

ARTISTS MAKING MOVIES

BY CHRISTINA LANZL



In the 1990s, many of the biggest stars of the 1980s art boom began to go Hollywood: Robert Longo directed *Johnny Mnemonic*, 1994; David Salle made *Search and Destroy*, 1995; and Julian Schnabel made *Basquiat*, 1996. Jeff Koons has a project in development and Cindy Sherman is currently directing her film debut—a horror movie. Though there is a long history of artists making independent and experimental films—including such modern masters as Léger, Duchamp, Man Ray, Dali, and Warhol—these recent, more mainstream efforts are largely a new phenomenon. But it is not surprising that Hollywood would beckon this generation of artists obsessed with issues of celebrity, media, and mass culture, for it is in the glamorous world of the movies that all these themes are played out on a grand scale.

While the journey from SoHo to Hollywood might seem a long one, the content of these artists' work makes the move seem natural, even inevitable. And it raises a fundamental question: Is it possible to maintain a critical and ironic distance from the world of mass culture while participating fully within it and profiting from it? The question of distance from material—Longo's flirtations with the look of advertising, Salle's borrowing of images from pornographic magazines—has always dogged those artists of the '80s who appropriated images from popular culture, just as it did for the Pop artists a generation earlier. Becoming active participants in this world erases completely the already fuzzy boundaries between "high" and "low" cultural forms.

For Longo and Salle, quoting from the mass media has been a means of posing political, ethical, and existential questions, and some of these themes are carried into their films. In *Search and Destroy*, Salle introduces an antiheroic cast of characters that recall his canvases with their often absurd juxtapositions of images drawn

from disparate sources—including movie stills. Robert Longo's fascination with "hero types" is echoed in *Johnny Mnemonic*, where the protagonist is caught in a conflict in which he must choose either to save the world or himself.

A child of popular culture, Longo has been quoted as saying, "I make art for the public." By contrast, Schnabel claims a "dialogue...with myself, not with exterior forces." *Basquiat* is an effort to sketch the life of Schnabel's friend, Jean-Michel Basquiat. It is the story of a young artist's rise to fame and fortune, one that replicates Schnabel's own rise to stardom and that takes place within Schnabel's own circle of friends. The Schnabel character, barely disguised in the role of Milo, figures prominently in the action. By telling the story of the 1980s New York art scene—in which he was a key figure—some have claimed that Schnabel is engaged in self-aggrandizement. Schnabel's involvement with the movie is certainly all-encompassing: he wrote the screenplay; his family acted; he painted many of the imitation Basquiats; and paintings by the character Milo are recognizably Schnabel's own. Roberta Smith, however, writing in the *New York Times*, sees a continuity between Schnabel's earlier work and his film: "But there is the more interesting issue of how a film directed by an artist relates to a larger and quite different body of visual work. For better or worse, *Basquiat* places itself squarely in the middle of Schnabel's multifaceted oeuvre. It may be the Gesamtkunstwerk—a total artwork—that his scattered talents and semi-talents have always sought, the fullest representation of his sensibility so far."

All these films tend to be extensions of, rather than departures from, techniques and themes employed successfully in other media. The narrative of both *Basquiat* and *Search and Destroy* is intercut with layers of disparate footage: *Basquiat*'s crude ani-



Key: *Johnny Mnemonic*

...and spaces scenes in the city with surreal seascapes that serve to illustrate the artist's drug escapes; *Search and Destroy* intercuts idyllic scenes of a boy in the countryside, presumably taken from the book the main character unsuccessfully tries to produce as a movie. These breaks in the narrative mirror the layering of "appropriated" images so central to the art of the '80s; the bizarre conjunction of images in Salle's art is extended in the language and set of his film.

For Longo and Salle their involvement with film has deep roots. In the early '80s, Longo's *Men in the Cities* series included stop-motion photography, actors, and set designs, for which the artist served as producer and director, and photographic stills taken from Fassbinder's *American Soldier*. He directed his first film, a half-hour piece called *Arena Brains*, in 1987, and made a number of music videos for such bands as R.E.M., Living Colour, and New Order; he also produced performance pieces at The Kitchen, Franklin Furnace, and the Corcoran Gallery. Following a similar path, David Salle created set and costume designs for plays and dance pieces by choreographer Karol Armitage, and experimented with video and performance art during his student days.

