

THE KITCHEN

VIDEO

MUSIC

DANCE

PERFORMANCE FILM

512 West 19th St. (Btwn 10th & 11th Aves) New York, NY 10011

Reservations: 255-5793

★ NEW YORK CITY ★ MAY 1988 ★ \$1.95 ★

TECHNOLOGY

Words cannot really do justice to the awesome anarchistic spectacle of Survival Research Laboratories. You just have to go and experience their hellish, mechanical nightmare for yourself. SRL salvages discarded industrial heavy machinery and reconstructs it into massive kinetic monsters, often weighing thousands of pounds and standing up to 40 feet tall. Masters of pyrotechnics, their shows simulate violence and the politics of power. This show, co-sponsored by Creative Time, The Kitchen and the New Museum is bound to be one of the most controversial, mind-bending, gut-wrenching rituals of the post-industrial age.

To psychically prepare you for the sheer physical and mental onslaught of SRL's fire-breathing, pavement-pounding, flesh-ripping, saw buzzing, metal monsters, we called up the group's leader, Mark Pauline, in his unearthy factory of fear in San Francisco and talked with him about his plans for the group's first major New York performance to be held in the Shea Stadium parking lot May 17th.

Carlo McCormick: I like the way that not all the machines work just how you want them to work all the time. There's something poetic about what doesn't quite work. How do you feel about the element of failure in SRL?

Mark Pauline: I think it's a significant consideration, but it's an ancillary one. It's OK if it doesn't work as a small percentage of the whole event, but ultimately failure is failure. It accumulates in the system just like other poisons, and at a certain point it destroys what you're trying to do. I see it as inevitable whenever you're trying to do anything as complicated, as hard, as technical and as bulky as what we're working with. We've been able at SRL to encapsulate it in a system that doesn't make it look too bad when it happens, where it looks like part of the show as opposed to the way NASA looked when the space shuttle blew up. Failure is not part of their subtext.

C.M.: SRL strikes a peculiar balance between sheer spectacle and sensationalist entertainment and an undercurrent of political and social subversiveness.

M.P.: Politics doesn't have to be the dull, dreary experience that it is now. It's a matter of inferring meaning by taking the rhetoric and reorienting it to the reality of the situation. Real politics is about lies, and understanding

it is about dealing with how people lie and what they're trying to say. Creatively it's a boring and self-contradictory exercise to make straight-forward, dogmatic political statements in your art. We try to make our commentary interesting, threatening and intense. To keep the audience's attention the entertainment has to come above the politics. But you want to make people consider wider implications about how fucked up everything is.

C.M.: What are the roots of your gnarly, mutant machine aesthetic? I think of nihilism, science fiction—especially J.G. Ballard, industrial noise music, heavy metal and punk.

M.P.: Those are phrases that in their time were all very exciting. I was always trying to get involved in cultural phenomena that are on the edge somehow. I've been too much of a follower, but I've at least tried to be aware of and understand these things. I've gotten involved in so many stupid scenes since the age of 11 it makes me sick to think about it. In literature, of course, Ballard and Burroughs have been a major influence on me. Much of what SRL is about stems from the fact that I'm a member of a really privileged class in this country. I'm a white male. I was brought up with that attitude that you can do anything and it can mean anything.

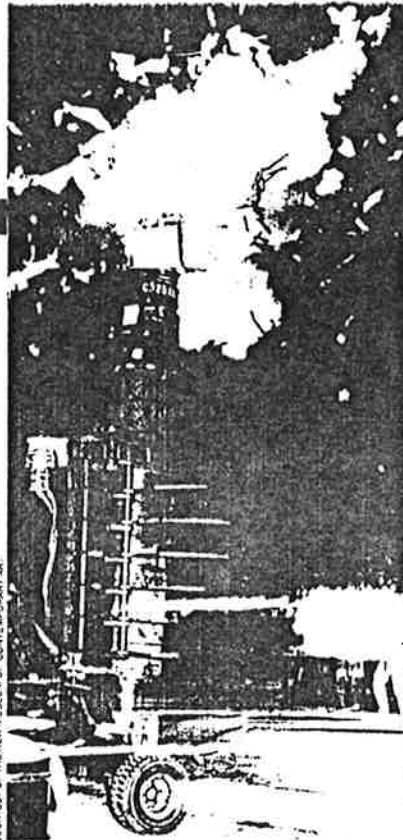
C.M.: Don't you feel constraints? As extreme as SRL is, are you not held back by finances, legalities and even an inner sense of discretion or morality?

