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National College of Art and Design

Faculty of Design

Department of Industrial Design

## **Carnival From Hell**

Mark Pauline

and

Survival Research Laboratories

by

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## Introduction

I hated hippies.  
Hippies were for peace,  
and I wasn't for peace.  
I was for death and  
destruction.  
Mark Pauline  
(Vale, 1983, p. 30)

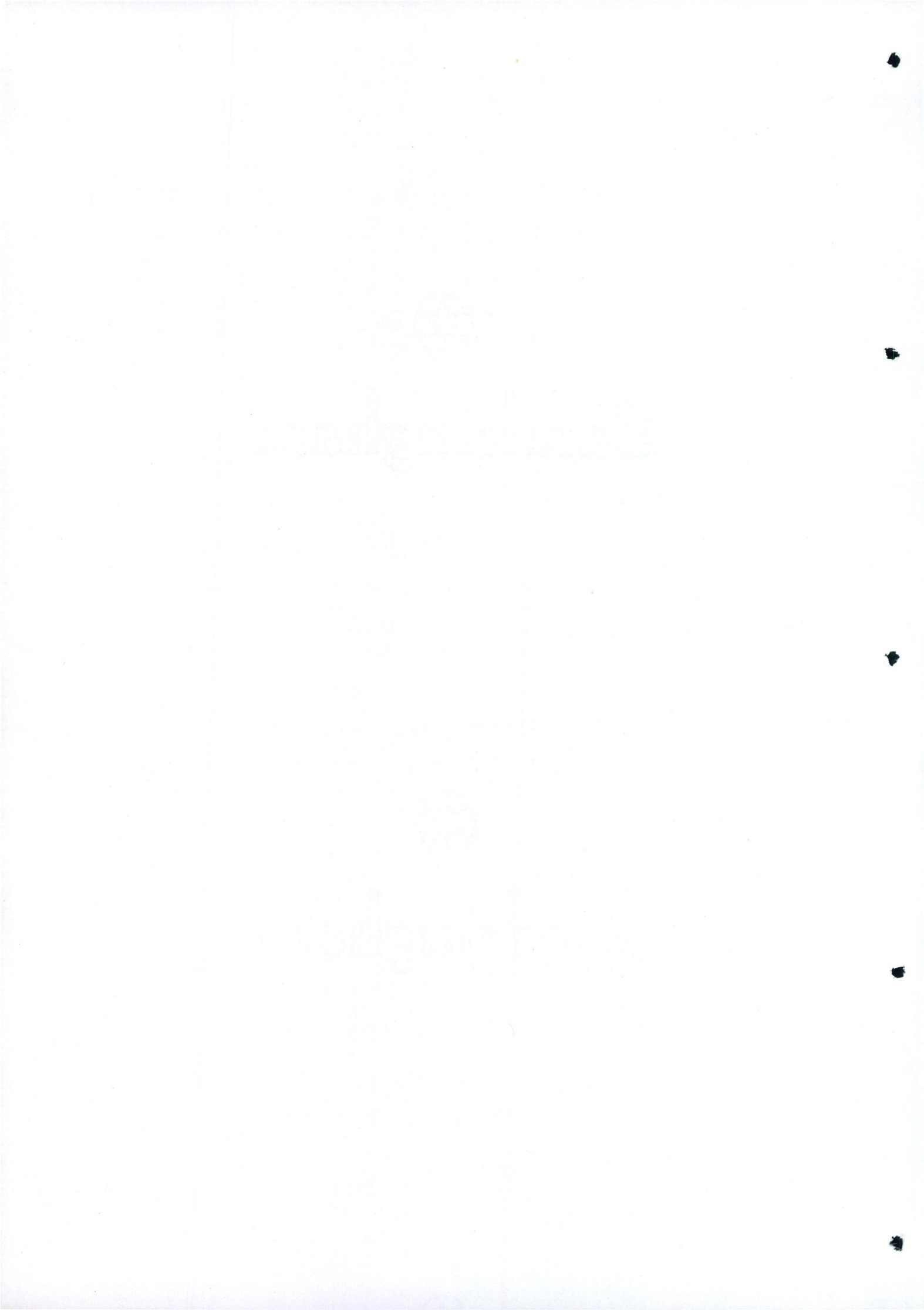


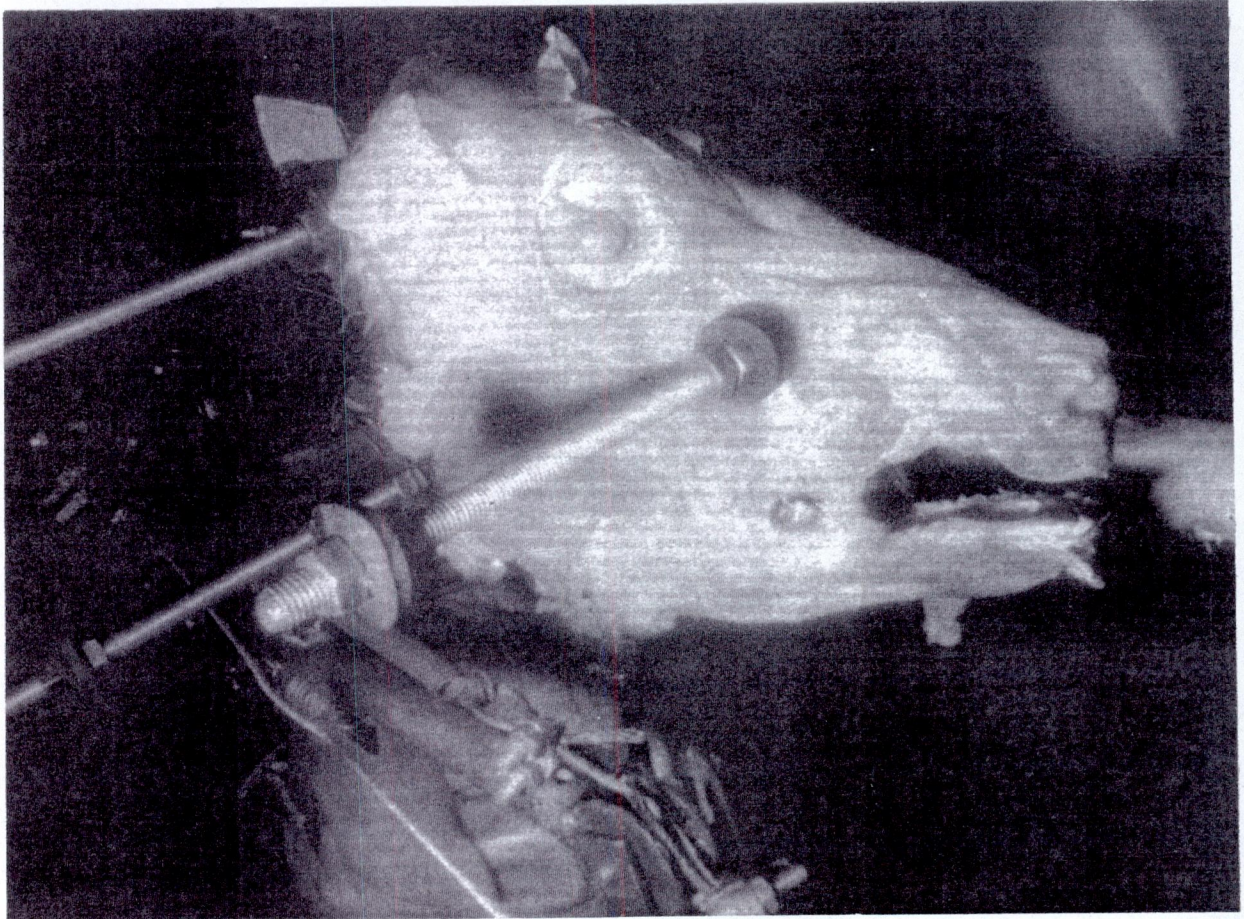


In this thesis I will discuss the work of the San Francisco based machine performance group, Survival Research Laboratories. In their work, which began in 1979, they have incorporated technologies that have traditionally been available only to industry, and have been abandoned before their usefulness had expired, in favour of newer technologies. They use this technology in their performances to enhance the characteristics of both live and dead flesh.

In recent years, advanced technology has been firmly gripped by both the established art world and the avant-garde. However, many of these technologies have been used by artists without serious modification and are replicants of mass produced items produced by the "system". The avant-garde have been using these technologies to try and subvert the system, by using the "system's" own tools. However this line of subversion ultimately leads to recuperation by the system due to the financial requirements needed to be fulfilled before these tools and mediums can be acquired.

Survival Research Laboratories have, to a certain extent, avoided recuperation by acquiring the technologies they use in their performances by unconventional means. SRL emerged from the post-punk industrial scene that was quite prolific in the San Francisco area during the late 70s and early 80s. SRL's underlying philosophy is an anarchic desire to use technology to undermine the "system". Technological innovation is the basis





**Plate 1:** Piggly Wiggly: The first attempt at mating meat with machinery. (1981)



of the groups performance. They feel it is important to be able to take a technology that has been prematurely abandoned by industry, and use it to create something that is undeniably impressive and which carries their message to the widest number of people. In using machines they want to produce images and experiences that are so powerful they will have an unforgettable influence on the people who see them.

There are many positive subverting elements in the performances of Survival Research Laboratories, which unfortunately are undermined considerably by their disregard for two major elements concerning their work. The first of these is the position of women in relation to their machines and their exclusion in the creative process. The other aspect is the philosophical and material affinities their work shares with fascism. These subjects are covered in greater detail in chapter five. The similarities with the philosophies of Nietzsche are the thread that ties SRL and the Futurists that preceded them. This thread runs throughout this thesis.

Another area discussed in this thesis is the historical background of the combination of performance art and technology. It will be shown that from the beginning of performance art's being recognised as an individual medium in its own right, it has relied heavily on technology to enable its realisation. It is incorrect to assume that SRL are the first major proponents of machine art, as their forerunners include groups like the Italian Futurists, The Bauhaus and individuals like Jean Tinguely and Marcel Duchamp.



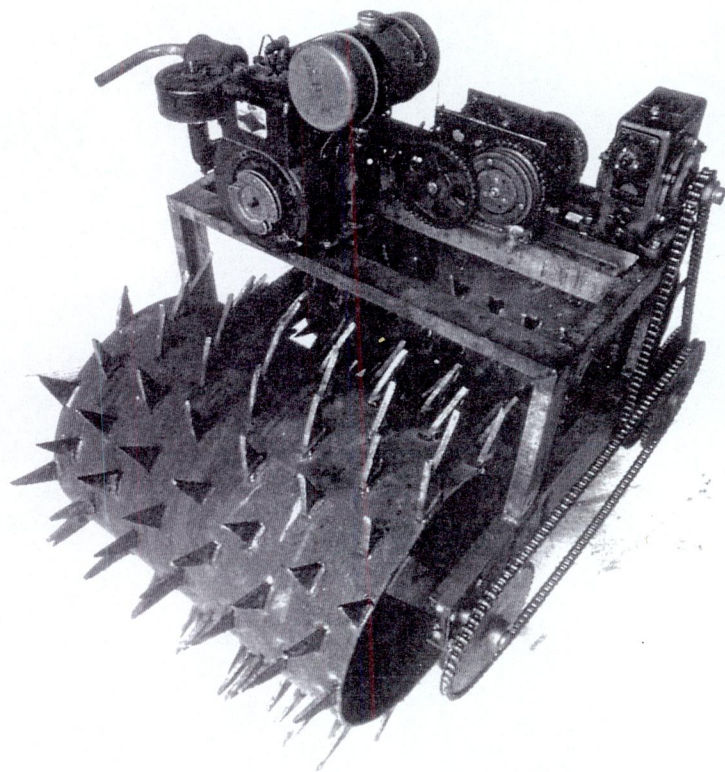


Plate 2: Spiked Roller Machine (1985)

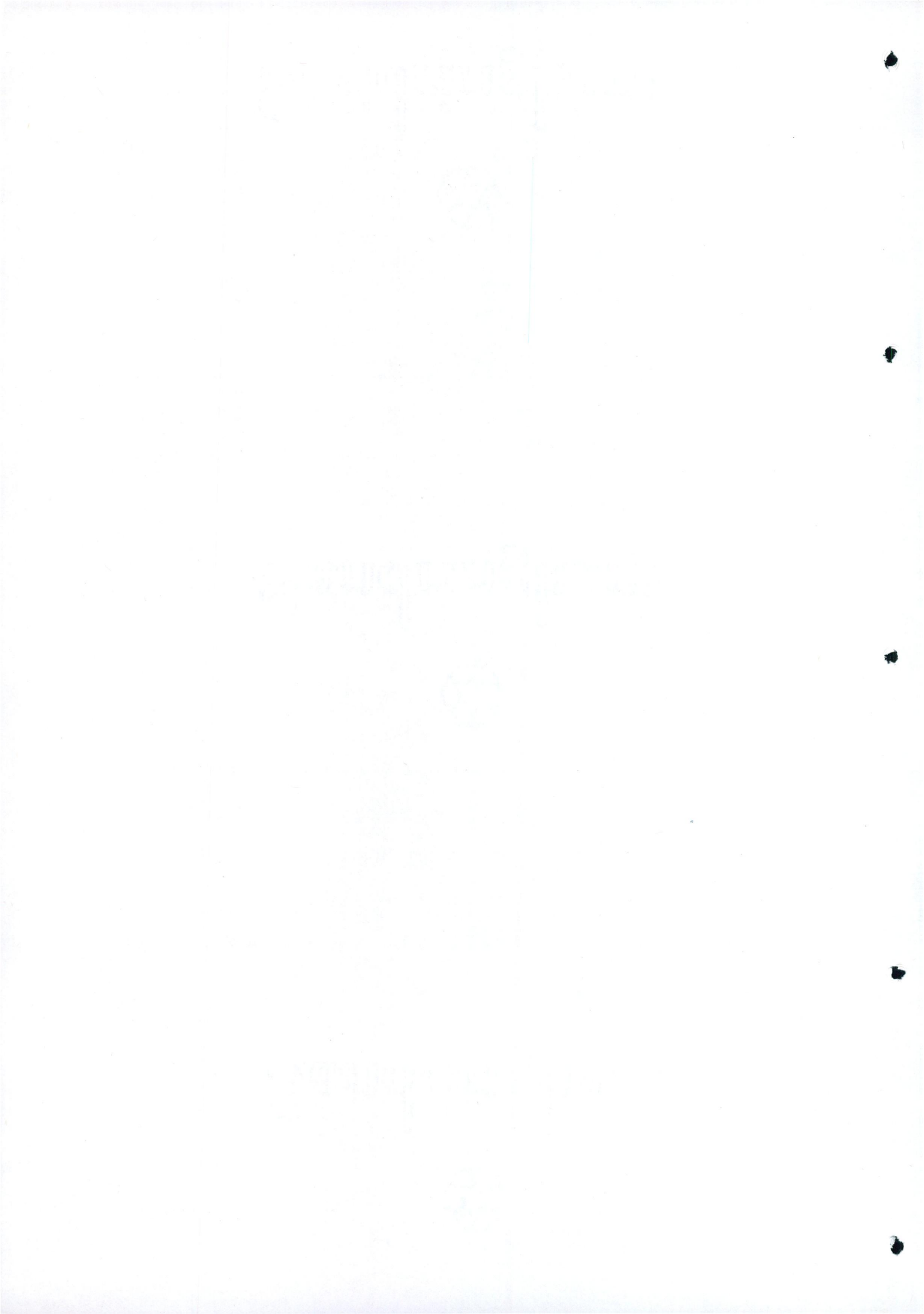




To describe all of the performances of Survival Research Laboratories would be far beyond the scope of this thesis. As a result only the first performance is discussed in detail and the emphasis is placed upon the motivation behind their work, and how successful SRL have proved to be in achieving their goals.

It will also be proposed that the work of Survival Research Laboratories does not fulfil the requirements of machine art as described in Kostelanetz's "Metamorphosis in the Arts". Among these criteria are sculptural qualities as well as choreographic standards for gauging the articulated activity in time, environmental relations and the interaction of the parts (Kostelanetz, 1980, pp. 261-262). Combining this with their disregard for women and dubious political affinities, the effectiveness of SRL's work as art has been severely impaired.

This thesis hopes to bring a critical and contextualising account of the work of Survival Research Laboratories, and to place this work in the position that it should rightly occupy. The work of Survival Research Laboratories has an unsound conceptual basis, and is perhaps more effective as a spectacular "Hieronymus Bosch, come to life in the graveyard of the Industrial Revolution" (Vale, 1983, p. 23).



