

Article

Survival Research Laboratories: A Dystopian Industrial Performance Art

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Abstract: This paper examines the leading role played by the American mechanical performance group Survival Research Laboratories (SRL) within the field of machine art during the late 1970s and early 1980s, and as organized under the headings of (a) destruction/survival; (b) the cyborg as a symbol of human/machine interpenetration; and (c) biomechanical sexuality. As a manifestation of the era's "industrial" culture, moreover, the work of SRL artists Mark Pauline and Eric Werner was often conceived in collaboration with industrial musicians like Monte Cazazza and Graeme Revell, and all of whom shared a common interest in the same influences. One such influence was the novel *Crash* by English author J. G. Ballard, and which in turn revealed the ultimate direction in which all of these artists sensed society to be heading: towards a world in which sex itself has fallen under the mechanical demiurge.

Keywords: biomechanical sexuality; contemporary art; destruction art; industrial music; industrial culture; J. G. Ballard; machine art; mechanical performance; Survival Research Laboratories; SRL

1. Introduction

If the apparent excesses of Dada have now been recognized as a life-affirming response to the horrors of the First World War, it should never be forgotten that society of the 1960s, 70s, and 80s was laboring under another ominous shadow, and one that was profoundly technological in nature: the threat of nuclear annihilation. Hence, we must give serious consideration to the industrial culture of the 1970s and 80s—and with the word "industrial" implying an intimate, but also wary relationship with technology. In particular, England in the 1970s witnessed the emergence of industrial music bands involved in a counterculture that operated as a platform of exchange between the arts. The visual productions of industrial musicians, who were initially performers, revealed a global artistic phenomenon operating at the intersection of a multitude of media. The industrial movement involved an elaborated thinking between film, graphics, music, performance and video art in an experimental framework, and under the increasing influence of technology. Genesis P-Orridge theorized this movement encapsulated through the slogan "Industrial Music for Industrial People", borrowed from a conversation s/he had with Californian performer Monte Cazazza and then adopted for the band Throbbing Gristle. These artists intended to construct a new model of socialization from within the post-industrial ruins in which they operated. They exploited the decadence of urban landscapes, and created an aesthetic of dystopia, revealing disturbing hybridizations that questioned the negative—but perhaps also inevitable—effects of technology on the human psyche. Through destruction and trauma in art, these artists asserted a resistance to a new form of power that threatened

control over their daily lives, their present, and their future.¹ The idea of “progress” thus became a producer of trauma examined in light of the machines created by the Survival Research Laboratories (SRL): a post-apocalyptic iconography with destruction as its necessary focus. This paper examines how the mechanical performances of this collective have anticipated different contemporary issues about the relationship between men and machines, while referring to specific concepts and references (those formulated by several industrial bands, and by J. G. Ballard).

2. Destruction, Survival, and Robotics

In his work *The Destruction of Art* (Gamboni 1996), Dario Gamboni underlines the fact that the tools chosen for destruction are also the ones used for construction. Ruins constitute an ideal space within which to contemplate the recurring theme of destruction—a subject that had attracted a considerable number of artists by the middle of the 1970s. Art historian Kristin Stiles, focusing on performance art, highlights the fact that “destruction art is exhausting. It requires not only consideration of the most urgent and often overwhelming conditions of life, but also constant vigilance so that the dissociative desires to escape into numbed acquiescence do not prevail.”² An ideal theme having thus been discovered by the industrial music rebellion, there is also a general embrace of the corollary phenomenon of survivalism. According to Stiles, “destruction art bears witness to the tenuous conditionality of survival. [. . .] It is [. . .] one of the few cultural practices to redress the general absence of discussion about destruction in society” (Stiles 1992). The tendency towards an art of destruction reveals, above all, how these artists apprehend the consumer society in which they have evolved, and the prominent role played therein by technology.³ The re-appropriation of that same technology for radical and violent ends hence questions the pat formulas of an “information society”, and control is re-asserted over it as well by making that technology available as a set of tools for the individual. In a summary statement, Stiles evokes the fashion in which artistic appropriation of the machine can address the twin issues of destruction and survival:

Certain kinds of presentational art forms have demonstrated a predisposition for and an ability to convey the ontological effects of the technology, phenomenology, and epistemology of destruction and the ways in which individuals and the collective negotiate the resulting crisis of survival. These performances and/or public events often feature advanced technology and/or use the body or body surrogates. Robots and other mechanized body substitutes sometimes serve as the aesthetic site for the representation of the conjunction of social and political practices and in interrelationships that collude in destruction. (Stiles 2016, pp. 29–30)

If the author then goes on to argue that the work of artists who merely subject the body (mechanical or biological) to destructive influences cannot in itself constitute an artistic movement, it still seems possible to evoke the emergence of a serious artistic trend, manifested by technological hijackings of a most extreme sort. The machines designed by the American artist Mark Pauline, and remotely controlled during the disquieting performances of the SRL⁴, offer a prime example of destruction as survival. Kristine Stiles relates the extent to which “destruction art is the visual corollary to the discourse of the survivor: it bears witness to the tenuous conditionality of survival—survival itself

¹ This new form of power was identified by the concept of biopolitics by Michel Foucault, who examined here the theoretical effects of the technology over the body (Foucault 1976).