The big-budget releases by Longo, Salle, and Schnabel received plenty of media coverage, though much of it was critical of artists who were seen as stepping outside their normal field of activity. The largely negative reception mirrors that given earlier to Warhol's efforts in the medium, as if such crossovers were inherently suspect, the product of misguided ambition. But, as in the case of this younger generation, Warhol's ventures into filmmaking seemed a natural extension of his media-driven art. The difference is that Warhol's efforts were low-budget affairs seen, if at all, by art audiences, while recent releases have attempted to bridge the gap between the art theater and the cineplex; one thing that hasn't changed in twenty-five years is the suspicion that accompanies such genre crossing. In big-budget productions money dominates as investors look to turn a profit. Robert Longo originally planned to shoot *Johnny Mnemonic* as an independent film, but William Gibson's participation as author of the screenplay attracted major funding, and he ended up directing a \$28-million picture that received little positive feedback from the press. *Art in America* reviewer Ken Johnson concludes: "To be fair, the failure of *Johnny Mnemonic* probably has less to do with the weakening of Longo's artistic resolve than with his inexperience at dealing with the nightmarish logistics of big-money movie-making.... What he might have made on a smaller scale and a more independent basis is hard to say, but surely it would not have turned out to be so routinely commercial. The irony is that Longo once was one of those who manipulated public-domain imagery in order to drive wedges of critical consciousness between viewers and the dominant culture's representation of truth. With *Johnny Mnemonic*, it seems that he subordinated his own critically or aesthetically challenging purposes to the demands of the dominant system to try for a multiplex hit."

In a conversation in *Interview* with Henry Rollins, who also stars in the picture, Robert Longo offers his candid view of both the movie industry and the art world: "Whereas movie people are pretty upfront about making money, in the art world it's about making money, but everyone disguises it under the idea of aesthetics. If anything, I think the movie gave me more faith in making art than ever before, because I just figure, O.K., I do my work, live



Left to right: Griffin Dunne, John Turturro, and Christopher Walken in a scene from David Salle's *Search & Destroy*, an October Films Release

an existence somehow, get by."

And, in fact, Longo's own assessment of his movie is rather critical: "I figured there's, like, 160,000 single frames in the film and each one of them is my art. I don't necessarily know that the movie I made is a work of art. I went out to make a [science-fiction] genre movie and tried to do it with artistry.... I didn't know what the fuck my visual style was going to be, and I still don't know what the movie is. I know I didn't make *Citizen Kane* or *The Last Action Hero*."

David Salle's *Search and Destroy*, released one year after Longo's *Johnny Mnemonic*, was also disapprovingly received by most critics. One of the few objective reviews came from Lilly Wei, who wrote in *Art in America*:

"When it became known that David Salle was making a movie—going for the celluloid seems an artistic rite of passage these days—many in the art world awaited the results, not all with generous intentions. Although the reception was rather chilly when the movie appeared, and although its run was short, *Search and Destroy*, based on a play by Howard Korder, is an entertaining and visually stunning *divertissement* which more people should have the opportunity to see.... Despite a Hollywood-flimsy structure, Salle's *Search and Destroy* is a meticulously put together film."

The core theme of both *Search and Destroy* and *Basquiat* is the high price of fame, a theme that must have autobiographical implications for the directors who have at times been victims of their own success. The narrative of *Search and Destroy* revolves around antihero Martin Mirkheim's obsession to produce a movie and "to be somebody," at any price as it turns out. *Basquiat* tells a similar story in chronicling the painter's fast rise to stardom and early death. He becomes a tragic figure, and this fact

alone propels the hero to ultimate stardom. Donald Kuspit calls it "the character disorder of our times—the wish to be an actor, a celebrity, a star." The desire for fame, deeply ingrained in the American psyche, is in conflict with the traditional image of the starving artist. This conflict is played out in the life of Jean-Michel Basquiat whose inability to deal with his sudden notoriety drove him to a tragic drug-induced death.

The fact that Longo, Salle, and Schnabel are famous artists has shaped the critical reception in the media, garnering a great deal of attention while raising questions of motive. In an age when artists are celebrities, their lives inevitably become part of their work, or at least its frame of reference. As Schnabel was making *Basquiat*, *Vogue* showcased his home, wife, and children, demonstrating the extent to which the artist/director was himself the subject of his own work of art. As Warhol proved a generation ago, the surest way to achieve celebrity in America is to make art about celebrity. And given the fact that Hollywood is the land where celebrity is king, it is not surprising that these media savvy artists of the '80s would be attracted by its glamour and promise of a truly mass audience. Despite their critical reception, it is certain that the cinematic efforts of Longo, Salle, and Schnabel help to redefine the role of the fine artist in the age of multimedia, breaking down barriers between the worlds of high culture and mass culture, between fame and celebrity. ■

Christina Lanzl is a multifaceted art professional and exhibiting artist. The former director of the Bromfield Gallery, she is currently assistant to the project coordinator of the Boston Arts Academy. Presently, her work is on the set of the MTV show, The Real World, that begins airing in July. Andrew Neumann, instructor of film at the Museum School, helped with the research for this article.