was like the *American Soldier* figure except his feet were trapped in ice. There were a bunch of these men that couldn't get out of the ice because their feet were trapped in it but their bodies were all wreathing.

I realized—I had been basically making all these black and white drawings up to that point, a number of them that were all based off of appropriation, images I would find in magazines and newspapers, things like that. The problem is it got harder and harder to find images I wanted and I didn't have the money to buy magazines, or books, or things like that. And all of a sudden I realized I'll just take the pictures of these guys, you know what I mean.

Now here's—it goes so schzitzy trying to remember all this shit. Alanna Heiss said this really great thing to me when I was much younger. I worked at Art Park when I was in Buffalo and I think I eventually got fired because I

asked too many questions of the artists, I was too much like, you know—I was more interested in finding out what the artist thought about it than actually helping them work and do their pieces. But I met Alanna there and Alanna explained something to me there, because she asked me what I did and I had explained to her I had this huge system of performances.

She said, you know, if you come to New York and—this is what I remember she said but this is the essence of it. As a young artist you can't expect the art world to understand this whole complex thing that you're doing. You have to do one thing and you've got to do one thing well. I processed it in my mind is that I turned it into a visual image that it's like you have to come up with a knife point to enter, and then as you push the knife in the wound gets bigger. Do you know what I mean?

It's—so what happened was is by itself *Men in the Cities* became my focus. I needed to get people to do drawings up. So who would I call? I called Cindy, the woman I started living with, this woman Gretchen, I called Eric Bogosian, I called Glenn Branca. I called people, friends of mine that could come and—you know, there was a punk rocker that I knew, Evan Sheppard, and I would take them in my studio, up on my roof, and I would throw things at them or I would tie ropes to them and I would yank them around the ceiling, and I would take photographs of them. I would take photographs of them from a low angle so that they—again I said this part yesterday about I wanted to have, like, a kind of a statuesque feeling. Then we projected it and then we drew them.

People got it. It was actually kind of caught—you know, it caught people's attention because it was the pin point, it was the tip of the knife. It was very clear what these things were. The thing that was very important was there were three things that happened, that influenced how they were presented. They were never meant to be seen as a single image, like, one guy by himself. They were always meant to be seen as triptych, or a triptych, or five or seven in a row, or something like that. They were always—do you know the Degas reliefs at the Modern? I always liked that there were three of them, you know.

At the same time I saw these pictures of three hostages that were being held in Iran at the embassy. There were triptychs of them. I also thought about punk music. I always—I was constantly listening to music and I was constantly listening to the Sex Pistols, and the Ramones, and Talking Heads. I was constantly listening to all that stuff. I realized that I was really interested in chord structures and the way the chord changes in the songs were.

So the triptychs became, like, changes in the music. They had a musicality to them that was really critical and that they had this kind of rhythmic structure to them. So anyway—and they related to—they had a historical relationship and they—it just seemed, it fell into order and it made—it made incredible sense. The irony was that when I went to do women—I started off just first with men and the first sizes of those drawings were maybe—I think they were like 40—60 inch by 40 inch. So they were slightly under life size. But then Metro Pictures opened.

Oh, in the meantime I had been courted by Holly Solomon to show with her at a gallery. I just didn't get it. I just —I was very flattered by it, that she wanted me to do this, but I didn't really see me being her—

[Audio break.]

ROBERT LONGO: Oh, but the other thing that happened is—so there was Holly, but I have to backtrack for a second. So when Cindy and I were living together and the *Pictures* show opened, and things like that, you know, there was this guy who called me up who wanted to see my work. It was, like, the first, kind of like, European guy that really was interested in my work and his name was Kasper Konig, who I later found out was, like, this incredibly important guy historically. He wanted to come—he had heard something about me and wanted to come over to see my work.

So I said, okay, sure, but then I realized we had no electricity, you know. So we had to figure out how to get more electricity in the house because remember I told you—

So he comes over. We have no heat. It's during the winter. He's freezing, he's bitching about the heat. He's, like, this German guy, like, this stiff guy. All we had was some joints and bourbon. He didn't smoke pot but he drank a bunch and he stayed maybe a half hour, looked at the stuff, and then said okay and then left. It was, like, big fucking deal.

So then the next morning I get a phone call, like, really early in the morning. We were still asleep and I get up. This guy is on the phone and he says, "This is Kasper Konig. I think you need money. Go to Konrad Fischer in one week and he will have a check for $3,000 for you," and he hangs up the phone.

I was like—I go back to bed to Cindy and I said, "Cindy," I was like, "That German guy just said he's going to give me $3,000, you know." Back then it was, like, getting like, you know, $25,000. I was like—she said, "Really?"

JUDITH RICHARDS: Did you know who Konrad Fischer was?

ROBERT LONGO: No. Well, yeah, I—vaguely, vaguely, vaguely. I mean, I was quite literate about what was going on in the art world at that point because of magazines and going to shows, and stuff like that, but I had never met Konrad Fischer. I never went to Konrad Fischer's and then finally I get a phone call from Konrad Fischer like three weeks later saying, you know, "There's a check here from Kasper for you for $3,000. Are you going to come get it?" I was like, Fuck. So he gave me $3,000 just because he thought I needed it. It was pretty wild.

So anyway, I ended up—he ended up putting me in a show at *Westkunst* and we became friends eventually and I actually paid him back.

JUDITH RICHARDS: What city is that in?

ROBERT LONGO: Westkunst was in—I think it was in—

JUDITH RICHARDS: Cologne?

ROBERT LONGO: Cologne, yeah. We became friends and he was, like, my fairy godfather, you know what I mean. The guy just came along. But I've had a lot of these fairy godfathers, which was really great.

The next gallery that became interested in my work was—so that $3,000 paid for the show that I made at The Kitchen, *Boys Slow Dancing*, helped pay for that. Then I had my first—Linda Cathcart from Buffalo comes into play. Linda is now the director of the museum in Houston [Museum of Fine Arts] and she wants to include me, those reliefs, in a show in Houston. I remember quitting my job driving the taxi saying, okay, I'm going to just really try to figure out how to do this art thing because I was—now I was starting to sell things here and there.

Then I was approached by Brooke Alexander and I was just really—I really liked this man very, very much. He did this show called *Illustration & Allegory* [1980], or something like that, that I was in, and Troy was in, and Jack was in. It was—an essay was written by Carter Ratcliff. Now what's interesting is that writing in relationship to one's work can be incredibly helpful, particularly when, you know, you have someone who is willing to spend the time to take a schizophrenic kind of collection of ideas that you're doing and collect it all and enable it to come out of the tip of a pencil. Do you know what I mean? The idea—I always had this image of, like, writing as like—you know, like, in Europe have you ever seen when they write on cakes? They have that big, huge thing where they put the blob of stuff in it. They fold it up and then they cut it. The idea that all that shit is coming out of, like, this tip, you know. It somehow—that you're able to actually focus it and create a linear-

Anyway, so Doug Crimp's *Pictures* essay was incredibly important because it was seeing written in a linear way the way you were thinking. It wasn't like I learned something new from him, but it was a way of actually helping you articulate what it is that you were doing. You know, here I was a kid that was raised in the suburbs and highly, highly influenced by the representations of the world, and here I was making representations of representations. It was like, duh, of course, you know. He was able to formulate that. The Tom Lawson article was really helpful, Craig Owen's articles were really helpful. Carter's essay was really helpful. Where am I going with this here? So anyway—

JUDITH RICHARDS: Brooke Alexander.

ROBERT LONGO: Brooke Alexander, so he wanted me to be in the gallery. At the same time Helene [Winer] and Janelle [Reiring] had come—and I had known Helene now for a long time, from Artists Space, and Helene was thinking about opening up a gallery with Janelle and I had met Janelle and I really like both of them. They took Cindy and I out for dinner and they asked us about being in the gallery. Now Cindy and I weren't living together anymore but we were pretty close friends and she was real good friends with the girl that I was living with, Gretchen Bender.

But what was interesting is they were also saying that they weren't going to open a gallery unless Troy was in the gallery. Troy was, like, my best friend so—but Troy had been, there seemed to be lots of people—Troy was going to be like the Jasper Johns of our generation. He had already sold pieces to Bruno Bischofberger. Nannina Nosei [Nannina Nosei Gallery] was real interested in him. Larry—it was, you know—but he—

JUDITH RICHARDS: Was Larry Gagosian even around then?

ROBERT LONGO: Yeah, yeah. Nannina's gallery where she showed her work was in Larry's old gallery space, Larry's old loft on West Broadway. So Nannina—but I knew Troy would do because we were—it was—so the original group at Metro Pictures was basically this group of friends. You know, it was Cindy, Jack, Troy, me, Richard Prince, and who else? Tom Lawson. It was basically, like, one—you know—it was basically the *Pictures* show with a few other people in it.

It seemed to make sense to me. So I call Brooke and I tell him I'm sorry I can't do this with you but, you know, you've been really great, and stuff like that. So Brooke takes Helene and Janelle and I out for lunch at Blatto's. Brooke proceeds to tell me that his father passed away last year, and stuff like that, you know, left him a little money, and stuff like that. His father, he says his father at one point said to him that a time will come in your life when you know you're at a critical moment in your career and you'll need someone to give you some money, you know. Brooke said his father never gave him any money. But Brooke thought that I needed some money and Brooke gave me $20,000 for my next show, no strings attached, you know.

The thing with—

JUDITH RICHARDS: Had you heard that he had done that to anyone else?

ROBERT LONGO: No, no.

JUDITH RICHARDS: So this is another one of your godfathers?

ROBERT LONGO: Yeah. [Laughs.] I know it's quite amazing. So I had the money to do the show with.

JUDITH RICHARDS: He didn't want you to give him work?

ROBERT LONGO: He just—there was no strings attached, nothing. "You pay me back when you can." No interest rates, nothing.

JUDITH RICHARDS: A loan that—

ROBERT LONGO: Was to help me produce the work for the show.

JUDITH RICHARDS: So you felt you would pay him back but if—

ROBERT LONGO: There was no pressure, there was nothing, there was nothing. It was just balls out straight support, you know. It was really—and I did that first show at Metro and it was a pretty good success. It ended up being on the cover of *ArtNews* or something, which is, like, the only cover of any art magazine I've ever been on, which is always quite infuriating to me.

But anyway, so the thing is is that he paid for that initial, helped me pay for that show and subsequently once the work became successful I did all my prints with Brooke. So Brooke made quite a big chunk of money on the prints. I gave Brooke a big drawing from that show, which—I mean, I'm sure it's worth at least a half million dollars now, you know, at least. So he made out okay. It was a smart move. He made out probably better than if there would have been an interest rate attached to it.

So what I was saying is when I decided to do women, which was interesting too, is that the men all looked like they were being shot or they were in some kind of, you know, violent, you know, impact or something. It was, like, some big explosion was happening. When I went to do the women the idea of doing the women in that kind of way seemed wrong. It seemed like they would look like victims.

So the women became much more powerful. They became—they seemed to be, like, self-generators. Like, I described that one drawing of Gretchen where her hands, people thought she was maybe a transvestite, where her hands are incredibly powerful. So the women never quite had the explosiveness. Instead they had this more kind of internal power, but at the same time they had gestures to them.

Because we lived down on South Street and Troy lived in—

JUDITH RICHARDS: And Gretchen mainly modeled for those women?

ROBERT LONGO: Gretchen, Cindy, Ellen Carey.

JUDITH RICHARDS: There's one with, kind of like that, with the head down like this?

ROBERT LONGO: Yeah, from the side, the side. The main models were Cindy, Gretchen, Ellen Carey, Jo Bonney, Merle Ginsberg. I can't remember them all, anyway—

But the thing was—so I was collecting these hundreds of photographs. You know, I would shoot, like, four rolls of film and I would get, like, maybe one or two images. But what started to happen is I actually started to cut and paste them together. I started to actually alter reality in that sense to get the way I wanted the image to be.

Diane was working with me. So Diane and I worked together and if I didn't have Diane working with me it would have taken me forever to make these pieces because—and then I started adding more assistants in because I

wasn't concerned with, like, spending an enormous amount of time making these things incredibly perfect. I realized that with these drawings—

JUDITH RICHARDS: And these are all the charcoal, right?

ROBERT LONGO: No, no, these were graphite—

JUDITH RICHARDS: Graphite.

ROBERT LONGO: —graphite and charcoal. The black area—oh, the black areas in the drawings were charcoal. The features and the faces and the hands were all graphite. Then there was a slight bit of charcoal that was rubbed on top of the graphite to give it a kind of graininess.