² From *Concerning Consequences. Studies in Art, Destruction, and Trauma* (Stiles 2016, p. 30). Stiles adds that “destruction art is the kind of performance art where conditions of human emergency are most vividly displayed” (Stiles 2016, p. 42).

³ For the link between consumerism and technology, see “Swing Low, Sweet Chariot: Kinetic Sculpture and the Crisis of Western Technocentrism”, wherein is documented the fact that a great portion of 20th century consumer goods were machines of some sort (Smith 2015).

⁴ Officially formed in 1978, the name of the collective—Survival Research Laboratories—stems from an advertisement published in the far-right magazine *Soldier of Fortune*.

being the fundamental challenge posed by humanity in the twentieth century and to humanity in the twenty-first century. Destruction art is the only attempt in the visual arts to grapple seriously with both the technology of actual annihilation and the psychodynamics of virtual extinction” (Stiles 2016, p. 31). The witnesses of SRL’s performances were faced with the annihilating effects of armed devices that exploded and self-destructed, as seen in *Noise*, a performance held at San Francisco’s Golden Gate Park in 1979 (Figures 1 and 2).⁵

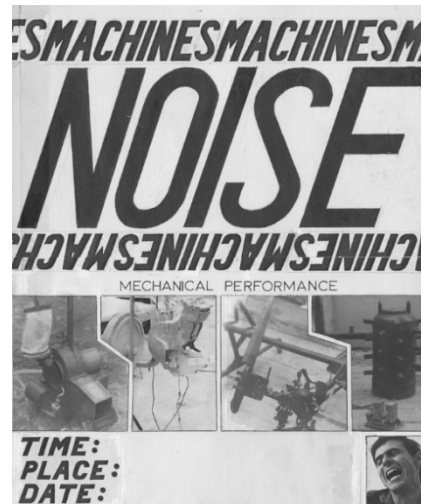


Figure 1. Poster for *Noise*, a mechanical performance by SRL, 21 September 1979, Golden Gate Park Bandshell, San Francisco. © Survival Research Labs (www.srl.org).



Figure 2. Scene from *Noise*, a mechanical performance by SRL, 21 September 1979, Golden Gate Park Bandshell, San Francisco. © Survival Research Labs (www.srl.org).

In 1983, the “first industrial performer” explained the relevance of resorting to machines: “The intervention of human performers limits the performance because there are many preconceptions at stake. By using machines, this problem can be avoided altogether; you can trouble people by throwing

⁵ As an example of the connection between industrial music and mechanical performance art of this kind, members of the British industrial band Throbbing Gristle were present for the occasion. Jean Tinguely, of course, had not only created in 1960 his self-destructing *Homage to New York*, but also, in 1962, had staged a series of explosions in the deserts of Nevada entitled *Study for an End of the World No. 2* (Museum Tinguely 2013).

a whole bunch of very precise ideas and images at them.”⁶ This strategy was at the center of the event *Terrifying Scenes From The Battlefields of Tomorrow* (1980) and its machinery, and whose goal was the questioning of the very nature of images and of their survival. The machines, which the members of SRL designed for the occasion, were indeed targeted at portraits of armed individuals, with the said portraits subsequently being the victims of rockets launched in their direction (Figures 3 and 4).

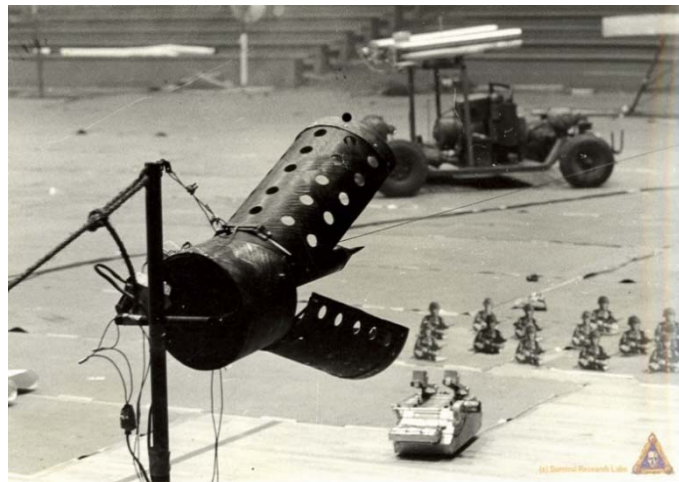


Figure 3. Scene from *Terrifying Scenes from The Battlefields of Tomorrow*, a mechanical performance by SRL, 6 December 1980, Kezar Pavillion, San Francisco. © Survival Research Labs (www.srl.org).