**Chapter 1**  
**Performance Art**  
**and**  
**Technology**

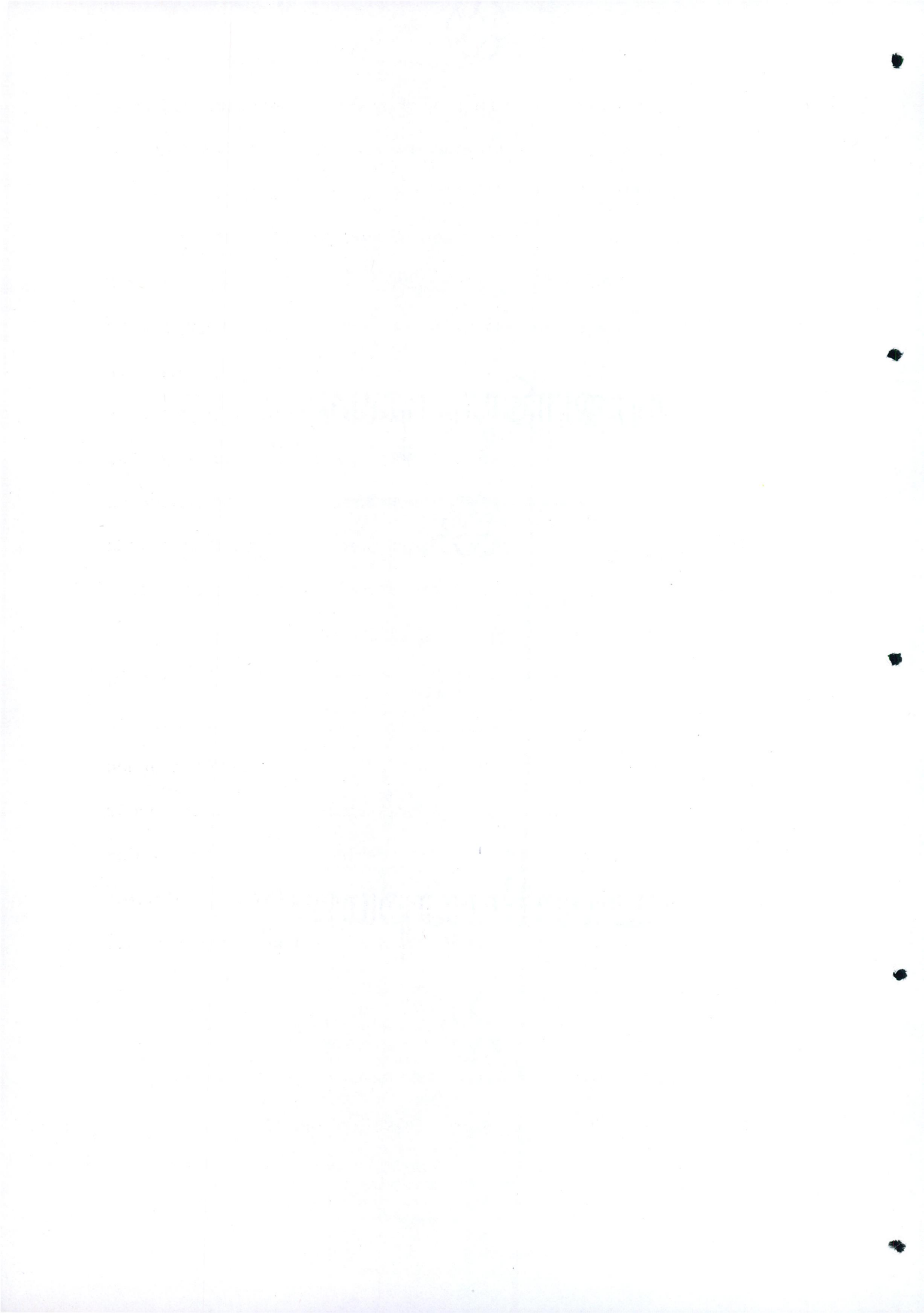
War is beautiful, it initiates the dreamt-of  
metallisation of the human body. War is  
beautiful because it combines the gunfire,  
the cannonades, the cease fire, the scents,  
and the stench of putrefication  
into a symphony.  
(Benjamin, 1968, pp. 238-239)



The argument that art and technology are inherently opposed, and as cultural forces eternally antithetical, carries less influence than during the arts and crafts movements of the 19th Century, largely because this man-machine analysis displays little sense of how human beings actually relate to technology. The tools we use serve primarily as extensions, enabling us to perform tasks for which we are biologically insufficiently equipped. We could dig up the earth with our hands, but the job would be easier with a shovel. What is more, the art of our times has been profoundly influenced by machinery, because technological change redefines current opportunities; this development in turn generates further artistic experiment. Furthermore, the argument that insists upon an irreconcilable conflict between art and technology discounts the historical fact that artists in all fields have always exploited the latest technologies available to them (Kostelanetz, 1980, pp. 239-242).

Performance art has, from its inception, exploited the most advanced technologies available to it. It was the Italian Futurists with their multitude of manifestos beginning in 1909, that linked technological advancement with art and specifically performance art. They were the first to use performance as a new medium to try and convey some of the more abstract concepts their manifestos contained.

The Futurists began working with technology as one of their central themes, before the accelerated technological advancement of both World

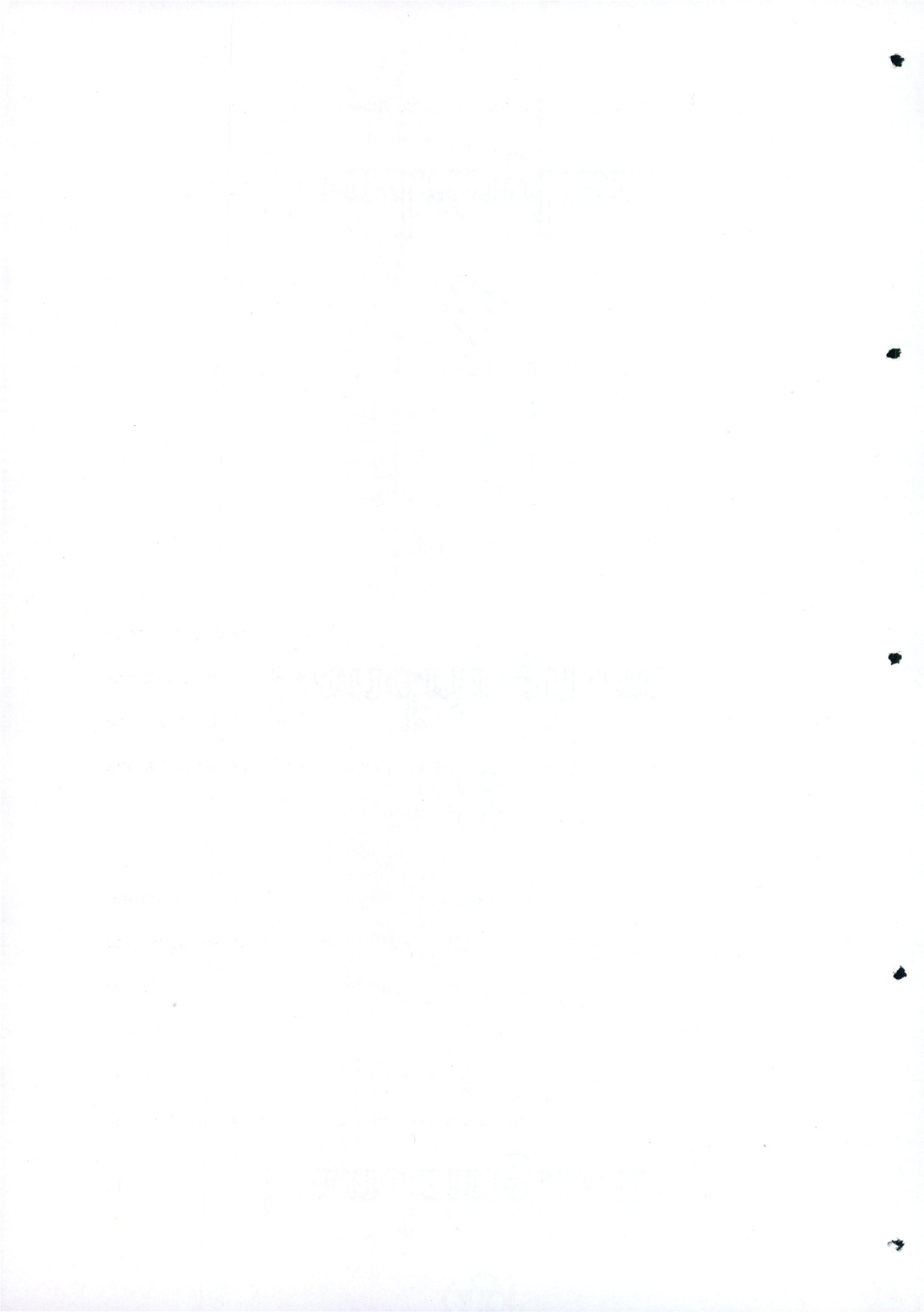


Wars and thus the actual technologies available to them were primitive, compared to today's standards, or were ill suited to the uses they attempted to put them to. To overcome this they concentrated their efforts on producing human actions that were mechanistic and music that was both based on machines and produced by them. Russolo's *Art of Noises*, aimed to combine the noises of trams, explosions, motor cars, trains, and shouting crowds. Special instruments were built, which at the turn of a handle, would produce such effects. These consisted of rectangular wooden boxes about one metre square, with funnel shaped amplifiers containing various motors making up "a family of noises", which would become The Futurist Orchestra (Goldberg, 1988, p. 21). This Orchestra of noise was used frequently to accompany subsequent Futurist performances of human mechanisation.

Not only did the Futurists regard technology as the new aesthetic, they also believed, as Nietzsche had, that war was the ultimate free expression of man. Not only did war bring about huge leaps in the development of technology, e.g. the development of the aircraft from its invention in 1909 to the high-speed flying warplanes that were created for the First World War was, by conventional standards, meteoric. The Futurists were well aware of the positive affects war had on the creative possibilities of technology, and Marinetti praises war in his manifesto on the Ethiopian colonial war:

For twenty seven years we Futurists have rebelled against the branding of war as anti-aesthetic... Accordingly we state:... War is beautiful because it establishes man's dominion over the subjugated





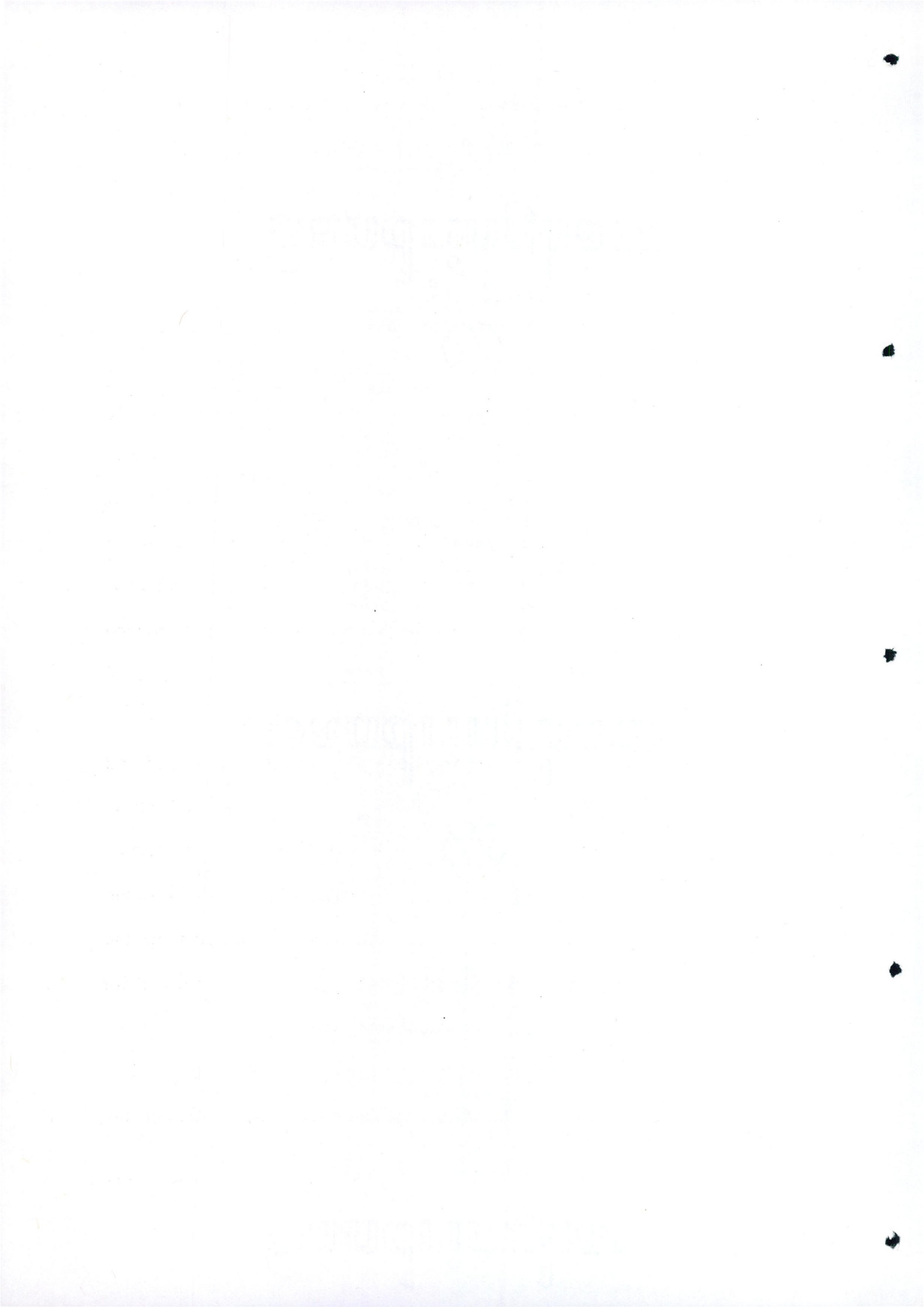
machinery by means of gas masks, terrifying megaphones, flame throwers, and small tanks. War is beautiful, it initiates the dreamt-of metallisation of the human body. War is beautiful because it enriches a flowering meadow with the fiery orchids of machine guns. War is beautiful because it combines the gunfire, the cannonades, the cease fire, the scents, and the stench of putrefication into a symphony. War is beautiful because it creates new architecture, like that of the big tanks, the geometrical formation flights, the smoke spirals from burning villages, and many others,... Poets and artists of Futurism!... remember these principles of an aesthetics of war so that your struggle for a new graphic art... may be illumined by them. (Marinetti 1925 quoted in Benjamin, 1968, pp. 238-239)

As Nietzsche had expressed it:

war is training in freedom... Freedom means that the manly instincts that delight in war and victory have gained mastery over the other instincts... The free man is a warrior (Nietzsche, 1987, p. 92)

The creation of a symphonic war, a war that is art or vice versa, is exactly what SRL create within their performances. They relish the symbols of war and destruction and these symbols are the basis of their performances. An SRL performance would not be complete without its armoury of tanks and rockets.

This mechanisation of the performer echoed similar ideas of the English director and theoretician, Edward Gordon Craig, whose influential magazine, "The Mask", was also published in Italy. Enrico Prampolini, in his manifestos on Futurist Scenic Atmosphere and Futurist Scenography (both 1915) called, as Craig had in 1908, for the abolition of the performer. Craig had suggested that the performer be replaced by an "Übermarionette", but



he never actually realised this theory in production. Prampolini, in a disguised attack on Craig, talked of eliminating "today's performers". Nevertheless the Futurists actually built and used those inhuman creatures (Goldberg, 1988, p. 22).

The Futurists continued to merge performer with performance space using specially designed sets and marionettes; while Balla, in 1917, in a performance based on Stravinsky's *Fireworks*, had experimented with the "choreography" of the setting itself. The only "performers" in *Fireworks* were the moving sets and lights. The set itself was a blown-up version of one of Balla's paintings, and Balla himself conducted the "light ballet" at a keyboard of light controls. Not only the stage, but also the auditorium, was alternately illuminated and darkened in the five minute actorless performance (Goldberg, 1988, p. 24).

By the middle twenties, the Futurists had firmly established performance as an art in its own right. There was even a manifesto of Futurist Aerial Theatre, written in April 1919 by the aviator Fedelle Azari. Azari prized aerial theatre, which used the acrobatic abilities of aeroplanes to compose theatrical performances in the air, as the best way to reach the largest number of spectators, in the shortest period of time (Goldberg, 1988, p. 32).