But because we lived down on South Street we were close to Wall Street. One of the things I used to do when I didn't have a job, and stuff like that, I would walk around and go to Wall Street. I would go watch these people on the trading floor. I would walk around, I would just walk around this world. I realized that—somewhere I heard this thing that when Wall Street sneezes the rest of the world catches pneumonia, or something like that. That was back then. Now obviously it's true.

But it seemed like the uniform of white western world was a shirt and tie for a man and, you know, a skirt or a dress for a woman. So I chose these images for the drawings, but I channeled through a punk sensibility, which was, like, thinner ties, and thinner lapels, and tighter pants, and sexier, tighter dresses. So I didn't want them to be those people. At the same time I wanted them to be white doomed people. I was very aware that I was making only white people because they—to me they were like—they were, like, buildings falling down, you know. They were, like, collapsing buildings.

It's always horrible to me when I read people writing now that they call them like, you know, yuppies, you know, dancing yuppies. It's like, oh, God. That's one of the worst things about your art, making art, is that you put your work out there and it can be completely misread. It's just—you go, oh, my God. When I read that yuppies, dancing yuppies, it's just art. Or your dancing figures, they're not dancing, you know.

Anyway, a problem was starting to arise because I saw these sequences happening and the drawings were now nine by five feet and Metro was selling them individually and that was bothering me that they were being deconstructed. Oh, and the other thing is that what was in between the drawings at Metro Pictures were reliefs of buildings, tops of buildings, that were—all the reliefs are always painted—that's another thing I want to talk about—all the reliefs are always painted in high gloss auto paint. I always loved the idea of cars. I thought cars were, like, these incredible sculptures that nobody knew who made them, you know. The idea that it was just a shell and that the mechanism, the intensity of the mechanism was within, internal.

I mean, I always thought about the idea of public art, public sculptures. I thought monuments were these really —they were, like, cinema in a weird way because you viewed them as you walked by them, or something like that. I loved that shininess. Now that I think back—because I think that an artist like Anish Kapoor was really—you know, in our society if something is shiny and smooth it's good, you know. Then if you—then in America if you make it big it's even better. So big, shiny and smooth is really good, you know.

So this was disturbing me that they were being broken up and sold individually. So I had to figure out a way how to combine all this work into units so that they couldn't be broken up. I was also really interested in scale. I wanted to make stuff that really challenged the viewer. There was a kind of weird self-destructive mechanism that I always have had in that, you know, when people start buying your art in the beginning, you know, you felt like they were taking your children away, you know. You kind of got resentful about it. At the same time you wanted to make the money. Then you started feeling—then you get to the point where you think they're not paying enough money. Then you get bitter and you really want to test their love.

So you figure I'm going to make this piece really fucking gigantic and see if somebody really wants it, do you know what I mean. At the same time it's like you—it's like you want—I wanted so much to fight against the things that influenced me. I wanted to fight against the movies and the television, the movies and the magazines and the billboards, you know, the ads on the buses, and things like that. I wanted to compete scale wise with what was out there.

I also—as an American there were two things that happened that kind of reinforced it. The idea that big was good, it was—I remember reading a book—like there are these two books, one was called *Zethel* by Wittgenstein.

JUDITH RICHARDS: *Zethel*?

ROBERT LONGO: Zethel, which means strips of paper. The other one was *Napoleon Bonaparte, Famous Quotes*.

So they were books that you didn't have to read as a book, they were sentences. In the Bonaparte book he said he didn't really care about art as long as it was big, which I thought was really great.

But the thing was I remember going out to dinner when I was younger with my sister after one of her successful singing performances and I had this crazy uncle called Uncle Peter. He was, like, this real pompous, Italian, rich guy, you know, who ultimately we found out was a crook later on. He wanted to take her—he was her godfather and he wanted to take her out to dinner and we went to this famous restaurant, some famous Italian restaurant, but not like in Little Italy, like uptown someplace that my sister had picked out because my sister wanted to go, kind of like, a fancy nouveau riche place. So Uncle Peter was paying for it and Uncle Peter ordered clams. The clams came and they were these little clams, these really delicate little clams. My Uncle Peter was like, "What the fuck is this? Look at these little clams. I want clams. These are little clams."

It was, like, immediately realizing that my uncle's equation with what made this good was if the clam was big, not that it was delicate and small, you know. The idea of big was good seemed to be constantly reinforced—big cars, you know, women with big breasts, whatever it was. It was the whole reaffirmation of it.

I realized that because I was thinking in these sequences I started to make these structures that became like sentence structures. The idea again of, like, not trying to be pinned down by a skill per se, I made these kind of basic ground rules, that I would try to use at least three mediums within a piece, that I would introduce color. I just finally had gotten—at home—I finally bought a color TV for the studio. I mean, we didn't have a TV. I think we had an old shitty black and white TV. I finally had a TV and a VCR, or something like that.

All of a sudden I had a color TV in my house all the time. This was like 1980, or something like that. I was making money, so I had money to help produce the pieces and I went out—I went bezerko and I made this series that, for lack of a better word, courtesy of Rauschenberg, I made Combines. The first ones that I showed, the first group were pretty good. Actually the Museum of Modern Art bought the first one, one of the first ones. They were really meant to be very much like sequences in—

JUDITH RICHARDS: After being shown at Metro Pictures?

ROBERT LONGO: Yeah. Actually while the show was up they took it out of the Metro Pictures, brought it up to the Modern on an off day, and then—and it was a big piece. They were very much about objectifying almost like an edit in a film. You know, like, when the monkey throws the bone up into the air and it turns into a spaceship, what do those two frames look like if you just, you know, literally took that.

So these Combines—and they were usually sculptural elements, and drawings, and paintings and reliefs and they always—they always had a collection of things in them. *Pressure* [1982-1983] is one piece that the Modern owns. It has a building relief and a drawing underneath it that's in color. There's a piece that the Tate Museum owns in London called *The Sword of the Pig* [1983], which was a piece about men—each piece had a kind of story, a narrative to it, and each piece had a sentence structure to it. Like *Sword of the Pig* for lack of a better—but this is a really early one, this one. This is called *Culture, Culture* [1982]. So this is about nine by eighteen feet.

So this is a drawing under red Plexiglas, okay. This is—

JUDITH RICHARDS: A pencil drawing.

ROBERT LONGO: Yeah.

JUDITH RICHARDS: On black paper or—

ROBERT LONGO: White paper.

JUDITH RICHARDS: Drawing?

ROBERT LONGO: Yeah. And then this is a painting on wood that's varnished and has that kind of yellowish kind of color. So what this picture was was it was basically—all those [Sergei] Eisenstein movies where you always saw, like, the revolution happening, where they pulled the statues over, like, this always looked to me like the statute being pulled over, you know. This was, like, the guy, like, [Yuri] Andropov, or something like that, who—you know how on the telephone they had the red light, the red button, this is the guy who's, like, basically calling in more troops, do you know what I mean.

So this—but this also is my father and my father when I was growing up with my brother and sister away at school, like, I told you about, we would only be able to talk to them on Sundays. He would always flip out that we were on the phone too long. He was always fucking horrible. He was like—he was so cheap.

This is the horse that my father didn't let me ride on, you know what I mean. But this horse is also painted, like,

the rider in the Disney version of the *Legend of Sleepy Hollow*, with no head.

JUDITH RICHARDS: Ichabod Crane.

ROBERT LONGO: Yeah. But I remember that, I remember as a kid I just thought it was the coolest thing, that black blueness of that cartoon. Did you ever see that? Yeah. I mean, I just thought that was, like, the most incredible thing.

So this was an example of, like, the kind of montage that was both social and political.

JUDITH RICHARDS: To clarify, metaphorically that's your father, it's not an—

ROBERT LONGO: No, it is my father.

JUDITH RICHARDS: Oh, it is an image of your father.

ROBERT LONGO: That's my father. This is actually a photograph I took of Bolivia, Bolivar, the guy up on the—

JUDITH RICHARDS: Simon Bolivar?

ROBERT LONGO: Yeah. Because the idea is that when a horse—I learned all about these things about equestrian statutes. If there's one foot up it means he's wounded, two feet down it means he didn't get wounded. Alexander Lieberman had a great idea. He wanted to take all the equestrian sculptures in New York City and put them all together in Battery Park.

This is *Sword of the Pig*. This one was kind of like an apology to most of the women artists that I knew because what was happening is that men would take—it was, like, courtesy of Reagan it was, like, not only was it good to be rich again, but it was like—it seemed like all the things that had been achieved in the 60s and the 70s were going back into the closet—sexism, racism, you know. It was like—and men were becoming the peacocks again. All the art that was happening, like, the Schnabels, and Cucchi, and Clemente, and Chia, and all that sort of crap seemed to be just like dominating everything. Women, the women's art at that time, Cindy, and Jenny Holzer, and even Barbara Kruger at the time, they seemed to be more like the razor blades. They were much sharper, more precise, much more tougher.

So this piece is called *Sword of the Pig*. What this is is—the mechanism, structure that created it is basically the idea of a sword. This is the handle of the sword.

JUDITH RICHARDS: Looking at the left.

ROBERT LONGO: Right, yeah. This part of the sword, this is, like, the part that covers your hand, the naked figure. Then this piece—this is, like, a three-quarter-inch-thick aluminum that is actually embedded into the frame like the way a sword would be in. Like all these fetishistic little things were really important to me, like, the way things were put together.

So this drawing is actually underneath a yellow piece of glass. This is very much like Soutine's slab of beef. This is made up of three different guys. Like the top part of the body is one guy, the penis and the middle part are another part, and the bottom part are another guy. It's under yellow Plexiglas. This is actually a church.

JUDITH RICHARDS: The left?

ROBERT LONGO: The left part, the left part of the sculpture. What it is is it's—if you look at a steeple, if you look at a church the way it is with the steeple it's kind of like somebody laying on the ground with, like, an erection. What it is is kind of like the church steeple pushed down on itself. So this is basically kind of a squashed church.

Then this image here is an abandoned ABM [anti-ballistic missile] site.

[Audio break.]

ROBERT LONGO: It's an abandoned ABM site in Montana. It's these—so what it is is it's like—

JUDITH RICHARDS: This is the red side.

ROBERT LONGO: Right, it's red on silver, red on silver. So what this is is it's, like, an impotent missile silos because underneath these circular things were missiles. So ABM or anti-ballistic missiles, so this whole thing seemed to be, like, this kind of really, kind of frustrating thing to me. The idea that these became outlawed, missiles that shot down missiles, it seemed, like, a pretty good idea to me. It looked a bit like a, kind of like, a scene from some ancient civilization. Like the radar tower was this kind of pyramid in the background.

Anyway, so it had this kind of structure to it, you know. It had institutions, it had this idea that it was a sword, you know. I had these kind of system that were involved in the Combines, and stuff like that. That became kind of important to me.

So what happened is that by the end of the 70s *Men in the Cities* developed and then *Men in the Cities* turned into the Combines. Meanwhile through all this stuff I was still doing, playing in bands and doing performance pieces. I did a performance piece called *Surrender* [1979] that had dancers and a saxophone player in it. Anyway, in 19—I can't remember, maybe '82, or something like that, I did this big, elaborate—or '83—I did this big, elaborate version of all the performances together at the Corcoran Museum in, kind of like, the grand hallway of the Corcoran Museum. It was *Sound Distance [Of a Good Man]*, *Surrender*, and this other piece called *Empire* [1982].

The thing that had always interested me and always interested Troy as well was fascist imagery because it seemed like—and later when I went to meet a couple of archivist people in Washington I realized that—this old guy was explaining to me that he thought—he had lived through the Second World War. He thought that the Americans and the Germans up until the war happened were almost the same in their sense of artistic, like, you know, social realism, and things like that, that the thing that separated them was the fact that the Germans actually started a war. The Americans could have become the same thing in a weird way.

He used examples in the art of that time. It was actually fascist art being made. Like in Washington, like, if you travel across one of those bridges in Washington, there's like—there's a guy who's standing next to a horse and the guy is almost as big as the horse. I mean, if you go to, like, the Olympic stadium in Berlin there's almost the same sculpture, things like that.

What interested me about the Nazis was that they had created a visuality to seduce the public. I thought as an artist, I thought that—I had developed this idea that I thought I was supposed to be—as a visual artist I was supposed to be a guardian of the culture. I was supposed to watch TV, and watch the newspapers, and watch the magazines and somehow keep a check on what was going on. Do you know what I mean? It was like—you know, like, the guys who are at the elevators in the buildings and they watch all the TV monitors, I used to watch two TVs at the same time and have it on all the time. I mean, when my wife met me she thought I was out of my mind.

