

MACHINE DREAMS

Survival Research Laboratories' Heavy Metal

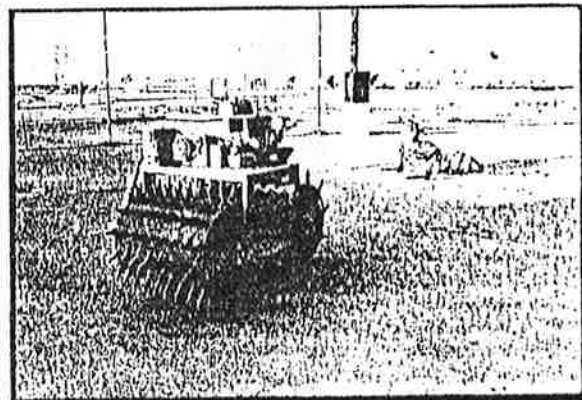
AFTER TWO YEARS of false starts and close calls, Survival Research Laboratories' first full-scale performance has made it to New York. The San Francisco-based performance group, renowned for spectacles built around the interactions of what they call "menacingly reconstructed industrial or scientific equipment," creates big loud ugly events presented as "socio-political satire." Anyone who has seen SRL shows can vouch that they resemble *Road Warrior* set pieces staged by Grand Guignol grease monkeys.

The baroque hyperbole that surrounds the group (helped along by such titles as "A Cruel and Relentless Plot 'b Pervert the Flesh of Beasts to Unholy Uses") has inspired a goosey press that mimics and inflates the apocalyptic pose: "Sirens screamed," one journalist wrote of an SRL event, "I watched mechanically re-animated animal carcasses perform a bizarre ballet before they got shredded by terrifying monster machines. Fire and poisonous fumes were everywhere. Killer vehicles roaring through unleashed flames... sadistic humanoid robots destroying each other mercilessly... glass exploding... blood spurting... rockets."

In actuality, SRL events tend to horri- less than unnerve. They're louder than

mud-bog races, and glass does explode. Fire and fumes are everywhere. Robots loom. But the terror they provoke is mostly relative to your nearness to the apparatus and familiarity with the exits. (At a 1986 Seattle performance I attended, a robotic vehicle with snapping pinners "engaged" the audience by lunging at the front row.) The satire can be diffuse: SRL's manifesto sternly claims that the pieces "feature no human performers whatsoever." Yet, as the artists load artillery, manipulate the lurching machines, set off the Shock Wave Cannon, and expose themselves to the dangerous display, their presence and vulnerability come to seem central to the purpose. SRL's founders do nothing to discourage the usual critical epithet of "totalitarian art" or their doomy Kafkaesque image of flesh-threshing madmen in a thrall. But the violent waltzes they choreograph with the refuse of postindustrial America have a distinctly elegiac tang: machine dreams.

It's not all heavy metal, however. In a 1985 Los Angeles performance entitled "Extremely Cruel Practices; A Series of Events Designed 'b Instruct Those Interested in Policies 'That Correct or Punish," two machines played tug-of-war with a pig carcass until it split and splattered the audience with guts—the Peckinpah factor. "We put our anger into the performances to confront people with their own worst fears," SRL's founder, Mark Pauline, says, although this isn't exactly the response SRL provokes.



In a fenced section of the parking lot at Shea Stadium on a bright Thursday, Mark Pauline is taking a motorized monster for a test walk. "Pretty neat," a bystander says of the Inchworm, a car-sized black vehicle with a hydraulic strut that bristles articulated claws. Pauline is wearing dirty work clothes and holding the radio-machine controls in his good left hand. The other was blown off several years ago when a detonator he was building accidentally exploded. Surgeons managed to reconstruct two workable digits using Pauline's toes. Typically, he blames the mishap not on the hypervolatile rocket fuel he'd handled, but on his own attitude of feverish hubris. "Up until then I'd always been close to accidents,

**SPIKE
ROLLER
(FOREGROUND)
WITH
SNEAKY
SOLDIER**

CONTINUED ON PAGE 20

BY GUY TREBAY

the village **VOICE**

CONTINUED FROM PAGE 19
but I'd never gotten hurt."

MARK PAULINE GREW UP in Florida, a gun-happy adolescent, car thief, and committed member of the Puckers Island Gang. As a kid, he once used an acetylene torch to melt off the top of a shatterproof gumball machine. He attended art school in Florida, moved to the Bay Area in the 1970s, and formed Survival Research Laboratories in 1978 (later joined by Matt Heckert and Eric Werner). The name came from the back pages of *Soldier of Fortune*. "Some defunct company. I never saw the ad again." He lives in a factory in an industrial district of San Francisco with his 150 machines.

Pauline buzzes the Inchworm back and forth through an oil slick near the trailer that transported SRL across country. There are cables looped neatly on the ground, and a blue tarp strung from the truck to shade the crew's lunch. Pauline holds the radio control in his left hand and pokes at the controls. Matt Heckert rides his bike in nervous circles waiting for an assistant to return with canisters of diesel. The rest of the 15-member crew sets up machines and props for Tuesday's show (which will have happened by the time you read this), a combined strategic effort of Creative Time, the Kitchen, and the New Museum.

