For the first part of the show, most of the audience kept at least one eye glued to the imposing replica of the UT tower. SRL catered the show to the Austin audience by reenacting the Charles Whitman shooting of 1966. The "Randy Weaver" robot perched on the structure's upper rim, playing the part of Charles Whitman by repeatedly firing four gun blasts onto the field. Meanwhile, the V1 slowly danced around the tower, blowing smaller props downfield before turning its attention to the plywood-and-steel foundation. Blasts of fire rattled the audience's dental work as the rocket pointed its nose into the tower.

Continuous rocket blasts quickly ignited the wood at ground level, and the audience cheered as sparks rose through the replica's inner cavity. This was the logical climax of the evening for many in the stands, and the V1 seemed the perfect tool for the job. Throats boomed from the rocket set more flame and a steady spring wind soon turned the tower into a 70-foot inferno of blazing wood, twisting metal, and liquified robot parts.

As the structure became engulfed with bright flame, the crowd's reaction turned from loudly triumphant to strangely silent. Rather than cheering the Tower's demise, they quietly watched embers shoot upward as more combustibles burned to ash. With a series of cracks, the tower slowly twisted and crashed to the ground, and after a short cheer, some searched for the next spectacle while others quietly stared into the crumpled piles.

Forty-five minutes into the performance, the infield was fully transformed into SRL's trademark war zone. Chaos ruled as the props burned, machines lay wounded on the track, and standing robots went after anything still standing. The rocket gun cart sped through the obstacle course left by the wounded and dead mechanical participants.

The smell of smoke, burning petroleum, and bleeding machines filled the air as parts of the stands began to empty. Families were generally the first to leave, followed by the sound-sensitive, and then those racing Austin's 2 AM curfew. Whether the audience left disturbed, disgruntled, or delirious with joy, they'd have plenty to discuss over breakfast the next day.

Back inside, the FlameBlower inched toward the huge tripod as the SRL crew kept looking for one last thing to burn...
the aftermath

The following morning -- ten hours after the show's end -- Longhorn Speedway looked like the target of a surgical strike or a massive train derailment. The tower's enormous metal superstructure lay in a pile of ashes. The show's mechanical actors scattered across the field, resting up from a particularly strenuous performance. Claws and arms were streaked with residual carbon from the evening's little firestorms. The grace inside the track's perimeter was scorched black from rocket fire, burning debris cannons, and the occasional road flare.

Still-smoldering tires and crossett poles let off an AMAZING stench. The vapor mixed with other aromas of industrial warfare (melted plastic, gunpowder smoke, and diesel fumes). For the crew at SRL-- sleeping late after the post-show victory party-- it was the smell of victory.

But among the smoldering hulks and charred debris, it was obvious that the crew had rectified its wounded machines before turning in. The ill-fated Walking Machine (which had an indestructible reputation) had been put up on jack stands until further repairs could be attempted. The props had been destroyed, but the machines would be reworked and used in the next show.

Close to the infield's center, the Carnival of Fools were busy cutting apart their donated canon-- trying to salvage debris for use in future installations. The cleanup had begun, and parts of the art recycled.

Art, entertainment, or just a lot of noise? Tell us what you think about SRL.

artistic mayhem

pit stop village

mixed reviews
Don’t Mess with Texas?

When 4,500 Austinites crammed into Longhorns Speedway on Good Friday to witness Survival Research Laboratories’ panoply of destructive machines, it was the perfect marriage. What people on earth are more open-minded than Texans when it comes to extremely loud, fire-breathing technological apparatus? And what better place and time for SRL’s festival of ironies than a stock-car racetrack at the height of the Texas wildflower season? Along with the SRL staples (sound-and-fire-spewing cannons and an array of unlikely-looking machines that somehow evoke the medieval, Paleolithic, and industrial eras simultaneously), the show also included several Texas-themed “events.” A cheer went through the crowd (punctuated by an occasional “Yee-haw!”) as the fire-cannon ignited a four-story facsimile of the University of Texas tower. Other site-specific displays included the Bubbhacrane (the sole purpose of which was to repeatedly lift a burning dune buggy 30 feet in the air and drop it) and an equestrian flag ceremony, in which riders flew the SRL flag and the Texas Lone Star. As my 82-year-old grandmother from Brady, Texas said, “If I hadn’t seen it with my own eyes, I never would have believed they could have done so much interesting stuff with all that junk.”

