

## **INTRODUCTION**

By Gene Baro

Vincent Longo is one of the great printmakers of our time. His innovations in etching technique have extended the formal and expressive possibilities of the medium. Other master etchers have enlarged the medium by complicating their procedures—and their results; Longo has broadened the range of etching by simplifying his.

No artist has matched in etching the directness, clarity, and consistency of Longo's abstract plates; certainly, no one has informed an essentially rationalist and systematic approach with so much personality and feeling. Longo's images are based

printmaking away from the then-prevailing mystique of graphic technique and from the confining, intimate scale of the book. He worked large and rapidly, aiming to celebrate the simple power of black and white, but also in order to make the directness and energy of the cutting an inseperable element of the image. Some 2'x 4' prints were cut in a matter of one or two working sessions.

Longo's elimination of preliminary studies and his willingness to allow image quality to be determined by the method and act of carving brought his woodcuts as close as possible to being primary creative works rather than synthesized copies of drawings several times removed. It was as if the drawing and its repetition occurred simultaneously.

The culmination of Longo's free, gestural approach to carving is in such prints as "Mithuna" (1960) and "To Admiral Meaulnes" (1961). For the remainder of the decade, his woodcuts (indeed, all of his prints) develop another direction. The images become more central, less gestural; concern is for an interlocked balance between figure and ground, positive and negative (see, for instance, "Roundabout 2" 1964). Longo's carving becomes more deliberate; he works more slowly; and his images take on a stamped, not a painted, look.

Longo's prints of the 1960's mark a return to the matter of his drawings and paintings of the late 1940's. Those early works dealt with centers and star-like forms. If some of them were formally unresolved, they nevertheless reveal, taken as a group, the thematic preoccupations and sensibilities that characterize Longo's art today. In his expressive work of the 1950's, Longo mastered the woodblock and etching techniques and achieved the all-but absolute ease of handling that is reflected in the simplicity of his later work. With the medium in his control utterly, he could move toward essentials.

He describes himself at this time as looking for what was fundamental to art and to his own feelings. He thought a good deal about visual archetypes and was preoccupied with mandala designs in other media. Abstract, diagramatic structures interested him greatly; he consulted a variety of cultural sources and looked, for instance, at temple ground plans, ceiling designs, Tibetan painting, and Hindu yantras.

He felt then that he had to "get rid of a lot of undifferentiated dexterity." His prints began to be concerned almost totally with ideas about form that minimize relational elements of composing. The concentration comes to be upon standard signs involved with square and circle.

Longo had taken up the mandala idea as early as 1961 (see the woodcut of that title and year). He was, of course, not committed to the liturgical meaning of the figure, but only to its formal properties. He varied the arrangement of the mandala components, so as to see the image in fresh light. He recast the convention in original combinations suggestive of new spatial and structural meanings. "Mandala" (1961), like "Haywire" (1961) and "A Turning" (1963), was made and printed in edition simultaneously. These prints developed as the surface was gradually carved away with each additional color. All that was left of the original block was the area, corresponding to the last color, that completed the final state.

upon timeless forms—the circle, the square, the grid—and upon such concepts as centeredness, symmetry, extension, and regularity. Everything is known, nothing is concealed; but the work is full of surprises. These basic motifs and principles are seen freshly, personally, and are made to convey visually sensations and emotions that we expect only from the highest art. In the conceptual sense, Longo's work adheres to a strict formality; in practice, it shows a formal inventiveness and ease, even a spontaneity, seldom observed in prints. It is as if this artist had freed himself from the mechanical demands and uncertainties of woodcut and of etching process.

Longo thinks of himself as fundamentally a painter. He was established as a painter long before he became involved in printmaking (his first woodcut was made only in 1953, his first etching in 1956). In fact, his printmaking activity has come to be a source for his painting. Thematic shifts in Longo's paintings, visual developments, are anticipated in the prints. And Longo treats prints rather as if they were paintings. The prints deal with space and surface much as the best painting contemporary with them does. Longo's prints offer effects that one finds, not in etchings or woodcuts, but in paintings.

The painting analogue in Longo's prints is part of their extraordinary originality. They are neither printmakers' prints, which too often exist merely to display technical virtuosity, nor painters' prints, which typically reproduce and popularize images out of painting. Longo's work has the force of a primary engagement with the issues of perception; the woodblock and chisel, the zinc plate and etcher's needle, are like brush and canvas to Longo. It is important to realize that this artist works directly and exclusively upon the block or plate. There are no preparatory drawings, no transfers or tracings.

Longo's indifference to editioning his prints, his carelessness with plates, his tendency to get on with another print once proof is taken—these things support the notion that for him printmaking is a painter-like activity. But there is also a record in the prints themselves.

