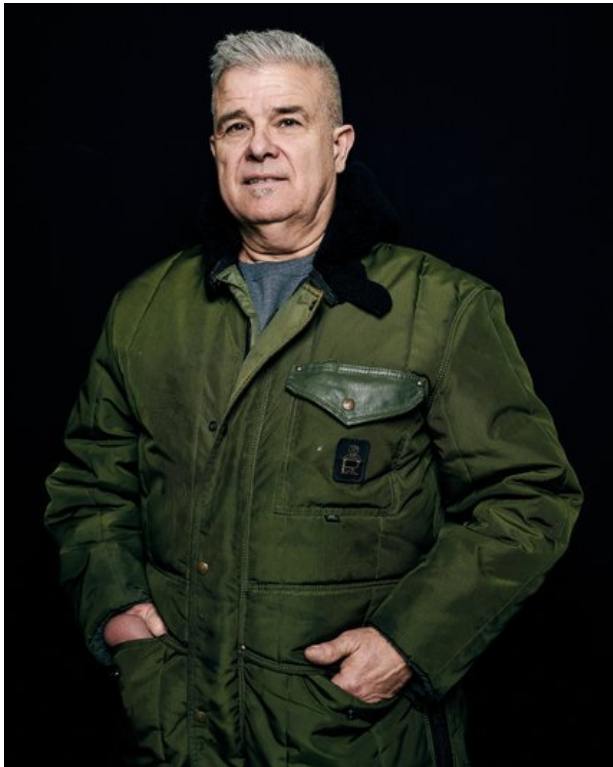


# The New York Times

ART & DESIGN

## Fire-Breathing Robots Bring Anarchy to a Chelsea Art Gallery

By DANIEL McDERMON | JAN. 5, 2018



The artist Mark Pauline, who works under the name Survival Research Laboratories, has a new exhibition at Marlborough Contemporary.

Vincent Tullo for The New York Times

The artist Mark Pauline has a reputation for creating chaos. Over four decades, working under the name Survival Research Laboratories, he has earned a devoted following for pioneering violent, large-scale performances by custom-built machines and robots.

One of those [shows](#) might include a flamethrower mounted on a walking frame the size of an elephant, a pile of 20 pianos set ablaze, a menacing claw just the right size to grab a human head in its pincers and a bin full of rotting vegetables.

Now, after years as an art-world outlaw, Mr. Pauline is bringing his machines to the marketplace. This latest project, opening at Marlborough Contemporary on Saturday, will be less pungent but promises to be nearly as spectacular in a white-cube Chelsea gallery.

On the opening day, Mr. Pauline's "Pitching Machine" will hurl wooden planks at up to 200 miles an hour into a bulletproof containment vessel, where they will disintegrate in calamitous fashion.

The exhibition, "Inconsiderate Fantasies of Negative Acceleration Characterized by Sacrifices of a Non-Consensual Nature," will also be his first selling show.

“People have told me that they would be a big art-world phenomenon,” Mr. Pauline said, referring to his creations. “But people have been telling me that since 1979.”



A detail of “Rotary Jaw With Squirrel Eyes.” Credit Vincent Tullo for The New York Times

That was the year he began his idiosyncratic career as a maker of heavy equipment for manufacturing mayhem and a choreographer of bizarre, occasionally unauthorized performances. Animal remains were sometimes incorporated. Explosions, intentional and otherwise, were not uncommon.

The authorities were frequently involved. On YouTube, you can watch [video](#) of Mr. Pauline being confronted by a fire marshal after a 1992 performance before a groundbreaking at the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art.

Despite the conflict, his safety record is largely intact, with one notable exception: A 1982 explosion in his shop badly wounded Mr. Pauline, taking most of the fingers from his right hand.

An enterprise that began in solitude has grown, and Mr. Pauline has come to work with a number of assistants, largely volunteers.