M.P.: Those restraints are in your head. I try not to do things that make me look foolish, like biting the head off a chicken. It was interesting what C. Carr wrote in her Village Voice review of Research's Pranks book.

C.M.: Where she pointed out that everyone in it was white and Karen Finley was the only woman.

M.P.: Because white guys are the only people under the impression that they can do anything. At least the people in that book are doing it in a subverted way, in kind of a way that any underclass person can relate to. They strike back in a way that everyone who's fucked over would like to. At that stage it's a contradiction in terms because the only people that can encompass doing that are the privileged people that don't have so much to complain about to begin with.

C.M.: You have a rather ambivalent relationship to art, almost love/hate.



COURTESY OF THE NEW MUSEUM OF CONTEMPORARY ART

Survival of the illest

Survival Research Laboratory comes into town for a Shea Stadium blowout.



M.P.: I'm certainly delighted with all the help the art world has given, they are the only people who've really helped. There's a lot of things about the art world that I'm really embarrassed about and that may be why I don't want to be considered part of it. It's like working for Hewlett-Packard, saying you're a scientist, but when someone says, "you're working on defense contracts and you're involved in technology that's going to kill people," of course, you're going to lie and disassociate yourself in some way and be very embarrassed. I feel the same way about art. SRL is about trying to maintain an uncategorizable status in any way. One should always resist and deny the easy categorizations others try to impose on you.

C.M.: What are the many facets of the SRL enigma? You have a definite corporate feel.

M.P.: That's what it's all about. SRL is about taking the advantages and the privileges that the corporations have enjoyed and used to destroy and much money from everything around them. We take the techniques that they use and turn them towards something a little different that works just as well but for totally different purposes. How else can creative people get access to any really powerful tools with no constraints on them without forming an organization? SRL is about providing a place for people interested in using these industrial toys. There are about 40 or 50 people who come by here all the time to help out, when they want to hang stuff out on these giant tools. We're relegated to very crude equipment because that's all we can get. It's industrial equipment for the most part, the stuff that essentially built up the economic base of this country. These are powerful, intense devices that you can magnify your reach with, so to say. Maybe SRL can make a case for the creative use of defense technologies and start siphoning off funds that would otherwise go to war-making. War is becoming obsolete now. It's more the people want to play with their toys because the toys are so much more interesting than all the people they spend their lives meeting. Everyone wants the computers and the VCRs because they are so much more fun than anybody else. Finally technology has reached a point where it makes life worth happening, like the way for an awful lot of people drugs and alcohol make a party worth happening. I think art's going to be

the next slush fund when the defense industry collapses, they're going to have to find something for all these scientists to do. It's going to be in the entertainment industry with all these very costly, complex spectacles.

C.M.: What is the nature of violence in your art?

M.P.: It's cartoon violence. It's like watching a cartoon character fall ten miles down and get flattened like a pancake. He'll just pop back and be OK except for some dirt on him and that disappears in the next frame. I think it's more thought-provoking than seeing someone get snuffed on Miami Vice. Cartoon violence provokes a lot more consideration about what violence is really about. We repackage violence in a way that you can really look at it, without the emotional distraction of it involving people.

C.M.: You often reanimate and abuse dead animals in your show. Is that a distraction?

M.P.: I don't think so. I think it's something that pulls people into the work. We're anesthetized to human violence. People care more about animals, even dead animals, and what they do to animals much more than they care about what they do to each other. I find that adding a flourish of dead meat here and there keeps people from getting too comfortable with the entertainment.

C.M.: Can you talk a bit about your New York show?

M.P.: I don't have a title yet but it's going to be about the way you feel when you have to make a decision about something and there's 10 million things that you have to look at over and over again. You know, can't see the forest for the trees. We're going to make an artificial forest out there. Maybe we'll even do the scene from Bambi when the forest burns down. It's going to be about the way that having to do that all the time makes you feel sick. It's connected to how all these natural mechanisms that are built into the human mind are getting twisted and subverted by the way that people live now in a complicated culture. It's going to be a folksy sort of theme, how we're going to get out of the woods. If you have trees, of course, there's going to be the forbidden fruit. We're going to have something like having your head in the sand, and of course, we're going to have herds of grazing animals. Those are some of the things you can expect to see.

★ Carlo McCormick