The Futurists used practically every major technological innovation of



their time as a medium for their art. Not only did they use the sound-producing technologies, but lighting, airplanes and radio. In their last major manifesto (1933) radio was heralded as "the new art that begins where theatre, cinema, and narration stop" (Goldberg, 1988, p. 30). However the futurists began to decline after this and it was left to other groups to further the integration of technology and performance art.

Man and machine was as much a consideration of the Bauhaus analysis of art and technology as it had been for the Italian Futurist performers. Costumes of the stage workshop, under the direction of Oskar Schlemmer, were designed to metamorphose the human figure into a mechanical object. Schlemmer noted in one of his passionate diary entries:

Might not the dancers be real puppets, moved by strings or even better still, self propelled by means of a precise mechanism, almost free of human intervention, at most directed by remote control? (Goldberg, 1988, p. 106).

By 1923, puppets, mechanically operated figures, masks and geometrical costumes, had become central features of many Bauhaus performances. However the closest Oskar Schlemmer and his associates came to autonomous performing machines, was in Kurt Schmidt's "Mechanical Ballet" in which abstract movable figures were carried by "invisible" performers, creating an illusion of dancing automatons (Goldberg, 1988, p. 109).

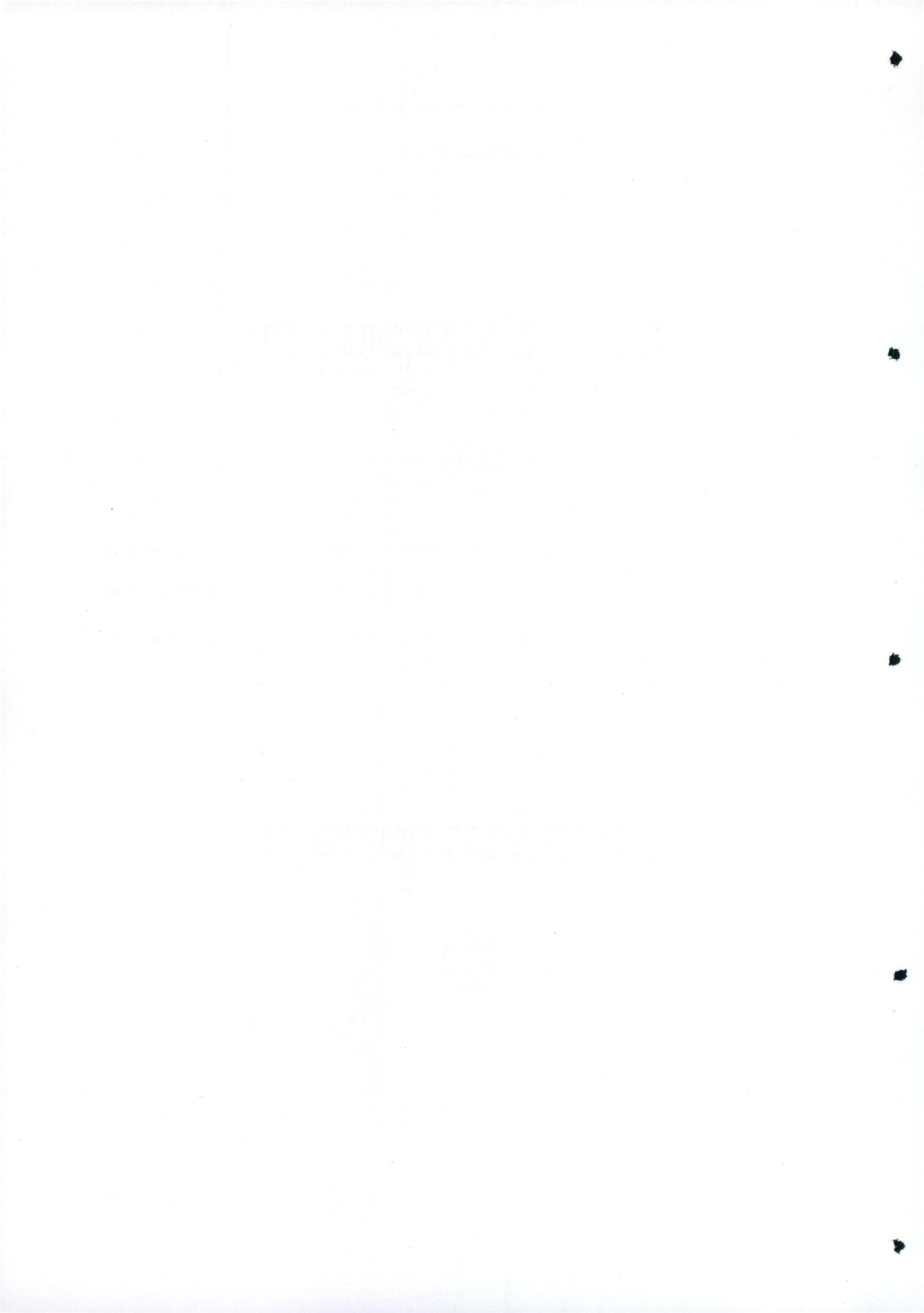
However, since the 1930s there have been few artists to use machines in their work. Notable of those who have is Jean Tinguely. In the



late fifties, he began creating highly satirical "drawing machines", with moving, jointed arms attached to crayons that drew jerky, artistically trivial lines on rolls of paper mechanically fed across them. The thrust of the satire seemed aimed at the theoretical automatism of some Expressionist painting of the time. As if to satirise technology itself, most of Tinguely's machines were prone to break down and were grotesque in appearance. Tinguely's next step was the now legendary *Homage to New York* (1960), a sculptural collage full of moving parts that proceeded to destroy itself, with a little help from an accidental fire and less autonomous friends. In retrospect, *Homage* seems something of a cul de sac, and as a result Tinguely was unable to make any advance on it (Kostelanetz, 1980, p. 272). SRL also wish to ridicule the established art world so as to subvert and negate it. They do this, as Tinguely did, by relinquishing part of the artistic control to autonomous machines and allow the machines roam freely creating the interactions between machines in a mostly autonomous way.

Since the sixties many artists have begun to use technology in their work, but there is an inevitable time delay between the realisation of a possibility and its actual use. Another and more specific reason for this slow assimilation, is that few artists know much about machinery and few art schools provide such knowledge. Furthermore, innovations are made in the art of artistic machines, in spite of the fact that technology's situation in society does not encourage artistic experimentation. While the industrial corporations that develop nearly all advanced machinery often support



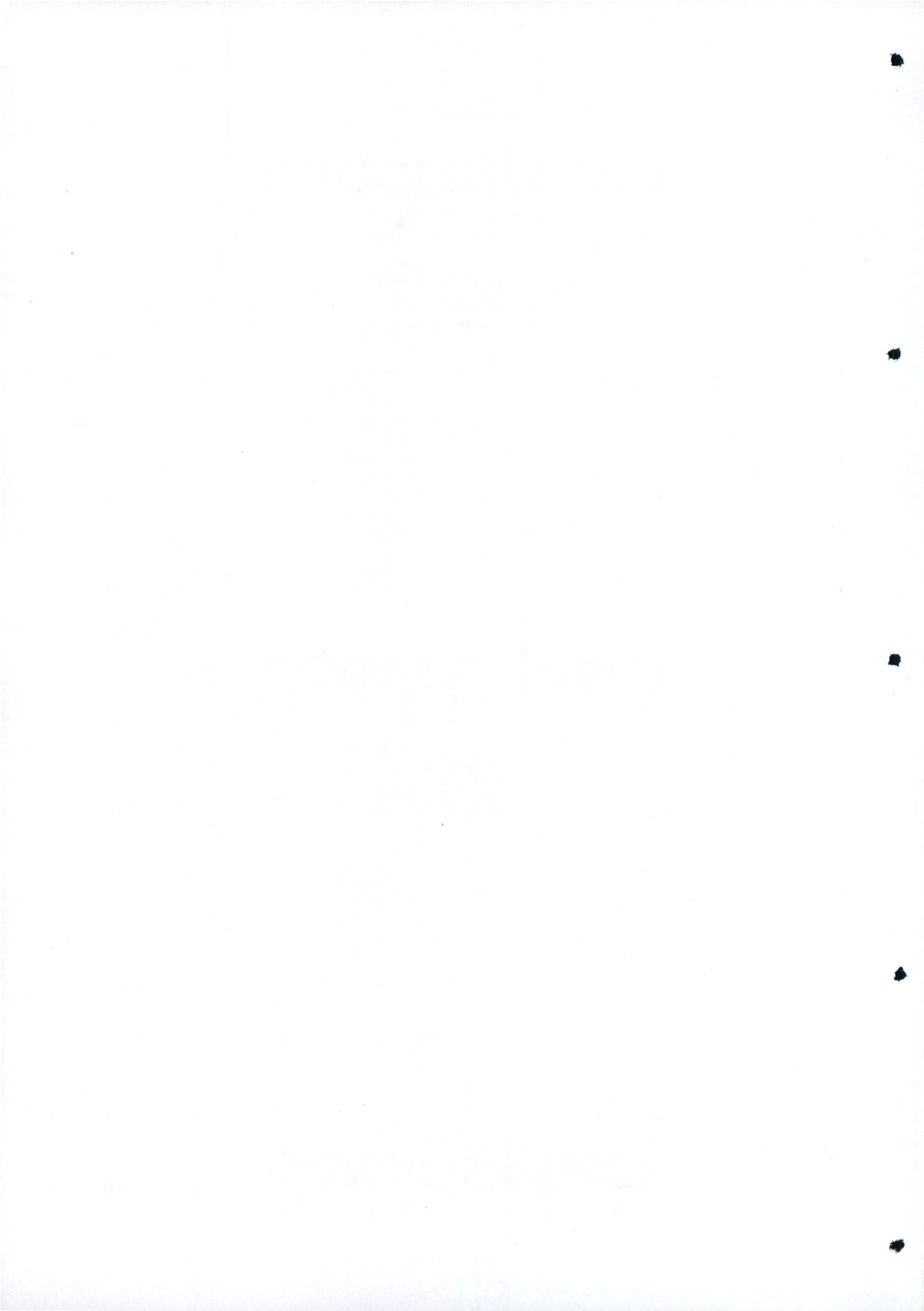


projects calculated to promote their achievements, their policies in art rarely allow for the kind of creative and critical risks that customarily precede artistic advance. However, according to Kostelanetz, the function of machines in art is ultimately not to imitate or supersede human action, but to provide man with the means to extend his creative ideas (Kostelanetz, 1980, pp. 279-80). It is from this historical background that Survival Research Laboratories have emerged, and it is the extension of their creative ideas, their physical power and the glorification of destruction, that is embodied within their machines. As Nietzsche says "A living thing desires to *vent* its' strength... all mechanical occurrences, in so far as a force is active in them, is a force of will" (Nietzsche, 1973, pp. 26+49). This is exactly what SRL wish to achieve with their machines as modes of their expression through what they believe is the only truly powerful way remaining, machines.



**Chapter 2**  
**Foundation**  
**of**  
**Survival Research Laboratories**

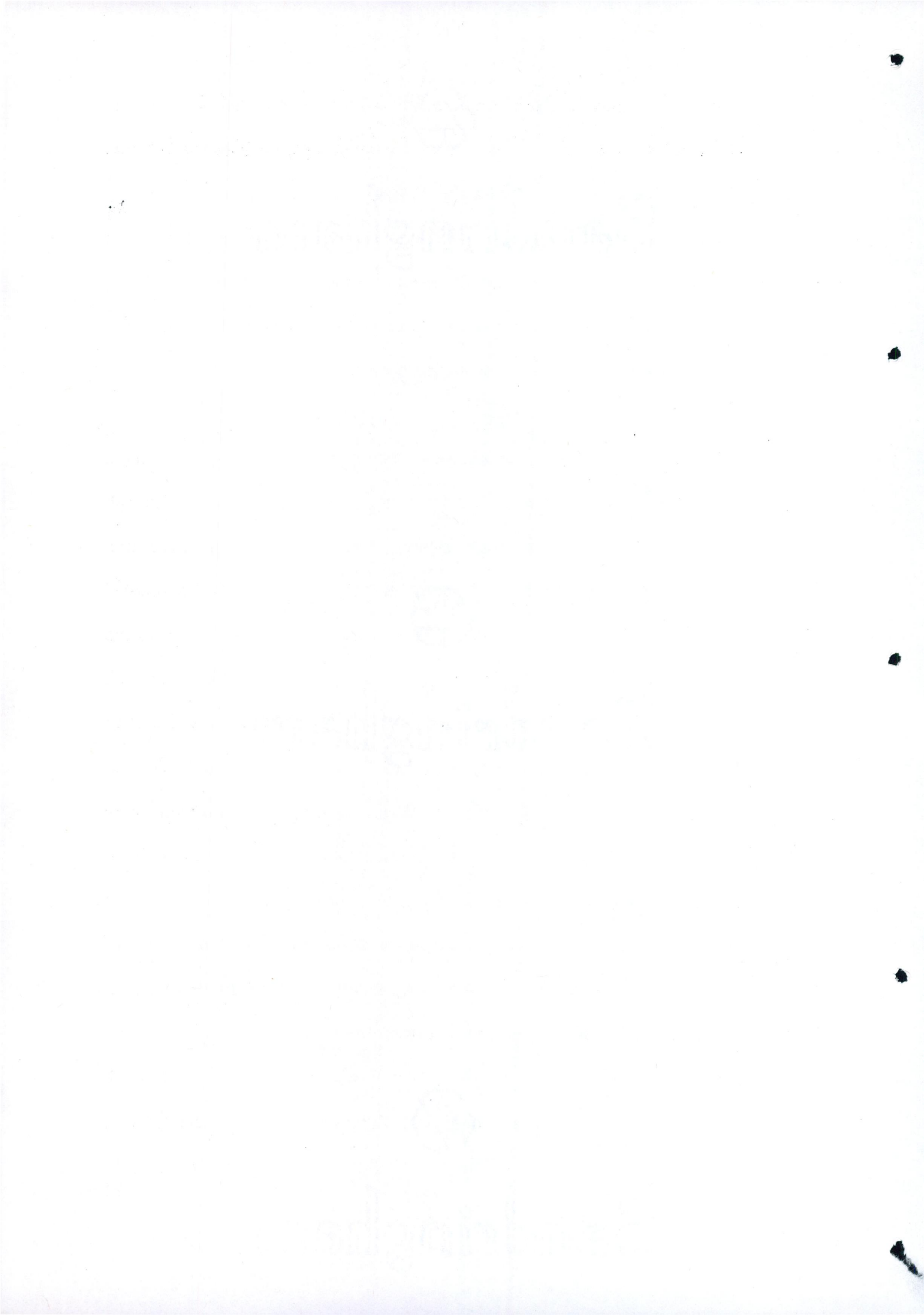
"I like to think of myself as a maniac"  
Mark Pauline  
(Belsito, 1985, p. 15)



For an increasing number of individuals, whose ability to accept conventional art has been undermined by the collaborative efforts of Mark Pauline , Matthew Heckert and Eric Werner, the name Survival Research Laboratories elicits a response of legendary proportions. Indeed one begins to wonder whether SRL's performances resemble a demolition derby, an industrial machine show or a Black Mass, and whether the artists involved are engineering geniuses or delinquents on a rampage.

Survival Research Laboratories is based in a dingy warehouse on the outskirts of San Francisco's Mission District. From this base, Pauline and company have fashioned their lasers, tanks, helicopters, rockets and inventions with names like *The Mummy Go Round*, along with other organic robots (machines which animate dead animals or are controlled by live ones). These they set loose before audiences in various parking lots, warehouses and art spaces, the audience being drawn to the shows with titles like *A Cruel and Relentless Plot to Pervert the Flesh of Beasts to Unholy Uses* and *Fiery Presentation of Dangerous and Disturbing Stunt Phenomena*. The audiences have witnessed these contraptions burning, crumpling and exploding a variety of targets before ultimately turning on one another. The resulting chaos draws wild applause from the spectators whose traditional reverence for art is suspended by the theatre of simulated warfare, and its obvious dangers ( Belsito, 1985, p. 7).