Figure 4. Scene from *Terrifying Scenes from The Battlefields of Tomorrow*, a mechanical performance by SRL, 6 December 1980, Kezar Pavillion, San Francisco. © Survival Research Labs (www.srl.org).

The futuristic paramilitary aesthetic on display here attempted to imagine the technologic conflicts in a multimedia and post-apocalyptic world, and with the assistance of the screening of several short films.⁷ This confluence of genres has as its focus an announcement of the death of Western society, foreshadowing Friedrich Kittler’s theory, according to which the increasing materiality of the media ultimately leaves the subject itself out of the equation (Kittler 1995, 1986). Mark Pauline’s work, however, is not exclusively concerned with mechanical elements, inasmuch as he sometimes includes animal carcasses—a rabbit for *Rabot*, a hog’s head for *Piggly-Wiggly* (Figure 5)—and also

⁶ Mark Pauline as quoted in the *Industrial Culture Handbook* (Vale and Juno 1983, p. 27).

⁷ Among these, one has to mention *Letters to Dad* (1979) by Scott & Beth B.

collaborates with industrial musicians such as Monte Cazazza.⁸ One of the works designed by Pauline and Cazazza, and exhibited during the Factrix “Night of the Succubus” concert at the Ed Mock Dance Studio in San Francisco (6 June 1981)⁹, was an animated sculpture made of the body of a pig arranged on a robotic structure and targeted by Monte Cazazza’s dart gun (Figure 6). We, thus, witness in the industrial culture of that time a foreshadowing of the interpenetration of the organic and mechanical, which has become such a large part of current discourse.

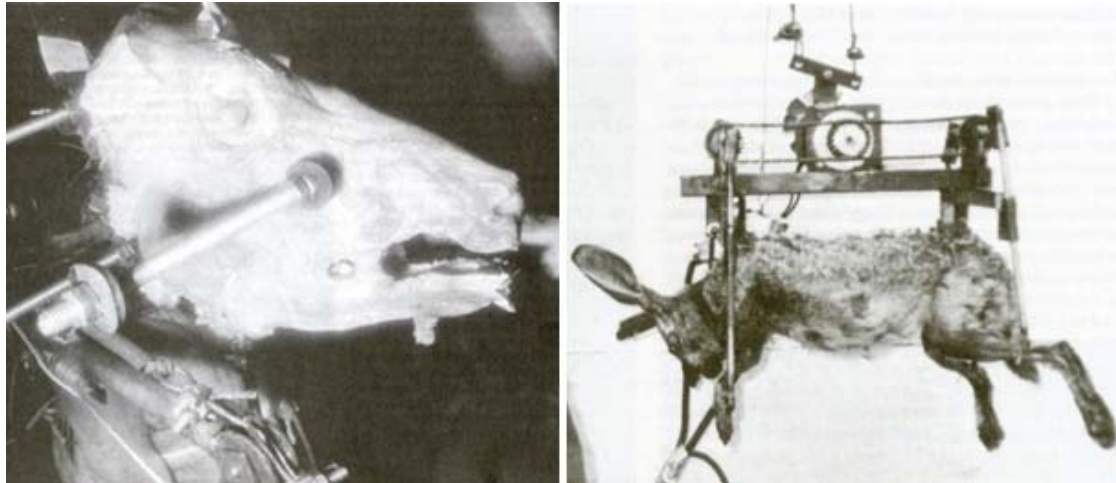


Figure 5. *Piggly-Wiggly* (left) and *Rabot* (right) by Mark Pauline, 1981. Hog’s head, rabbit, and mechanics. Courtesy of the artist. © Survival Research Labs (www.srl.org).



Figure 6. Animated sculpture for *Night of the Succubus* by Mark Pauline and Monte Cazazza, 6 June 1981, Ed Mock Dance Studio, San Francisco. Pig, robotic structure. © Survival Research Labs (www.srl.org).