The thing was that imagery, the idea that they realized that Goebbels were kind of creating modern advertising and that the swastika was such a profoundly, kind of like, hypnotic symbol, that these people basically created 20th century advertising.

JUDITH RICHARDS: Well, there was the presence of that Russian constructivist.

ROBERT LONGO: Yeah, but they weren't nowhere near—they were no—but they were nowhere near as good as the Germans were. I mean, *Triumph of the Will* and the swastika are like an ad campaign that, you know, look what it did. I always thought it was really quite amazing that, you know, other than Speer were the only kind of aesthetic people that were punished after the war. Like Leni Riefenstahl, nothing really happened to her. Spears got—Spears went to jail not because of the kind of, like, propaganda that he was involved in but because he had —he was working in the armaments factories. I mean, but his—you know, his other crime was that he helped create this kind of fascist imagery.

I thought about the artistic responsibilities that an artist has, about what you perpetuate in your art as a really important thing. What you say in your art you have to be responsible about. You can't—you know, I just thought about responsibility in relationship to what you were trying to do. I mean, in America in particular, it's, like, what was interesting and I started to find out that, like, the largest number of Nazi—the most Nazi paraphernalia now being produced was being produced in, like, Illinois, in the world, you know. It's, like, Americans have this incredible fascination with Nazis, you know, because of the ad campaign capacity.

Anyway, so that—there was a performance called *Empire* that used the lights from the Nuremberg rallies, that used that idea, and it basically kind of turns into an air raid, where the lights kind of go up and they become, like, a ceiling. It's complicated.

So we're now, we're kind of, we're approaching like the mid-80s, or something like that. The thing that's interesting is that *Men in the Cities* occupies in my body of work basically from 1979 to 1981, but it's basically been, like, the curse of my life. I've been running away from it ever since. I mean, one is fortunate enough to establish an archetype in their lifetime. The problem always is that it becomes this thing that you have to run away from the rest of—I remember I met Tom Stoppard and we were talking. He was talking about some—he was at—after the opening of one his plays he was having dinner. After the dinner—and it was, you know—he had had a pretty successful career and he overheard people talking at the other table going, "We like this play but we like his early work much better," you know. It was just like—

You know, people still today say, "Oh, you're the artist that did those yuppie dancing figures." It's just like, you know. On one hand it's really great that I've established an archetype, on the other hand it's like—it's such a small part of my body of work, although I do think that—Joseph Conrad said artists have to be single minded. I think we tend, artists have to be somewhat of a one trick pony subjectively or contextually. The work is constantly changing clothes if it's always still the same thing. It's always this thing about boy into man, navigating—going from to play to actual physical aggression, power, power as the last taboo, power as mediation or power as meditation.

But it's really funny too because I remember—recently—my recent work I remember Cindy was here and she was looking at the atomic bombs and the waves and she said, "You know, it's like the atomic bombs are like the cock and the waves are like the pussy. It's like you can put them together and put them in." She said, "You know, all your work is always about orgasms and coming." I was like—I blushed, it was just like, "I guess you're right," you know. It's all about like—

Well, anyway, so the work has gotten bigger and more and more elaborate and more and more complicated. I did a double show at Metro and Castelli's. Metro Pictures at that point was on Mercer Street and Castelli's was—

JUDITH RICHARDS: Greene.

ROBERT LONGO: On Greene. So I did, like, this double show. It was, like, a big, elaborate, you know, thing. The whole body of work I thought was actually—I mean, I was hitting a lot, I was hitting the target pretty regularly. I don't think I—that period of time I made a few weak pieces, but in general it seemed that most of those pieces during that period of time I'm still willing to stand behind, although I still see their mistakes.

But what started to happen is around 1986 I got this machine where you could actually print pictures off the TV. It was, like, a Sony scanner thing where you hook it up to the TV and you press a button and this strip of paper comes out, a printout. You could—so I could get all the images I wanted. It was incredible. I was kind of getting image overload.

Around that time—I had been talking about wanting to make a movie for a long time called *Empire*, which was this kind of big, gigantic rock video I guess for lack of a better term. It was more like a disjointed narrative. I could never raise the money for it. Then Richard Price, the writer, he took this basic idea and ended up writing a script for me about it. We never could get the money—I never had enough money because I was always taking all my money and putting it back into my work. I wasn't the guy who bought the house in the Hamptons, and things like that. I was, like, an idiot on one hand. I was putting all of my money back into my work. I was completely irresponsible about money. It was either that it went up my nose, it went—or it was paid to assistants or I lent the money to people, but I predominantly put the money back into the work.

So I didn't have the money necessarily to pay for my own movie, which was what I should have probably done, although I was making a ton of money. But what happened around—I made a short film called—I made a bunch of rock videos that I thought were actually pretty good because I figured if I really wanted to make a movie I would have to teach myself how to make movies, although I knew a little bit about movies because I used to go see all—I know a lot about movies because I used to go with media studies and I used to see all these films. I saw films a lot. I was a film junkie in a lot of ways.

So by doing the rock videos I figured out a way how to teach myself how to do it. I set basic ground rules for doing rock videos that because I was an artist I, you know, the band didn't have to be in the video if I didn't want them to be in the video. It didn't have to be any stupid story or anything. It just—you know, I said music is this incredible thing that is so formal that anyone who listens to it can bring whatever picture they want to it and now you want me to literally illustrate it; it would be a—it's a horrible mistake, you know. I want to give you images that evoke what the music potentially could sound like or look like.

JUDITH RICHARDS: Were those—did you imagine those videos would be picked up on MTV or used by the band commercially?

ROBERT LONGO: Well, they were done originally—

JUDITH RICHARDS: Were they commissioned actually, that they could be paid for?

ROBERT LONGO: Well, what happened was is I wanted to do rock videos but I couldn't figure out how to do it. Then a friend of mine who actually is in my band now, our band, Anton Fier, who was this extraordinary drummer and—

JUDITH RICHARDS: How do you spell his last name?

ROBERT LONGO: F-e-i-r [sic]. He was, like, considered one of the greatest drummers in New York at the time. He

had played with the Lounge Lizards and the Feelies. He was—Herbie Hancock. He had this kind of eccentric—he assembled, like, this all-star band that he wrote music for and did records, and they would occasionally do records. He asked me if I would do a video for them, which was, like, so cool. He actually realized—he said, "Do whatever you want."

So the first video I made for his song, a song called "Go Boy," ["Boy (Go)," 1986] I realized—I showed it to him and then I realized when I showed him the rough cut I realized that it was a mistake and he said to me, "No, no, no. This is not what I want. I want your work. I don't want you to make an MTV video." I basically tried to make an MTV video. I tried to make a narrative. I mean, I just didn't know what I was doing and I just fell back on what—I was imitating what I had seen.

So instead what I did was I took this eccentric film called *Page of Madness* [1926], this Japanese film, and I laid it down as, like, the groundwork, as, like, the understructure. Then Gretchen was working with me and she was the editor. We worked together and what I did was I started to insert—I just—I made a list of images that I associated with the song, we filmed them all, and then we just started cutting them into the video.

The video turned out actually pretty good. It's actually one of my favorite ones. I showed it to Anton and he loved it. It was—for a very small, low budget, it was a very, very low budget, it became a pretty successful video on MTV. The irony is about a year later after I watched it I went, oh, my God, I know what this is. Have you ever seen [Dziga] Vertov's *Man with a Movie Camera* [1929]? Vertov's *Man with a Movie Camera* was made in like 1917. What this is it's, like, a lexicon, a vocabulary, an encyclopedia of everything that you can do with a camera, every shot that you can make, you know, a man outside the car, the camera on the tracks, dropping a camera. Anyway, the zooms, the—it's basically the vocabulary for cinema. What I had made was a three minute version of that. I had basically made, you know, a man with a video camera rather than a man with—

It was really—it was quite shocking to me that what I had done was I had basically imitated, totally subconsciously, this seminal work. But what I had done is I had created my vocabulary for the rock videos that came afterwards. So what I did was I stole from all the film—I used to work for Paul Sherrod. I used to make his films, those flicker films. So what I took from all those guys, from the filmmakers, the structuralist filmmakers that I used to know from Buffalo, is I started making these rock videos that had, you know, thousands of edits and really fast cut, flicker frames and all this other stuff.

I realized that inadvertently I started influencing MTV. All of a sudden they had, you know—the first, the next video I did we broke the video editing equipment because there were too many edits, you know. It was like, there was, like, you can't have more than a certain amount of edits per second and we were pushing it.

Then I started doing rock video. I did rock video for REM. I did a rock video for Megadeath. I did a rock video for Reuben Blades.

JUDITH RICHARDS: Megadeath?

ROBERT LONGO: Megadeath, which it was really great because in 1986 I seemed to have kind of—I was trying to get sober. I seemed to have hit a brick wall with my—

JUDITH RICHARDS: You had one child then?

ROBERT LONGO: No, no, no.

JUDITH RICHARDS: No.

ROBERT LONGO: I seemed to have hit a brick wall at that point. I was trying to get sober and at the same time I really wanted to do, like, a real blowout exhibition. So I did these two exhibitions that were called *Steel Angel, Part I and Part II* [1986]. In one of those—

JUDITH RICHARDS: Where?

ROBERT LONGO: At Metro, but Metro now had moved to a much bigger space. I made these huge pieces and one of the pieces was a piece called *All You Zombies* [1986]. It was a piece that had this monster made out of bronze. It was a combination of the—did you ever see Picasso's orangutan that he made where he used, like, two children's toy cars to make the head?

JUDITH RICHARDS: Oh, right, yeah.

ROBERT LONGO: Well, I used that basic principle except I made it more like a film monster, like alien, or something like that. But it was made up of tires and coke bottles. But it was really quite horrible. It was basically, like, a portrait of myself because I didn't know where to go anymore. It was really weird.

But the work—some of the work back in those two shows, I would say of those two shows 70 percent of the work was really pretty good. The other 30 percent was, like, missed horribly. But there was some really great pieces in that period of time.

But what happened was is then I made a short film called *Arena Brains* that opened at the New York Film Festival. Then I kind of got lost. The next body of work I did was I left all the images behind and I basically wanted to just resurrect the pure physical force of the work. So there were no images in the work, and it was interesting that the week—I think the month that that show opened was the show, it was in '88, it was the show that Koons opened up with Michael Jackson I think.

JUDITH RICHARDS: Oh, it was—

ROBERT LONGO: Yeah. I think it was really the changing of the guard at that point. Like I lost my images. A lot of my dealers were very disappointed that I wasn't working with pictures anymore and it was just this physical stuff. At the same time the LA County Museum [of Art] bought one of the pieces, bought this black planet, which was a piece that was about a friend of mine dying of AIDS, Arnie Zane. That was another thing, like, Bill T. Jones and Arnie Zane were some of my closest friends and going through Arnie's death of AIDS was just intense.

So what happens now is that I'm scheduled to do this huge retrospective at the LA County Museum [of Art] in 1989. Howard Fox is organizing it. We have a huge budget from AT&T. We do this big, huge—oh, in the meantime I was scheduled to do a big performance at BAM [Brooklyn Academy of Music] in like '88. I ended up canceling it because it just got too complicated. Joe Melillo was really upset with me that I did this. I just decided I couldn't do it. It was interesting to finally learn how to say no when I realized I was over my head.

But anyway—so in '89 this big, huge retrospective opens in Los Angeles of my work.

JUDITH RICHARDS: A mid-career survey.

ROBERT LONGO: Yeah.

JUDITH RICHARDS: Did you think of it as a retrospective?

ROBERT LONGO: Yeah, because when I saw the show hanging up I realized I was dead, I could be dead now. I mean, this was, like, enough for one person's lifetime. I mean, I thought it was—you know, I keep reiterating that I always have great reservations about my work but there are some times I'm actually pretty impressed with it, you know. I thought the show looked pretty great. I mean, it was—

JUDITH RICHARDS: Sometimes artists talk about a negative impact of a retrospective.

ROBERT LONGO: Well, it does, it does, because I did it in LA and I planned it all out. You have to realize that it was just—it was from 19—, basically 1975 to 1988, which is like what, 15 years maybe, you know. We're not talking about really old stuff, you know. The stuff was pretty fresh. It wasn't that old to me, you know. I mean, but, you know, like, this piece was owned by the Tate in London and this had to come with a special courier. It was kind of a huge event.

Then I also did all my—all my—I did the performance that I wanted to do at BAM. I did it at Royce Hall [Los Angeles, CA]. It went really—it was really—

JUDITH RICHARDS: That's at UCLA?

ROBERT LONGO: Yeah. And it really went really great and I was very happy with it. It was called *Dream Jumbo* [1989].

