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R E N A I S S A N C E E V E N T S

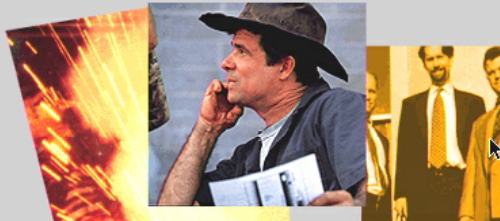
BANG!

You're Under Arrest

America's Most Explosive Performance Group Goes to Court

Photographs by Marla Aufmuth

The diabolical machinery of Survival Research Labs is a "physicist's wet dream," in the words of founder Mark Pauline. For two decades, the performance group's metal monsters - some the size of semis, with iron claws and WWII rocket motors for mouths - have been ramming into each other, clawing apart dead cows, and breathing fire for happy, twisted audiences.



SLR founder Mark Pauline (center and far right) says his mighty metal monsters are being banished from performing in San Francisco.

Pauline's genius has cost him. His hand was mangled in an explosion in his workshop in 1982, and a 1990 *F/16 Fuzzshow* in Lewiston, New York, was censored when Pat Robertson and other members of the Religious Right condemned it as an outrage. Still, not one of the group's 25 core members has ever been arrested for their pyrotechnics. Until now.

On 11 March, Pauline and SRL manager Mike Dingle will go to a pretrial hearing to address charges that, according to Pauline, will make it almost impossible for them to mangle heavy metal in their hometown of San Francisco. Their arrests came in connection with the 26 November *C/Zone Fuzzshow*, an extravaganza of hip heavy artillery, with live Internet and audio feed. The show - financed by Pauline's credit cards - featured a jumping, exploding Unabomber puppet and an Armored Attack Helicopter, as well as a bound-and-gagged Execution Guy.

The charges (unlawful open burning and use of explosive materials) will probably be dropped in exchange for community service, because it's a first-time offense. For these cash-starved performers, however, this is more than a slap on the wrist. SRL can't afford the pricey permits required by the San Francisco fire department, so the group is effectively banished from home. Says Pauline, "We won't be able to do the shows we're accustomed to doing and we're known for. Period."

Angry but not defeated, Pauline says that he'll take SRL on the road to other states and countries. "Most artists would rather do a painting, write a book, or do some computer graphics, because you don't have to worry about machines and a lot of complicated technology," he says. "But people like myself like taking risks. We like involving other people in those risks. Most people don't think they can provoke the wrath of the gods and get away with it."

Though SRL shows can get a little scary, today's climate of intolerance and lack of support for experimental or provocative art is even scarier. We asked Dezzo Molnar, an SRL engineer who creates the robot jet engines, to re-create what you missed at *C/Zone Fuzz*, in all its fiery glory.

[Crime Wave](#)
[Audio/Video](#)

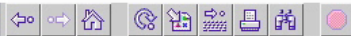
[Discuss](#) the arrest of Survival Research Labs.

R E N A I S S A N C E

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R E N A I S S A N C E E V E N T S


[Bang!](#) You're Under Arrest

Chronicle of a Crime

by Dezzo Molnar



For Survival Research Labs' *Crime Fuzzshow*, we had 24 hours in a parking lot at the base of the Bay Bridge to set up, perform, and move out. Both a clandestine and overt activity. The show location was kept a secret to even our own workers until the morning of the performance. The neighbors watched with binoculars from their high-rise condos as months of preparation unfolded. Live Internet feed informed the dedicated about our previously unannounced show. On-site, we gave vague answers. A convertible-load of young upwardly mobiles demanded, "What's going on here?"

"We're shooting a film." I answered.

"Oh yeah! What film?"

"Sixteen millimeter."

To reenact the crime as it happened, click first on the top left picture.

Enhance the show with a RealAudio soundtrack [\[14.4\]](#) or [\[28.8\]](#).


[Audio/Video](#)

[Discuss](#) the arrest of Survival Research Labs.

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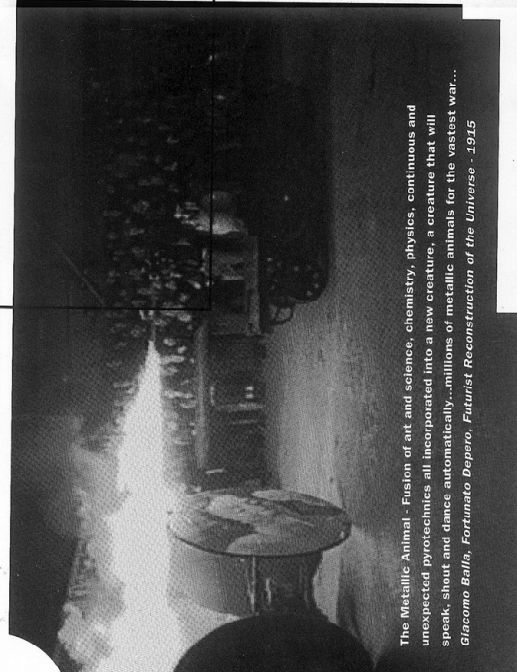
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Mark Pauline is an alchemist, animating infernal machines from the ruins of planned obsolescence. Synthesising sophisticated military-industrial technology with a locking gallows humour (and a real-big dictionary), since 1979 he has directed his *Survival Research Laboratories* (SRL) in the production of almost 50 machine performances. Typical shows (some titles: *Misfortunes of Desire*; *Acted Out*; *An Imaginary Location Symbolizing Everything Worth Having*; *A Cruel and Relentless Plot*; *To Pervert the Flesh of Beasts*; *Unholy Uses*) confront the censored-off, pummelled audience with the reality of a violence usually limited to the news media.