3. *Man-Amplified*.¹⁰ The End of the Natural Body and Postmodern Cyborgs

This diversion of organic elements calls into question the very nature of the body, of “its *naturalness*,” according to Isabelle Queval. The new pharmacology, transplants and prosthesis imply a plasticity

⁸ The work *Terrifying Scenes from The Battlefields of Tomorrow* already showed these kinds of collaborations with interventions by Factrix, Monte Cazazza, Tana Emmolo and Cole Palme.

⁹ The performance was recorded on a VHS tape on the same year. Several excerpts from the video were used in the film *True Gore* (1987), directed by Matthew Dixon Causey and Monte Cazazza (credited as “creative consultant”). According to Jack Sargeant, *True Gore* is “a film which gleefully depicts what many would consider polymorphic sexual dysfunction as home movie [...]”. The extract presented in *True Gore* depicts Cazazza digging at a sore on his penis with a metal scalpel, and Smith letting a gigantic black centipede scuttle over her labia” (Sargeant 1999).

¹⁰ From the title of the album composed by the members of Clock DVA in 1991.

of the *human* which the body emblemizes, and whose fusion with technique remains problematic. Thus, the techniques of health, training, enhancement, and ‘augmentation’ announce their hold over a work-body suffused with the artificial, and indefinitely perfectible. The advance of knowledge entails, by its very inevitability, an increasing reification of the body. The contours of human identity, just like the notion of the *natural body*, are called into question¹¹. To this conversation regarding hybrid machines and the thoughts which they arouse of the end of the natural body, Donna Haraway adds the figure of the postmodern cyborg, and which can be distinguished from the way in which the Dadaists “symbolized the different aspects of the machine and industrial life.”¹² If the opposition of “organisms [and] machines, [has been] blurred” since the end of 20th century, Haraway writes, the “distinctions between the natural and the artificial, the body and the mind, self-development and external creation”¹³, which should be obvious, keep arousing the interest of industrial artists. The phenomenon which Haraway raises is linked, in particular, to an effect of reversal, in which the machine “is debased to the stage of a means of expression of carnal pleasure”, while man transforms himself into “a muscular machine that turns away from pleasure and pursues production”, according to the culture studies specialist Klaus Theweleit (Theweleit 1977). Mark Pauline’s performances with the SRL exemplify these artistic questions through the prism of robotics. If robots can be traced back to the imaginings of the ancient myths, Gottfried Hattinger explains that the presence of androids in contemporary art began in 1964 with Nam June Paik’s sculpture *Robot K-456*. The art historian holds that, “in artistic intents, the machine as a tool, traditionally balancing ends and means, does not play a great part, as opposed to its use as a tool through which artificial works are produced or as an invention which is not oriented towards use, but towards the representation of an intellectual construct, towards the creation of a sculpture or of a spatial or kinetic event” (Hattinger 2014, pp. 61–62). This understanding of robotic installation can be seen in Mark Pauline’s hybrid machines, conjuring up the ambivalent relationship between flesh and robot, between the organic and of the mechanical, and which can be found as well in the “repetition principle” of cut-up¹⁴, a core process of industrial culture. These extreme stagings were accompanied by massive explosions, destroying, as designed, the installations themselves. The goal of the American performer was also to explore the mechanisms of thought, of his own reflections as a human being. This intention he materialized during the performance *Mysteries of the Reactionary Mind* (1981), in which, as an example of an entity reacting to a stimulus, machines gradually destroy monumental paintings created by members of the SRL (Figure 7).

The noisy mechanical claws of the machines, as well as the missiles launched against the canvases, place the destruction of art in a soundscape that also emphasizes the theme of alertness, and, in fact, an alarm echoes throughout the various actions as a call to these workshops of artistic destruction. The devices of *Mysteries of the Reactionary Mind* and its “exploration of the mechanics underlying reactionary thought”¹⁵ once again foreshadow an entire current of contemporary philosophy since, according to Jean Baudrillard, “if men dream of original and brilliant machines, it is because they are disheartened by their own originality or because they would rather surrender it and enjoy it through

¹¹ From the introduction to the article “Corps Humain” by Isabelle Queval (Queval 2015, pp. 40–41).

¹² From “Technologie et sexe dans la science-fiction. Note sur l’art de la couverture” (Alloway 1956, p. 45). See also Matthew Biro’s *The Dada Cyborg: Visions of the New Human in Weimar Berlin* (Biro 2009).

¹³ Donna Haraway as quoted in *Manifeste cyborg et autres essais: sciences, fictions, féminismes* (Allard et al. 2007, p. 35). The authors add that “our machines are strangely alive while we are appallingly inert.”