The creations, mostly built with castoff and recycled materials scavenged from Bay Area factories and corporate labs, have traveled with Mr. Pauline around the world. In 1999, he set up an internet connection to allow users in California to control a machine in Tokyo. And

despite the occasionally medieval appearance of his works, he has continually updated them to remain at the leading edge of technology. One machine at the Marlborough gallery, “The Big Walker,” was created in 1986. Another, “Track Robot,” was first built in 1998 and has recently been updated to be controlled via a 3-D Oculus Rift headset.

For the gallery director Pascal Spengemann, who organized the show, the [exhibition](#) offers a chance to connect Mr. Pauline to an art-world audience that may not be familiar with his work, and to look at his machines as sculptural objects on their own.

“They have this kind of operatic presentation,” Mr. Spengemann said, “but what does it mean when you extract one?”



The “Pitching Machine,” which hurls wooden planks at up to 200 miles an hour, is powered by the engine from a Cadillac Eldorado. Credit Vincent Tullo for The New York Times

The gallery declined to share information about pricing for the works. When asked, Mr. Spengemann said, “Putting a price on artworks is always kind of both easy and hard.” He added, “Mark has spent literally decades working on some of these things.”

Even amid the counterculture scene of ’70s and ’80s San Francisco, Survival Research Laboratories stood out for its steadfast resistance to commercialization.

“Everything about S.R.L. resisted success,” said Adam Savage, the former “Mythbusters” host, who recalled seeing the work in the early 1990s in San Francisco. “They wouldn’t charge enough, and Mark would always have to spend a couple of days in jail after every show.”

Mr. Savage also recalled a sense of danger. “Whenever you went to one of their shows,” he said, “you knew you were going to fear for your life at some point.”

The anti-commercial stance owes a lot to Mr. Pauline’s early experience as a military contractor, building 40-ton mechanical targets for Air Force pilots to practice on. That was in 1972, as the Vietnam War raged, and it entrenched in him a permanent resistance to the corporate world.

“I just want to be in my own hermetic world where there’s no commerce, there’s no killing,” Mr. Pauline said. “There’s just goofing around.”

The Survival Research Laboratories performances generally come with unwieldy, gonzo titles, like “A Calculated Forecast of Doom: Sickening Episodes of Widespread Devastation Accompanied by Sensations of Pleasurable Excitement.” They also resist a simple political interpretation, although they are resolutely hostile to corporate culture and straightforward narrative. Blasts of cacophonous polka music have been a recurring motif.

Mr. Pauline evades questions about what his work might mean.

“I always try to come from the point of view that I’m living in a Stalinist empire,” he said, “and that everything you do has to be kind of carefully shaded so on one really knows exactly what it is.”



Detail of “Running Machine,” a Survival Research Laboratories creation first built in 1992. Credit Vincent Tullo for The New York Times

Having his work in a mainstream commercial gallery represents a new chapter for Mr. Pauline, said Amy Critchett, his wife, who works as an artistic producer for the light sculptor Leo Villareal, creator of the Bay Lights installation on the San Francisco-Oakland Bay Bridge.

In a conversation with Mr. Villareal, a revelation hit home for her. “Wait a minute,” she recalled saying. “You make money as an artist?”

After decades of Mr. Pauline’s operating independently and funding his own work, she said, it was time to consider another approach, like the Marlborough Contemporary show.

“We have a kid to send to college at some point,” Ms. Critchett said. “It’s time for those machines to help out.”



Mr. Pauline with “Running Machine” in 1992. Credit: Courtesy of the artist

Despite his yearslong connection to these works, Mr. Pauline showed no trace of sentimentality about selling them.

“I’ve got millions and millions of robots stored in my head,” he said, adding, “I just use them as needed.”

At the suggestion that the collisions and explosions in his work are themselves a bit scary and violent, Mr. Pauline demurred.

“I’ve always felt like it’s a comedy act,” he said, “but probably not the kind of thing that seems funny to most people.”

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Survival Research Laboratories: Inconsiderate Fantasies of Negative Acceleration Characterized by Sacrifices of a Non-Consensual Nature

Jan. 6 through Feb. 10 at Marlborough Contemporary, 545 West 25th Street, Chelsea; [marlboroughcontemporary.com](http://marlboroughcontemporary.com).