THEATRE OF WAR



(Interview)



The Metallic Animal - Fusion of art and science, chemistry, physics, continuous and unexpected pyrotechnics all incorporated into a new creature, a creature that will speak, shout and dance automatically...millions of metallic animals for the vastest war... *Giuseppe Ballo, Fortunato Depero, Futurist Reconstruction of the Universe - 1915*

Beasts with iron lungs breathe smoke and flame, mechanised marionettes performing a progressive dance to the death. This ritualised destruction is both a contemporary potlatch, and a panacea for the worst excesses of capitalism - a crucible to absorb us all. SRL are our Theatre of Cruelty, an assault on the Situation Normal - All Fucked Up of consumer society. In the absence of human performers, or even dialogue, SRL describe new vocabularies of flame, mechanised gesture, and the piercing sounds of me(n)tal fatigue. In the aftermath of the Gulf War, organic warriors are as redundant as Bosch. Read on.... *Jim Krank*

What was the initial impetus behind SRL? I'd been trained for basically two things: I had a degree in visual arts and I had pretty extensive experience in the trades - engineering, making machines, devices. I wanted to create some kind of system that could be tailored specifically to my interests and needs and skills and to incorporate as many of them as possible. It was very calculated. I literally sat down for about a two week period and figured out the basic form. I'd envisioned at the outset that we would be able to do these huge performances for big audiences, that it would be this thing that would rival other popular culture events but would be extremely different from them.

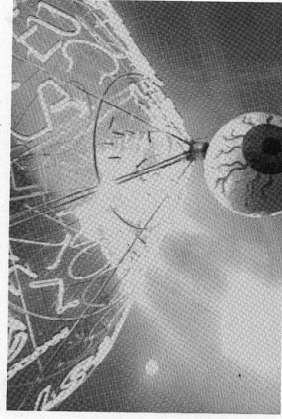
Was there a relationship to theatre in your mind when setting up SRL? Oh, yeh. There always has been. I have a background in theatre, experimental theatre and I was always more interested in creating an event that was based on the juxtaposition or combination of things over time. I didn't want to do just a sculpture exhibition.

How choreographed is it? It's as choreographed as we can make it.

There is, like, a written script which all the operators have and we've had, a couple of times, time to rehearse this script.

Of course, it's very unpredictable. We try to use as much equipment as we possibly can in any situation. That way when things change - the machine breaks, or it can't work exactly the way you expected it to - there's more equipment there to take up the slack.

How attracted are you to the possibility of chance actions arising



between the machines? There always are. Sometimes, those are the most interesting actions. I'd say that the intentional things, on a point-by-point basis, that there are more of them.

How do you develop the theme? By the time that you get a title, it's usually a few weeks before a show. I like to have as much of the performance as fixed as possible before I come up with a specific title for it. You start out very non-specifically where there are just big machines that are being built that are very complicated, pretty general purpose, and then as the theme comes into play you start thinking well, you know, I should actually choose this machine over that machine because you can make more dramatic visual metaphors with this set of machines. Then you start modifying those to specifically suit the performance and then start building sets and prop pieces.

It seems as though you cast it like in the theatre, fitting the available hardware to the theme. I think that it's like anything else; it's just a human activity, there are just certain logistical rules that are involved in creating complicated events, taking a bunch of work and condensing it down to a certain point. It just happens to be the same for theatre. It just happens to be the same for a military campaign. You are doing it because you are not really sure what's going to happen and because the goals are not really specific either. You're just trying to find out what the result of the work will be.

One of the things that struck me while I was watching the tapes of your show was that what was created when the machines went out was an actual, specific language that I hadn't seen before, a visual theatrical language that seemed to me to be extremely relevant to the contemporary themes that you were talking about. Is that evident to you? Oh, yeh. I think that's one of the nice things about it. Because of the nature of the physical world a lot of the work is just done for you. There is a natural language, in the same way that there's a natural affinity that physical objects have for each other, like physical principles are enacted almost arbitrarily, an alchemical thing. You're just there and if you have enough stamina something will eventually happen. It's very difficult to generate that kind of a language if you're just using static objects, or if you just tried to have people performing. There's a real critical mass that you have to reach

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with that particular kind of language, any language of technology, so that you get beyond the technical aspect of it and other things begin to happen. Otherwise, with the shows, I'd probably make them simpler.

Another interesting aspect of your work is that it seemed to unite two sides of America: one is its technological genius and the other side is its initial radical libertarianism, the anarchic side. Do you see something of that in the work you do? As far as I'm concerned, I just think that the only way to maintain your optimism is through a clear understanding of technology. The people who are really doing interesting things are the creative-type people who are really using technology. If you're a creative person and you are not using technology, you are really going to be disenfranchised. I continue to be really interested in it because there's still the hope of affecting the culture, putting across a position which is at odds with what people would expect to hear in the media or whatever. To me, it's the only way to do that and to get people to pay attention to what you're doing and take it seriously.

We get taken pretty seriously by people in other laboratories, to the point where someone at NASA would say, well they're doing this great thing, why don't you come down here and check it out, we want to come down here to your lab and see what you're doing. To me that's very encouraging because what we have to offer them is just ways of realistically dealing with technology outside the sort of way that is done now.

What about the crossover between art and science that you display? I mean, the good thing about technology is that it cuts out a lot of the bullshit. You have to be so rigorous and work so hard to be able to use technology effectively that I think it separates our people who are serious from people who aren't serious. People talk about it as a co-option thing but everything's co-optive. The fact of the matter is that if artists don't become conversant with technology then they'll just be left out of the culture more than they are now. I think that with people who don't have to work full-time and who are just thinking about stuff naturally, there is a greater chance that they will think of things in a way to find interesting conclusions. I think that the voice of people that aren't working needs to be heard more and I think that the only way that will happen is by people being conversant with technology.