JUDITH RICHARDS: As part of the retrospective?

ROBERT LONGO: Yeah. But now what started to happen is I had to do the show again in Chicago.

JUDITH RICHARDS: At the MCA [Museum of Contemporary Art]?

ROBERT LONGO: Like tour it. At the Contemporary Arts Museum, yeah. That's when I started to—that's when this whole thing became horrible. It just became I'm not going forward, I'm going backwards, you know. It was, like, all of a sudden became an albatross.

JUDITH RICHARDS: By the retrospective?

ROBERT LONGO: Yeah. It was just like this—I don't want to do this. I want to—at the same time that success of the show in 1988 of just the objects, of the—one, two three, four, five, six—sorry. One, two, three, four, five, six,

seven, of the seven pieces, one, two—four were sold but they were sold very slowly. Usually when I would do shows stuff would pretty much just sell, like, right away.

But the problem also was I was getting lost with my work. I was really getting lost. I also was still using drugs and stuff. The thing that's interesting about drugs is that you take drugs—people take drugs to get high. But then what happens if you take enough drugs you don't get high so much anymore as you just get to a normal point. So just to feel normal you have to get high. You don't get to that place where you used to get. That place—when I was younger and I used to get stoned, and high, and fucked up—a lot of this work comes from—it comes from the fact that when I was high I felt like the drinking and the drugging enabled me to see things that I couldn't necessarily see without.

But what was happening now is I was trying to get to that point and the more drugs I took I still didn't get there and I was just—I was just wasting away on it and I was making a lot of, a lot of shitty art and it was pretty awful.

JUDITH RICHARDS: Was there anyone who was telling you—

ROBERT LONGO: Told me, telling me I made shitty art?

JUDITH RICHARDS: Being frank with you?

ROBERT LONGO: Yeah, Helene and Metro was always pretty good at it, but at the same time there was, you know, there was this kind of negative reaction to my work that was starting to happen. I unfortunately had taken a really, kind of like—my persona out in the world I don't think I'm terribly proud of it now that I look back at it. I created the—I didn't know how to be an artist, you know. I became incredibly aggressive to other artists whose art I didn't like. Do you know what I mean? It was like—it's like, the kind of, Greeks like, you know? The idea if you didn't like their theater play you killed the person or something, you know what I mean. It's just—I became aggressive.

JUDITH RICHARDS: Do you think that was because of the drugs or just insecurity or—

ROBERT LONGO: Insecurity, the drugs, just competitiveness, just, you know, thinking that I was right and they were wrong.

JUDITH RICHARDS: Do you think it was something about the times, the art market in the 80s?

ROBERT LONGO: Sure, but it was—you know, it really did feel like at one point there was, like, you know, like, Metro should have leather jackets with their names on them and Mary Boone shouldn't. We should, like, have street gang warfare, or something like that. I mean, it was competitive for sure, but we were also incredibly immature, you know.

What happened is the generosity that existed between artists died once we started selling work. The rock clubs were replaced by the Odeon at restaurants. This is a depressing kind of thing. My friendship with Troy kind of stopped at one point because what was happening is that Cindy and I started to become, like, the stars at Metro. Troy and Jack, who were supposed to be also the stars or even the bigger stars, they weren't interested in. Mary Boone was trying to basically steal these two guys away. She succeeded in getting Troy to leave the gallery and to go to Metro Pictures—go to Mary Boone's.

Troy and I, kind of like, stopped talking to each other for a while. Maybe it was, like, a two year period. Then our girlfriends kind of got us back together. They both—because I was always bitching about how much I missed him. Finally our girlfriends got us back together again. We're still—

JUDITH RICHARDS: So that was Gretchen still?

ROBERT LONGO: Yeah. So we were—

JUDITH RICHARDS: And who was the girlfriend of Troy?

ROBERT LONGO: Ann Supernaut. We became very close and we still are. But meanwhile I had done a show in Paris. So out of this muck and mire—

JUDITH RICHARDS: After the retrospective?

ROBERT LONGO: Yeah. Well, the retrospective was still going on because then it went to Connecticut, it went to the Wadsworth Atheneum. So it went, like, from 1989 to, like, 1990, you know, or '91. It was just this ordeal, depressed and go—repeating the same shit over and over again, and the interviews, and blah, blah. It just became horribly detrimental. I'm making a lot of crappy art.

Then I stumble on this idea of—I read an article about how, the whole thing about how they're trying to outlaw the burning of the American flag and how they're trying to make flags out of, like, non-flammable things. At the same time I see this image in a Palestinian refugee camp of them flying a black flag over the refugee camp because it's just—it's basically, like, there's this incredible hopelessness that occurs.

So I start drawing—I take photographs of flags, I start taking photographs of flags, and I start drawing black flags. I thought it was bizarre that I was drawing them out of charcoal because here I was drawing them already burnt.

The whole political climate, you know, was still not great, although—what's interesting about, like, growing up under Jimmy Carter, I mean coming of age with Jimmy Carter where it's, kind of like, you're not quite sure if he was a conservative or a liberal and then you have Reagan come along, which was just like—it's as if—what's interesting about having Reagan elected is, like, it's as if someone drew a line in the sand and you had to decide which side you were on, which I think is always really great for art. When the political situation is clear—that's why in a weird way I think Bush was really great for art, you know. I think it took us awhile to realize how fucked he was, but I think it made it clearer. I think that—I don't know how great Obama will be for art now that—I don't know, but I'm sure glad he was elected that's for sure.

But—I don't know where I was going. So at the end of the 80s.

JUDITH RICHARDS: You started—

ROBERT LONGO: Black flags.

JUDITH RICHARDS: —the flags.

ROBERT LONGO: I had developed early on, like, in the end of the 70s, a really incredible relationship with a guy named Dominic Ranieri, Ranieri Sculpture Casting.

JUDITH RICHARDS: How do you spell that?

ROBERT LONGO: R-A—R-A-I-N-E-R-I.

JUDITH RICHARDS: Okay.

ROBERT LONGO: He cast my work and he was just the most wonderful man. They were—you know, he was an Italian from Southern Italy. We immediately had rapport. Anything I would bring to him he would take it with incredible enthusiasm. The more crazier—like that monster was, like, the most insane thing I had ever cast and he ever casted. But he cast the *Corporate Wars* [1982] piece for me. It's a big bronze, it's a big aluminum piece. It was just quite amazing what he did.

JUDITH RICHARDS: I'm going to change discs.

ROBERT LONGO: All right.

[END OF DISC 4.]

JUDITH RICHARDS: This is Judith Richards with Robert Longo, January 31, disc 2. Okay, Robert, I'm ready.

ROBERT LONGO: So—

JUDITH RICHARDS: So you started casting.

ROBERT LONGO: Right. I started doing—so with Dominic I wanted to make bronze black flags. So Dominic, we created this kind of crazy system of how to do them and they were basically one of a kind castings. We did a show at Metro. When we first showed the first couple of them just in the office and stuff, we had, like, a reserve of like maybe five or six or seven people who wanted to buy them and I had only made like one or two of them. This is like 1988.

JUDITH RICHARDS: Before the retrospective?

ROBERT LONGO: No, no, then—no, '89, '89, because they're not in the retrospective. Then I do a show of the flags and the art market crashes, starts to crash.

JUDITH RICHARDS: Yeah, '90.

ROBERT LONGO: Well, at the end of 80s, but at the very end, and nobody buys anything. I think we sold out of

like 12 or 13 pieces we sold like 4 of them. It was really quite crushing. Meanwhile I did a show of the—

JUDITH RICHARDS: But you knew that—did you know not to take it personally, that this was happening to everyone?

ROBERT LONGO: No, no. I took it personally. I took all of the shit that happened in the art world personally. It was always—I remember when my work, I realized my work wasn't selling as much as [Julian] Schnabel's was and it was like in the early-80s, and I remember telling Janelle that I was going to kill myself, you know, that way my work would be worth more money. Janelle said to me, "It won't work. You haven't been around long enough."

It was like, oh, fuck, I'm going to make you—I'm going to live and make it—I mean, I've been very fortunate to have the dealers that I've had for as long as I've had because they—it's like my family. We've had our fights and our arguments, and I thought about leaving them at one time, you know. I did drift away from them for a while, for a chunk of time. But, I mean, I trust them completely and they're very much like antique dealers.

JUDITH RICHARDS: How is that?

ROBERT LONGO: Because I think they're always on the verge of quitting. I think they have a hard—I mean, they love selling art and they love doing that stuff, but at the same time a lot of the bullshit that goes into it they don't like. I think they really love art and I think that in the '90s what emerged is a whole generation of people, artists and dealers, that they basically hated art. It was kind of a weird self-hate thing that was going on.

So I do a show with the black flags in France, in Paris, and it's quite successful there. I build this huge—

JUDITH RICHARDS: You're measuring success by sales?

ROBERT LONGO: Sales but also critical stuff, you know. There's this huge—I made this huge—and someone pays for me to make this huge black flag out of wood. It's, like, a big, huge freestanding piece. So it's all very exciting.

JUDITH RICHARDS: And how was that flag interpreted? How did you feel that it was critically understood and did that match what you felt was the true, the actual meaning?

ROBERT LONGO: You know what, at that point there were a few articles that were written, a few people I talked to that seemed to have gotten it, got what I was doing, but to be honest with you once the work was selling it meant that people were getting it. It was really kind of a mercenary mentality. But ultimately what things have become to me in my life is I don't really care about writing anymore, about what people write. I care about if I sell the work because if I sell the work it means I can make more work. Like selling work enables me to make more work. Basically my life is making my work and my family.

That's—it's like—the problem about—I went through a period of time where I actually read, I actually—I just started getting destroyed in the press. See the retrospective, while I was in Paris—I've always been on the borderline where people either like my work or they hate my work. That's okay with me. But I was in Paris at the time and Roberta Smith reviewed my show, my—I think it was the LA County show. She wrote this really horrible, scathing review of my show and it was just, like, destroyed it. The headline of the title of the review, it was in the Sunday Times, it was like "Robert Long Ago." It was really quite—it was really quite devastating. It was a body blow that took for years to recover from. I mean, it affected the collectors, it affected—it was—I basically kind of just got written off.

I mean, I really—there's kind of a really weird feeling that I have in the art world is that I think I have some place but I don't know really what. It's difficult to understand where I am. Sometimes I don't know, I can't say "I'm, like, he was in that generation." I'm like, Blah, blah, blah. I don't—I don't know how seriously I'm taken sometimes. Sometimes I feel like I'm being taken, like, as if I'm Leroy Neiman or something like that. It's a really weird feeling.

But the thing is is that what I've learned is to try really hard not to pay attention to that stuff and to just do my work, and to have, like, a core group of people that you kind of trust as your board of directors, who believe in what you're doing.

JUDITH RICHARDS: Including your dealers?

ROBERT LONGO: Yeah, and very much so. Helene in particular has been extraordinary. Whenever I get to some fucked up place I'll have her come over and she'll even have the balls to, like, say, "Well, why don't you try to do this?" Most of the times she's wrong but it's the fact that she says it, you know, is really great. I have a few friends that still are like that, which are really great.

But the thing was is the art world was falling apart at the end of the 80s in New York. My relationship was falling apart with Gretchen at the end of the 80s. I was at this—and I met a woman in Paris at the time who lived with

another guy, but the thing that became interesting to me is I really loved Paris. It seemed like a place to hide.

I saved my life without realizing it. See, because if I would have stayed here in the 90s, in the early-90s, it would have been horrible. So instead I moved to Paris for three-and-a-half or two-and-a-half years. If I would have stayed here I would have blamed everything on the gallery, you know. Instead I felt like I was being blamed for the 80s. I think there was, like, an article, like, on the cover of, like, *ArtNews*, like, what happened to the 80s and it was one of my drawings, or something like that. You know, it was like—

So I moved to Paris and—

JUDITH RICHARDS: There was no complication of leaving New York in terms of studios, or family, or anything?

ROBERT LONGO: Well, what I did was I used to—I sublet this place to Frederich.

JUDITH RICHARDS: Heiner Frederich?

ROBERT LONGO: No, Friedrich Petzel.

JUDITH RICHARDS: Oh.

ROBERT LONGO: The studio kept running and I would come back like, you know, once a month, or something like that. I developed—and I set up a studio in Europe.

JUDITH RICHARDS: In Paris?

ROBERT LONGO: In Paris. But the thing that was more interesting was that I had created this kind of myth of being, like, this incredibly insane drugged artist who made work that was way too big for European art dealers. By being in Europe I also could have—I had direct relationships with art dealers. I basically at that time also was really pissed off at Metro, so I just didn't deal with them anymore.