Mark Pauline, the founder of Survival Research Laboratories



graduated from college in 1978. During his time in college he studied in both Italy and in London where he spent six months living in a Cornwall Street squat. This was in 1976, at the height of the Punk era in London and it is unlikely that Pauline had remained uninfluenced by the Situationist tendencies of Punk. Pauline, after graduating, tried to interest galleries in his native Florida in exhibiting photos of him illegally altering billboards. However the gallery thought Pauline to be crazy, and refused to support him. Soon afterwards Pauline moved to San Francisco. He spent some time there hanging around with underground new wave and experimental bands. It was in late 1978 that Pauline began to work on the borders of illegality, modifying billboards to become grotesque parodies of themselves. He often did this in broad daylight when people were less suspicious of his actions. His most publicised modification was however done at night, this was the Telly Savalas poster, Feel the Velvet Baby, which became Feel the Pain Baby. The reason for the change from "velvet" to "pain" was that Pauline felt that what the poster was really doing was trying to sell people an opiate for the pains of life and he felt that he should disclose the real meaning of the poster. Telly also received a macabre grin and a picture of a man firing a gun out of the poster was also inserted beside him.

As well as his billboard work, Pauline did a poster campaign on banks. This consisted of pasting a six foot by seven foot poster of two cats having sex. While cats are having intercourse the male cat bites the neck of the female in a violent and passionate way. The poster was headed with







## Telly With Teeth

Plate 3: Telly with Teeth (1979)



huge fluorescent orange letters "PAY ATTENTION", and underneath it read "In the domestic cat, as well as in larger felines, the neck bite during copulation is a common occurrence." He then spray-painted "\$LAVES" on the bank windows. The neck-bite was meant as a metaphor for the way that banks "fuck" people around, and the way in which they have a strangle hold on people's finances. Accompanying the posters was a threat:

Under no circumstances will you be allowed to damage or remove this sign for 5 days. In the event of any violation, a destructive counterattack will be launched against this bank. (Juno & Vale, 1987, p. 8)

One bank's response was to hire a guard, and leave the lights on 24 hours a day; but they left the poster up for the full 5 days. Another bank left the poster up for a day and a half. As retaliation for not leaving the poster up, Pauline returned to the offending bank and poured a nitric acid and urine mix into the night deposit box. On one occasion Pauline did the same thing in his home town in Florida. Here however the reaction was quite different to that in San Francisco. The next day, the town was full of police and FBI agents, who went around all the art schools and counter-culture places in the area. Finally they found out from some art teacher, who had apparently found out from some students, that Mark Pauline was responsible. Surprisingly Pauline was never approached by the authorities. Pauline felt that the work he did with billboards and banks was only the first step away from working within the established art world of galleries and museums, which he thought of as creatively stifling and oppressive.

Since Pauline had been trained as a visual artist, logically he should



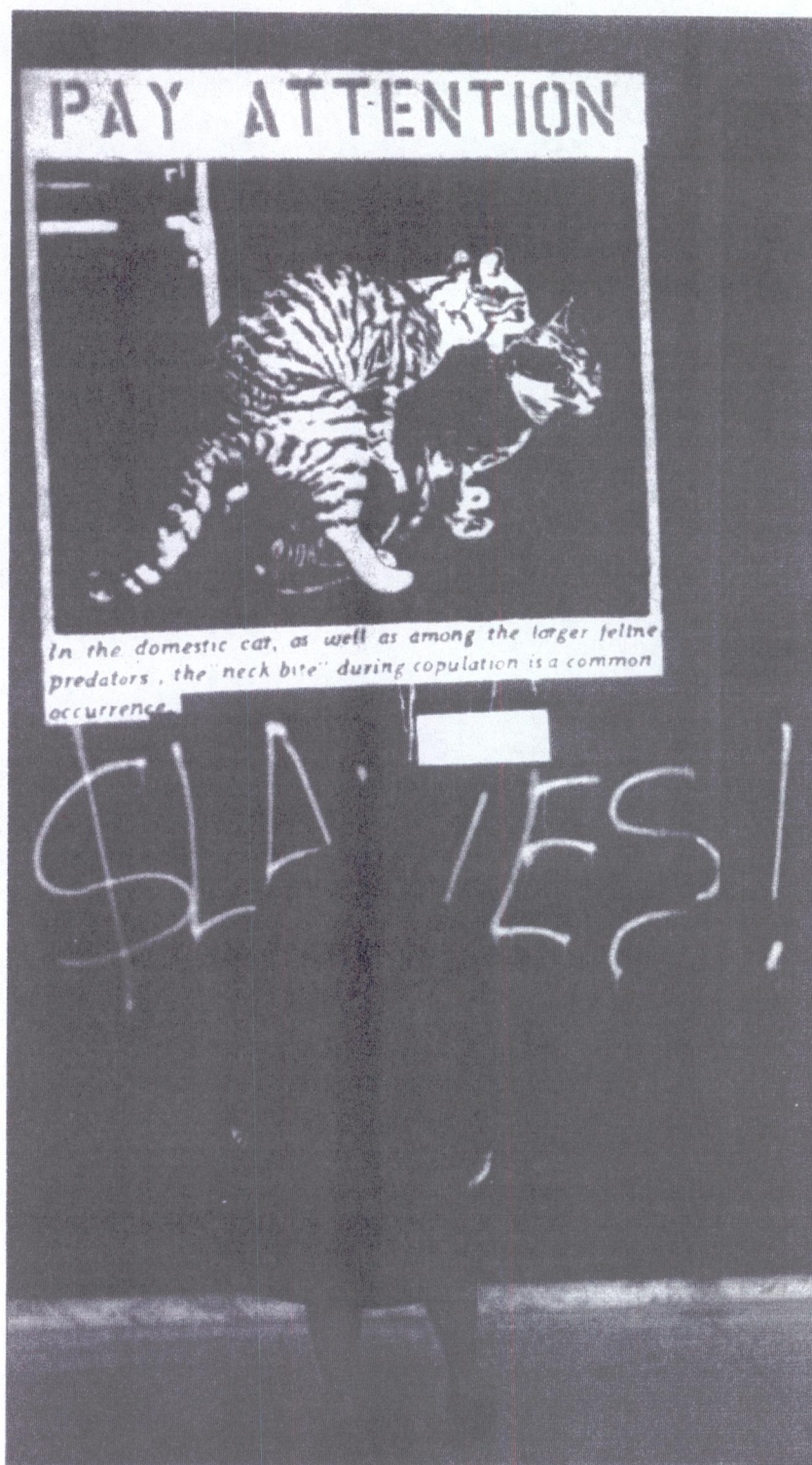


Plate 4: Feline sex education poster (1979)



have orientated himself towards art galleries. He did the billboards to get away from gallery dependence, and through this experience, got the feeling that it was possible to do really exciting things on an independent basis, and that more people would see his work than if it were in a little room with clean walls and perfect lighting.

Pauline realised that the billboards were a dead end, as in doing them he was not utilising all of his talents. He had a working knowledge of mechanics, welding, and electronics and had learnt how to stage a theatrical event while at college. He began "snooping" around the industrial areas of San Francisco, which at that time were in a period of decline. Pauline knew that he had to coalesce his performance abilities with his technical skills and perhaps, he thought, it would be possible to actually have some fun and do something new that no one had done before. ( Juno & Vale, 1987, p. 13)

Pauline began to collect all sorts of different machinery by covertly visiting redundant industrial complexes, and taking whatever he thought would be useful or that he needed. His favourite activity was making some apparently immovable piece of machinery disappear overnight, to the bemusement of the workers the next morning, by removing it piece by piece. From the outset, Pauline felt no need to spend large amounts of money on the equipment he would use in his performances, believing instead that necessity was the mother of invention. He also had been greatly encouraged by his success with the billboards without getting any form of





permission from the owners or the civil authorities. The fact that the actions of Survival Research Laboratories are mostly illegal does not worry any of the members, although they do not wish to burden individuals with the consequences of their actions, and would rather big business bear the brunt of the financial implications.

Once Pauline had gathered enough equipment to stage a performance, he set about organising it. His first machine performance was called *Machine Sex*, and took place at Alex's Service Station in February 1979. Included in the performance were some dead pigeons, live snakes and an incendiary device. This first performance was on the brink of the second oil crisis and Pauline used this as the theme of the performance.

The dead pigeons had been killed previous to the performance by Pauline, and dressed up in little Arab doll costumes. He had also assembled a tape player, an incendiary device and hundreds of little black plastic oil drums. As the service station was closed on Sunday, Pauline just hopped over the fence and began setting up. Just as the show started the owner of the Station (presumably Alex) went up to Pauline and pleaded with him, wanting to know " what the hell was going on?". Pauline casually assured Alex that there was absolutely no way that he could have known what was going on and that it was all right . He gave Alex twenty dollars for the electricity he might use and carried on with the performance (Juno & Vale, 1987, p. 13).

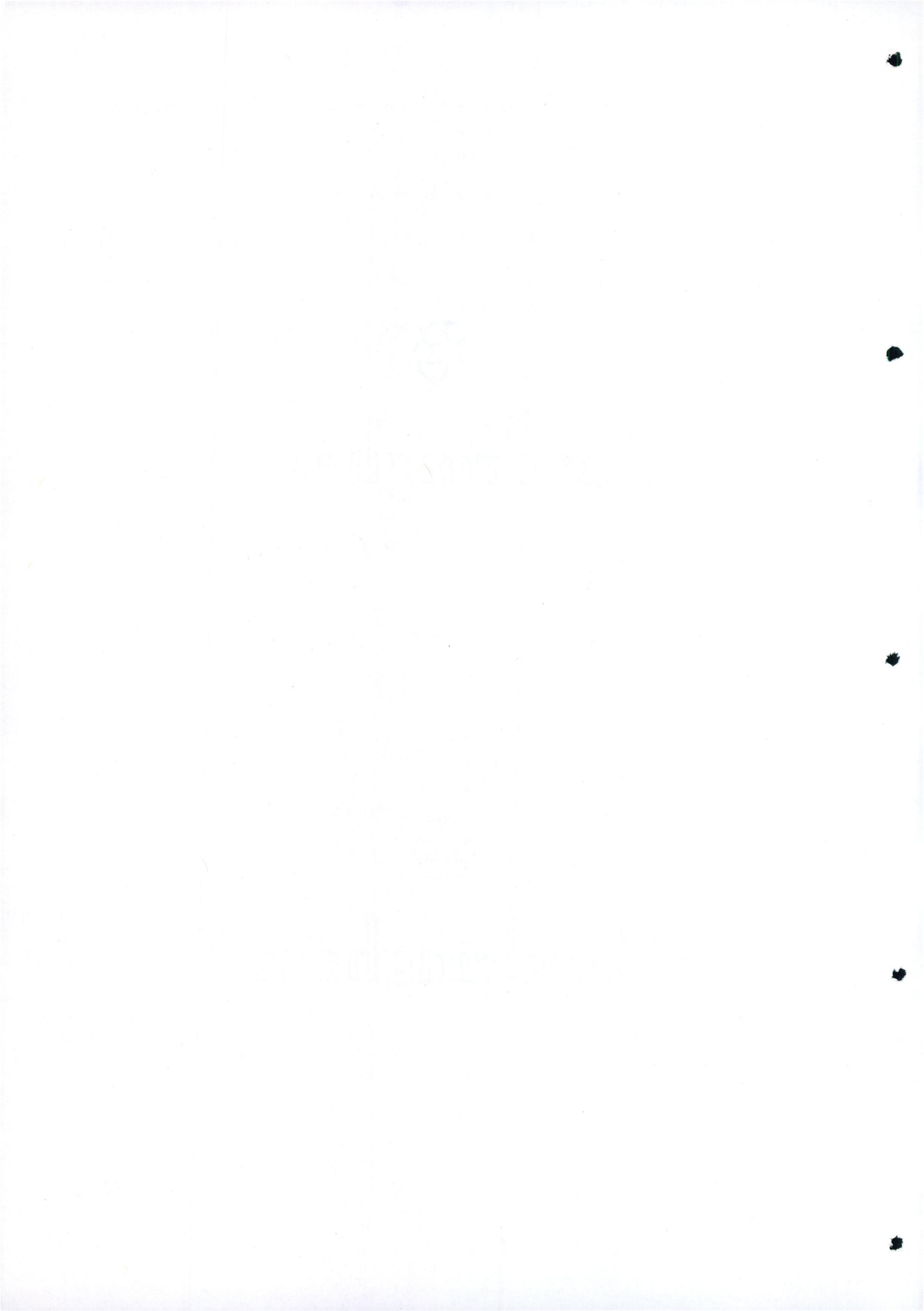


The performance began with the soundtrack, which was a scratchy staticised version of a Cure song called "Killing an Arab". Then he started up the machine filled with dead pigeons, and one by one they fell into this centrifuge and were chopped up, sometimes all the guts and pieces of clothing would get thrown out towards the audience. After about six pigeons had "performed", Pauline ignited the stack of little oil drums that contained a huge mass of live snakes. This mass of snakes exploded right next to the audience ending the performance (Juno & Vale, 1987, p. 13).

Soon afterward Mark Pauline was joined by Matthew Heckert, who had previously been in a new wave experimental band called *Pink Section*. Heckert had begun by creating the sound tracks of industrial noise, sound bites and music for the performances; but by 1981 he was involved in creating whole systems like *The Mummy Go Round* and the sound system they use in their performances.

Later in the same year Heckert and Pauline were joined by Eric Werner, who had just moved from Los Angeles where he had been working in the aerospace industry as a machinist. He had met Heckert while he was at the San Francisco Art Institute, where he had studied for a year.

These are the three men who form the core of Survival Research Laboratories and who have remained working together for over fifteen years, creating machines of awesome destruction. However the absence of women



not only as co-workers, but also in the content of the performances, has created a lot of negative criticism of their work and furthers their segregation from the mainstream art world. Also their allegedly proto-fascist affinities and the similarities in their work with the philosophies of Nietzsche have called into question the integrity of their work. The relationships between SRL and feminism, fascism and Nietzsche will be discussed in a later chapter.



## Chapter 3

### Motivation

I like to make trouble  
and work hard  
Mark Pauline  
(Vale, 1983, p. 25)

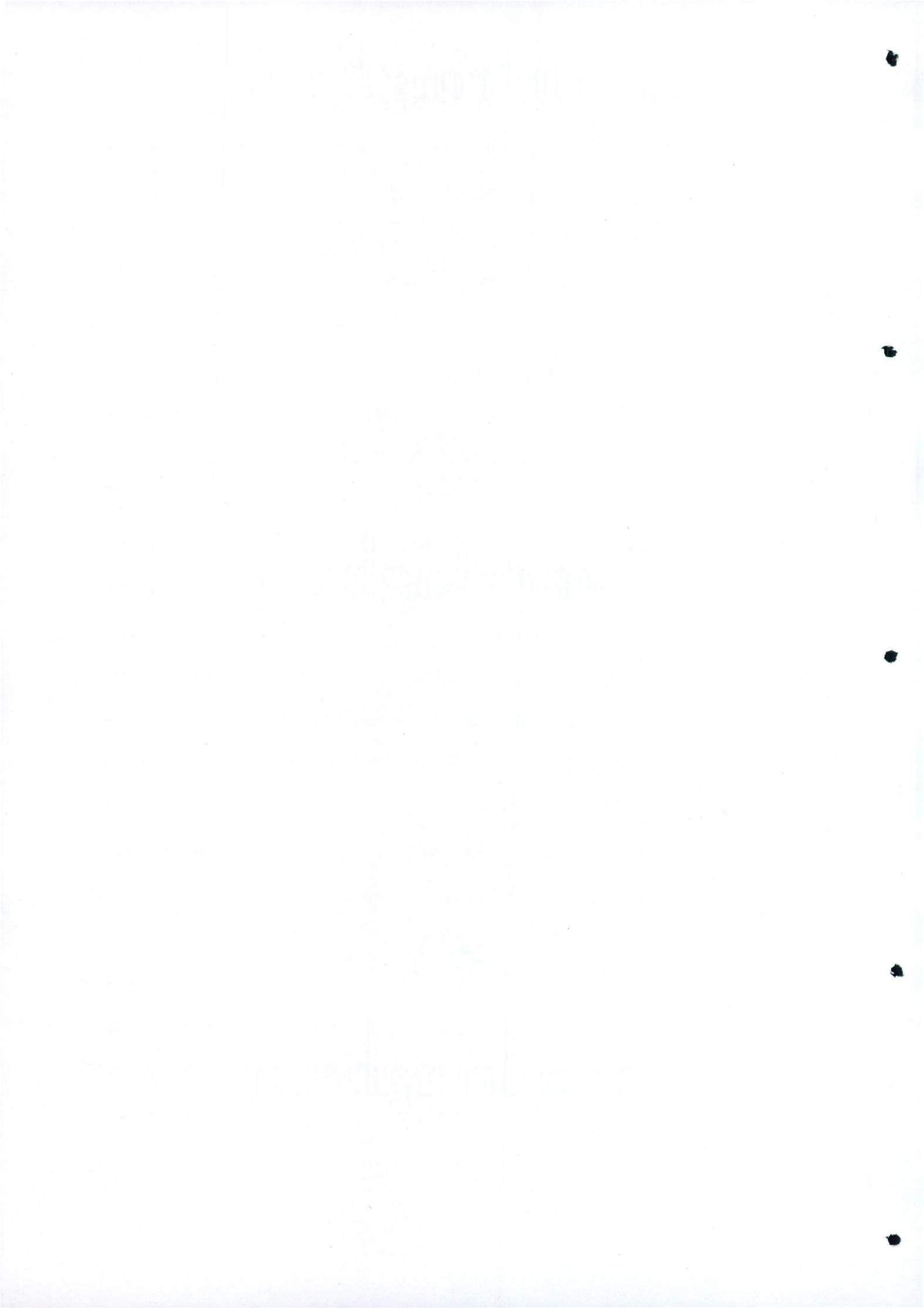




There are many reasons why SRL choose to work in the way they do. In this chapter these reasons will be discussed in relation to how they influenced the founding of SRL, and how they have continued to work with machines and as performance artists. The first question that could be asked when viewing the work of SRL, is, why do they use machinery?