What is the relationship between the human operators and the machines? I think that the machines are nice, really. They sort of have personalities of their own but it's a little bit unplanned. Those machines are characterised up to a point but I think where they really become viable as characters is at the point when the people who are operating them just sort of transpose their own character onto the machines. The machines really seem different in different shows because different people run them. We always switch over.

So it's another level of casting. Yeah, there's a level of casting going on. People choosing what they want to do, which is based on their interests and who they are and then me choosing, trying to decide. Usually it just works out that if someone wants to do something, it will probably be OK.

Where do you get your equipment from? There are a lot of different ways. Sometimes I go into old factories, take stuff apart, you just scrounge around and find stuff. There's so much stuff that is just cast aside in the States, in California it's sort of unbelievable. You can literally go out and pick up a ton of equipment every week, very high quality, functional equipment, parts, components, materials, tools, really nice tools.

What about the cruise missile? The cruise missile motor. There's these guys, they're aerospace and they buy defence department stuff, weapons components, rocket launchers, cruise missile engines. This was a cruise missile engine that was a prototype engine, a test engine, built in '77. It was a hundred



and fifty dollars. You can buy these engines but they cost two to three hundred thousand dollars.

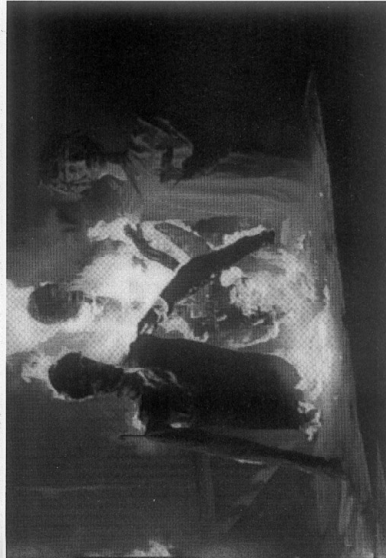
What about this relationship with the military-industrial complex? On the one hand you're using their equipment but you're using it to criticize... Everyone uses their equipment. All technology is military technology. No technology is civilian technology. This tape recorder is like a military device that has been commercialised. I think it's great to be using it like that. It's an aberration that artefacts of that quality were produced in the first place and it's less likely that there will be that kind of stuff in the future. So I think that in some ways it preserves. It's recapturing the value that that stuff never really had. Those artefacts exist at the furthest envelope of materials and there's usually no justification for that outside the military.

Do you ever see a moral aspect to technology? Yeah, there's always a moral aspect to technology. I can see that. I like the

fect of working with used equipment. The idea that you are taking these things and creating new lives for them, for me that's sort of sounds insane but in a way you really are. You're taking things and recharacterising them. Maybe there's some sort of moral aspect to them, I don't really know. The immoral aspect is what you do with it. I don't do things that kill people. I try to make sure that it's intense but to not to cross the line so that people get injured.

Is this rebirth of technology within a different context part of the motivation? Personally, I just like fiddling with stuff. I like fiddling with things. I like fiddling with ideas that are compelling enough that maybe people are interested in them, that maybe they affect people's choices or whatever, at least to provide that information.

Another thing that struck me was that there was all this creative energy that was being directed towards destroying things. Now that's part of the show, part of theme, etc, but have you ever done works in which the point is to create in



some way? It's not really possible to do that. It's hard to really say what is a creation and what's not. Rockets create a lift-off by destroying the fuel and the fuel is destroyed. Cars move from place to place because they destroy the environment and also destroy the fuel and damage the oil that they have in them and damage their components. The machines are destroying themselves from the moment they're created. I think that's just the nature of machines. I think that's also the nature of humans. Humans are destroying themselves from the minute they are born. You're wearing down, you're getting old. I think that it's different in a show because of course it's accelerated and I think it's more of a metaphor for natural forces, the destruction of a natural force.

It's also a very healthy way to think about technology. It's a transitory thing. The intention is to create this situation where all your work is just basically discarded to the winds and to see

what you think about that and what that really means. Most of the time people have a really weird protective, paternalistic attitude towards their technology. I think part of an SRL show is to surrender it, surrender the idea that your work is precious and that it's important and then the reverence we have for this is reasonable. I think that's part of what the destruction's about, not so much about 'cause I'm into destruction.

What about SRL's links to the American punk scene? I went to a college where a lot of members of the early punk scene went to college, like Anto Lindsay from DNA. I went to school with him, and Gordon Stevenson who was in Teenage Jesus and the Jarks and Exene from X and her sister both hung around the school, did weird art performances back in like '73 and '4. I moved out to San Francisco and looked the same as I had for years and so did everybody else, all this youth culture thing, and I was just never very interested in music to do it. So I just thought, well I can sympathise with this approach to tearing down a certain sort of encrusted institutions but I said who cares about music? Why would anybody want to tear that down? I didn't seem to me that interesting. My idea was that I would sort of do this other thing and it ended up being a thing about the art scene.

How do you want to develop SRL from here? Technically, there are a few areas that we're going to work in. We're gonna work on a class of robots that can fly, like levitating type platforms that move around in a show to get another dimension to things. Also, more closely-coupled systems, between the operator and the machine.

There's also another class of machines that I'm working on now that have complicated ways that they move that will require computer-controlled stuff to work really fast, much more dramatic, that'll be really unstable. More into working with the kind of technology or knowledge-based systems that are more current, even than what we do now which in many ways is very current. Right now we want to be able to do these shows in a way that we can still retain the immediacy for larger audiences and that's why I want to have flying machines. You need machines that are completely incomprehensible and which move very fast, like nothing anyone's ever seen before, so that the mystery of the show is maintained even though it's bigger. Those are the directions that I want to work in for the next probably five or seven years.

Mark Padline and SRL documentalist, Leslie Gladjo, held a lecture at the IMA in September. Several documents of their performances were shown at the Glare Film Festival in October along with Gladjo's documentary on dissident journalism in Bosnia - Truth Under Siege.