Growth in Online Entertainment
Market Has One Player Eyeing Technology Role

By Jodi Cohen

WEBWEEK magazine May 1997

MONSTERBIT MEDIA started building Web sites in the early days of HTTP 1.0 for the Austin, Texas, music scene. It was the first to do a wireless T-1 video broadcast of the nationally recognized Survival Research Laboratories performance art group. The performance had to be done at a race track because of the pyrotechnics, so the company hooked up two 65 foot towers so the video signal could be transmitted back into town. “We pride ourselves on being the first to push the envelope, and it’s usually stuff like this that allows you to push the envelope,” said Mellie Price, president of Monster Bit Media and affiliate MB Media “We were one of the first to try and use video technology.”

The company handles on-line ordering, live broadcasting, mailing lists, and other items found on many music Web sites. “We are really a turnkey digital provider” said Price. “We have installed digital lines to do the broadcasting through MB Media for several large music festivals.” If an independent-label artist wants to discount CDs online during a live broadcast, for instance, MB Media runs a special on the CD and offers online transactions, which generate revenue. With larger artists, such as George Clinton, MB Media establishes a link to a major CD provider and gets a cut of the profit from CDs sold. If MB features a live broadcast from one of its large venues, distribution is handled by the network and the site receives a flat rate, because the venue, not the artist, is the client.

Currently, the company is both a content and a technology provider. But Price said she would like to evolve away from being a content provider toward becoming a provider of the backend network to keep everything running smoothly. “There are going to be really big players producing really big networks, and they are more suited for content delivery”, she said. “But each of those networks is going to need a support network and infrastructure, longevity and a good reputation.

Price said she hasn’t had a need to find advertisers and says that artists don’t like sponsorship and advertising anyway. What she is working on are marketing campaigns in which advertisers related to the content are worked into the programming, such as a special on Gibson guitars. “I don’t think the banner advertising model works,” she said. “But as the price of technology falls and becomes more readily available, the audience will broaden out on the Web anyway.”
The mainstay of SRL’s dramatic craft is not the microchip but the motorcycle drive chain.

ations. Drive chains are tough, they’re cheap, they work just great, and if you get anywhere near them they cover you with indelible gunk. Drive chains are very Mark Pauline.

Most of the SRL crew members have been in residence here for almost a week, sucking jet exhaust, chain-smoking, eating from big black tubs of tasty potato salad, and spattering themselves with tiny bits of flying solder. Over at the contaminated squad, they have one “shower,” a water-splitting wall-mounted tap in a blank concrete cell lined with blue plastic sheeting. They sleep in bags on green canvas cots, in a vast echoing concrete hall where the least cough, sneeze, or snore sounds like a gunshot. Here, the strongest difference between the urban vegabonds at the local Saint Vincent’s and the SRL crew is that SRL is much, much dirtier.

These people are setting entire new standards for nightmarish postindustrial anti-chic. Only heavy-duty cosmopolitan San Francisco Bay area performance artists, who double as the Dilberts from Hell, could dress coming apart during the show anyhow, so when in doubt, just weld it. Failing that, bore a massive thumb-sized hole through it with the drill press and bolt it on. If that doesn’t work, fetch the bungee cords, the C-clamps, and the metal epoxy. Don’t worry: if you use too much, you can always trim it back later with the metal saw.

Fifty people who can weld, glue, saw, and clamp will get a lot of results. Mark and his longtime majordomo Mike Dingle are very results-oriented guys. Dingle bellows at the crew, reading from a filthy yellow notepad. “Home Depot’s open till midnight! Whaddya need?” People raise their hands and ask cordially for duct tape. “Who’s gonna fix that Allen bolt on the winch?” Two people volunteer at once. “We need more coffee grinders!” another shouts.

Jets from the airport roar periodically overhead, reducing everyone to involuntary silence as they munch their vegetable salads and slurp their coffee. They all know each other. It’s Scott the pyro guy, Kevin the powder maker, Phil who’s working the Flame Balls today, Todd and Lisa, Warren and Lance, Greg the neatly trimmed fed from the Stanford linear accelerator, Debbie and Christian and Mike, Brian and Amy and Lisa and Lauren. It’s a tribe. The situation has the vise of a cyberpunk Amish barn-raising.

Dingle is finishing up his rant. “If you don’t have something to do, come see me!” He has to declare this for form’s sake, but it’s pretty clear that nobody is going to come asking. Everybody here is already busy.