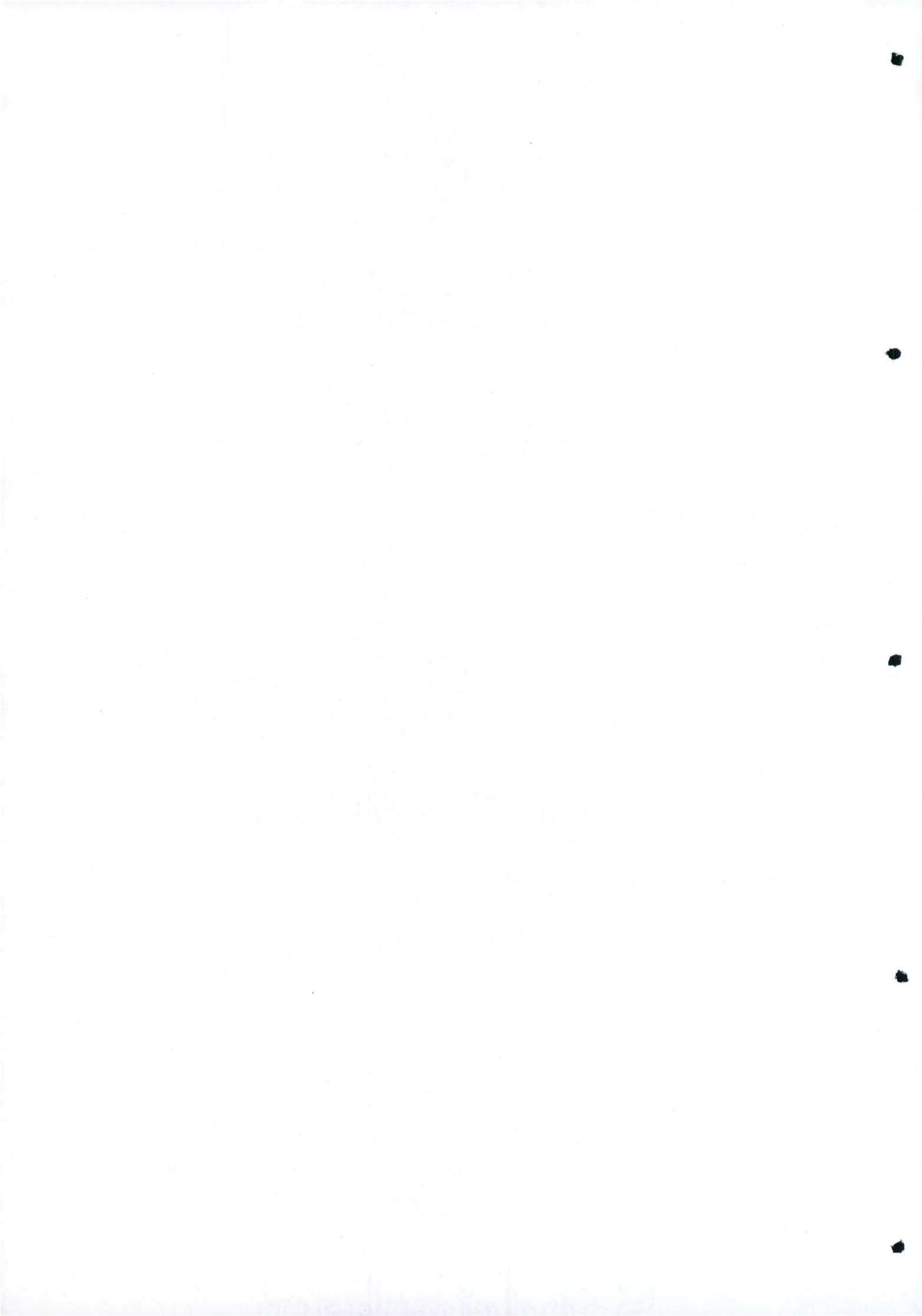
According to Mark Pauline there are three main reasons for this. The first and probably the most important, is that after he had achieved some success with modifying billboards, he felt that he was not using his skills to the best of his abilities. As he had a concise knowledge of mechanics and electronics, he decided to use machines to express his ideas. The use of machines was also based on his personal belief that in today's society, the only really powerful way to express oneself is through machines. This allowed him to convey his ideas to a wide number of people at the one time. In eliminating human performers in the performances, they hope to free themselves of any preconceptions their audiences may have towards the human body. However by using machines, they are taking on all of the preconceptions the audience may have towards conventional machines and by doing unconventional things with them, they try to destroy these preconceptions.

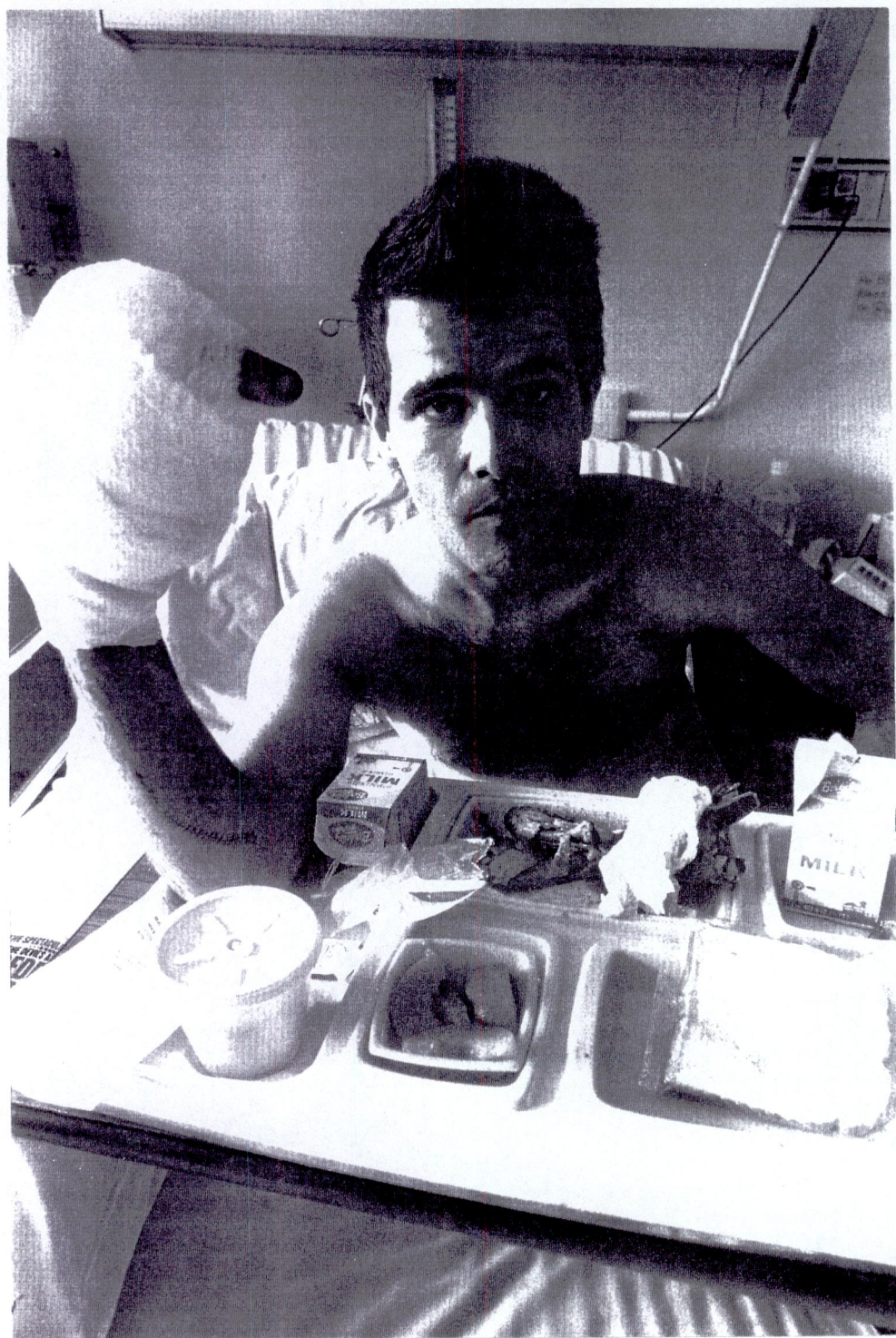
According to Mark Pauline, the reason for the machines they create being used in performances, is to prevent them from falling into the category of sculpture. This would lead them to become mere things that could be



bought and sold, only to end up in clean sterile art galleries, the very places that SRL are opposed to. SRL spend month after month working on their machines, for a show that could last only ten minutes, which makes the whole exercise even more absurd, ridiculous and pointless. This wanton destruction of objects that may have taken months to create is contrary to the concept of technology as an agent of production. Technologies are developed to better the development of mankind; by destroying their technically awesome machines in a spectacular and terrifying way, SRL are subverting the concept of machines as agents of production in an extremely forceful and impressive way. The first performance that Pauline did was an experiment to see if he could spend all that time creating something that would be destroyed in minutes, and still find it worthwhile to do it. He felt it was worthwhile for him and since then has continued to make more sophisticated and cruder machines. (Vale, 1983, p. 26) One of the reasons perhaps, why it is so worthwhile for Pauline to spend so much of his time and effort on something that ultimately will be destroyed, is that if his machines were to survive for posterity, the technical wizardry that created them would become just another part of history and would lose the impact and force it enjoys in the idiom of the performance.

Another major reason that SRL work in the way they do, is simply that they have decided that the ideas that are supposed to be right are just lies. Having decided this, they realised that they did not have to give up the fun things of their youth, because they know it is acceptable to have fun.





**Plate 5:** Mark Pauline, San Francisco General Hospital, (1985)

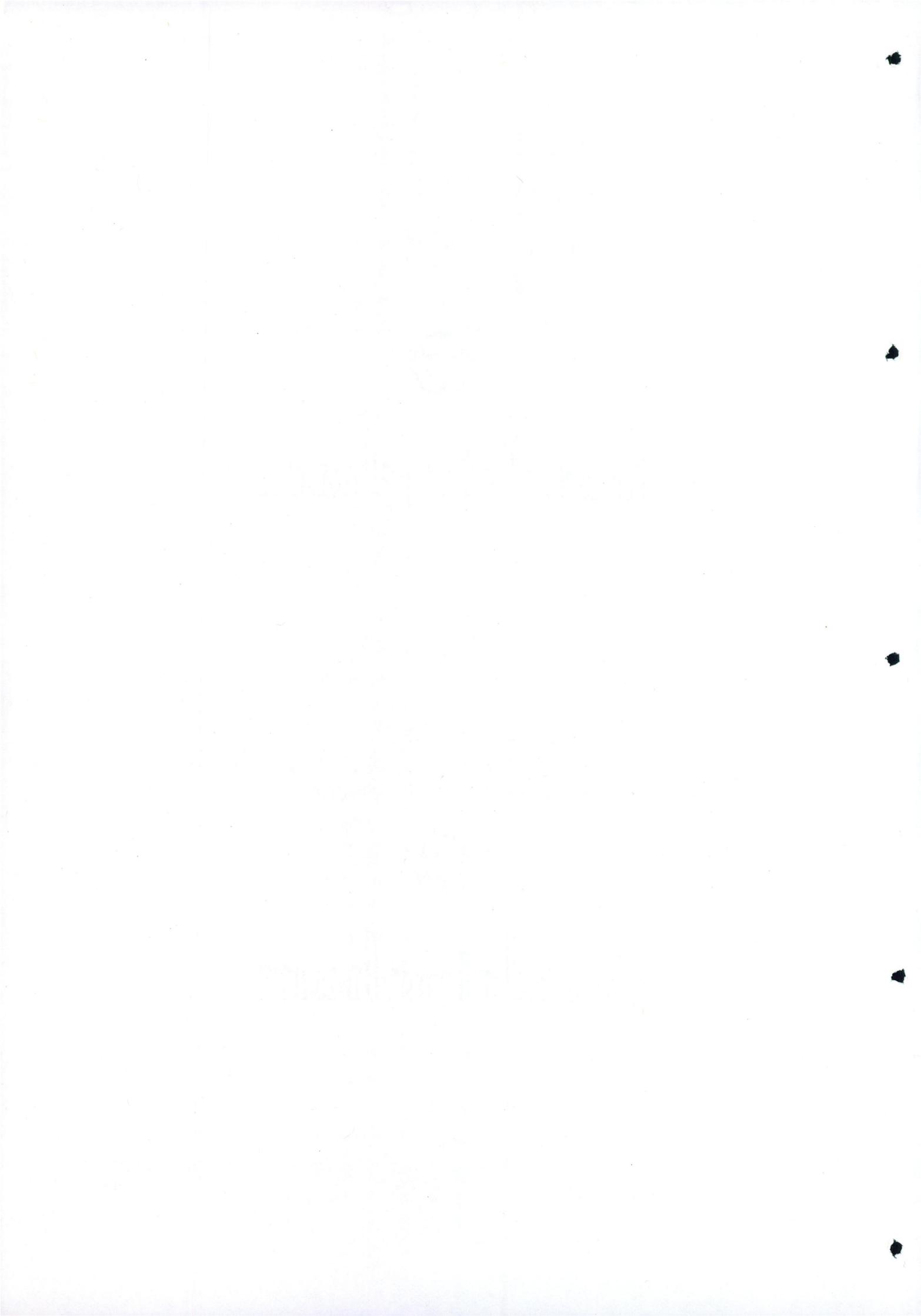


However they do realise that there is more to life than having fun and that to achieve a satisfactory enjoyment of life you have to work hard. This is what they try to achieve in their work, they want to be able to work hard at something they enjoy. Obviously they enjoy their work judging by the amount of effort and personal risk they put into it. However Mark Pauline lost most of his right hand in an accident with a rocket motor.