Interview with Julian Jahn

San Francisco

THE LARGEST DAILY CIRCULATION

★★★★★

THURSDAY, APRIL 9, 1992

THURSDAY, APRIL 9, 1992

Wild Start for S.F. Museum



PHOTOS BY FREDERIC LARSON/THE CHRONICLE

A Fire Department official took performance artist Mark Pauline by the arm after a fire was started at the ground-breaking ceremonies for San Francisco's Museum of Modern Art.

Fires, Screams, Roars, Naked Figures

By Ingrid Chen
Chronicle Staff Writer

The construction of a new Museum of Modern Art in San Francisco literally got under way with a bang yesterday, amid a bizarre performance of roving robots, ear-popping explosions, cacophonous roars that sounded like dinosaurs feeding upon women, and flames that had to be extinguished by firefighters.

The \$60 million museum, a somber, red-brick building topped by a zebra-striped skylight tower, will open in January 1995 on Third Street near Mission Street. With 200,000 square feet of spacious galleries as well as an auditorium, library, cafe and bookstore, the Modernist building will double the institution's current space at the Veterans Building on Van Ness Avenue.

"It will be a beautiful, but



This fire-breathing cannon started several small blazes

more importantly, a functional home for the Museum of Modern Art," said museum director John Lane at the ground-breaking ceremony.

Mario Botta, the architect

from Switzerland who designed the new building, told a crowd of art enthusiasts and civic dignitaries that he was excited to see

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WILD MUSEUM CEREMONY

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the sun shining upon them, "knowing it is probably the last time the sun will shine on that exact spot."

"That's the power of architecture, to transform... an enclosed space into a space for man," said Botta, whose words in Italian were translated by his associate, Ugo Fruh. "What we are doing is to transform a piece of nature into a piece of culture."

The event drew a mix of San Francisco life. Well-heeled museum sophisticates, corporate supporters and city politicians sipped bubbly from plastic champagne glasses within the fences put up around the site. Outside the fences were a younger crowd of artists from South of Market.

The first shovels of dirt contributed to a modern artwork directed by San Francisco artist David Ireland. City officials and museum fans began excavating a crescent-shaped incision in the ground as a recording of Botta's voice was broadcast. Once the trench is cleared, concrete will be poured into the mold to produce the museum's first new sculpture.

The event was then brought to a violent and explosive conclusion with a "cyber-mechanical" production by performance artist Mark Pauline and the Survival Research Laboratories.

On a lot next to the museum site, Pauline and his crew had built a stage set that included a number of roly-poly naked human figures lying on their backs with hands and feet sticking out in disarray, next to a tower and a wooden shelter covered with a billowing green parachute-like balloon.

The production began with head-splitting noises — somewhat like a herd of roaring dinosaurs — as a remote-controlled six-legged

robot walked around with an arm and human hand outstretched. A large canvas of naked men and women making love was then unveiled above the shelter, and soon after, the recorded screams of women joined the acoustic assault.

A long cannon — actually a German V-1 jet pulse engine — came out, shooting flames and smoke, generating explosions that shook the windows of nearby office buildings and wrecking the set.

By the end of the performance, the human figures were crushed and the balloon and shelter were on fire. A San Francisco fire engine arrived to put out the flames.

"Looked like a bunch of death and destruction to me," said Carl

A critic's view
Of the performance art
SEE DATEBOOK, Page E1

Kirby, a Pacific Gas and Electric Co. worker across the street. "I can't believe they couldn't come up with something better. That's pretty modern, I have to give them that."

"I thought it was pretty heavy with sexual metaphors," said Larry Altvater, 32, an artist who lives in the Mission District.

Pauline himself said that the purpose of the performance was to "create... hallucination in broad daylight for a few minutes" and contrast a "barely controlled kind of anarchy" with the typically rational and orderly atmosphere of downtown.

The Fire Department was not amused. Captain John Drocco of the Bureau of Fire Prevention cited Pauline with a \$60 ticket for creating a fire hazard with the jet engine.

Museum Dedicates Site With a Bang

Performance art makes statement at ceremony for Modern building

By Kenneth Baker
Chronicle Art Critic

Physical danger to invited guests is not on the agenda of most institutions' groundbreaking ceremonies. So give the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art credit for jazzing up what might have been a very staid occasion yesterday with plenty of flame, nerve-shattering noise and good old-fashioned litigation liability.

Or blame it, if you happen to feel that explosions, raunchy imagery and visceral fear have no place in museum festivities.

In a daring move that seems to have come off harmlessly, SFMOMA hired Survival Research Laboratories to stage a machine performance to mark groundbreaking for the museum's new permanent quarters, a \$60 million structure to be built on Third Street.