Lunch is over, and Mark’s among the last to leave. He’s patiently explaining to the air gun guys how to “bake the liquid out of the rounds” without any sudden untoward detonations. Then Mark gets back to his work, beetle-browed, hunched, persistent, focused. He and Dingle have the same cast of features. They look like anything but a pair of ultraviolet hipsters from the crinkly edge of the contemporary art world. Mark and Mike have the careworn look of a pair of country vets about to lose a sick cow.

Mark, though very obviously the leader of SRL, doesn’t waste much time fostering the Pauline personality cult. He doesn’t offer praise or criticism, he doesn’t give any rousing speeches to the troops. You don’t get a lot of touchy-feely and back-patting hanging out with Mark Pauline. But when he’s around, stuff happens.

The show officially starts at 11. I go out to join the line at the ticket door and eavesdrop. (No doubt I could pitch in with the crew if I wanted, but I’m a novelist by trade. I could cut my thumb off slicing a bagel.)

The clean-cut college kid in front of me is talking to his friend. “Yeah, he blew his hand off and had some toes sewn on for fingers!” I’ve never read an article on SRL that failed to take note of Pauline’s injured hand. His uninjured left hand is also quite remarkable, very sinewy and dexterous, a real craftsman’s hand. His left hand is probably the best-looking thing about the guy.

Not much happens till midnight. The audience filters in to stare in disgusted awe at the dozen inert machines and the truly vile backdrop of billboards with graphic images of such gooey and revolting hideousness that the eye can scarcely absorb them: a nude man absenting huqnaing a withered starving child; a nude and hugely pregnant blond ostentatiously enjoying a tall...
The things won’t kill each other fast enough; it’s all one can do to not jump out and help.

SRL radios blow themselves. Anonymous eulogists of mechanical revenge, they don’t get their names in lights, they never get their own record for originals. However, they so eagerly enjoy stalking ostensively backward and forth in front of the inevitable audience while chatting over their headsets and making small arcane adjustments. The fact that they’re so ignobly ignored by the audience while doing all this insignificant insensible technical stuffs clearly a big part of the kick.

The second people in the crowd aren’t really much of a crowd for an SRL gig. It fosters the occasional venue, Pauline, quoted in The Azone Arrangement, is in a public service mission to spread San Francisco’s careless attitude toward sex, love, and the pursuit of intense physical intimacy. Mark Pauline has been all but banished from San Francisco where recent legal exiles prevent him and his mighty robots from performing in the home town without purchasing the required – and inscrutably elusive – fire permits, which Pauline says “won’t happen.” Earbuds are distributed, which help, but with the music, Mark really pays out at an hour or two immensely intense or immensely irritating soundtrack towards the crowd into a properly destructive density. Shortly after, the erstwhile spend-goof and the fan start.

The Bomblader; a previously inarticulate piece of army green machinery, marches into a nestly parody of life. More than life, really – the thing is an actual character. Bomblader becomes a grinning harlequin, pelting his “abominable” bomb/coordination with gushing rubbers. Mutilated armymen across the tent. Eventually, it becomes clear that the audience is becoming the performer. The audience is the performer. The audience is the performer. The audience is the performer. The audience is the performer.

V.I., in hiding, any of this. She wiggles coyly and spins aside repeatedly, perhaps taken aback by Bomblader’s irresistible aluminium. Now a few of the billboards begin to spin in place, humbly disintering a statement from this unutterably nauseating display.

Bomblader gets his war with a nasty sirloin of jackhams, and cresses. He then shakes off apparently untoward V.I., scorched and finessed, suddenly oats butt on Bomblader with a wailing of jet flame. The stick, dust, and smoke are indescribable. Screams of disgusted gas溢es from the audience, culminating over the scene and the ear.

The angry and baffled Bomblader turns to vent his sudden fury on the A’s. The A’s, in a sort of shipwrecked, shipwrecked device made of sheet metal and other stuff is almost out of the ear from San Francisco’s icehouse, is slow to anger. When it wakes, however, its wriggles riles so madly suddenly, shaking the knee, long knuckled flower stalk of steel and palm, and spining a spinning tab-sized machine with a picture of a rambunctious man and his amazing dog’s head. Triple teeth of white yucks burling its steel spin and gnares at the A’s knees.

Screw leached attires over geometry to pick a fight with Bomblader. Screw Machine, a veteran SRL device, has a long phallic metal of collecting and dispersing performance machines for the museums and collectors’ crowd, but there would be something very odd about that – like an African ritual mask taken from the dances and put in a flexible box so it might well be collectible, but it won’t be Mark Pauline.