JUDITH RICHARDS: Do you think they didn't protect you against this criticism or that they could have done something?

ROBERT LONGO: You know what, they can't—I don't know what—you know, they have a lot of other artists to take care of too. I mean, you can't—their loyalty can only go—I have to be realistic about it. It can only go so far, you know. But I was a bit of an asshole to them, and so the fact that we still work together gives great credit to them.

So I went to Europe and I started creating relationships with dealers that didn't go through Metro. One of the relationships I started was with a gallery called Hans Mayer in Düsseldorf. This man helped create some of the biggest works that I had ever made while I was—you know, I had an idea. He says, "Let's do it." So I did this one installation with 30 wax crosses that were like, they were, weighed almost two tons each. They were 15 feet tall. It was like minimalism meets religion, you know. We did this big bronze flag. We did a lot of things together.

What started to happen is my economic support from my studio was dwindling and less and less work was selling. It was getting harder and harder. But I did a big retrospective of my work in Hamburg and it was organized by this German museum director named Thomas Kellein who had always been a real big, huge supporter of my work. The show was supposed to be tour from the Deichtorhallen [Hamburg, Germany], to the Reina Sofia to—and end up, go to Italy someplace and then it was supposed to end up in his museum, Kellein's museum, which is in Basel during the Basel Art Fair.

So as the show was getting set up in Hamburg he tells me that the Reina Sofia has dropped out of it without any real reason, he assumes it was budget, and that the Basel show had to be changed, the date, because the city had decided to do a universal sculpture show at all the museums during the Basel Art Fair. So my show had to be pushed back like two months.

Have you ever been to Basel? I mean, you only go to Basel when there's an art fair. I mean—so I said I don't want to do any of these shows. This is it. Let's just do this show and we're done.

JUDITH RICHARDS: Just do the show in Hamburg?

ROBERT LONGO: Yeah. And Thomas is really a wonderful, wonderful man. He said okay. Thomas came to see me, like, in 1986 and said he wanted to do a big show of mine in the museum, in his museum in Europe and I kind of laughed at him. I said, "You mean you want to do, like, the big work? Are you going to"—see, European dealers would always come to me and say, "We really would like to do a show of yours, but could you make the work smaller?"

I was like—I said, "You're joking. You want to really—you want really the work?"

He said, "Yeah, I want the biggest of all your work." We've become really, really good friends since then. But the thing is he was really understanding about it. So while I was in Hamburg, I was still living in Paris, I met my wife by accident.

JUDITH RICHARDS: What's her name?

ROBERT LONGO: Barbara Sukowa. I had actually seen her, like, in a movie a few days—

JUDITH RICHARDS: How do you spell her name?

ROBERT LONGO: S-U-K-O-W-A. I had actually seen her in a Lars von Trier movie called *Intropa* a few weeks before I had met her. But—

JUDITH RICHARDS: What's the name of the director, Lars?

ROBERT LONGO: Lars von Trier. I have no idea how to spell it.

JUDITH RICHARDS: Okay.

ROBERT LONGO: Anyway, the thing about—and when she was in the movie she had a different color hair. Anyway, I didn't even recognize her. These friends of mine wanted to introduce me to her but she didn't show up at the opening. I had met her the day I was taking down the show. It was something. I don't know what happened.

Anyway, I remember telling one of my friends that I was working with, one of my close friends—he kind of is, like, my master assistant. Whenever I do big shows I call him up and he comes and does them, or something like that. He works for, like, all the big auction houses, and things like that now. I said, "I think I'm going to marry that woman," just jokingly.

Anyway, it turns out—so we talk a little bit and she's on her way with her two children, her two sons, to Los Angeles. I said, "Well, I'm going to Los Angeles too." I'm on my way to Los Angeles because this guy named Joel Silver, the guy who's the producer of all the big, kind of like—like, *Lethal Weapon,* and things like that, he's—we've met and he likes my work and he knows I want to do movies. So he said okay, I'm going to let you direct one of these episodes of this cable TV series he has, *Tales of the Crypt*. He said, "Why don't you come to LA and do it?"

So I said, "Okay, great." So Barbara and I were both going to LA at the same time. It just so turned out that a guy from Salzburg named Gerard Mortier who was now the new director of the festival wanted to meet—

JUDITH RICHARDS: Salzburg Music Festival?

ROBERT LONGO: Yeah, wanted to meet me because he knew I had done these big performances, and stuff like that. He wanted to meet me and asked me if I would be interested in working in Salzburg. So on the way—it turns out that Gerard is an old friend of Barbara's. So on my way to meet Barbara I met Gerard in Chicago. Then when I got to LA I met Barbara.

I mean, I never thought about having kids before. Actually kids totally terrified me. Barbara had these two children, she was not married, and one was 12 or so, 13, and the other one was like 3. Hans was 12 and Victor was—Hans was 12 and Victor was like 3 or 4.

Anyway, it was an interesting development. She was highly suspicious of me and I didn't—it wasn't an immediate reaction I thought I would have a woman. But anyway, we ended—things ended up working out. I mean, she wanted—she moved to New York, we moved into together.

JUDITH RICHARDS: How long did you stay?

ROBERT LONGO: Oh, the thing is—

JUDITH RICHARDS: Did you actually stay in LA or you just took a trip to LA?

ROBERT LONGO: We lived in LA for—we lived in LA for like, I was in LA for, like, two-and-a-half months doing this film.

JUDITH RICHARDS: And you did direct that?

ROBERT LONGO: Yeah, I directed this. She was in LA with her family because she—her agents were out there. My wife is, like,—my wife at the peak of her career was like Kate Blanchett is now. She won, like, the best actress at the Cannes Film Festival for Rosa Luxemburg [*Die Beduld der Rosa Luxemburg*, 1986]. She's won all these awards for movies that she's done with Fassbinder. She's one of the main Fassbinder—this is the irony, that she's a Fassbinder actress. She was in a horrible movie called *The Sicilian* [1987], a movie with—

Anyway—but she's won Cannes, Venice, Berlin. I mean, we have all these trophies that she uses, like, as doorstops, and things like that. It's really—she's the most modest, humble person who takes all that shit. You know, she doesn't care—like, I care about what people say. She doesn't care anything about it. It's like we're really complete opposites.

Anyway, we started living together and I wanted to move back to New York because Robert Wilson had become a friend of mine inadvertently. I had always loved his work. We would meet all the time in Europe. People would invite me to a dinner and he would be there, because it was—the thing that was always great about Paris is that I wasn't hanging around really French people, I was hanging around with expatriates.

The thing that I became—I had always thought that my—and Kellein said this to me. He always thought that my work was too American for America. The irony is that when I went to Europe it became even more American because I'm sitting in my studio in Paris and I realize I'm drinking Coke, I'm reading the Herald Tribune, I'm listening to Jimmy Hendrix. It was just like, Aren't I in Paris? You know, I should be listening to like, I don't know, Maurice Chevalier or something, having a beret on or something.

I always found all the French artists, I found them all so lazy fucks. They were all in the cafes for lunch. I mean, Paris was great, great for me, because it was great because it was like—it was like a sex party in Paris to a certain extent. I kind of worked out a lot of my—I kind of sowed a lot of my oats and got over a lot of things while I was there. But the thing is that—and also Jon Kessler was in Paris with his wife and kids—well, his wife. We became really good friends because we played basketball together in Paris. George Condo was there, and Rhys Chatham was there, an old friend of mine who I had played in a band with.

So we—

JUDITH RICHARDS: What neighborhood did you live in?

ROBERT LONGO: I lived near the—actually the Marais. I lived actually near the Pompidou. But—

JUDITH RICHARDS: At some point go back to Salzburg because I think you said something—

ROBERT LONGO: Oh, yeah, I will, I will. So Wilson we would get—you know, we would get high, we would get drunk together, and he would say, "Go back." He would say, "You should go back to, go back to New York." He said, "Don't do what I did." Because all his support primarily is in Europe. He says, "Go back. You should go back. You're young enough to go back."

Then I remember meeting Richard Serra at one of the openings and he leaned over to me and he says, "Are you still making big art?"

It was like, "Yeah, I'm trying, I'm trying."

He said, "Good."

So I remember—I finally realized I really wanted to go back to New York, so I wanted to go back to New York. So I was planning to go back to New York and Barbara had entertained the idea of taking a year in New York with her kids. So we ended up moving in together.

JUDITH RICHARDS: Because she was living in Paris?

ROBERT LONGO: She lived in Hamburg, she lived in Hamburg. I met her in Hamburg. So—

JUDITH RICHARDS: Were you still—did you have a relationship while you were in Paris and she's in Hamburg?

ROBERT LONGO: Yeah, yeah. Then—so we ended up living together in New York and shortly after that we got married. I adopted the two kids and then shortly after that we had our third kid.

So what was interesting having kids was that those antennas that I had I realized had gotten kind of dull as to what was going on in the world. I realized that kids were like an amplifier for those antennas and that through them, I could use them to see what was going on in the world as well. I was still struggling with the work. I wasn't sure what I was doing. My oldest, the oldest kid Hans had—we both loved playing basketball. That's what bound—actually that's how Barbara and I actually got close because her oldest son and I would play basketball

together all the time in LA, you know. I really liked him and it was a strange connection. That's how Barbara and I ended up connecting up.

JUDITH RICHARDS: The kids spoke English?

ROBERT LONGO: Yeah, yeah.

JUDITH RICHARDS: It was their second language and German was their first?

ROBERT LONGO: Yeah, yeah, they both—they both were born in Germany. The youngest one didn't speak English until he moved here and that was an incredible experience to watch him learn how to speak English.

So he would—we were playing basketball. We used to go together to play basketball in the cages on West 4th Street, but that day he went by himself. He was like maybe 14, I don't know, something like that. He came back and he started telling me this incredible story about how this kid pulled out a gun because there was a fight. I realized that he was, like, really excited about it and it was something really—I just went, I can't believe we're living in the city where people, kids have guns.

So I threw myself into this whole research about guns. This group, body of work subsequently came out of it called *Body Hammers* [1993], which were these drawings of guns done exactly the same way I had done the *Men in the Cities* drawings.

JUDITH RICHARDS: They're called *Body*- what?

ROBERT LONGO: *Body Hammers*. I stole the title from this Japanese movie called *Body Hammer* [1992]. It seemed like the appropriate title. But I did the drawings exactly the same way that I did the *Men in the Cities*. It's the same paper. I mean, it's ironic that they ended up becoming, like, the equivalent—like, you could put a gun drawing over here facing a *Men in the Cities* drawing. It was like—

JUDITH RICHARDS: Did Diane Shea also do that?

ROBERT LONGO: Yeah, she was working with me on those. And I also made a sculpture, a bullet ball [*Death Star*, 1993]. It was maybe about four feet in diameter. It was made out of .38 caliber bullets that were the average bullet used that year. I did all this research with the FBI. It had 18,964 bullets and it was, like, a huge disco ball of just bullets. It hung from these I-beams.

So I did this show at Metro of the guns and again Peter, Peter Schjeldahl always hate my art, so he always trashed the show with some more trashy reviews. I think we sold, like, two or three drawings out of it. The Modern put a reserve on one of the guns.

JUDITH RICHARDS: Who was the curator who was behind that, do you know?

ROBERT LONGO: I don't know. I don't know. But the thing was is they took it up to the Modern for the board of directors to see it and Agnes Gund—the guy had just shot all those people on the Long Island Railroad.

JUDITH RICHARDS: Oh, yeah, '93.

ROBERT LONGO: Yeah, exactly.

JUDITH RICHARDS: Because that was just in the news recently, that woman who—

ROBERT LONGO: She didn't want—

JUDITH RICHARDS: —Congress—

ROBERT LONGO: She didn't like my work and she didn't want the gun. So the gun was sent back and they didn't buy the piece. I thought that was really funny that Agnes Gund—. The thing was it was really clear that, you know, I was not being judgmental with these images. I was basically presenting these images to you. I wasn't glorifying them I don't think. I was just presenting them to you. It became clear to me that, you know, my job was to reach my hands into, like, the current culture and just rip things out and put them in front of you.

So that was pretty devastating. We started struggling for money for a while. Metro wasn't selling anything. Then this goofy project that I had been trying to do for a long, long time was floating around. Oh, and then I did these crosses with Hans, I did these was crosses with Hans.

JUDITH RICHARDS: Did you ever connect that with Catholicism and—

ROBERT LONGO: Yeah, yeah. It was—yeah, well, it was, like, the—it was, like, the revenge of religion. It was like—the title of the piece was called *When Heaven and Hell Change Places* [1992]. It was, like, crosses that could fall and kill you basically. I mean, it was, like, expressionistic minimalism or something. Because when they're standing there these crosses kind of glow because they're translucent, they're wax. But they—and they stand—

JUDITH RICHARDS: Are they permanently installed somewhere?