They also use their work to undermine the society that condemns all of the things that they enjoy, such as gore, guns, death and destruction. Mark Pauline says he is the "kind of person that is just annoyed... Everything bothers me all the time" (Vale, 1983, p. 30) Pauline could be described as:

full of malice towards the lures of dependence which reside in honours, or money or offices or raptures of the senses; grateful even to distress and changeful illness [the loss of his hand] because it has always liberated us from some rule and its prejudice, grateful to the god, devil, sheep and worm in us, curious to the point of vice, investigator to the point of cruelty, with rash fingers for the ungraspable, teeth and stomach for the most indigestible (Nietzsche, 1973, p. 55)

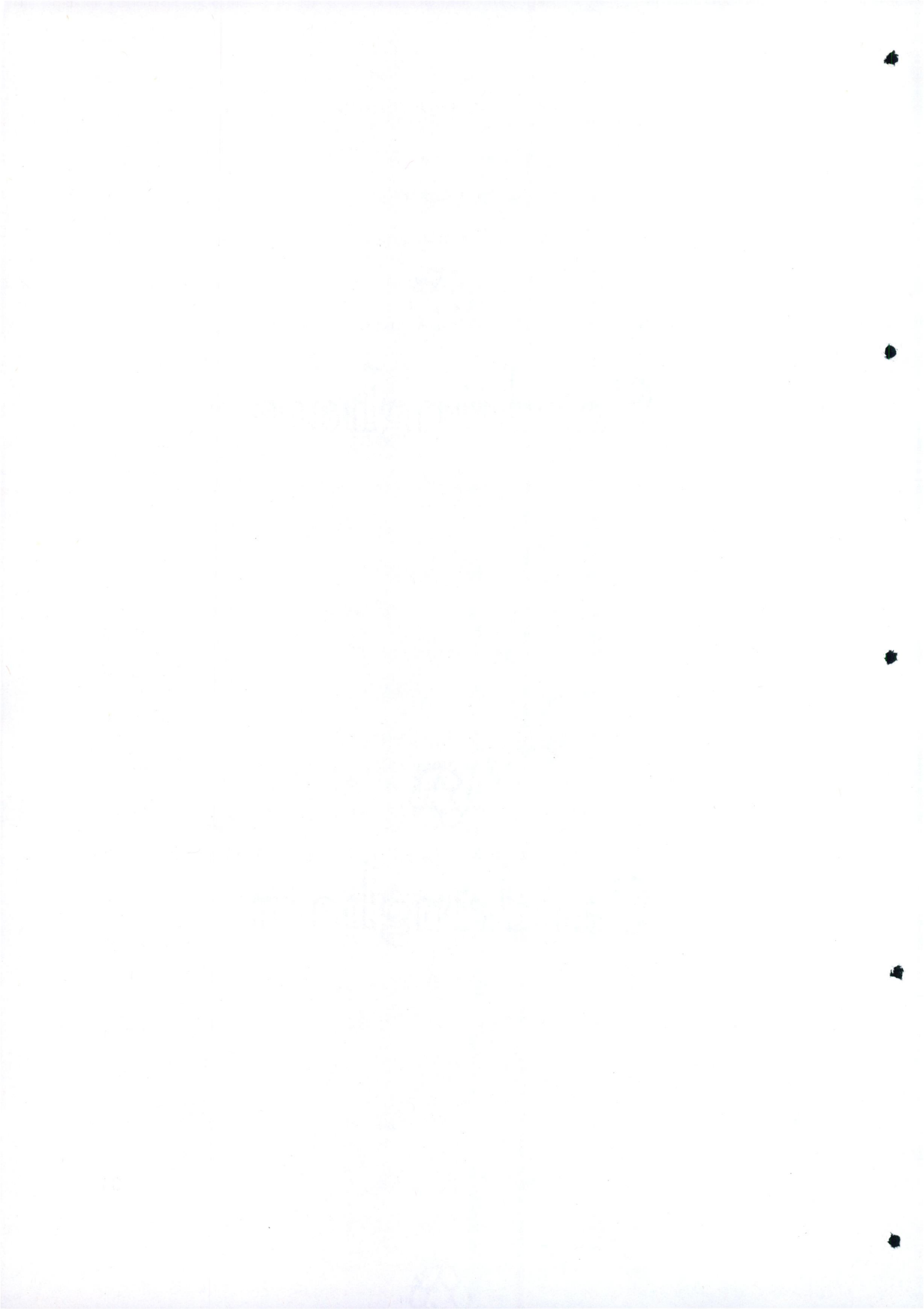




**Chapter 4**  
**Subversion**  
**and**  
**Recuperation**

Dead animals, things that are dead,  
make people feel funny. Then I thought, well  
if things that are dead make people  
feel funny, then what are people going  
to think if they see things that are  
definitely dead, but are moving around  
and look like they're alive?

Mark Pauline  
(Vale, 1983, p. 26)

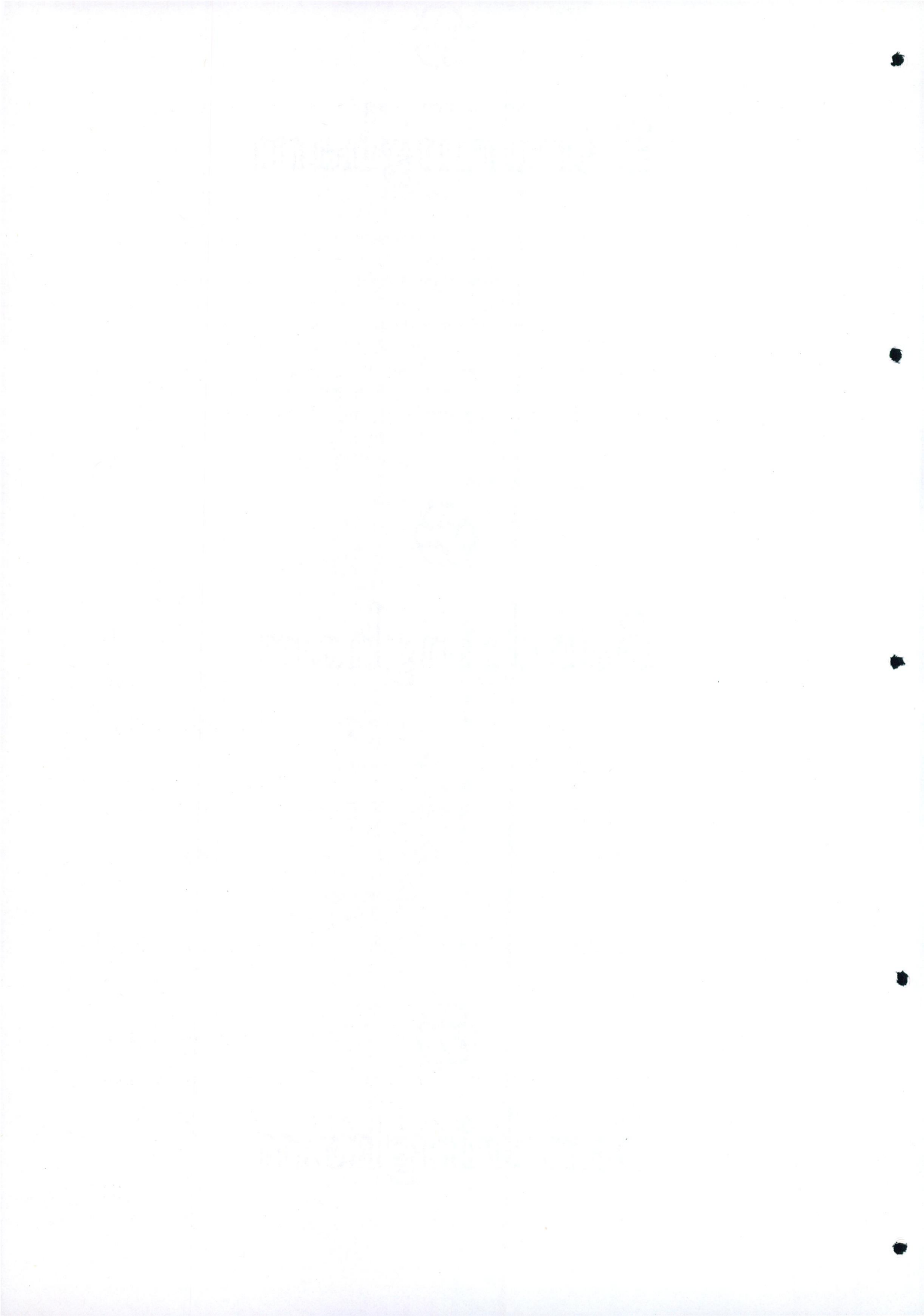


SRL have continually claimed throughout the years that they are subverting the "system" by using the tools of industry. The most effective and overt way in which they do this, is by taking technologies that have been prematurely abandoned by industry and society. They then remanufacture these technologies into something that it was never intended to be by its inventors. Mark Pauline believes that:

there is a nice form of justice there: turning something against its' engineers best wishes. It confuses an issue of these things in the first place, because any time you take something that's so utilitarian and do something non-utilitarian with it it's just confusing. It just blurs the reality of what you're doing even more. Just makes it harder to pin down (Vale, 1983, p. 34).

No matter how successful SRL are at changing the utilitarianism of the technologies they use, they do not ultimately change the manner in which the mechanics of the technologies operate. The basic unchanged nature of the raw materials that make up an SRL performance lends them an air of reality. This air of reality lulls audiences into thinking that these horrifyingly destructive machines could have just rolled off the production line of some experimental factory, and are embarking on the wholesale destruction of the earth. These machines are the antitheses of the conventional machine as a system of production, their function is to destroy.

The apparent futility of spending sometimes up to a whole year constructing machinery that will be utterly destroyed in a performance that may only last from 45 minutes to one hour, is the very goal of SRL. They

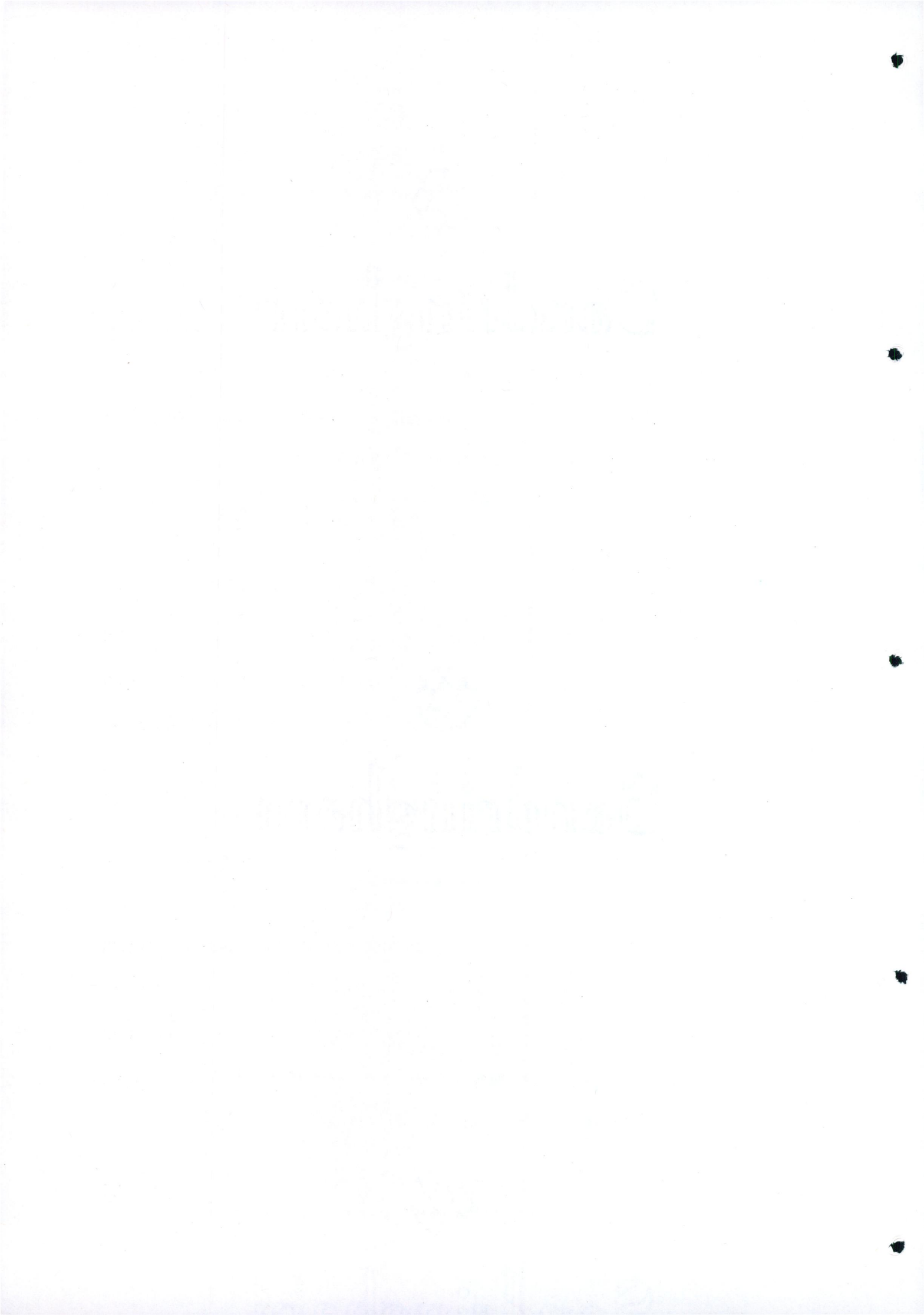


emphasise this futility to make their performances even more spectacular by allowing the often amazing mechanical feats that they achieve in their machinery to be laid waste. As SRL continue to operate within the popular underground many of the people who go to see their shows have had some prior knowledge of what will constitute the performance they are about to watch; as advertisement is mostly by word of mouth. Their audience is essentially prepared and therefore their reactions can be more or less calculated in advance of the performance. This pre-programming of their audience allows SRL to get away with many aspects of their work going unquestioned by the audience and accepted quite readily with minimum analysis.

The theme that runs through practically all of SRL's performances is that machinery's traditional role as a system of production, has been undermined by overproduction, and that as a result, machines have become the precursors of apocalyptic destruction. SRL believe they are:

the vaccine for the virus of total destruction. It's the perfect vaccine. In any situation where you put people in a dangerous position, it prepares them for other dangerous situations, like a holocaust (Belsito, 1985, p. 18).

If we view the world as a biological mechanism, then perhaps SRL's demonstrations in raw power could at least make the people who control the real destructive forces in our world think twice about the ramifications of those forces. Or perhaps these shows are to prepare us for even more dangerous situations in the future (Durland, 1988, p. 21).

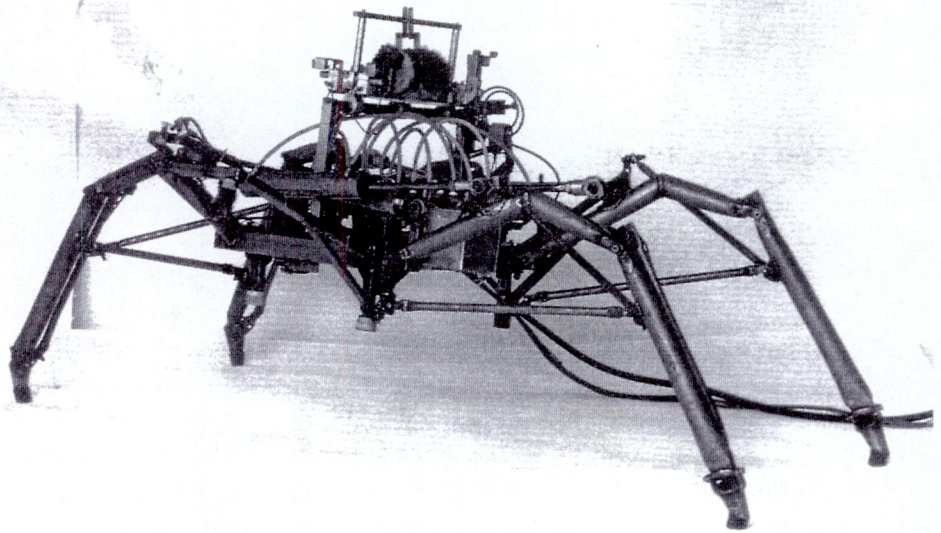
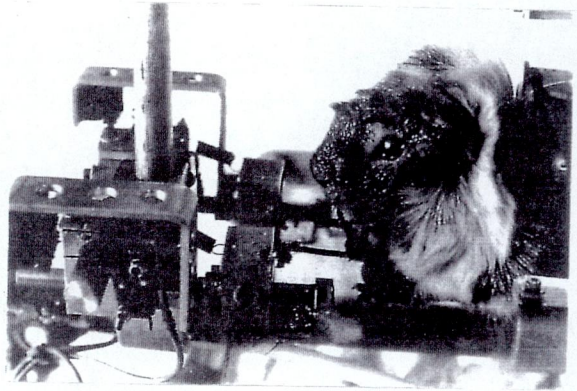


SRL also believe that machines could become the equalising force within nature, by bestowing abilities on animals that they are not biologically provided with. An example of this is the walking machine, developed by Pauline for his pet guinea pig Stu (short for Stupid). He felt that animal rights groups were tackling the problem of animal exploitation by humans in a very roundabout way. So he decided to create an incredibly complicated and powerful machine that was operated by an animal. Stu, the guinea pig, quite quickly understood that its movements controlled the machine and was not in the slightest bit bothered by being suddenly able to take six foot, rather than six inch, strides and that his breath could control a ten foot flame-thrower. This application of technology to empower animals could be construed as a nightmare scenario, often portrayed in sci-fi films featuring giant killer ants etc. It is precisely the nightmarish that SRL want to emphasise, and they do this by suggesting that the present status quo which exists between animals and humans, could be disrupted by the subversive application of machines.