If SRL were just another small attempt to perform a thing and outrage the bourgeoisie, then the effort would have lasted about as long as the average rock band. But Pauline says that “what I pay is exactly what the best of the efforts of life, in his life he has so other.”

You take some gravel-heeled techied folk from wherever who know how to weld boilers, put him in art school and teach him about graphic design and experiment with the, hangout with punk musicians even though he doesn’t like music (one of the odder things about SRL, that they don’t listen to music on the job), and he finds his life’s work. He gets a severe, brutal hammer cock on his music.

Mark Pauline has been at the center of the postmodern culture into a kind of superconductive arc.

Mark doesn’t care if it’s "cr" or if it’s "technology". He never looks for reverence in the art press or drama press (though he’s quite aware of the artistic attention). He rarely teaches or asks for NEA grants or for federal, state or local art grants; he doesn’t care if it’s "theater" and doesn’t care if it’s "sound" or "aesthetics". He takes all special effects gadgets for "folk-worship", because the big money and big audiences are not what Mark Pauline wants (and will have, with gorgeous, despite all aid) in a space to breathe, where he can be a spectacular boilermaker dramatist, public social critic who builds jet engines and animals carousels apart at all: all it is, all the rest of the planet will have to accept him on his own terms and no other terms, at all, ever. He has the moral lines of postmodern culture into a kind of superconductive arc where he can isolate solitude. People sense this about Mark Pauline; his ability is a rare thing, a big thing. The appeal very strong.

None of this denies the deeply problematic aspects of SRL art as ugly, tasteless, noisy, and brutal. Mark has been very honest and straightforward about this. People should take him at his word when he says (as he told New York Times reviewer) that the piece is caged by Burnt Cheese. I mean, the practical world I have the every thing work. But I don’t want to just sit around and be a vegetable. Doing SRL is the best idea I’ve had in a very long time. None of this happened because he had a mind of making me criminal in white pajamas and my own microchip factory. It happened because the whole flimsy clutter of postmodern tech’s inherently exciting in a particularly sickening and dangerous way that most of it cannot rationalize sense. It is fasciating and evil, with the same imp of the perversely disenfranchised that makes humanity’s automaton-stiffness look as lovely as a sweet while the horses and buildings and cities where we live and work and sleep and live tend to look like the creepy cutouts those riffs come in.

This is Mark’s work at work: what the world isn’t busy making inscrutable things inscrutable.

Mark Pauline’s been at the center of the postmodern culture into a kind of superconductive arc.
Great pillars of smoke shoot into the night air blanketing a twoblock radius near Folsom and Main with an ominous cloud of gray black soot. For those of us not hip (or square) enough to get our directions on-line Sunday night, the smoke acts as a makeshift usher guiding us to the site of the latest constructive mayhem from the folks at Survival Research laboratories. Since Mark Pauline started the organization in 1979, it has staged nearly 50 events, to the delight of thrill seekers and industrial pagans worldwide.

From half a block away you can see 10foot columns of flame blaze through the darkness, illuminating the corrugated underbelly of the Bay Bridge and washing nearby buildings with a bloodred glow. Piercing airraid sirens squeal repetitively, complementing the industrial chorus of metalonmetal screeching and generator hum.

Though the conceptual artists of SRL have chosen an isolated, deserted lot for “Crime Wave” (described on the Internet as “the humorous aspects of violent human interaction”), nearly 1,000 people have shelled out $10 each to stand on the temporary bleachers inside the fencedin arena while hundreds of others climb the surrounding hills or stand on car hoods, dumpsters, and balconies for a better view. Most everyone has brought camera equipment and earplugs.

“Never, I mean never get anywhere near SRL without plugs,” warns a middleaged skater. As if to chase his point home, a flare gun shoots off nearby. Under the stark glare of the floodlights, the scene is a model of calculated anarchy. Dozens of men and women clad in Armygreen jumpsuits, industrial goggles, and protective earwear thread their way in between exploding flame-throwers, whirling helicopter blades, selfdestructing robots, re animated roadkill, and colliding vehicles. Their headsetwearing, walkietalkiecarrying counterparts move authoritatively through the crowd, lending the only semblance of control to the spectacle.

“It’s an example of contained chaos,” says an older spectator whose friend is on tonight’s SRL crew. “I’ve seen videos, but live it’s something completely different. On tape you see the overall theme, the concept of mechanized chaos. Live, it’s dangerous. You feel the heat of the flame. You feel the music in your bones. There’s the sense that something could go wrong at any time.”