"This is all being done in a rush," says Pauline, after shutting off the Inchworm. The problems of coaxing city bureaucrats to permit a spectacle that might involve live explosives, dead animals, human prostheses, and open flames were unexpectedly settled last month. "We waited a long time for a site and suddenly they called us and said it was on," says Pauline. Leaning on the chain-link fence, he adds, "We haven't slept much. We wanted to do it in a leisurely way, but they got the okay for the site and it was time."

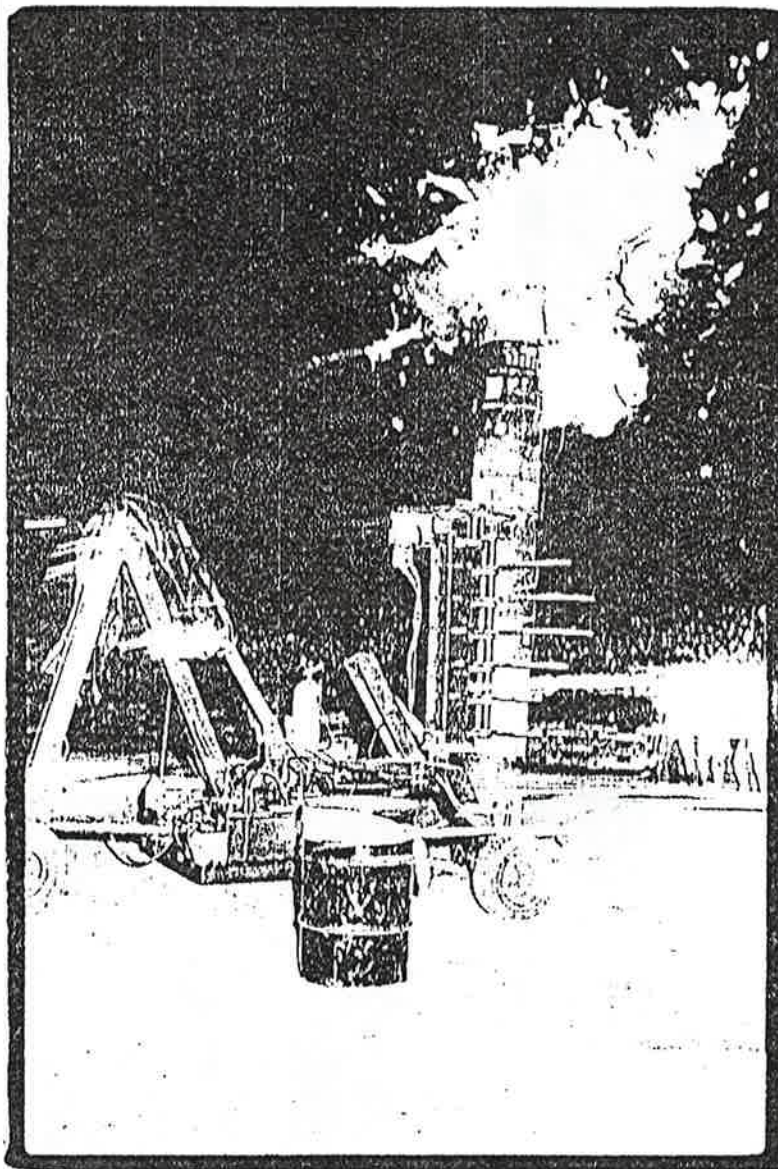
Although worn, Pauline talks about Survival Research Lab with the fervid tone of someone possessed: "Originally we were supposed to appear at Hunters Point, but that never got past the conceptual stage. The pier next to the *Intrepid* was our next site and for a while that actually looked like it was going to happen. Ultimately they were afraid. The foundation is just wood pilings, and they were worried about the weight. That show was set for September and they canceled at the last minute.

"This show is titled 'Misfortunes of Desire,' with the qualifier line, 'Acted Out at an Imaginary Location Symbolizing Everything Worth Having.' It's sort of

SRL's *Paradise Lost*. We're creating an oasis in the parking lot here with a watering hole. We're using parts of trees, oaks mainly, wired together to look like palms, and painted. We're putting a flower garden in front. We've got a thousand wood sash windows that we'll use to build skyscrapers, and hundreds of barrels that we're welding together into big rings called the 'Wheels of Misfortune.' Suspended in the middle will be eight-foot

anthropomorphic figures that we can rig to jerk around.

"The flamethrower we use now is more powerful than the old one. It burns diesel, so it's safe, but it's capable of producing a 100-foot flame. That's Matt Heckert's toy. The Inchworm moves like a big ant. It can dig or lift stuff or move itself in circles. The Catapult will be used to launch leaflet bombs, with appropriate messages for the crowd. And the new



INCHWORM AND EXPLODING EGG MAN

ADAMS MCGANDLESS

Wave Cannon is more scientific than our old one. It funnels the explosion to create a column of standing air. It really shakes things around, blows out windows.