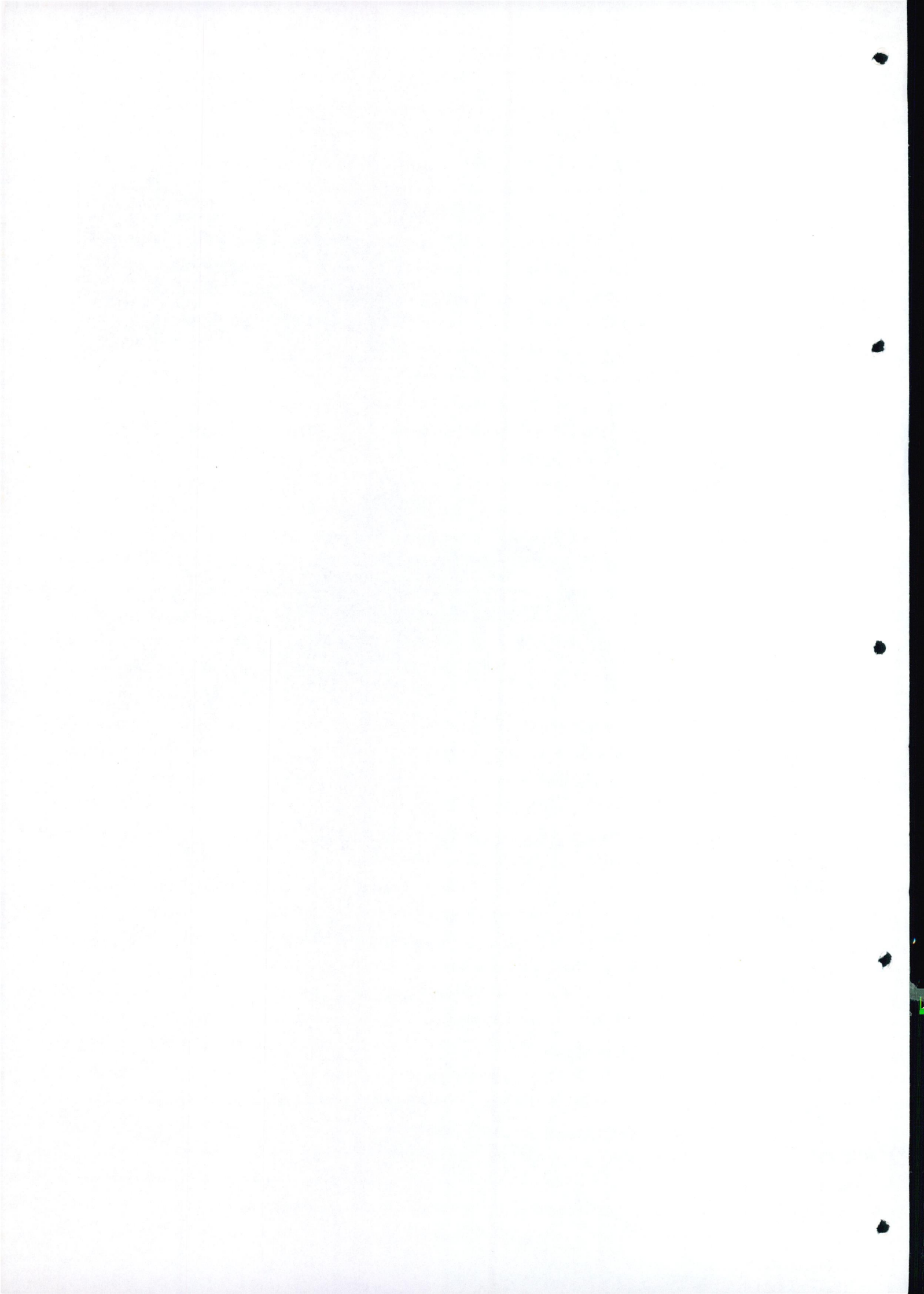
Mark Pauline has always liked to think he could stir up trouble. "It excites me to think I can cause trouble" (Belsito, 1985, p. 25 + p. 31). Nauseating the squeamish and alarming pacifists is what SRL want to achieve, so that when these people leave a performance, an indelible mark has been left upon their psyche. They will not forget the performance and so will have been successfully inoculated against the terrors of global destruction. They achieve their goal by subverting the apparently







**Plate 6:** Walking Machine with Flame Thrower, Guinea Pig controlled (1985)



incorruptible, the concrete tenets of technology and the laws of physics, which are perceived as the regularising influence in modern society.

On a more subtle level, the extremely ingenious machines that SRL create for their performances, and their "hands on" low-rent approach to design experimentation, is the envy of many billion dollar laboratories.(Coupland, 1992, p. 73) Many of the researchers working in these laboratories can often be found dropping in and out of SRL's dingy warehouse, mostly consulting Pauline and Co. about various aspects of projects they are working on. Pauline says that "what SRL want to do is to be able to have commerce with regular companies and laboratories that are doing stuff that is more conservative" (Belsito, 1985, p. 15). However this "commerce" is purely figurative and conceptual rather than financial. They wish to do this, not only to be taken seriously by industry, but also to be able to influence the creation of future technologies through their association with conventional scientists. Many of the personnel SRL use in the development of their machines are the best in their field, who find working on unconventional machines more stimulating than their previous jobs, and no doubt it has an influence on how they will work in conventional projects.

As SRL are concerned with producing machinery for predominantly destructive purposes they have attracted considerable interest from the U.S. military, particularly the machines called Swarmers. Swarmers are tank-like machines that can rise to twenty feet in height, but more importantly, from



a military standpoint, they are capable of navigating autonomously, recognising similar machines at a distance, working out in what direction they are travelling in and assuming the same direction. These capabilities are essentially what an autonomous tank should be able to do. However, not even world-renowned laboratories (such as MIT's Artificial Intelligence Laboratory) have been as successful as SRL. With such keen interest being shown in their work by the military, SRL may very well be in danger of not merely influencing the people in control of the destructive forces on this planet, but actually helping them to create even more efficient machines of destruction. Unfortunately this is something that does not seem to bother SRL and reinforces the criticism that they are in fact "delinquent adolescents on the rampage" (Belsito, 1985, p. 7).

For over fifteen years now, SRL have remained on the outskirts of the mainstream and are firmly rooted in the popular underground. One of the reasons for this is their awareness of the dangers of being recuperated by the mainstream. If this were to happen they would no longer be able to go out and steal their equipment and put their audiences in the extremely dangerous situations they are accustomed to at present. By freeing themselves of major financial worries, they do not have to come into contact with the mainly conservative people who control money and are involved with handling it. They like to view the equipment they steal as grants from industry and claim that if what they were doing by stealing a couple of hundred thousand dollars worth of equipment was really illegal, they would



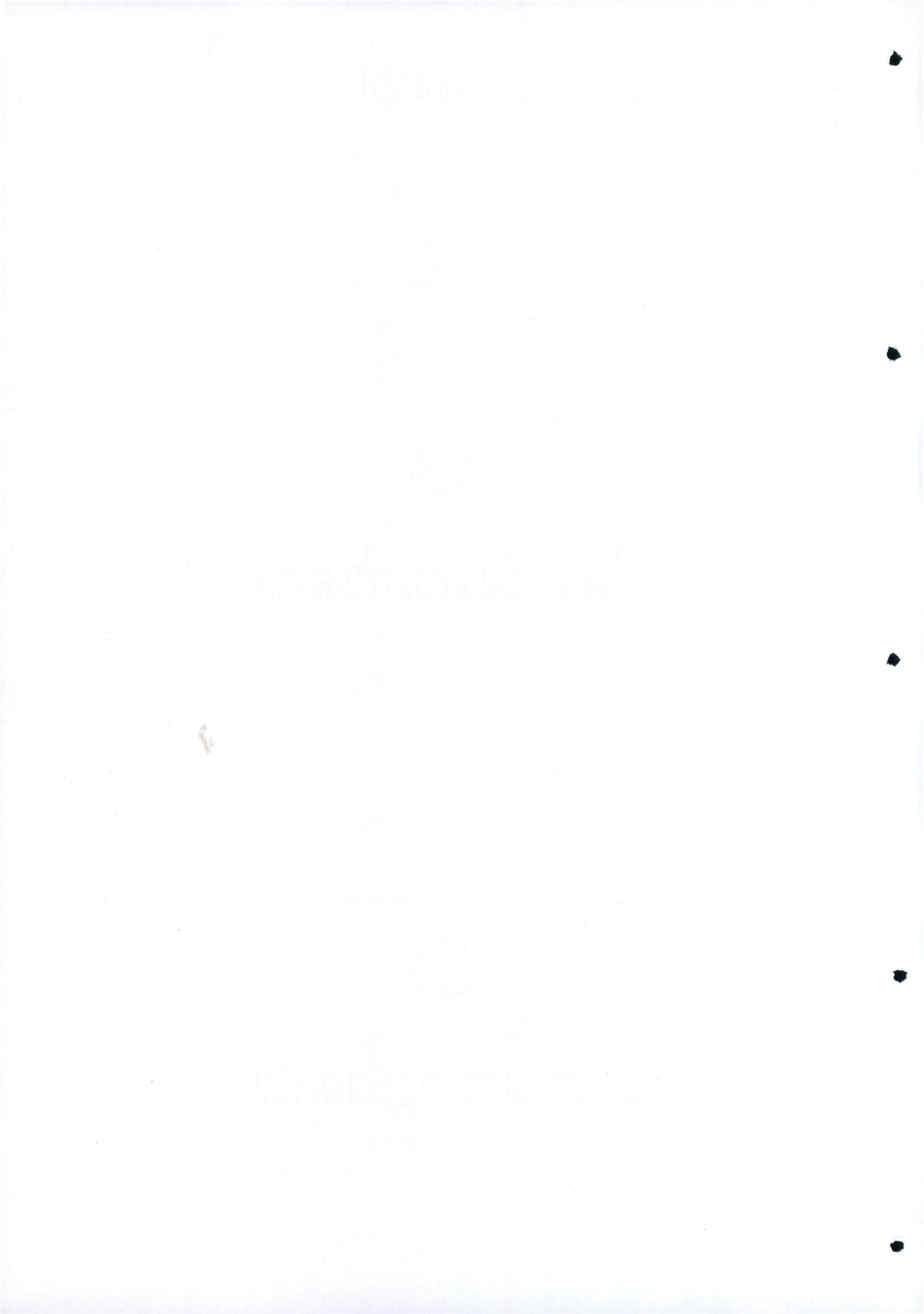
be in jail (Belsito, 1985, p. 12).

Not only is practically all of their equipment stolen, but many of their performances are staged in disused car parks and warehouses, without any prior permission being sought or obtained. Although they make a conscious effort to stay away from people who control and handle money, they seemingly have no qualms about accepting financial grants or being paid to perform at civic events.

Essentially if SRL were to be recuperated into the mainstream, they would have to become a more high profile group within the popular media. This however, has not happened for two reasons. The first reason, is that SRL are fully aware of the restrictions that would be imposed upon their performances if they tried to disseminate them through the popular media. Also the explicitly horrific and nauseating nature of an SRL performance, excludes it from being screened in its entirety on most conventional television programmes. To use television, or any other real time medium to present their performances, would essentially disable the ability of the show to influence people, as the camera that presents the performance to the public need not respect the performance as an integral whole. The mechanical reproduction of the work of art through cinema as described by Walter Benjamin is also applicable to television:

Guided by the cameraman the camera continually changes position with respect to the performance. The sequence of positional views which the editor compiles from the material given him, constitutes the completed



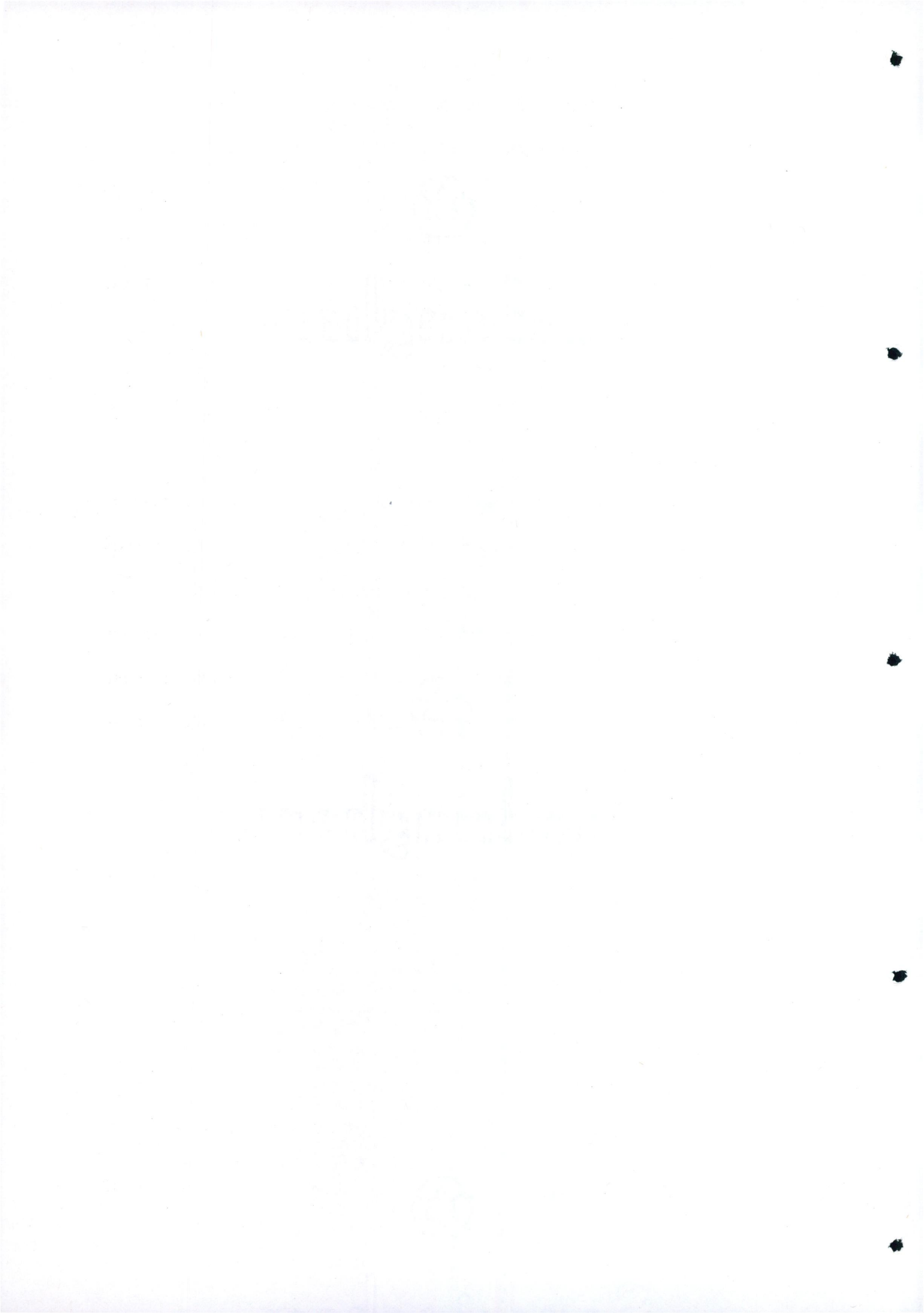


film. This permits the audience to take the position of a critic, without experiencing any personal contact with the performance (Benjamin, 1968, p. 228).

Having said this, SRL do try to ensure that their performances attract considerable media coverage as publicity. They know that the media cannot ignore a group who can send a lightning bolt down a half mile stretch of street.

As SRL have remained a small operation, with only three full time members, they have been able to keep absolute control over their work. As they work to please themselves, they are not concerned with how an audience will react to their performances. However the audiences quickly become aware that their safety has been severely compromised by attending a performance. There are no barriers between audience and machine and it is not unknown for pieces of smouldering machine to fly into the crowd. "The firsthand misery that the audience could potentially suffer is a significant part of the creative statement" (Juno & Vale, 1987, p. 15) These sentiments echo what Nietzsche said almost a hundred years before.