When Longo began to make woodcuts in 1953, he set himself the problem of countering as much as he might the indirectness of prints. He carved freely over and into areas of india ink painted roughly on the block. There was never the benefit of preliminary drawing; the image evolved from the over-all activity. Proofs were only taken when the image was in its final stage of development. In some cases, for example, in "Swinging White" (1958), the first proof represents the final state of the block. In all other cases, only minor changes seemed necessary.

During the middle and late 1950's, Longo looked closely at the woodcuts of Gauguin, Kirchner, and Kandinsky. His understanding of these masters helped him to control the black on white and white on black interchange within a single print. But mainly he gained in technical grasp by doing. In the non-technical sense, he was influenced by abstract expressionist painting, particularly by the work of Pollock and de Kooning. He wished to apply the same sort of free expressiveness to the resistent block.

In this period, Longo's carving became increasingly free and brushy. He was after an autographic art, abstract writing without any tightness. He tried to push More recently, Longo has concerned himself with explorations of the grid. In this work, the grid is apt to be both subject and image. There, diagrams, principles of ornamental patterning, are examined, not as a way of supporting symmetrical designs—that is, as a guide to their creation—but for their potential as graphic images and ideas in themselves. For instance, "Quarter Turn" (1968), which states a different color in each corner, is composed in quadrants that turn, pinwheel-fashion, on a central pivot. Each color has the same quantity of squares in identical pattern. Randomness is suggested by a system of regular turning.

It is of interest—and typical with Longo—that the impact of this print, and our pleasure in it, are independent of our understanding of its organizational principle. What persuades is the image, the structure as given.

Longo's current woodcuts attempt to combine direct, spontaneous carving with the regular, minimal composing of the etchings. Carving tools and an electric flexible shaft tool, to which saw wheels and routing bits are attached, are now used.

I have dealt at some length upon Longo's woodcuts. He develops identical or analogous concerns in etching. There is, in fact, more concentration upon this medium. The exploration is more intense; the body of work is larger; the innovations are of the first importance.

Longo decided to stress etching in the late 1950's. His desire to command the complexities of the medium led him to make thirty or forty very involved prints, in many states of completion. Only a few of these were ever exhibited. With these etchings, as with the woodcuts of the period, Longo was looking for the freedom of expression and the inventiveness of painting. But the plates seemd too committed to etching as process, too heavy with technique, for Longo's fastidious taste. The preferred print was "Simple Grace, No Blame" (1960).

The experimental series continued on and off for years, until "Cluster" (1964). By this time, Longo's images were projecting centeredness and were distinctly more simple and severe in handling.

Of course, not all of Longo's etchings of the early and mid-1960's were experimental. Major plates were produced in the bitten line technique (see "Keeping Still" 1964, "Yantra" 1964, "Yantra 2" 1965, and "Center" 1965). This was the method of Rembrandt's etching.

Lines are drawn with a stylus on a hard ground consisting of asphaltum, resin, and beeswax. The point of the needle exposes lines on the plate. These are bitten with acid, so as to hold the ink. When the lines are deep, a raised effect is created on the print. Darks and black areas result from several stages of etching. The richest, most velvety blacks can be obtained.

Longo's plates by this method try to demonstrate the process of building a surface. Cross hatching is the common way. Longo's hatching is deliberately uneven, loose, and quickly laid down. It relies for its depth of tone on many periods of drawing and etching. Repeating the process over and again breaks down the surface in less obvious ways than if the hatching were carefully controlled. The repetition of technique reinforces the sense of an insistent surface, whose rich tones give a contemplative quality to the interaction of form and area. The subtleties of a slowly built surface confer presence, stillness, suspension. A print such as

"Keeping Still," where the active quality of a tipped square is countered by the quiet and inner direction of the cross hatching, evokes this floating ambivalence of surface. The hatching operates as texture, tone, color, and space. The square is not the image; the image is the whole muted mobilization of the surface—a non-image in the conventional sense.

More recent etchings in the bitten line technique—for instance. "Score" (1969)—demonstrate that grids reduced in size of mesh become hatched areas that read as tones rather than as textures. Although in analysis they remain textured patterns, they are responded to as tones. A series of lines is linear in effect only when there is sufficient space between to keep them individual—in short, to prevent them from being seen as an area of gray.

Closely-hatched and deeply-bitten surfaces produce printed passages that require slow viewing, if all the richness is to be taken in. The printed surface is far richer, for instance, than the most tonally developed Doré drawing because the lines in the print are far more varied in depth of tone, in degree of embossment, in added incident owing to the action of acid, which transforms the originally drawn lines.