Despite the palpable threat of disaster, the rapt crowd seems fairly relaxed, drinking beer and smoking cigarettes. Standing on the back windshield of a burnedout Corolla, Matt, an ecstatic 19 yearold, oohs and aahs. “Man, I wish I was on ‘shrooms,” he says. “I just didn’t have time to get it together.” Like the majority of the assembled, Matt only found out about the show a few hours ago. “Most of it’s wordofmouth,” says a helpfulman named Kimo. “It was released on the Net less than 20 hours ago.” SRL generally keeps things under wraps until the last minute; not only does it keep the crowd size manageable, it keeps the cops away—until the explosions start, at least.

Suddenly, the “Party” house, a small, colorfully painted structure built on an adjacent hillside, bursts into flame and slides down the incline onto the pavement below, crushing the copulating robots within.

“It’s a modernday version of an ancient New Guinea custom,” Kimo explains. “A chosen virgin has sex with each male of the village. During the last act, the house is lit on fire and the supports pulled out with both the man and woman still inside.” He beams. “It’s very tribalistic. The whole thing is, really. A good release, don’t you think?”

The searing heat from a 15foot tornado of flame pushes me to the back of the crowd. Several veterans of the Police and Fire Departments stand glancing casually at the action and chatting. “We weren’t given any advance notice,” says Officer Patrick Driseoll. “I responded to a reported explosion, but so far, so good. They’ve been pretty cooperative.” He points to the couple dozen SRL personnel working crowd control.

A final shot rings out as the last of the metal monsters is consumed in flame.

“Thank you very much for coming to our concert,” booms the first human voice of the evening. “Please depart in an orderly and safe fashion.” Surprisingly, most of the crowd obeys, leaving only a few souvenir hunters to loiter around.

“I’ve sold six of these,” yells John, a young machinist who contributed to the show. He’s holding an enormous smoking spear in his gloved hand. “I asked Mark [Pauline] if we could sell them, and he said, ‘Why not?’ I made these.” Never one to pass up a work of art, David Duprey, Night Crawler’s photographer, barters John down from 20 to 13 bucks. “Thirteen’s a lucky number,” says John as he leans the piece against a fence. “Be careful —it’s hot,” he warns. “I’ll get you babes!” a spectator yells in support. Shoudering the monstrosity, Duprey heads for his motorcycle, blending into the smoldering backdrop of twisted, broken machines and charred pavement.

By Silke Tudor
Chill winds
Survival of the fittest

Several thousand lucky San Franciscans got to witness a rare outdoor performance organized by Survival Research Laboratories at the foot of the Bay Bridge last November—and some of the guests who showed up (in full force) were members of the police and fire departments. Although no spectator has ever been seriously injured at an SRL show, says group founder Mark Pauline, it was good to know our civil servants were there should the unforeseeable happen.

As it turned out, the unforeseeable did happen: Pauline and organizer Mike Dingle spent a total of 25 hours in jail last week for charges stemming from the November performance. Pauline said the San Francisco Fire Department had already issued an arrest warrant for what it called “unlawful open burning” and “using explosives without a permit.”

In the 15 years that SRL has been organizing performances in the city, this is the first time any serious charges have been brought against them. Several charges were initially issued by the police department, but they were eventually reduced to a very reasonable $60 ticket for blocking the street.

Pauline said he would like to work more closely with the fire department but is dismayed by their lack of cooperation, especially in comparison to departments in other cities across the country. (SRL recently returned from a show in Phoenix, more extreme than the November show, and got complete assistance from the Phoenix Fire Department, which issued full permits and supervised the show.) For more on SRL, check out their Web site at http://www.srl.org, which features information about past performances and their recent run-in with the authorities.

Fire Alarms
As Night Crawler reported last November, Survival Research Labs staged “Crime Wave” at an empty lot on Beale Street. Although no public property was damaged and no spectators were injured, Mark Pauline and Mike Dingle were slapped with arrest warrants two months later and charged with “unlawful open burning” and “use of explosive materials” by the SFFD. They turned themselves in (and were later released), and face a Feb. 14 court date. Though Pauline says “SRL had never had any direct confrontations with officials before,” an anonymous source claims that an SFFD representative told the DA that they’re sick and tired of dealing with SRL’s semifrequent events. But as anyone who has ever attended one can attest, safety is always foremost. “If they said that they want to work with us in the future, that I’d understand,” Pauline says. “We just did a show in Phoenix three block from City Hall, and the Sheriff’s Office laughed about it.”

For more info, check out the SRL Web site at http://www.srl.org.