ROBERT LONGO: No, no. A lot of them actually got, ended up being destroyed because of the shipping. The floor had to be steel plate to hold the mountings. So when you're walking in the gallery it was, like, you were walking on these steel plates. And the way the light hits the crosses they start to glow, the edges glow. They were—the last place they were installed actually was Venice Biennale [1997].

But the thing is they traveled in these steel cases and there was a shipping strike in Venice. So they just took them and threw the crates off the boat. So when we opened them up at the Venice to install them—

JUDITH RICHARDS: The wax is—

ROBERT LONGO: —the wax is all cracked.

JUDITH RICHARDS: —fragile to begin with.

ROBERT LONGO: They were all cracked. So we tried to put them back together again, and for the opening it was okay, they were kind of together for the opening, but the second day huge chunks started to fall off. So we had to put the steel boxes back on them, which actually were kind of beautiful. So that was a whole—

JUDITH RICHARDS: Were they caskets?

ROBERT LONGO: Yeah. It ended up looking like caskets. So it was interesting. You had guns, flags, crosses, which kind of made, like, this one group of work, which ended up being a museum show in Germany at the Museum in Kassel.

So anyway, I ended up—this project that I had been thinking about doing for a while called *Johnny Mnemonic* [1992] comes up and I do—

JUDITH RICHARDS: Called what?

ROBERT LONGO: *Johnny Mnemonic*, which is a film. It happens through a guy I met in France, Stefan Ehrenberg at a bar one night, who happens—

JUDITH RICHARDS: Stefan?

ROBERT LONGO: Ehrenberg, who happens to own a piece of mine. He was a big fan of my work. He's in the film business and he starts to help me get the movie made. *Johnny Mnemonic* was a movie that was based off of a man who I become friends with, William Gibson, who wrote *Neuromancer* and he's the man who kind of created cyberspace and cyber punk. We had written this idea for kind of a low budget black and white, kind of gritty science fiction movie based off of this short story that he wrote, "Johnny Mnemonic." I wanted it to be, like, kind of a modern version of, like, the Godard's *Alphaville* [1965], or something like that, but we couldn't get a million dollars or, you know, two million dollars.

So what ends up happening is that Stefan gets involved in it and he gets all these other people involved in it. Through a series of bizarre relationships and different things in—I had to go back and forth to California a lot. We start to make this movie, *Johnny Mnemonic*. I mean, we were going to shoot it in Toronto.

So my family moves to Toronto [Canada]—

JUDITH RICHARDS: Because shooting it would involve how many months of work?

ROBERT LONGO: Oh, like four or five months. But the course of making a feature film it takes years. It's like—it was like—it seemed like from 1993 to when I finished it in '96.

JUDITH RICHARDS: So your family moved to Toronto, the kids were—

ROBERT LONGO: The kids and everything, yeah.

JUDITH RICHARDS: You took them out of school?

ROBERT LONGO: Yeah, we moved to Toronto. My youngest son was born in Toronto, so he's Canadian-German-

American. We shot the movie there. But the thing was that making the movie with other people's money, particularly studio money, it was really a nightmare. It was really—I mean, the idea that Art is a boy's name really applies to these people. I mean, they just—in Hollywood you meet a lot of people that can say no and very few people can say yes, the money people. It was just really a horribly difficult experience and torturous. I didn't get to make the movie I wanted to make. I made a movie that's maybe like 60 percent of what I wanted to make.

There's too many stories involved in it. Keanu [Reeves] got involved in the movie as a favor for me. It's just, you know, elaborate. The idea that if you go to the store and buy a can of red paint and you come home and you paid $5 and when you come home and you open it and it's not the right color, just imagine that multiplied by $26 million. It's like—

JUDITH RICHARDS: I've talked to many other people who have tried to make independent film.

ROBERT LONGO: Well, this wasn't an independent film. This was through Columbia and Tristar. The movie went from like $1-1/2 million, $1 million to like a $26 million movie. Then Keanu becomes successful because of his movie *Speed* [1994] and Tristar's film, their summer movie falls apart, *Mary Reilly* [1996] with—it's a total mess. My movie was supposed to be this kind of quirky little movie that comes out during the, kind of like that weird zone of, like, now, like February. Instead all of a sudden my movie now becomes, like, a summer movie. They try to sell my movie as, like, this big action blockbuster thing and it—it was—and they keep on trying to change the movie and it was just fucking torturous. It was just horrible. It was one of the more depressing experiences.

Meanwhile, you know, I'm going home at night and Barbara is like, you know, going through post-partum depression a little bit and I'm having to take care of the baby. I'm working nights, so I take care of the baby in the morning a little bit. But it was pretty difficult.

So then the movie gets taken to LA to get re-edited. So I have to move out to LA and leave the family at home. I'm out in LA dealing with these incredibly stupid people. It was just horrible. I had to make a decision do I quit—but, see, the whole thing is, the plan was by the people who were making the movie, they were going to try to fire me in the very beginning. But anyway, it was just a horrible experience ultimately.

JUDITH RICHARDS: Did your name remain on the movie?

ROBERT LONGO: Yeah, yeah. I kept on hoping and fantasizing that somehow magically it would turn into a good movie, but it's okay. I mean, it's a bit of a cult classic. It's made—for a $26 million movie it's made, I think it has made something like, you know, over, like, $200 million. So—but that's over now. The thing about movies is that movies have to make their money immediately. It's not over a period of time. They have to pay people back.

The thing that's also interesting is that you learn a horrible lesson about how movies, bad movies are made. We were fighting over the script until the very—until I said—even after I started shooting because the movie was money pregnant. That means the money was locked into place and if you didn't start shooting on that day you lost the money. So it was hard.

So we were still fighting over the script while I was shooting the movie. It was just ridiculous. I didn't know where I was going with the movie. I mean, Keanu and I were, like, completely flipping out because we didn't—what's the character arc? You know, what do you do? At the same time there was kind of a general feeling of conspiracy that because I was an artist and I wasn't a real filmmaker that people weren't really incredibly supportive of me doing this film.

I had Michael Chapman, do you know who he is? He did like—he did all the—he did *Raging Bull* [1980] and all those things. He had agreed—he wanted to do my movie. He knew my work and he was really excited about doing my movie. But I couldn't have him be my DP [Director of Photography] because he wasn't Canadian. See when you shoot in Canada you have to have a certain amount of Canadians. So the DP I had was, his major film credit was *Weekend at Bernie's* [1989]. I mean, it was—I just—it was like—it was a complete nightmare.

So when we came back from that film it was a bit—we finally got—after you do all that stuff it was a bit disastrous. I came back to New York and I was completely lost. We were struggling for money now. Hans Mayer said, "Look, you need money I have an idea. Would you"—would I consider drawing portraits of people.

I was like, "Oh, no." So I said, "Okay, I'll only do women, you know."

He said, "Okay. I'll find someone."

So the first couple of women were really nice and I had to shoot, like, 10 or 15 rolls of film to find one picture. I wanted them to be like *Men in the City*-ish kind of looking, you know. But it got more and more harder and, you know, they didn't like—and then they didn't like their portraits. I did seven, a total of seven. The last one was

just absolutely horrendous.

My wife said to me, she said to me, "Well, you know"—this was kind of—the portraits happened, kind of like, while we were finishing up *Johnny Mnemonic*. So *Johnny Mnemonic* finally finishes and she says to me, "Why don't you just go back to the studio, get rid of all the assistants, get rid of everything, and just go back and do what you do and just go draw, just forget everything, you know."

So what I did was I decided I was going to go back to zero and where zero was was appropriation, was where I started my work, by looking at images in the world. I decided what I was going to do was I was going to do this project. I was going to draw a drawing a day. The other thing is I didn't want to travel anymore. I had this young kid that was just—he was like a year-and-a-half old now, not quite a year. I didn't want to travel anymore, I didn't want to do anything. I'm done. So I have to do a drawing a day.

When I was in Buffalo I worked briefly for Hollis Frampton who made that film called *Magellan*, a 24 hour film. I thought, well, that's what I'm going to call this project, *Magellan*. I'm going to do a drawing a day based upon an image that I find in the world, like in the phantom empire of images. I thought that—and this is because my wife has had an incredible influence on me. She's European, she's German, she comes from kind of a very humble, Protestant background. Her work is all about trying to understand Germans and how Germans became what they became and what happened to them after the war. She still gets incredibly emotional about, when she talks about, you know, trying to understand the Holocaust, and things like that, because Germany has this incredible history. I've learned a lot obviously about Germany, which is kind of funny.

But thing is by going back to zero—actually every day, by myself, I made a drawing of some image that I found. I thought that this was—my wife made me so aware of how anesthetized I had become by images that I realized that somehow I wanted to make the world of images become accountable. The fact that these, that images, the amount of images that you see in a course of day enter you, you know, quietly, painlessly, you have no really recollection or understanding of the consequences of these images. So I wanted to make one image a day become accountable. I wanted it to become accountable to me.

So I would pick an image a day. So it happened to be a leap year, so it was 366 drawings. I would draw, you know, the kid would be in a carriage next to me while I was drawing. I drew at the beach house, I drew here, I drew at home. I showed the first—the viewing of it was at Metro. We had had a rocky start, you know, and we kind of got back together and I showed it at Metro.

JUDITH RICHARDS: How big was the show?

ROBERT LONGO: Well, each drawing was about that big, about 20 by—

JUDITH RICHARDS: 18 by 24?

ROBERT LONGO: No, framed, and stuff like that, they probably became like 20 by 30 [inches], or something like that. So it was literally floor to ceiling. It was like, at Metro it was like—if you go onto—there's a website called robertlongo.com and you will see, you can see it, you can see it.

So at Metro we did the show and I think we sold, like, three of them, my drawings. No review, nothing. I really just like—it was just fucking depressing as shit. I was just, you know, what am I going to do. I don't want—I don't want to teach, I don't—you know, and again Hans come into the picture. Hans has always been great about keeping me alive. He finds someone to buy 25 and another person to buy another 25. Then he finds somebody to buy 15.

Then we do—

JUDITH RICHARDS: These are pencil and charcoal also?

ROBERT LONGO: They were not. They were a new way of work. They were a way that I used to work when I was a kid. They're vellum and on the vellum it's magic marker with black magic point mark, and then on top of the permanent marker is charcoal, and then it's erased.

This curator, this really wonderful curator, Gertz Adriani from a place called Tübingen in Germany where these really important shows by Warhol, and Kiefer, and Richter had happened, he wants to do a museum show of the whole thing in Tubingen. It then goes from Tubingen and then Kellein takes it to Bielefeld [Germany], his museum [Kunsthalle], and then it goes to the Kunsthal in Rotterdam. They do a book and slowly, bits by bits, we sell parts of it. This is like '97, or something like that, '98.

Meanwhile while that's touring, and stuff like that, I start working with a Belgian dealer who's really an interesting guy named Hedwig Van Impe. He has a gallery called Cotthem Gallery [Gallery Cotthem]. I do—

JUDITH RICHARDS: You didn't make that name up?

ROBERT LONGO: What?

JUDITH RICHARDS: Hedwig?

ROBERT LONGO: I do a series of these gigantic photographs of superhero toys that my kids have. He actually sells them all and that's some of the sculptures that were made. In fact I have superhero in a block of resin. But they don't—but somehow those photographs don't translate into Germany or any other place. America didn't—they only seem to be there. It's like a body of work that doesn't really exist for me. People just won't accept me making photographs.

Anyway, so now we're in—so I start working on a body of work that somehow combines [inaudible] and the Civil War. So I start looking at all that stuff and doing—I developed this whole body of work about the Civil War for about a year, plans, and things like that.

Meanwhile I'm living off of the money that's coming from the *Magellan* things selling and some other things. You know, the other embarrassing thing is that occasionally I would have to take a *Men in the Cities* drawing and that would, it sold, and somehow that would pay for things.

I also do a show with this Italian art dealer who becomes really incredibly important, Emilio Mazzoli [Galleria Mazzoli], and he buys a ton of work of mine out of storage for a show. He does this incredible book. He just—

JUDITH RICHARDS: Storage that Metro Pictures was maintaining?

ROBERT LONGO: No, that I had—again this is not through Metro Pictures. It was through a really great supporter of mine, Richard Milazzo. He was like the curator. That was—he took a bunch of work that hadn't sold, you know, and that was some really great work.

JUDITH RICHARDS: So he curated the show for Emilio?

