

THE KITCHEN

Monster Robots Bash Paradise in Mock Battle

By STEPHEN HOLDEN

Weather permitting, tonight at 9 o'clock, the parking lot at Shea Stadium will be the site of an hourlong battle involving flame throwers, artillery, explosives and anthropomorphic metal machines that crush everything in their paths.

The event, which promises more intense combat than most of the sporting events inside the stadium, has an enigmatic name, "The Misfortunes of Desire (Acted Out at an Imaginary Location Symbolizing Everything Worth Having)." Over the course of the evening, a set depicting a mechanized man-made paradise, including a giant wheel of fortune, will be ritually crushed and smashed to bits by roaring, fire-spewing mechanical beasts.

While this machine-made destruction may resemble an actual military maneuver, it is really an art event put on by the San Francisco collective known as Survival Research Laboratories. "The Misfortunes of Desire," co-sponsored by three New York experimental arts organizations — Creative Time, the Kitchen and the New Museum of Contemporary Art — and budgeted at \$30,000, is the most elaborate production to date in the collective's 10-year history.

The 22 tons of equipment involved in the performance include a 12-foot shock wave cannon, a 10-foot-high, 4-legged walking machine, a 20-foot-long robot, nicknamed "the big arm," which can pick things up and throw them, a 300-horsepower flame thrower, a small radio-controlled tank, a 1,200-pound catapult and a 20-foot-long device called "the inch-worm" whose giant metallic pincers can lift and carry thousand-pound objects.

Since arriving in New York eight days ago, the members of Survival Research Laboratories have been camped out at the Shea Stadium site, living under a flatbed truck and working day and night to assemble the machines and fireworks.

Mark Pauline, the 34-year-old mastermind behind Survival Research Laboratories, is a native Floridian

and journeyman welder who moved to San Francisco in 1977 to be an artist. He started out doing billboard modifications and other forms of what he said in an interview last weekend was "creative vandalism."

Then in 1978, he formed Survival Research Laboratories, choosing the name because of its official corporate ring and the anonymity it gave him. He began by collecting heavy machinery from factories that were going out of business. Two years later, he teamed up with Matt Heckert, who designs the sounds for the performances, and in 1981 they began building fantastic, unwieldy devices, many of which look like prehistoric beasts, and using them in performances that parodied demolition derby and other familiar forms of cultural violence.

Today, Mr. Pauline presides over a 6,000-square-foot machine shop on the edge of the Mission District in San Francisco and makes his living as an engineering consultant and professional fabricator of oddball devices. While consultancy is his livelihood, Survival Research Laboratories is his passion. In 10 years, the group has given 35 performances around the country and made several videos that have spread their reputation in avant-garde circles.

They recently completed a 15-minute, 16-millimeter film, "A Bitter Message of Hopeless Grief," in which they created an imaginary world where machines acted out their own mechanical wills. This evening's performance is an extension of that film.

Accompanied by 20 Assistants

Survival Research Laboratories has built up a cult following. A corps of up to 50 volunteer workers follows members of the group around the West Coast when they give performances. For their trip East, they brought 20 assistants, who are divided into different teams. One group specializes in computers and electronics work; another is devoted to props, and a third to mechanical operations.

Creating imaginative warlike machinery involves a certain amount of risk. In 1982, while experimenting with rocket fuel, Mr. Pauline was blown into the air and lost four fingers of his right hand. But because he is left-handed, he was able to continue developing his art. The accident, he says, taught him a valuable lesson.

"When I examined the situation, I realized I was just another white male who had lived a life of privilege," he said. "Nothing bad had ever happened to me, and I'd gotten a sense of hubris. It becomes destructive when you think you can do anything and get away with it."

VIDEO

MUSIC

DANCE

PERFORMANCE

FILM

Because of the nature of the work, Survival Research Laboratories, whose only other New York appearance was a small-scale performance three years ago at Area, a downtown club that is now defunct, had difficulty in finding a suitable New York site. "The Misfortunes of Desire" was originally planned for September but had to be postponed when the piece was rejected by the Intrepid Sea-Air Museum. The Port Authority subsequently authorized use of the adjacent Pier 84, but rescinded its permission after its engineers decided that the pier wouldn't support the weight of the machines. The group then approached the Department of Parks and Recreation, which approved the Shea Stadium parking lot site.

While the behavior of the robotlike monsters in Survival Research Laboratories performances is carefully choreographed beforehand, the mechanical destruction that audiences will witness seems random, unpredictable and frightening. Above all, the performances are meant to create an aura of technology run amok.

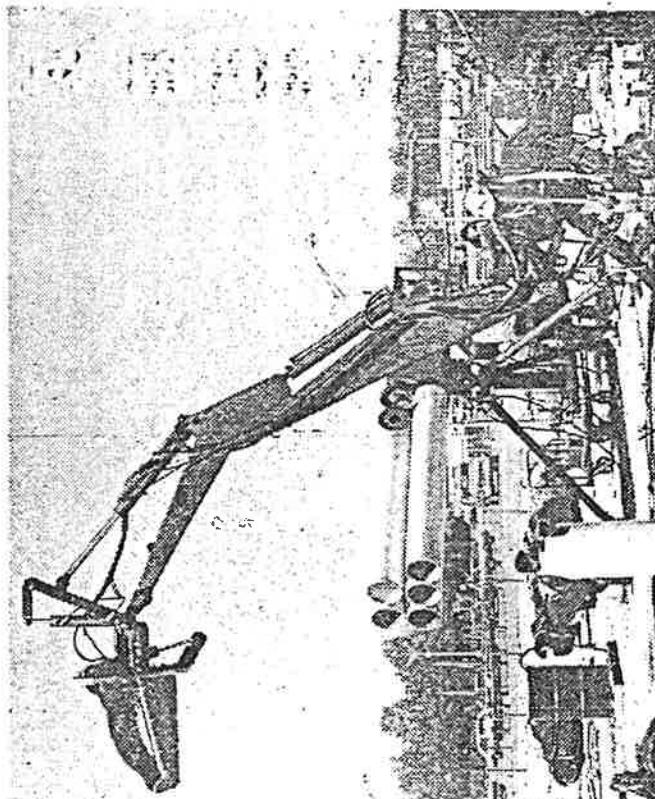
But if the work is loaded with metaphors about the relationship between humans and machines, Mr. Pauline is reticent about describing its specific meanings.

"I don't take a dogmatic view of why what happens happens," he said. "The show is about the power of the things we've created. It's about unadulterated, uncontrollable greed. It's about how paradise once gained, is soon lost."

Tickets are \$12, and a rain date is scheduled for May 19. For information, call 219-1222.

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One of the machines that will be used in the "art event" to be staged by Survival Research Laboratories at the Shea Stadium parking lot.