¹⁴ “Through cut-up, the principle of repetition reaches a degree of systematization which transforms it into a mechanical process. One can talk about a technique of cut-up. [...] Cut-up can both operate a mechanical (repetitive) and technical writing (a writing that requires a *technè*, a practice which stems from a kill). Yet, initially, the mechanical is opposed to the organic: cut-up can help conceive the deconstruction of this binary opposition and refashion the links between writing and the mechanical” (Hougue 2014). One should recall the fact that Mark Pauline met William S. Burroughs in the beginning of the 1980s, along with Matt Heckert. For Burroughs’ influence on industrial culture, see “Révolution bioélectronique. Les musiques industrielles sous influence burroughsienne” (Ballet 2017).

¹⁵ Mark Pauline as quoted in the *Industrial Culture Handbook* (Vale and Juno 1983, p. 27).

machines. For what machines can offer is the very spectacle of thought, and men, when manipulating them, can indulge in the spectacle of thought rather than in thought itself" (Baudrillard 1990). This "spectacle of thought" takes shape through mechanical reactions whose mental exploration is reversed in the field of contemporary cinema when Cameron Vale (Stephen Lack), protagonist of *Scanners* (David Cronenberg 1981), infiltrates a computer's circuits via a telephone network. After having been examined by Doctor Ruth (Patrick McGouhan), who leads a psychic research program named "scanners" that aims to explore the subjects noted for such abilities, Vale becomes aware of his faculty for both manipulating the minds of individuals and controlling machines at a distance: the nervous system here navigates through the printed circuits of the various targeted machines.



Figure 7. Scene from *Mysteries of the Reactionary Mind*, a mechanical performance by SRL, 5 April 1981, Fort Mason Center, San Francisco. © Survival Research Labs (www.srl.org).

This biotechnical fantasy of minds connected at a distance holds several analogies with the utopias of industrial performers, with their interest in cyberspace and the synthesis of organic and mechanical bodies. Gilbert Hottois, in highlighting this phenomenon of hybridization and commingling, notes that it is "often violent, gloomy, wild and unregulated. The typical mixture includes the cyborg, the individual plugged into cyberspace, and an infinity of prostheses whose city is the sum total. The technique is also *immediate* because it physically penetrates human bodies and brains, either to manipulate, amplify or interconnect them" (Hottois 2012). Indeed, this train of thought, under the influence of J. G. Ballard's works, goes so far as to question the basic tenets of sexuality itself.

4. Crash Biomechanical Sexual Hybridization

Ballard explores in perverse detail the twin leitmotifs of the 20th century: sex and paranoia. [. . .] With a ruthless and sadistic/masochistic honesty, he "reduces the amount of fiction", forcing us to come face to face with our own ambiguous attitudes. [. . .] What we are forced to realize is that science has become equivalent to pornography in its aim of isolating objects analytically from their context in time and space. [. . .] The obsessions are subjective—the only key in a world deprived of objectivity able to unlock the reality/fiction surrounding each of us.

Graeme Revell¹⁵

Crash, J. G. Ballard (1973) novel, exhibits a major strength in the expression of an unrestrained "industrial sexuality", sometimes revealed as an extreme violence inflicted upon bodies in certain

¹⁵ Mark Pauline as quoted in the *Industrial Culture Handbook* (Vale and Juno 1983, p. 27).

works. If the radical content of the novel lies in extraordinary sexual desire, where adepts can only be satisfied through car accidents, the story also exhibits the hold of technology over the human body—an aspect which the section “Technology and Pornography” of the exhibition “J. G. Ballard. Autopsy of the New Millennium” (Costa et al. 2008) displayed. Marianne Celka and Bertrand Vidal show how Ballard precisely describes the paradox of controlled societies in which “consumerist practices can be compared to a phenomenon of sensorial deprivation, through the ever renewed and renewable satisfaction of desires. Thus, only extreme practices, however meaningless and purely gratuitous, can bring new meaning in the world” (Celka and Vidal 2011, p. 43). The technological pornography of *Crash*—foreshadowed by the literary images of the catalogue/novel *La Foire aux atrocités*, which “transmutes pop culture in a neurotic and obscene nightmare” (Mavridorakis 2011, p. 24)—amplified the “cultural libido” of the Independent Group Pop pioneers who had inspired Ballard.¹⁷ His clinical studies of human impulse were eagerly consumed by industrial bands, inclined as they were to present a violent reality without filters. The fantasized violence of the automobile accident reflects the growing power of machines: technology has become so essential in the everyday life of the human species that it now occupies a place of potentially fatal intimacy. This fascination for crinkled iron could already be seen in Michael Rothenstein’s “Crash Box” series and in Warhol’s “Car Crashes”. This latter series, in particular, in which Warhol drew upon archived photographs to create *White Burning Car III* (1963), *Saturday Disaster* (1964) and *Ambulance Disaster* (1963), thus contributes to the establishment of a legitimate motif: that of violent death.