ROBERT LONGO: Yeah, and Emilio bought all the work before the show even opened, which was really—so that was another chunk of money. So—and in the meantime about a year before, like in 1990, this French, totally clichéd French guy, a friend of mine from Paris, Harry Jenkavici, had dropped—

JUDITH RICHARDS: Harry?

ROBERT LONGO: Jenkavici. Had dropped off a book at my studio and he said, "I think you'll find this interesting," because I had been talking about like this idea about—I had been talking about Freud and Einstein being, like, these bookends of Western culture, you know. They always seemed to represent somehow this, like—somehow contained—they were, like, the barriers of containment, or something like that. They just seemed like huge influences. Somehow I wanted to figure out how to work with that somehow.

He gives me the book, a book and it's a book of photographs taken by Thomas Engleman I believe his name is. It's at Freud's apartment a few days before Freud leaves because of the Nazis. This book sits on my desk for, like, two years and I look at it—and it's while I'm involved in this Civil War thing and one day I just start making a charcoal study of one of the doors in Freud's apartment, with the peephole and the nameplate. Then I start working on some studies and some ideas.

I start realizing that these photographs remind me a lot of when I was kid my father had a heart condition and we had to go to this doctor who was a boyhood friend of my Uncle Al's who was in the Bronx. We were living in Long Island. He was this really wonderful, magical doctor apparently. So twice, once a month, or something like that, we had to go to the Bronx, meet my father coming from New York City, and wait for my father to go to the doctor's and then go home. I had to sit in the waiting room, but it was this very old office, like, old leather chairs. It had—you had to walk outside and down another hallway to go to the bathroom.

I would go explore this whole place. Somehow this photograph of Freud's apartment and his office reminded me a great deal of this apartment when I was a kid. I also was struck by just the absence in these pictures because there was nobody in these pictures. I kept on thinking this is so incredibly insane. Here's this place where this man is trying to understand the great deep, dark secrets of our mind while the Nazis are, like, outside on the street marching up and down. Like his front door had like, had a swastika banner hanging on it.

So I started putzing around with that, but then I remember I had like—I had Jon Kessler and Gary Simmons would come over to the studio to look at this big Civil War body of work I'm working on and on the wall were hanging some of the Freud studies. I think Gary said, "What's that," after he looked at all the Civil War stuff.

I said, "Oh, this is the thing I'm just putzing around with."

He says, "I think you should do that." Because again you look for—you look for someone to give you help and direction and it was like, Oh.

To make a long story short about a month later I packed up a year's worth of work in a box, plans, and ideas, and everything and put it away, and put all my energy into the Freud drawings.

Now the thing that was interesting and what started happening with the Civil War stuff is I had just started to teach my kid, he was like 14 at the time, my middle kid, how to surf. I hadn't surfed in a long time. We went and got my old surfboard and I was teaching him how to surf. There I was in the water a lot with my kid, pushing him on the surfboard, looking at the waves. All of a sudden some weird connection was between the Civil War images and the waves. I don't—

Anyway, so one January I remember—I mentioned before January seems to be, like, this point of, like, complete transition. We had some paper in the studio and I opened up this jar of charcoal that I had never, powdered charcoal that I never used before, and I started drawing this big drawing of a wave. So none of the assistants were around, nobody was around, and for about a week-and-a-half I just basically locked myself up and worked on this drawing of this big wave. It was like—it was like—it was really pretty good.

JUDITH RICHARDS: Was that after you had had the show of the Freud drawings?

ROBERT LONGO: No, no, no, the Freud drawings were just starting.

JUDITH RICHARDS: Oh, okay.

ROBERT LONGO: They hadn't started—I was just about to go into production with them. And what happened was is that the Freud drawings and the wave drawings pretty much happened at the same time. It seemed like for every Freud drawing I made I had to do a wave drawing. They seemed to be the yin and yang. The more and more I thought about it the more and more the connections become cleared because it was, like, this very structured drawings for Freud. The waves are much more organic, you know. Freud was about the power, you know, the power of the Nazis. This was about power of nature. The idea of the doors of the unconscious versus like, you know, the sexuality of the waves, the kind of motherness of it.

There were all these incredible connections that were happening. The technique, the charcoal technique and the kind of chiaroscuro atmosphere of it came from the *Magellan* drawings. It was much different than everything else that I had done before that. The thing that also struck me that was really quite profound was that each wave that I was taking the photographs, either I was taking them in the water or I was actually taking them out of surf magazines, and things like that. Certain places had very clear personalities to waves. The wave looked the same whether it was a big wave at that place or a small wave. If the wind and weather made it big or—it had a very specific personality.

The thing that became really quite fascinating was the more research I did into the waves is—I realized that the shape of the wave and the size of the wave is determined by what—not so much by the weather and the waves and stuff, it's dependent upon what's deep underneath it, the shoal, how quickly it gets shallow. So the personality of the wave is determined by what is deep underneath it. What does this sound like? Psychoanalysis. It was, like, really weird. The connection became quite profound.

The waves, I remember as a kid—I mean, with my youngest son in the water he couldn't understand waves. I remember there was, like, a ball floating in the water and I remember saying watch this. So I put the ball in the water and a wave came, and the wave came and the ball stayed in the same place. It's very difficult trying to convey to your child that this was, like, a communicated agitation. It's basically a spirit that's moving through the water. You know, you see the water moving but it's really not moving. It's, like, the ball is still in the same place but the waves, the wave comes but the water doesn't move, you know.

Anyway, so the connection became really quite profound. The first Freud show that I did at Metro I think we sold two pieces, one to a museum and one to a European collector. When I showed them in Europe the Europeans got it and they were just selling like hotcakes. The reviews and the critics, and it was really great, but in Europe they got it. In America they didn't get it.

This place called Haus—it's at Kunstahl in Krefeld [Krefelder Kunstmuseen] where they have two Meis van der Rohe buildings that he had designed called Haus Lange and Haus Esters [Museen Haus Lange und Haus Esters], and so they asked me to do the Freud drawings in both the houses, which was really cool because the drawings were of Freud's house at the same time that these buildings were basically built. So you had this kind of modern buildings with these drawings of this kind of old Viennese apartment building.

Then the Albertina [Museum] in Vienna—then—there's this really old time German art critic who I had met a couple of times who developed this strange fondness for my work. I never—I mean, he was, like, the Warhol

scholar and the big Picasso scholar. He just liked my work. I thought maybe he's just an old guy who's crazy or something. But he writes this incredible article about the Freud drawings in the German newspaper, the—I don't remember which. Anyway, there was this huge article about the Freud drawings and calling them, like, history pages and comparing them to, like, Richter's *October*, you know, the Baader-Meinhof things and all this.

The thing was he actually got it. See, the—it's, like, I wanted to somehow objectify absence. I wanted it to be like—I wanted you to feel things missing, I wanted you to feel that there was shit going on outside. I wanted you to have an unsettlingness in the image that had—there was nothing unsettling about it. It was totally calm. And also there was this disruption of scale that was really important to me, that things that were on his desk became really, really big, you know. I just wanted to—and I also just wanted his presence to be there. There was all these kinds of little perversions that I did, like, I changed his wallpaper to, like, actually like—you would have to look really closely. It was, kind of like, penises and pussies in the wall I think. I did, like, little weird stupid things.

JUDITH RICHARDS: Before the Gober wallpaper?

ROBERT LONGO: Yeah, this is—the Gober wallpaper I think happened before that. But this is not—you would have to look really closely to see it. The back of his chair, I put, like, images onto the back of his chair, like a—I just got to mess around with it to load these things kind of subliminally, but the thing that was—so that was happening and I did it and I showed the waves in New York. I think we showed, like,—we sold, like,—and the Freud show got trashed in New York. Then the wave show I think got kind of an okay review, but trashed too or something. I think we sold, like, two or three of them. Keanu bought, like, the best one. He bought it when nobody bought anything. He went in and he bought it. It was just, like—it was, like, a lifesaver.

[END OF DISC 5.]

ROBERT LONGO: But then the waves started to catch on. So now we're around 2000. The waves started looking more and more like smoke, and fire, and stuff like that, and 9/11 happens. I can't get to the studio. I get into the studio and I start using pictures from 9/11, the smoke and stuff to add into the drawings of the waves, and stuff like that. Helene sends me a picture of the World Trade Centers falling down with the smoke. She said this may be helpful to you.

So what it is is it's the towers collapsing and then in the bottom of the frame it's the smoke of the towers collapsing, all right, like that. But when it—right, like that. So that's how it comes out, right. But when it comes out of the computer it comes out like this. What does it look like? An atomic bomb. It was like, Oh, whoa, whoa. It freaked me out completely because I kept on thinking about George Bush and how George Bush was like—my children have to live with this man that may actually use one of these.

So again it was somebody—it was somebody pointing a direction to go. So I got all those *Life* magazines and I took them home and I was looking at them. I was trying to remember all that fear and all that shit. My youngest son walks by and I say, "What do you think this is?"

And he says, "Oh, it's a hurricane or a tornado." The connection of, like, the waves were power, were nature's power, the bombs were man trying to become nature. Do you know, trying to become as powerful as nature. It was just—I had no choice. I had to do the bombs. So the bombs came after the waves. But what had happened around the same time is—it's always very confusing as to what give one's wife as a Valentine's gift or a birthday gift. I had had this stupid picture of a rose laying around my desk for months that I liked. So what I did was I dyed a piece of paper with some red lumma dye that I had laying around and I drew this rose on it for her for Valentine's Day. It's, like, a 60 by 60 inch rose. When I was done with it it was, like, this is not bad, this is not bad.

JUDITH RICHARDS: You won't give it as a gift.

ROBERT LONGO: No, I gave it to her as a gift, but the thing was is that it was hanging on the wall next to the bomb and the bomb was hanging next to the wave. It was all of a sudden three things that were at the moment of what they were supposed to be. A rose is supposed to bloom, a bomb is supposed to explode, a wave is supposed to crash. It was like—the view that work can actually participate in the making of work, can actually contribute to you making work is actually profound. So this connection became really insane to me.

So the first bomb show I did was in Spain and I showed them with the roses. The title of the show was called *Lust of the Eye* [2002]. It came from this book I read by this man, I can't remember, I think it's called *The Force that Makes Us Stronger*. It's the—he was a war correspondent who became really addicted to going and looking at stuff and seeing horrible shit. Apparently in the Bible there was this passage that warns us of the lust of the eye, of being—liking seeing horrible stuff, do you know what I mean. So that was the title of that show.

But then when I showed the drawings in Metro, the bomb drawings at Metro, I didn't want to do the roses because it seemed a little too clever. So what I did was—and I showed them at Metro. The front room—when you

walk into the front room—the waves had kind of now come to an end. When you walked into the front room—Jack had died recently. On the left-hand side of the wall was a drawing of a rocket being shot off, which was, kind of like, my homage to Jack. Then on the other wall was a drawing of Einstein's desk the day that he died, his office. But what I had done with Einstein's office, I had put—Einstein's office and Oppenheim's [sic] [J. Robert Oppenheimer] office in Princeton were in the same floor. They both had the same offices except at either end. They had big—they both were, like, these little *cupolas*, you know.

So I took Einstein's—I took Oppenheimer's chair, which was bigger than Einstein's, and I changed some of the stuff on the desk. I compressed the space a little bit weirdly. Then behind the desk was a blackboard and the blackboard behind the desk was divided in half. I later found out—I will explain this later—but this was Einstein trying to connect the theory of relativity with quantum physics.

So I thought when I—do you ever get, like, a letter in the mail that you don't want to really open and if you figure maybe if I smoke a cigarette or I drink a cup of coffee that while I hold that letter there in my hands it will actually change? You know, like, the message inside the letter will actually change before I open it, you know what I mean. That somehow mystically something will happen.

So I changed the equations on the blackboard. I used—Victor was taking, like, advanced algebra, or something like that. So I started taking Victor's equations and plugging them into the stuff that was written on the blackboard, you know, just fucking up what he was trying to do. But the drawing was done to look like a Freud drawing. I wanted to make reference to my own work in a sense.

Then next to this drawing was a drawing of the corduroy of waves, you know, just—like if you were up on a hill and you looked out over the ocean and you just saw the big ripples of the waves. That to me—when I was growing up as a kid there was a movie, not *Psycho*, but there was a movie that truly frightened me that I only saw recently. It was a movie called *On the Beach* [1959]. Do you remember this movie? I knew that it was about atomic war and the end of the world and just to—just to hear that word on the beach still freaked me out.