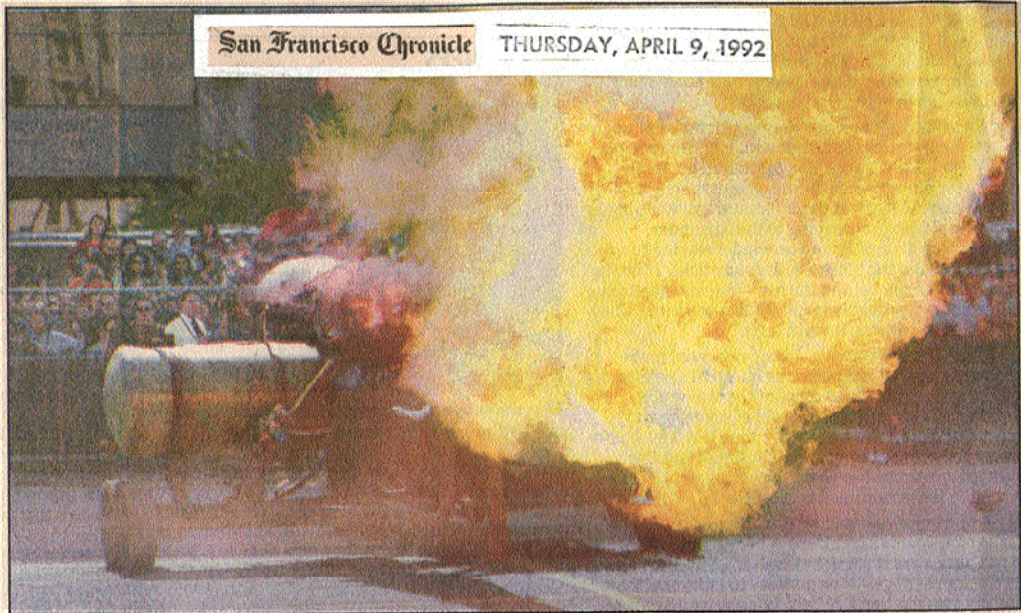
Spectacle Specialists

SRL is a local team of guerrilla inventors headed by Mark Pauline. They specialize in public spectacles in which remote-controlled machines clash violently, with uncertain risks to audience and crew alike.

People are drawn to SRL's performances as to a big fire or the scene of an accident, hankering for experience that seems more real than regular life, while taking guilty pleasure in not being its victims. One of Pauline's aims is to confront people with the violence implicit in a high-tech world and their secret attraction to it. Whether to call what SRL does art, he says, is not his problem.

The event's decorous artistic undercard consisted of shoveling in a symbolic crescent-shaped trench dug in the asphalt by San Francisco conceptual artist David Ireland.

Outside the fence were SRL's main



BY FREDERIC LARSON/THE CHRONICLE

Mark Pauline's fire-breathing machine art was set off at the Museum of Modern Art groundbreaking yesterday

constituents in studded leather and multicolored hair. And there were even more earplugs than nose rings in evidence: the real tip-off that this was SRL's crowd.

Finally, after SFMOMA director Jack Lane had cited Baudelaire's call for a "gritty urban art," and architect Mario Botto had blessed the site, Pauline's machines cranked into action with a bang.

As in all SRL events, many things went on at once, though the program was said to be an allegory of predators and victims.

Flames and Blasts

Preying on the nerves and eardrums of everyone present were the frighteningly mobile flame-throwing cannon and a companion sonic boomer whose intermittent blasts caused the plate glass windows in the adjacent

Wells Fargo building to throb visibly.

While the flamethrower careened around the middle of the asphalt lot, other contraptions — a multi-legged thing with a long metal arm, a wheeled pair of giant pincers, a sort of mortar that spat molten metal — assailed ram-

More on Museum Groundbreaking

SEE MAIN NEWS, PAGE A1.

shackle structures of cardboard and sheet metal.

Meanwhile, hydraulic devices shook loose from tall poles swathes of blue plastic that had veiled a sort of portable mural of an orgy.

The whole thing ended, not surprisingly, with an out-of-control fire, which a team of blase firefighters (SRL's severest critics) soon arrived to quell.

When a forklift came into play to

contain some of the burning wreckage, only the fact that SRL hadn't manufactured it made the forklift seem out of place.

Typically, this SRL piece seemed to consist of elaborately turning one kind of mess into another.

Attention Getter

The SRL event served its purpose for SFMOMA: it was nothing if not an attention getter. And it offered in spades the sense of contained emergency that much so-called avant-garde art aspires to.

But it is depressing to see a major museum — and art itself (if you count SRL's stuff) — competing for media flash with "Alien 3," the Space Shuttle launch and the Third World atrocity of the day.

All of which left me asking: Whose desperation is it, anyway?

Performance Art Outlaws Shake Up Museum Do

By DAVID LITTLEJOHN

San Francisco
Having raised \$80 million (of a projected \$85 million) in less than three years, the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art decided to break ground for its stunning new quarters — the first building in this country designed by the Italian-Swiss architect Mario Botta — earlier this month. Museum trustees and other donors, local politicians and perhaps a thousand invited guests gathered in a parking lot south of Market Street at the site of the new museum to trade gossip, show off their clothes, tans and hairstyles (all remarkably alike) and listen to speeches. Surrounded by a horde of photographers, they then helped dig David Ireland's ground-breaking trench, which will end up a work of art itself. (Cement will be poured in the final hole, then extracted after it has hardened — like that for a dental filling — as a sort of archaeological mold of the site's past.)

The guests crowded under a white marquee to eat Marriott Hotel goodies off of memorial Frisbees imprinted "Dig It," and drink hundreds of bottles of a special Brut champagne produced by Gloria Ferrer for the occasion, with a label designed by Mr. Botta.

Most memorably, they were given a performance by the city's best-known cyberpunk performance art outlaws, Mark Pauline and the Survival Research Laboratory, in a risky but commendable attempt by an establishment institution to embrace a genuinely modern, dangerous and defiant kind of art.

Celebs on the raised platform had a good view of the event, as did bank employees plastered against their shaking windows in a high-rise to the south, and construction workers standing on the steel framing of a new theater rising to the west. A mob of streetwise SRL fans pressed eight deep against the fence surrounding the

show: those in front, who had begun gathering early, had the best view of all. Most of us had to make do with glimpses over many heads of a nude orgy scene painted on a high billowing backdrop, large soft wobbling constructions that eventually burned or fell down, the tops of strange humanoid machines, great balls of fire and jets of sparks and green stuff, and a cacophony of amplified noises impossible to describe (sirens, screams, explosions, music, voices), including earthshaking booms that rattled one's skull and bones.

Eight days after the event, Mr. Pauline and his co-conspirators confronted their true constituency: several hundred young people dressed in various shades of black, jammed into an art deco nightclub just around the corner from the site. Here, between green-beam laser shows and thunder-rock music, unreeled a video of SRL's museum ground-breaking performance, for the benefit of those (like me) who had actually seen very little of it, beyond leaping flames and poisonous smoke.