Prints of this sort often suggest growth. They seem to be involved in an interminable process. Longo thinks of them as introspective in feeling, as supporting introverted ideas—"an awareness that is not necessarily lacking in clarity though totally non-verbal." "Tatha" 1970, like "Keeping Still" and "Center," was stopped rather than completed. Longo indicates that these prints could have developed further or stopped sooner; that they stopped where they did was a matter of it "feeling right . . . of the right degree of insistence the surface required." The bitten line technique, the oldest of all, is an essential of etching.

Longo's hatched, bitten line etchings demonstrate the same preoccupation with tonal definition as is to be found in the work of Rembrandt, Piranesi, or Morandi. Unlike theirs, Longo's work is not inhibited by descriptive detail. His lines and tones do not need to depict volume and shade; they are lines and tones that for all their tonality remain totally abstract. But they are no less evocative for being projected as pure visual form. In this sense, Longo's prints are less graphic—a painting equivalent—with parallels in painting concerns.

There are, of course, numbers of Longo's etchings that are not deeply bitten, dense, and intuitive. For example, "Wink" (1968), is for all its charm a didactic inquiry into random breaks in regularized linear repetition; forms are added by interruption! In "Expanding" (1965), no bitten lines are inscribed in the plate. The lines are really edges between three etched levels of plate. The sharpest side of the printed line is always at the outer edge of the shape it describes, giving the enclosed sections a softening toward the middle. "Wide Lattice" (1968) and "Construct" (1968) are likewise etchings that do not have bitten line or aquatint.

Longo's achievement in printmaking is grounded in total control of each step of the process, from preparation of the plate to final proof—total control over the techniques *chosen*. He writes: "I try to *choose* the right means for what is most important—my statement about prints—what I consider to be the essential qualities of the medium. In woodcut, it is carving—getting it all done in the carving. In etching, it is drawing with acid, impress of plate to paper. Printmaking has the finality, the absoluteness, of stamp and seal."

This artist accepts the necessary process, but thinks in terms of the minimum means to obtain the desired result. He always moves to cut into the technical demands, forcing them into pre-determined standards of form. This brings its own directness.

Thinking along these lines prompted Longo to use masking tape as an acid resist. This formidable innovation saved a lot of stopping out; at the same time, it increased precision. What is more important, it offered new terms to etching; a white line shaded on each side; smooth, soft shaded areas, unlike typical aquatint with its grainy texture; and newly found directness, for strong statements could be produced with one session in the acid bath. Longo's use of tape produced etchings that are unlike traditional ones or other graphics. A fresh formal statement was made with an old medium. Moreover, no violence was done to the traditional means; no other medium was forced in, no hybrid resulted. There was only direct drawing with tape and acid on metal (see "Construct," "Wide Lattice," "Shotgun," 1968 and "Wall" 1968).

Longo also used the masking tape technique in combination with traditional aquatint and bitten line (see "Between" 1969 and "Plaid" 1968). Here, a new medium—tape—adds strength to refresh old means.

Longo writes: "Means only serve formal aims and considerations. The aim is not to celebrate process, but to use it for specific effects, to explore predetermined sets of problems, in which *image* occupies a central role. Hence, the artist must find the means that suit his purposes and inclinations. Sometimes, he must invent them."

Longo's aims in prints are modest. Virtuosity is avoided, as is complexity and unnecessary technical involvement. The intimacy of etching is upheld. None of the prints is laborious or precious. All are done with ease—which is not to say they are knocked out. But effort is not an important input. Longo's prints require work, not labor. Creative tension—agony and labor pains—are absent. Instead, there is an almost rhythmic consistency in method, almost total ease.

Even the grid prints are never meansured out. The plate is placed on an existing grid, ruled with a casual, automatic technique. Slips of hand, mistakes, are left in.

Most grids start from a center cross, creating a quadrant, to which grid is added—filled in and developed, when diagonals are used, in a systemic operation (see "Lattice" 1968 and "Other Side" 1967).

Grids represent projects with grid structures: forms inherent in grid layouts are discovered and brought out. The grid, then, is basic to the form; it remains visible; it is the image material. (Very occasionally, Longo has imposed a mandala or circle onto a grid, but most of the grid patterns deal only in the lines of the grid as framework and as form.) The intent is formal.

Cross hatch and straight grids are interrelated and structurally interlocked, to the extent that they are offering aspects of the same form: the mesh. But what is most important is that in all these prints the limitation of terms (straight uniformly repeated line) is accepted, but formally extended—used poetically. The main considerations are formal, not technical. Essentials are retained: Longo has no interest in deadpan or hard-nosed aesthetics. Instead, there is creativity with a modest medium. The statement is quiet. There is no message.