If Neil Printz holds that this series “[constitutes] some of the most violent imagery in the history of art” (Printz 1988, p. 14), the aesthetics developed by the industrial collectives under the influence of Ballard’s science fiction amplifies still further the brutality of “mechanical” crashes, and to the extent that the deleterious transformations of the postindustrial model cannot escape notice. That the author’s universe has indeed had an impact on the industrial movement becomes truly evident on 19 October 1984, the date of a series of performances organized by RE/Search Publications as an homage to Ballard’s novel. V. Vale conceived, during the same year, the event “Crash: A Unique San Francisco Spectacle” in San Francisco’s Fort Mason for the release of his book dedicated to the British author, and which book includes articles, interviews, the first chapter of *Crash*, and some of Ballard’s short stories and collages (Vale and Juno 1984). The evening was divided into three parts, with installations and performances by Boyd Rice, Mark Pauline, Eric Werner and Monte Cazazza. The first was an intervention by Kristine Ambrosia who, hanging by her feet, was whipped by Boyd Rice in a police uniform. She in turn was holding a chain which passed through a hoop piercing Noni Howard’s clitoris, and who was laying among the victims of car crashes tied up on the blood-stained ground. The second phase of the event, an installation designed by Mark Pauline, featured two damaged cars manipulated remotely, thanks to a hydraulic system invented for the occasion. The report of the fanzine *Hello! Happy Taxpayers* mentions the presence of “cars [having] very slow sexual intercourse (like insects). There were four victims in the cars, splattered with blood, covered in gaping and very real looking slashes (made by Monte Cazazza). [. . .] Exploding blood bags were attached on the victims’ bodies and burst one at a time. [. . .] One of the victims was dressed as a housewife and had obviously been run over when going back home with her trolley: her groceries were scattered on the pavement” (*Hello! Happy Taxpayers* 1985). Four monumental paintings showing bodies maimed by car crashes, as well as a series of documents from the RE/Search book devoted to Ballard (quotes, collages, drawings, pictures) enriched the soundscape of Matt Heckert’s installation for the SRL. The four paintings hung in the back of the space next to the photograph of an explosion, a monumental portrait

¹⁷ Valérie Mavridorakis deals with the impact of the Independent Group, especially with its part in the 1956 international exhibition “This is Tomorrow” (London, Whitechapel Art Gallery), in Ballard’s work. This influence partly stems from “a lack of desire” felt by Pop artists during the 1950s, who attempted to restore “a form of ‘cultural libido’ [by resorting to] the themes of the ideology of abundance, linked with consumption and technology and which promised a cultural renewal” (Mavridorakis 2011, p. 16).

of Ballard, and a selection of his works, among which figured the dystopian novel *Why I Want to Fuck Ronald Reagan* (Ballard 1968). These pieces were accompanied by the screening of two films brought by Monte Cazazza, *Red Asphalt* and *Signal 30*, which documented car crashes and thus completing an extensive multimedia environment meant to immerse the viewer in the gloomy reality of *Crash*. Finally, at the end of the evening, SRL member Eric Werner repeatedly launched “his car, equipped with a steel spur and decorated with coats of arms on its missile shaped frame, at two crashed vehicles” (*Hello! Happy Taxpayers* 1985; Figure 8).



Figure 8. *Ram Car* by Eric Werner, 1984, San Francisco. © Survival Research Labs (www.srl.org).

These repeated assaults end the performance, recalling the ways in which machines can affect the body, whether psychologically or physically: the fantasy of self-harm by accident. Through the prism of an all-encompassing artistic expression, the influence of Ballardian fiction on 1980s American subculture is thus made manifest. A subsequent Mark Pauline performance, *An Unfortunate Spectacle of Violent Self-Destruction* (1981), had as its setting a car park with several damaged machines—this by way of focusing on the bodily changes generated by mechanical shock, and as underlined, in the promotional poster, by an image of a half-naked man suspended amidst smoking wreckage (Figure 9):

I’d been thinking all along that this should be a show about accidents. That’s kinda what it was about. There was a lot of equipment there that had accidents; a lot of equipment was destroyed. I tried to make sure that the things that were destroyed were as helpless as possible. Things were really tied down, roped up, like the big skeletal man, Flippy Man, that got hauled way up in the air and then crashed . . . and the robot thing whose heads kept blowing up . . . and the catapult firing at the huge face. Just all these things, like the guy getting hit in the head with a rock who tried to sue me . . . breaking the girl’s windshield with the ball-bearings that got thrown into the blower . . . accidents. I emptied a five-pound bag into this big blower; the bearings went past where people were and broke the windshield of a car.¹⁸