The flames came for the most part from a genuine loose cannon, a remote-controlled gun that rolled around the site breathing bursts of fire, and occasionally destroying other things. The sonic booms came from an engine of NASA origin (75 kilowatts of continuous power, with instant pulses up to 200 kw.).

Another piece of artillery, converted from a Japanese ship propulsion device — which Mr. Pauline calls a snot gun — exploded lumps of green methyl cellulose and sent them flying in huge arcs across the lot. An electromagnetic rail gun vaporized metal bars and shot out the resultant sparks at 200 mph, to set fire to or detonate other things. All the while a six-legged, 20-foot-long lobsterlike "running machine" was crawling and swiveling about on its own. Intelligent garbage cans, programmed to behave like bees or ants, rolled around and communicated with each

other. Mobile machines with serrated jaws or crablike claws tore pieces out of their fellow constructions. "Virtual reality" goggles enabled operators to see from the point of view of their distant machines — including a high-pressure air launcher gun designed to fire paint and plaster projectiles. In the end, with city firemen pouring out their hoses on the apparent chaos, the softer parts of the display were burned up or demolished. The durable SRL constructions will be refined for reuse, with other members of this extraordinary family of machines.

Partly because few of the champagne-sipping spectators inside the fence could see the event as well as the locals outside, or the bank and construction workers

may have been no more than a jolt for the jaded tastes of all those impeccably coiffed museum people, many of whom may still be asking, "But is it art?" and trying to get rid of the ringing in their ears.

But anything that allows Mark Pauline and his co-workers to create bigger and better machine monsters and parking-lot spectacles is to be praised.

Meanwhile, over at the old San Francisco Museum of Modern Art on the top two floors of a 1932 *beaux-arts* building in Civic Center, with half the gallery space that Mr. Botta's new palazzo will have, most of one floor is currently given over to an overly comprehensive retrospective of the paintings of Stuart Davis, which opened at the Metropolitan Museum in New York in November, and, reduced from 175 to 144 works, will remain here until June 7.

Art

Mark Pauline and

The Survival Research Laboratory

higher up (they could hear it well enough), and partly because it represented only a tiny fraction of what SRL can accomplish, I'm not sure that San Francisco's modern-art patrons got a sufficiently clear idea of one of the most consistently inventive and self-assured creators in their midst. A witty, attractive, intelligent fellow of 38 (part of whose right hand was blown off during one of his experiments 10 years ago), Mr. Pauline and his fellow mad mechanics have devoted themselves through 13 years and 42 shows to a unique and awesome mixture of Star Wars technology, ingenious mechanical creatures, layers of provocative anti-establishment statement (which goes down well here, less well elsewhere), war-aping near-death thrills, and occasional gross kicks. (Piles of food and dead animal parts feature in some of their shows.) This latest sign of their acceptance

Mr. Littlejohn is a novelist, critic and professor of journalism at the University of California, Berkeley.

Put 'Artists' in Jail

Editor — On CNN just now was a story about your city's art museum sponsoring some "performance art" — mechanical beasts belching smoke and flames.

We are still laughing. On the other hand we feel sorry for the residents of San Francisco in whose name such chicanery is perpetrated in the name of art. Who

ever sponsored that ridiculous exhibition should be fined under California's very stringent pollution laws. That is the best that can be said for what you poor people have been once again duped into paying for.

In Florida we call it fraud, not art, and we put them in jail.

W.J. (Bill) Scallan
Orange Park, Florida

The Chronicle welcomes letters from readers. Letters are subject to condensation. They must include signature, valid mailing address and telephone number. Mail to:

Letters to the Editor, San Francisco Chronicle
901 Mission Street, San Francisco, CA 94103

SUNDAY, AUGUST 26, 1990

The Washington Post

Show

The Power of the Mean Machines

The World According to San Francisco's Survival Research Laboratories

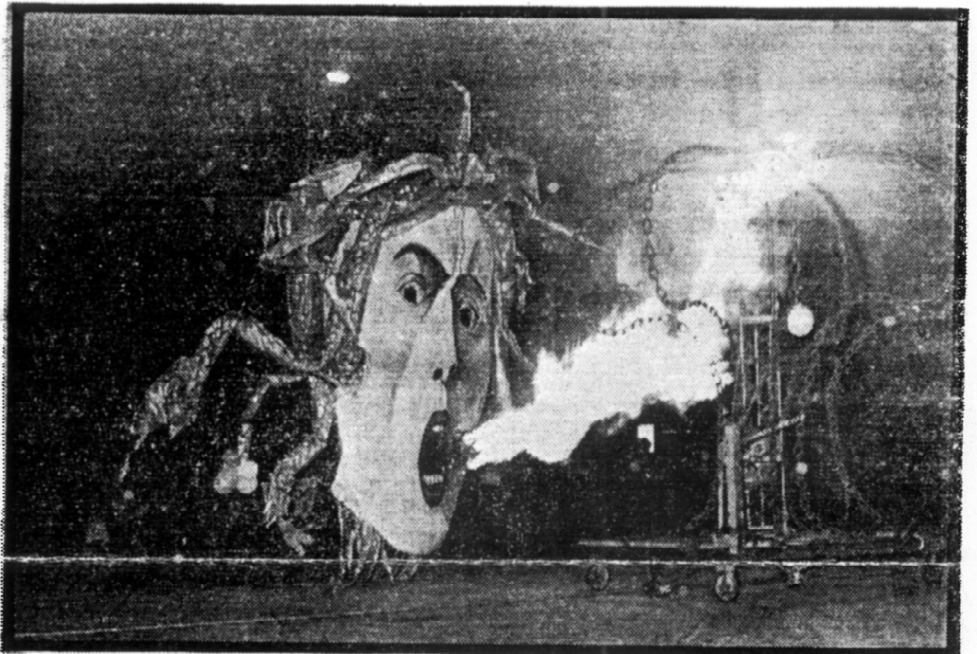
By John Voelcker
Special to The Washington Post

The members of the industrial performance-art collective Survival Research Laboratories are used to trouble. Fire marshals try to cancel their performances, activists charge them with cruelty to animals and mutilation of their carcasses, and spectators sometimes suffer minor shrapnel injuries at their shows. And now they are conservative commentator Pat Buchanan's "Outrage of the Week."