"The new cannon is computer-timed for six explosions a second. The other had a high explosive charge and had to be set off manually. In the heat of a show, it was a problem to get close and keep setting it off. We also have a big hook that propels itself end over end by its covers. I wanted to get giant photo blowups to put on the covers, but we just ran out of cash.

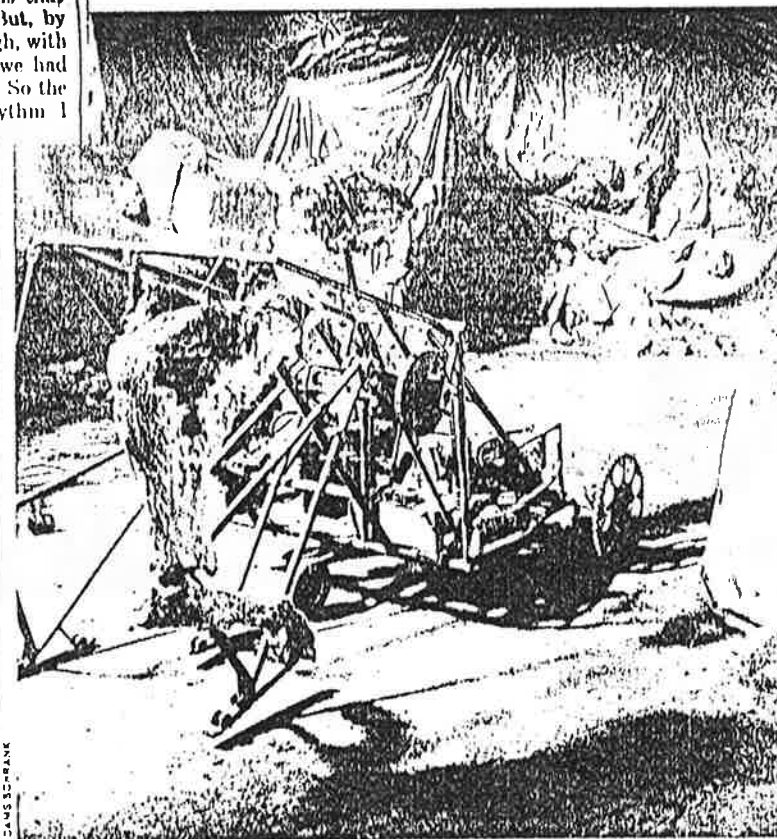
"The show will be about 45 minutes, as usual. We've worked a lot on creating an active ebb and flow of the energy, a chaos that builds and falls. We've been getting a lot more high-tech help now from disaffected military types and techies from Silicon Valley—Livermore Labs, Hewlett-Packard, and Bell Northern. With the new level of skill, you can program the machines to perform on their own. The walking machine, for example, doesn't need to be driven anymore: it's got a canned program.

"I've gotten to the point where I don't want to run the machines as much. I want them to express themselves, to create a wider range of active possibility. When we were relegated to a fixed script, there was less chaotic potential. It made the experience less intense. Now, we can establish a hypnotic rhythm that comes from there being just enough happening that it's beyond your power to remember. It pulls people into the show.

"Since the Seattle performance in '86 we've done a couple of small shows. Seattle was a disappointment because of last-minute problems. The fire department came down and made us take a lot of the equipment apart. The plywood house was supposed to burn. We were going to fan the flames. We tried to hide things from them, but they came in and followed the lines and said, 'Disconnect that and roll it up.' We had charges we were going to set off. We had the dead chickens that were supposed to be shredded. But, by the time the marshals were through, with 1000 people waiting for a show, we had no time to reconnect all our stuff. So the show didn't have the same rhythm I would have liked.



MARR,
PAULINE
AND
MATT
HECKERT



ALANUS SCORANE

"Since then we've done a demonstration at Stanford. We were speakers at their international design conference; they consider us designers, I guess. We also made a film called *A Bitter Message of Hopeless Grief*. That was a new direction because it allowed us to build an imaginary world for the machines. It was very complete. That's partly what we're attempting here. The machines have become so characterized—maybe too characterized, too defined—that we want to set them in their own world and see what they become.

"SRI has moved increasingly into the arena of military technology. I feel pretty strongly that, in the next years, the importance of the military is going to decline—soon. Partly it's because the technology has become so compelling that it's more fun to play with than use to destroy. Now that we have machines with some of the qualities we enjoy in people, there's less incentive to use them to kill.

"Our purpose is to take these servile mechanisms and see to what practical extent they can expand the parameters of creative imagination. We're adapting the tools of war. Ten years ago this stuff was important, but now it's just industrial junk. We're taking advantage of the simple fact of its obsolescence.

"I'm never happy describing SRI, because it's not about a dogma. It's a loosely organized group of people who feel like they don't completely fit into society. For them, SRI represents an opportunity to follow their real inclinations, and make art in ways that society sanctions or doesn't value at all. We're working toward another way of getting ideas across. I see it as a different kind of theater, a new idiom. Ultimately, how people label the group doesn't matter. To me the perfect audience is 3000 people who come away with 3000 completely different ideas of what happened."