So this drawing to me was, like, the drawing of the image of*On the Beach*, like here I am looking out at the end of the world, this ripple of waves. Then in the back room at Metro were the bombs. The bombs—you know, when you make work, again that personal social thing comes into play. You also like—all the compositional elements and the aesthetic crap and all this technical shit always bores me to talk about it, but the pictures are clearly constructed with vectors, and coordinates, and relationships, which is, like, my private shit and I always find it boring when I hear people talk about it.

But the art machines and the way that they function as visual things, but what was interesting is that each bomb had a personality that I used, I took off as a theme. Like this one bomb that to me looked very much like Goya's *The Colossus*. Do you know that painting?

JUDITH RICHARDS: Uh-huh. [Affirmative.]

ROBERT LONGO: Which now I heard is now officially not Goya but—

Another bomb was very much life a film noire, like, you were looking through blinds. The thing was is that all these images that I take from the world that I use they get beautified, or they get altered, or they get amplified. They're not—I'm not copying images. I'm using them as a place to take off from.

I mean, there was a Russian bomb that I got that it was so dirty and bizarre looking. It looked like it had been blown up, like, in a coffee can or something compared to, like, the American bombs that were, like, named after, like, movie stars, like [Betty] Grable, or [Marilyn] Monroe. I mean, they started looking like the Venus of Villendorf or something. I mean, it was incredible.

The bombs actually started to have some kind of success, which was great. So I'm now invited that summer to the 150th anniversary of the Theory of Relativity of Einstein at the Aspen Institute of Physics. They want to show, like, seven bombs at this convention, plus Einstein's desk. So in a room that looks like—it's, like, an octagon. It was beautiful, almost, like, cathedral chapel feeling.

My assistants go out there and hang the show before I get there because they had to have the show hanging up because—now Goya is a real, Goya has a lot to do with these paintings, these drawings, the bomb drawings. The title of the bomb drawings for Metro was called *The Lust for*—it was called the *The Sickness of Reason* [2003], which kind of comes from a little bit from Goya. It's a weird take on Goya's like, what was the *Sickness of the Sleep of Reason* [*The Sleep of Reason Produces Monsters*, 1799].

JUDITH RICHARDS: Yeah.

ROBERT LONGO: So this is more, like, the sickness. I mean, bombs are definitely, like, the sickness of reason.

Here I'm going to do this mathematical equation and if it works we're going to make the fucking bomb, you know. So Freud—so they had a meeting before the opening of the show, which I went out to, of all the Joint Chiefs of Staffs and the nuclear, Committee for Nuclear Proliferation in this room where they were surrounded by bombs. It was like—it was, like, a gift. It was, like, if I wanted my work to actually work I could have been thinking of Goya's, like, dining room where he had, like, the pictures of, like, Saturn eating a sun, and things like that. I thought that this was—those motherfuckers, how awful. When was the last time they looked at a picture of a bomb going off? It was just like—I thought about at the same time that clown [Donald] Rumsfeld was talking about Abu Ghraib and how Abu Ghraib—like when he said, "Oh, I see the photographs. Now I realize it's really bad, you know." It's like, duh. So they had this convention there. I don't know what ultimately happened there, but the fact that I know that they were sitting in this room surrounded by bombs really blew me away.

So I go out to the convention and as I'm at the convention I meet people who knew Einstein. Looking at the blackboard they're going like, you know, what was he working on, what was he working on? It's very interesting, you know. It's, like, I didn't know he was working on that. It was really quite bizarre.

JUDITH RICHARDS: They never thought, imagined that you could have decided what to put there.

ROBERT LONGO: I didn't say—I didn't say it's my son's algebra equations. But I didn't do—I didn't take them literally. I messed them up. So I sit through a bunch of lectures by Brian Greene, you know, the guy who wrote *The Elegant Universe*, and stuff like that. I'm sitting there and all these guys are talking about, you know, Einstein's Theory of Relativity, but they're also talking about the Big Bang, and the universe, dah, dah, dah. I'm also getting things confirmed in my mind that—like, I mean, I always blamed Einstein for, like, creating the atomic bomb, weapons of mass destruction. But Einstein, I found out at that convention, is more profoundly connected to the invention of fucking television. Like he—so this guy you can blame everything on. The next thing you know he, like, invented McDonald's, you know what I mean. That would be, like, perfect.

But, I mean, he enabled television to happen with his stuff. So that blew me away. But they're talking about planets, and theories, and outer space, and blah, blah, blah. I come home and I'm thinking about this stuff and I'm looking at the guy because I got a free copy of Brian Greene's book about *The Elegant Universe*, and it's all interesting.

That spring my kids start school. My oldest kid is taking, like, physics, where he's learning about, you know, outer space and all this stuff. My youngest one is learning about the planets. It was, like, duh, you know, go that way. It was an interesting experience to start all of a sudden collecting all these images and working NASA and all that sort of stuff because what started to happen before was I would look for images in magazines and books, and maybe I would find what I—but I would never go looking for a specific image.

The biggest thing that the computer has changed for me is that I think about an image I want and I go find it. That's a radical difference. It's like illustrating your dreams. It's like I have this idea of an image, let's see if I can find it. There's—and only recently did I realize you can actually just click on images.

JUDITH RICHARDS: Yeah.

ROBERT LONGO: I thought you had to click on the—yeah, anyway, I mean now I have a small army of guys that work for me and a couple of them are just masters on the computer. So the Planets happened. I remember, like, one of the first Planets I did was my son—it was in like—I guess he was, like, in sixth grade at the time or something. You know, he had to pick a planet to do a report on. What planet would a boy pick?

JUDITH RICHARDS: Neptune?

ROBERT LONGO: No, Uranus.

JUDITH RICHARDS: Oh, yeah.

ROBERT LONGO: It's like—

[They laugh.]

JUDITH RICHARDS: Now they don't think it's a planet.

ROBERT LONGO: Well, that's something else. But the idea that he got to stand up in front of the class and go, "My report is about Uranus, ha-ha, ha-ha," you know. I remember making a big drawing and I had him come help me do it. It was really—because it was just the highlight of the edge of—it was really cool.

So the Planets happened and then—

[Audio break.]

JUDITH RICHARDS: We probably have maybe ten minutes.

ROBERT LONGO: Great, great. So anyway, so the Planets happened, right, so the Planets happened. The title—and I did the Planets and I started doing Star Fields. Star Fields were really funny because—the biggest difference between—I've tried to paint, but one of the biggest differences between drawing and painting is that painting traditionally you start from a dark ground and you work to light. Drawing is the opposite. I start—like all my drawings, the white in my drawings is the paper and you work the other way. So it was, like, the opposite.

So when we were trying to do the Star Fields. It was kind of confusing on how to do the Star Fields. So I used black paper and white chalk. It seemed like cheating. It seemed, like, we have to start with a white piece of paper and fill in the darkness. It was, like, the opposite of God, you know. I mean, there was darkness and there was light. It takes forever to do the star fields. It was, like, quite insane. But, you know, there were, like, hundreds, you know, 250,000 stars I had to draw. It would drive us kind of fucking nuts there doing that.

But the thing that was—the title of that show came from the Koran. It was the—I think it was "the outward visible sings of the inward and invisible grace" or something. It was the idea of basically kind of a spirituality that had to do with it.

So the Planets happened, but the thing about the planet show that was important was that my son was 12 at the time, 12 years old at the time, and one of my best friends, Jon Kessler's daughter was born a day apart, Juliette. There was fairy tale that my wife used to always tell my kids called "The Clan of Havelman." It's about a little kid who sits in the crib who can't go to sleep and he's talks to the moon. The moon finally says, "Come with me, I'll show you the universe," and he travels around the universe.

I felt that watching my last kid now go through puberty and through adolescence, at the cusp of adolescence, was, like, more mysterious to me than the universe was. That to have these two photographs of them, this boy and girl sleeping, I made them become, like, the astronauts for the show. The other thing is that when you walked in there were two small pencil drawings, like, about postcard size. I copied Hieronymus Bosch's the doors for the, closed off *The Garden of Earthly Delights* [1503-1504], the glass globe that he made, and I made a drawing of a Pollack, a Pollack drawing that's at the Met. Because actually it was a big star field drawing that was in the show that was actually—what's underneath it is the Pollack drawing. Instead of making up a universe I used Pollack to be the universe and then I put stars into it. So that was like—you know, it was connected.

But I was—after the show was over I always went, did I make a mistake showing these color photographs of the sleeping kids in the show with these black and white drawings. So I said maybe I should try doing a kid sleeping. So I did a kid sleeping and I really liked it. I realized that the way the world was at this point you start to think about the future. When you get to be my age now, you know, I've accomplished a lot, you start thinking about what I'm leaving behind for the world, what I'm leaving behind for my kids. So these drawings, these sleeping children, was a lot about dealing with do I want them to even wake up to this world, you know what I mean. The heads, the children became a lot like the planets. They kind of were floating in this kind of nebulous space, and stuff like that.

Then after the Children came the Sharks, which was kind of a really weird thing. But the Sharks were—the Sharks happened because I was buying—I was out looking for Christmas presents. I was buying books and thought, Oh, this would be a good book for my youngest son because he likes sharks. The book never got to him because I just thought—because I started—I had been reading a lot about Joseph Campbell and collective unconscious in Jung and shit. I wanted to somehow deal with this kind of, like, collective unconscious. I wanted to, like, branch off from—because I had been dealing with, like, this intimate immensities or, like, essentials, like, scale had been altered in my work, like, planets got small, kids heads got big, you know. Everything was changing. The earth got smaller, you know. Little figures on Freud's desk got gigantic. I mean, scale was really a thing that was manipulated.

But somehow I wanted to deal with this kind of real profound mythological primitive stuff. Wow, the sharks, the sharks are, like, the most primitive thing. I mean, they completely—that idea that people are instinctively afraid of snakes because it's, like, imprinted on your DNA. I mean, people when they see sharks, when they see those—and it's only great white sharks that have those archetypal kind of triangle teeth. It's, like, you see that mouth open and you completely—immediately you're afraid. But it's also—it's also like a penis and it's also like a vagina with teeth. So I thought this was, like, this really incredibly complex, profound image.

So anyway, but that's—it ends at that point. I mean, the work from there now is a whole—is now I'm trying to take apart—then there was the Cleavage drawings, but that's a whole kind of entertaining thing. But I'm trying to somehow break everything apart so that I'm not dealing with subject matter anymore. Now I want to deal with, like, the mysteries. That's my basic idea. Mysteries seem to lie in a lot of ways in light. So the drawings are becoming more about light, which sounds so hokey because all artists say that: "My paintings are about light." But it is about the mysteries and about at times the denial of absolute. I mean, so the new show that I'm going

to do there isn't one subject matter. There's a forest, there's an image of a church, there's an image of a cowboy hat, there's an image of a rock concert, there's an image of airplane windows. They all have these kind of loaded, reverberating things and there's also a tower that's just—it's four drawings put together to make a tower but it's actually just a black tower, it's just black, so it's all reflective.

Because the thing is with the glass in all these drawings is that drawing the reflection has always been very conscious and very—when I do the installations I'm very conscious of what reflects in. Like, I did a show in Los Angeles recently where it was a gigantic set of wings, a big head of an Asian woman and a shark, a big huge shark. They reflect into each other. So at some points you actually see the shark with wings, which becomes a dragon, or you would see the woman and you see the shark with wings and this Asian woman's hair and it becomes, like, this dragon in this Asian woman's hair. You see the woman with the wings in her hair. The reflections are all very, very important to me. So they somehow—I'm very, very conscious of it. I mean, it's a drag the reflections but there's also—it puts the viewer in there.

Like on the Freud drawings, when you would stand in front of the Freud drawings, you were actually in that place. You know, you were, like, a ghost in that place, which is kind of cool.

JUDITH RICHARDS: So you don't want to illuminate those reflections by using the non-reflected glass?

ROBERT LONGO: You know, I tried to use it a little bit and the problem is that it works—non-reflective glass works really—unless you get paid, like, a gazillion dollars for museum glass the reflective glass has a tint to it and when you have black, just black images, you see the color of the museum glass and it's horrible.

JUDITH RICHARDS: That blue?

ROBERT LONGO: Yeah, blue or green. It happened in one of the art fairs in Miami, or something like that. I think it was in Madrid. It was abominable, the color, it was like—and the other problem is that it lets in too much light. Plexiglas actually amplifies the darkness a little bit because it has a slight warmth to it. So the drawings get—if you're in a big white space and you have all this light pouring into it the drawings just get kind of grayish looking, so it's problematic.

JUDITH RICHARDS: Okay, that takes us—

ROBERT LONGO: The end.

JUDITH RICHARDS: Well, that was great.

[END OF DISC 6.]

[END OF INTERVIEW.]