The latest bout of trouble started earlier this month, when David P. Midland, president of Artpark, canceled an SRL show scheduled to take place in the Lewiston, N.Y., state park on Sept. 1. Midland said Robert Wadlinger, the Lewiston town supervisor, had alerted him to a provocative SRL poster that requested the donation of Bibles to be burned as part of the show and that suggested donors steal them from hotels or churches. The Bibles were to cover a "love goddess machine," like tiles on a space shuttle, and the goddess machine would be involved in fiery battles.

Mark Pauline, SRL's artistic director and founder, says Midland knew all along that SRL shows were controversial, and that Artpark staff members were aware more than three weeks before the cancellation that Bibles covering one machine would be incinerated as part of the show. Midland had denied this earlier in announcing the cancellation. Because SRL designed its event specifically to "create the ultimate nightmare for the religious right wing," Pauline charges, Midland succumbed to the intolerance of local right-wing religious groups rather than back SRL's artists in making what Pauline calls their "collaborative mischief."

SRL intended the Artpark event—like previous shows—to make the audience rethink its relationship to the commonplace, especially tech-



A fiery display by Survival Research Laboratories.

nology. SRL's small installations and its large shows, in which remote-controlled robotic machines engage in epic battles while menacing the audience, are the real world as Pauline sees it: a menacing place where commonly accepted technologies enforce terror, familiar symbols inspire strife and machines are the masters, with humans their subjects.

Pauline has several answers to questions of the "Why do you do what you do?" variety: Because he wants to challenge audience's view of technology and to society's symbols. Because no one else is. And because he thinks they should.

"I like to take pieces of technology and twist them to other uses," Pauline says. "It makes me

happy to realize that what I'm doing with expensive electronics and aerospace components is exactly the opposite of what they were designed to do."

But with the increasing scrutiny of publicly funded art, Pauline deliberately set out to "really stir things up this summer," as he says he told Artpark. He says he feels his duty is to "create situations where people see things that are radically at odds with the status quo." The canceled show, he says, was an attempt to "go on the offensive and get at the hypocrisy of [those in power] by making mischief on a mass scale."

See SRL, G6, Col. 5

The Art Of SRL

SRL, From G1

In 1978, Sarasota, Fla.-raised Pauline came out of art school, worked for the military as a machinist for a while and then moved to San Francisco, where he started vandalizing billboards as a means of social commentary. The most noticed was a U.S. Army recruiting sign whose slogan, "We'll pay you to learn a skill," Pauline had changed to "We'll pay you to kill."

SRL's first show, "Machine Sex," was performed in February 1979 at a Chevron gas station. It involved a handful of pigeon corpses, a few small machines and accompanying music based on Camus's "The Stranger."

The shows gradually got bigger, and Pauline was joined for several years by collaborators Matt Heckert, beginning in 1981, and Eric Werner, beginning in 1982. The group videotaped its performances to document and advertise them. The tapes were carefully edited, but nothing that happened during shows was censored. This tended to preclude funding from mainstream arts organizations, which were often repulsed or baffled by what they saw. Even when SRL did get grants, curators were understandably apprehensive.

Last year, for instance, visitors to a small SRL installation at San Francisco's ArtSpace passed through Pauline's vision of an "interactive hell." He designed it, he said, as "a very unpleasant place for humans to be." Viewers walked into an environment of industrial noise, concussive shock waves and randomly flashing lights and images. A 50-foot section of the catwalk on which they stood separated, pitching and rolling, and moving its occupants toward a huge carriage rolling on a parallel track. A baton at the end of a single, articulated metal finger reached to within inches of viewers' faces. Throughout the performance the machines moved in response to random computer commands triggered by sensors in the space. One woman was slightly hurt by the baton (although

Pauline notes no injured spectator has ever sued SRL).

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SRL appropriated its name from an ad that Pauline saw once in the back of *Soldier of Fortune* magazine. Based in a huge machine shop in a grungy industrial section of San Francisco (the shop is also Pauline's home), SRL's most common works are enormous shows in which a variety of automated robotic machines interact, usually among flames, explosions and the destruction of elaborate sets.

For instance, a May 1989 show in San Francisco, "Illusions of Shameless Abundance Degenerating Into an Uninterrupted Sequence of Hostile Encounters"—a typical SRL title—lasted an hour and attracted a paid audience of 2,500, as well as 1,500 onlookers beyond a cyclone fence.

Disconcertingly cheerful Sousa marches set the mood, interspersed with fragments of actual cellular telephone conversations, both recorded and intercepted live, blaring over a dozen speakers. The sound of V-8 motors starting up drew cheers, but audience noise was soon lost in the din.

In the distance, a four-legged form slowly lurched forward, exuding bursts of flame. Wheeled and legged machines came to life, engines roaring or electric motors whining.

The machines rumbled among hanging cornucopias of rotting fish and vegetables, huge platters of foodstuffs, and animal carcasses attached to pillars. Eventually they turned on each other, enacting mechanical dramas of greed, conflict and combat. By the end of the performance, the asphalt was strewn with wasted "food," smoking ruins and the burned, skeletal figures of the machines that had "lived" there.