The imagery of *Crash* thus rubbed off on both the specific devices of artists and their imaginations, now imbued with the idea of a biomechanical sexuality in which the human body is an integral part of the machine. This implied hybridization is evoked throughout the film *Tetsuo: The Iron Man* (1989), in which director Tsukamoto Shin’ya (塚本晋也) shows Kafkaian transformations of the human body

¹⁸ Mark Pauline as quoted in the *Industrial Culture Handbook* (Vale and Juno 1983, p. 27).

under the grip of industrial waste. The grafting of technological scrap onto human flesh gives rise to the hybrid figure of the man-machine, and suggests, as an example of the way in which humankind tends to evolutively adapt to its own creations, a new, omnipresent, and indispensable form of sexuality.¹⁹

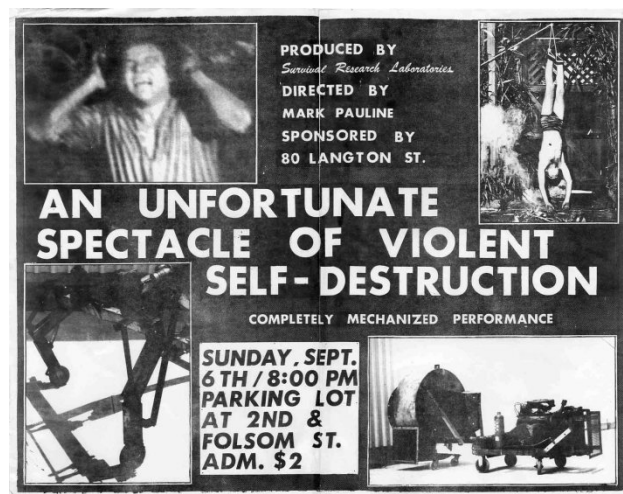


Figure 9. Poster for *An Unfortunate Spectacle of Violent Self-Destruction*, a mechanical performance by SRL, 6 September 1981, Metro Park parking lot, San Francisco. © Survival Research Labs (www.srl.org).

This libidinal connection, in which the biological systems and daily life of the individual become integrated into his tools, had already made its presence known in the title that Mark Pauline had chosen for his inaugural installation *Machine Sex*, in 1979. This title, in turn, had shared origins with the text of a poster that his partner at the time had in fact distributed on the streets of San Francisco, “Machine sex is a bore”, a phrase which evoked not only Pauline’s obsession with his own machines, but also the boredom which she felt when the American artist devoted long hours to his robots, and thus questioning the presence that the machine occupies in the lives of individuals (Figure 10). Pauline’s creations even seem to bear a form of a danger to his own life: “During the show his eccentric machines ran into each other, consumed each other, and melded into broken heaps” (Kelly 1994).

The lure of technological fascination also leads SRL members to conceive a 1988 “Misfortunes of Desire” performance, punctuated by impressive pyrotechnic effects (Figures 11 and 12).

This love of gadgetry once again testifies to the close link between SRL and the industrial movement in general. At a 1982 SPK concert in San Francisco, its leader Graeme Revell was equipped with “a homemade flamethrower designed by Mark Pauline, [which he] pointed at the audience, setting the clothes of a member of the audience on fire” (Dubois 2009, p. 133; Figure 13). If the audience member was not thereby wounded because of this action—and which could have gone incredibly wrong—the warlike attitude embodied by the members of SPK, equipped as they were with lethal weapons, confirms the ambivalence with which these extreme technological hijackings were regarded.

¹⁹ Tsukamoto Shin’ya’s themes are also exploited by Shozin Fukui (福居ショウジン) in the films *964 Pinocchio* (1991) and *Rubber’s Lover* (1996). Shozin Fukui had already directed two short films by the end of the 1980s: *Gerorisuto* (1986), as well as *Caterpillar* (1988), designed by the Japanese filmmaker when he worked on the filming team of *Tetsuo*. The two directors then resorted to the same film techniques: depth animation, handheld camera and hyperactive editing.



Figure 10. Poster for *Machine Sex*, a mechanical performance by Mark Pauline, February 1979, Chevron station, Columbus & Green, San Francisco. © Survival Research Labs (www.srl.org).



Figure 11. Scene from *Misfortunes of Desire: Acted Out at an Imaginary Location Symbolizing Everything Worth Having*, a mechanical performance by SRL, 17 May 1988, parking lot of Shea Stadium, Queens, New York. © Survival Research Labs (www.srl.org). Photography Credit: mxccandleless/adams.



Figure 12. Scene from *Misfortunes of Desire: Acted Out at an Imaginary Location Symbolizing Everything Worth Having*, a mechanical performance by SRL, 17 May 1988, parking lot of Shea Stadium, Queens, New York. © Survival Research Labs (www.srl.org). Photography Credit: mxccandleless/adams.



Figure 13. Graeme Revell with a homemade flamethrower designed by Mark Pauline during a performance of SPK, 17 April 1982, Russian Center, San Francisco. © SPK.

The main goal of these performances, however, remains that of alerting the public to the various transformations underway in a postindustrial world, and wherein sexuality is becoming, first and foremost, a mechanical affair. Ballardian metaphors thus appear as recurrent references in the works of an entire generation of artists at the margins of culture. This is evidenced by Graeme Revell's statement that Ballard "hinted towards the fact that the dynamics of post-industrial culture were that of seduction, or some kind of sexual pathology. We were driven by our own consent to take part in postmodern pathologies rather than controlled, from the outside, by some kind of devilish structure (the government or a military-industrial complex)".²⁰ In SPK's productions—which bring Ballard's solutions back into the field of entertainment, playing with many concepts albeit a singular aesthetic—the display of violent images combined with pornographic iconography attempts to act in the manner of electroshock therapy. The author Éric Dubois states that "for Ballard as for the SPK, violence pre-exists because of the very organization and functioning of society and remains a constitutive phenomenon. Behind its apparent functional coldness, death and self-harm impulses, sexual-machinic deviances proliferate in the individual's subconscious, creating an inorganic subconscious (a concept which Revell borrowed from Deleuze and on which he had wished to write a book)" (Dubois 2009, p. 126). All of these impulses, under the provenance of Lyotard's "activity of life"²¹, manifest themselves here as a relationship between sex and technology, while generating an aesthetic and theoretical tendency specific to the industrial genre. Thomas Thorn, an industrial musician writing in the illustrated article "Machine Sex" (Figure 14), thus concludes that "it is only a matter of time before technology renders sex between humans obsolete" (Thorn 1985). This observation appears in the experiments conducted by the SRL members when they question the representation of the subject by staging its own death in a dystopian world featuring aggressive and uncontrollable robots. This aspect leads these performers to explore survivalist reflexes—which are deeply rooted in American culture—through a disturbing paramilitary imagery that aims to fight against the most noxious effects of new technologies. This concern was already apparent, as we have just seen, in Ballard's novels that influenced a whole generation of artists who changed the usual protocols of performance art, while being aware of issues that will be at the center of transhumanism. Indeed, the questions raised very early by the SRL reveal how much scientific research can come initially from the field of experimental art, a field that has a significant impact on new multimedia art practices today.

²⁰ Graeme Revell in correspondence with Éric Dubois. (Dubois 2009, p. 108).

²¹ "The activity of life always covers that of death impulses." (Lyotard 1977).

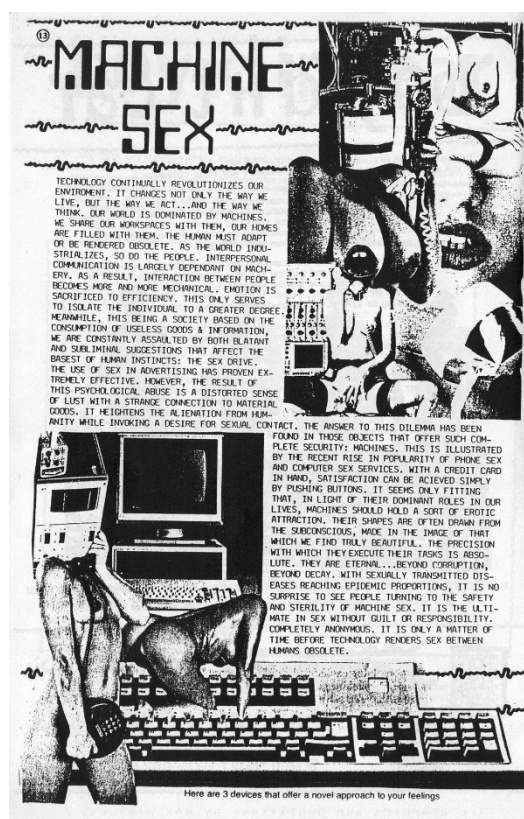


Figure 14. “Machine Sex” by Thomas Thorn, U-Bahn, No. 2, 1985. © Magazine and collages by Thomas Thorn.

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