Onlookers drifted past to stare at the wreckage, their ears ringing from the roar of unmuffled engines and the hundreds of shock waves emitted by a six-barreled electric cannon. Some compared notes on what they'd just seen. Others just looked stunned.

Like many SRL shows, the event caused an uproar. San Francisco authorities—by then familiar with SRL—anticipated the explosions, the flamethrower and the animal carcasses. And they ignored the burning tower of pianos, the machine that sprayed the crowd with pulverized fish and the huge spiked claw that menaced the audience while it tore down the scenery.

See SRL, G7, Col. 1

SRL

SRL, From G6

The TNT was the trouble: hundreds of olive-green cardboard cylinders about 5 inches by 3 inches, with printed messages saying, "High Explosive—½ pound of TNT." During the show, a machine was supposed to drop them near the crowd into a pool of fire where they would be destroyed. Instead, the cylinders were scattered over the ground. Afterward, crowd members ventured onto the charred site and picked up the cardboard cylinders.

The next day, the cylinders showed up all over the Bay Area: alongside major highways, under bridges, in automated-teller machines. The San Francisco police closed the Great Highway next to Ocean Beach after some were seen on the shoulder. More were found at the base of the Golden Gate Bridge and near the Interstate-80 overpass where the show was held.

The little canisters, however, were not TNT. Despite the realistic fuses sticking out the end, they were filled with plaster.

The group has also been frequently criticized for its use of animal carcasses in some shows. An Arizona newspaper once headlined a story about one of SRL's videos "Animal Mutilation Show." Actually, the carcasses SRL uses come from slaughterhouses, the mummified animals from train tunnels.

Dozens of volunteers collectively execute Pauline's visions through dirty, exhausting and sometimes hazardous work. The eclectic group ranges from leather-clad punks to Silicon Valley engineers in running shoes. All are united by the shared excitement of creating events that—to say the least—make most of the rest of the world very nervous.

Their size, complexity and danger make SRL events expensive to stage. SRL members are volunteers who work on individual shows and admission fees of \$6 or \$8 per person cover only some of the costs. Pauline and his associates support themselves by doing custom machine fabrication work, accepting lecture fees they are offered and improvising for materials and living expenses. SRL has been rejected numerous times for NEA grants. And fees they receive go toward rent for the shop, food for volunteers and ex-

penses associated with construction—although Pauline admits that SRL does pay for one \$10 dinner a week for him. Often, even paying for the crew's food is a problem, and volunteers bring their own tools—and sleep under SRL shipping trailers.

Then where do all those electronics and aircraft-quality components come from? Pauline and the rest of the group just smile. "We have friends," he says, adding the group also practices "aggressive scrounging."

Volunteers' motivations differ. Jonathan Levine, a freelance computer engineer from Calgary, Alberta, travels to San Francisco and lives with the group for several weeks before each show. He says SRL is the best application of the technology he spends his life with.

"Look at the current state of the electronics industry," Levine says. "The ones who make the most money are largely defense-driven. To me, it's highly unethical to use this technology in that manner. I want to make people think about [the technology] they're seeing and what it's doing to them.

"Also there's the collective nature of the shows. It's a loosely driven group of volunteers, and that affects the way people work—I can have a significant input into the design and the final outcome of the show.

"People call the shows militaristic, but that's the furthest thing from the truth. We may put on a pretense of a threat, but we have no intention of hurting people. We just want to see how far they'll go to protect themselves."

For Rick Rees, formerly a software engineer at Bell Northern Research, a Palo Alto, Calif., research and development facility, "the shows make people take responsibility for themselves. At a certain point, the show gets completely out of control, or people think it has. Someone who expected to be entertained, the next thing they know, they're just trying to save themselves from a machine that seems like it's about to decapitate them.

"It makes people view the world differently."

Pauline himself thinks "SRL fills a very apparent lack, by fighting what seems like a conspiracy to make this world less interesting. Society seems determined to stamp out unusual experiences on every level, but we're a way to keep people vigorous, by providing experiences they can't get anywhere else. Interesting things are proscribed all over; they're disappearing so fast that the whole world seems like it's one big corporate buyout.

"We're not corporate," he adds unnecessarily.

Is it art? That depends whom you ask. To Bob Riley, curator of media arts at the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art, the answer is unequivocally yes.

"SRL has inherited a serious mission and contributes significantly to issues of 'authorized' and 'unauthorized' art," he says. "These are not housebroken artists, and their refusal to be 'paper-trained' points up the oppressive attitudes of the Establishment [art world]."

Politics, theater, technology, ideology and engineering, says Riley, have always intersected in performance art. SRL predecessors, Riley says, include Provo, an anarchist-performance group centered in Amsterdam. In the 1960s, Provo presented street theater that dissolved any distinction between performers and ordinary citizens. Its spontaneous pieces, including mock assassinations, got performance art banned from Amsterdam for years.

Surprisingly, the Artpark controversy seems to have invigorated Pauline at the same time it has exasperated him. SRL has filed for a federal court injunction in Albany, N.Y., to force Artpark to reinstate the canceled show, he says. He is receiving letters of support from artists all over the country, and he intends to continue confronting "the right-wingers in power" who have mounted what he terms a broad-scale attack on artists.

"I had an idea for the next show," he muses. "We could invited every major right-wing organization, give them a sound system that'd punch through everything else, and let them say anything they wanted, from this obscenely ornate pedestal or podium. I think it'd be great to have those words, those positions, those arguments booming out during an SRL show."

More generally, Pauline says, SRL will continue its quest for "mischief on a mass scale" simply because "it's important to ridicule" society's assumptions and the attitudes of those in power.

"Any artist worth their salt should be doing that today, more than ever," he says quietly. "If they're not, then they're not functioning in society in the way that artists should function."

John Voelcker is a writer who lives in New York City. He has worked in two Survival Research Laboratories shows, one there and one in San Francisco.