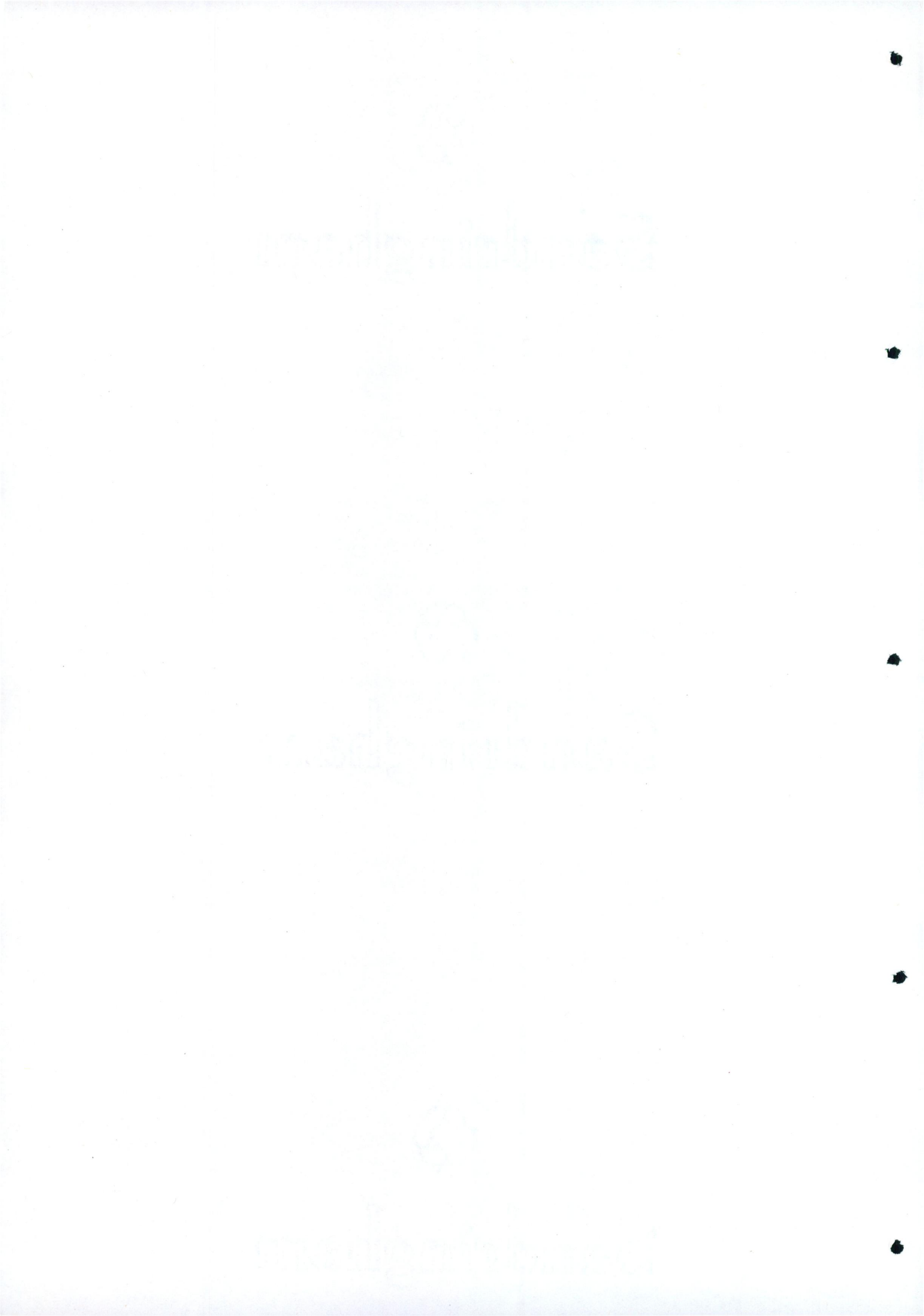
That which constitutes the painful voluptuousness of tragedy is cruelty; that which produces a pleasing effect in so-called tragic pity, indeed fundamentally in everything sublime up to the highest and most refined thrills of metaphysics derives its sweetness solely from the ingredient of cruelty mixed in with it. What the Roman in the arena, the Christian in the ecstasies of the Cross, the Spaniard watching burnings or bullfights, the Japanese of today crowding into the tragedy, the Parisian suburban workman who has nostalgia for bloody revolutions...Cruelty only that it had its origins in the sight of the sufferings of *others*: there is also an abundant enjoyment of one's own suffering, of making oneself



suffer (Nietzsche, 1973, p. 140)

The anarchic nature of SRL's performances, and the apparently insane characters that produce them, would, and have, obviously deterred the mainstream from incorporating them into the system. This fear of SRL and what they could be capable of if allowed access to the mainstream, has perhaps contributed to their continued success in the popular underground, and their inability to affect the mainstream.

Over the last fifteen years SRL have been successfully subverting technologies usually confined to industry and also have avoided being recuperated. At the same time, however, they have gained considerable notoriety among the popular underground for their now infamous performances. It is a pity then that because of the weaknesses in their work undermine their ability to successfully subvert the system. These weaknesses will be discussed in the following chapter.



## **Chapter 5**

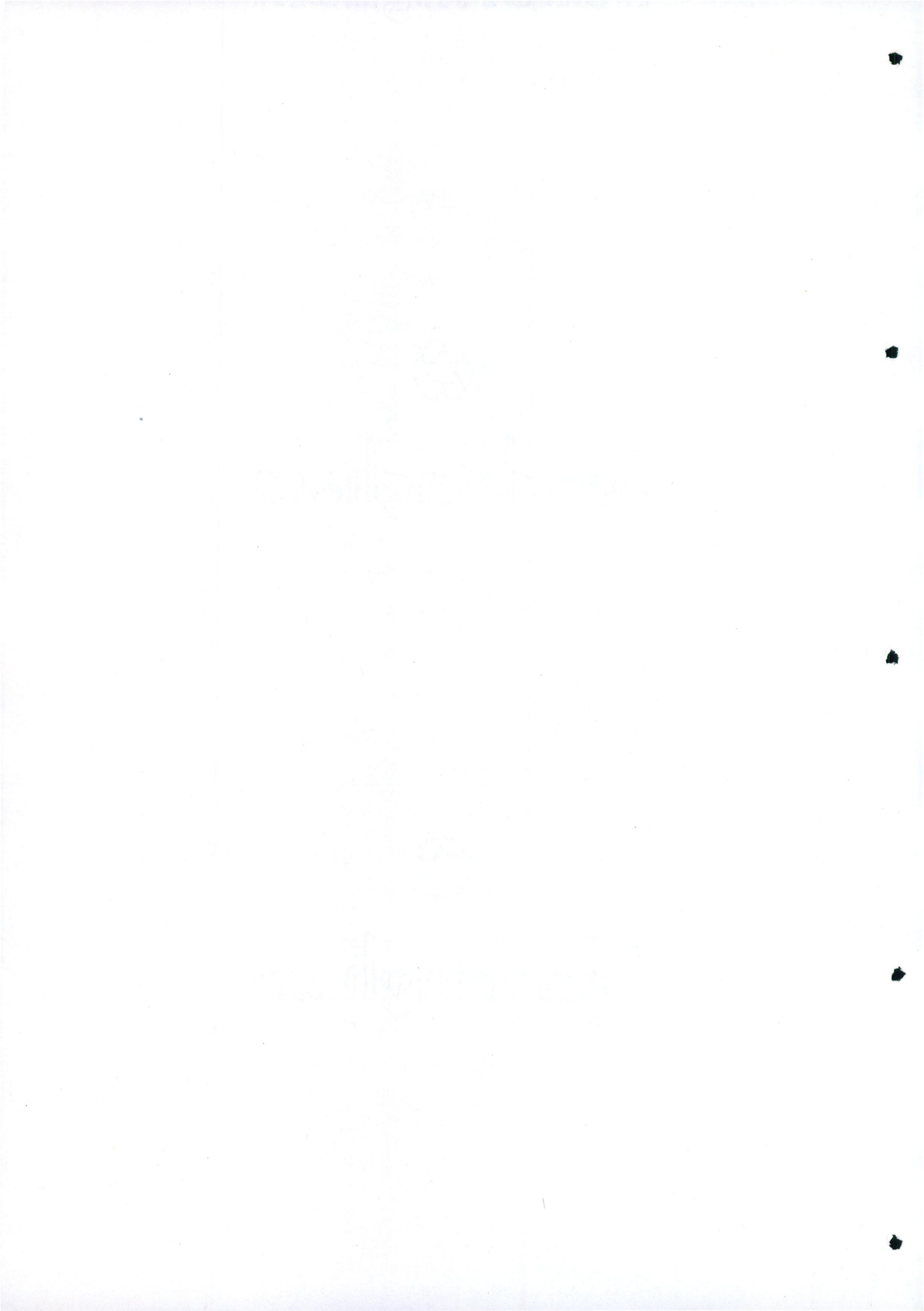
### **Machismo**

**and**

### **Fascism**

I use literature to maintain a certain sort of order in my mind. If I don't read literature that has something to do with my interests, the kind of cynical ideas I have, the structure of my mind starts to fall apart, and I can't think effectively any more.

Mark Pauline  
(Vale, 1983, p. 30)



This chapter will discuss the "macho" and allegedly proto-fascist aspects of SRL. Although their proto-fascist affinities are not widely appreciated, the feminine aspect or lack of it in their work is continuously under scrutiny. Elizabeth Richardson's criticism of a 1984 performance concisely sums up the attitude of SRL's performances towards women.

The Christian dichotomy of Jesus as "good" and Satan as "evil" is an uncomfortable dilemma. Add the John Wayne syndrome [i.e a man's got to do what a man's got to do] to this dualistic point of view, and a man sometimes has to be very macho to feel he is a real man. In reality, of course, we all have a spectrum of tendencies that can be evaluated relativistically. But for males who cannot transcend the stereotype, satanic rebellion is a common strategy...

SRL is a prime example of this adolescent identification with the glamorisation of the satanic split off...They are also wonderful examples of the 'missile envy type' (they illustrate the phenomenon of male primitive fascination with artillery, torture and death)... They are tough, strong, always sure of themselves, never admit mistakes, never show any emotion but bravado and are very dependent upon members of the same sex for peer group approval (Richardson, 1985, p. 4).

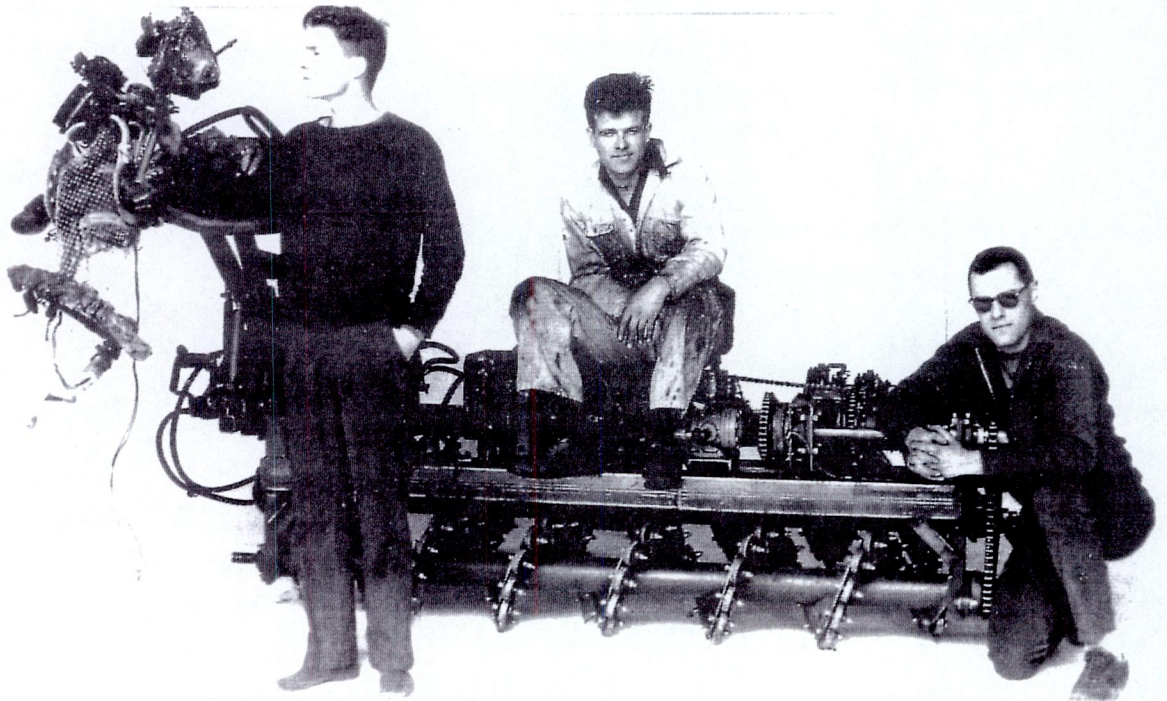
This assumption is not based merely on the fact that SRL consists of men only, but also on the fact that by their own admission they have:

tried to get women to join, tried to get women to work on the shows. But no woman has been interested enough to get involved (Belsito, 1985, p. 20)

This may have something to do with SRL's adolescent obsession with gore, guns and machines. They believe in questioning everything that society expects of them, but unfortunately they do not apply this to their







**Plate 7:** Mark Pauline, Eric Werner and Matthew Heckert pose with the Srew Machine and Throwbot. (1984-85)



unquestioning acceptance of the things of their youth. They seem to believe that if they liked something when they were young and are expected to grow out of it they should, as a form of protest, continue their interest in it. This self-absorbed view of society is essentially a male view.. The only questioning of society that they engage in relates specifically to their own point of view and as a result it is a male perspective of society.

Women do not occupy an equal standing within the work of SRL, as the machines used in their performances are built and controlled by men. Cyberfeminism also assumes that technology is a masculine enterprise. It is taught by men and it has a thirty year rule, a legacy of male-dominated training, right from primary schools to Masters' degrees. Men control the teaching of technology, thus they also control the development of technology. Women are excluded and as a result are forced to attain a perceived position of otherness similar to that of the machine, in relation to man. Machines are "female" because they were mere things on which men worked, because they always had an element of unpredictability and tended to go wrong, break down. However, to assume that technology is "masculine" is to assume that men and women have nothing in common, and secondly that the language of technology is fixed and immutable. But technology is encoded in significantly more ambiguous and contradictory terms, than language that refers to e.g. ships and boats, objects controlled by men as "she" and where to refer to an object as "he" is thought of as incorrect language use (Plant, 1993, p. 12). As a result it is incorrect to

STATE OF TEXAS

COUNTY OF DALLAS

IN SENATE

January 10, 1901

REPORT

OF THE

COMMISSIONERS OF THE

LAND OFFICE

FOR THE YEAR

ENDING

DECEMBER 31, 1900

AND

THE

LANDS

REMAINED

UNDISPOSED

AS OF

SAID DATE

AND

assume that the convergence of women and machines is wholly negative. With the increased availability of information technologies, it is women who through the network of broadly based feminist groups have laid the foundations for a non-hierarchical, free-flowing network of information that "allows women's desire to flow in the dense tapestries and complex depth" (Plant, 1993, p. 14) of the information highway.

Silicon and women's liberation track each other's development. With the development of the silicon chip came the liberation of women from the traditional roles they had previously been forced into by patriarchal society. Women are no longer perceived as occupying submissive stances or alienated as hysterical by the mainstream. The connection between women and technology has been sedimented in patriarchal myth:

The link between women and machines only appeared after the beginning of the 19th century, just as machines came to be perceived as threatening entities capable of vast uncontrollable destruction. (Springer, 1991, p. 305)

An example of the linkage of women and destructive machines is the film *Metropolis* (Fritz Lang, 1926) which combines the acceleration of technological efficiency with fear of technology's power to destroy humanity by running out of control. (Springer, 1991, p. 305) The object of both the allure of technology and the fear of its power is embodied in a robot shaped like a human woman. The technologies that Survival Research Laboratories employ have incredible capabilities and certainly evoke fear and awe in the audiences - they are massive "bodies" that overpower human characters.

100  
100

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"Their erotic appeal lies in the promise of the power they embody"(Springer, 1991, p. 316). The extreme physicality of SRL's machines culminates not in sexual climax but in violence, which according to Springer substitutes for sexual release. (Springer, 1991, p. 316) As J.G. Ballard says:

I believe that organic sex... is no longer possible... What we're getting into is a whole new order of sexual fantasies, involving a different order of experiences like car crashes, like travelling in jet aircraft. These things are beginning to reach into our lives and change the interior design of our sexual fantasies (Ballard quoted in Barber, 1970, p. 157, quoted in Springer, 1991, p. 303).

Sexual metaphor in the description of powerful thrusting, grinding machinery, turbines, pistons and in groups such as the Futurist movement, are some of the ways that technophiliacs have expressed their passion for technology. SRL are most definitely technophiliacs as they devote their lives to technology as it provides an erotic thrill, and gives control over massive power that can itself be used to control others. The machines of SRL with their heftiness and thrusting actions represent human sexual responses on a grand scale.

According to the theories of Margaret Mahler, fascist males (SRL's proto-fascist affinities are discussed later in this chapter) invest all their energies into maintaining a fragile edifice of selfhood. In order to protect themselves from the weaknesses they project onto women, fascist males encase themselves in body armour, both literally and figuratively. The machine body becomes the ideal tool for ego maintenance. The sexual act,



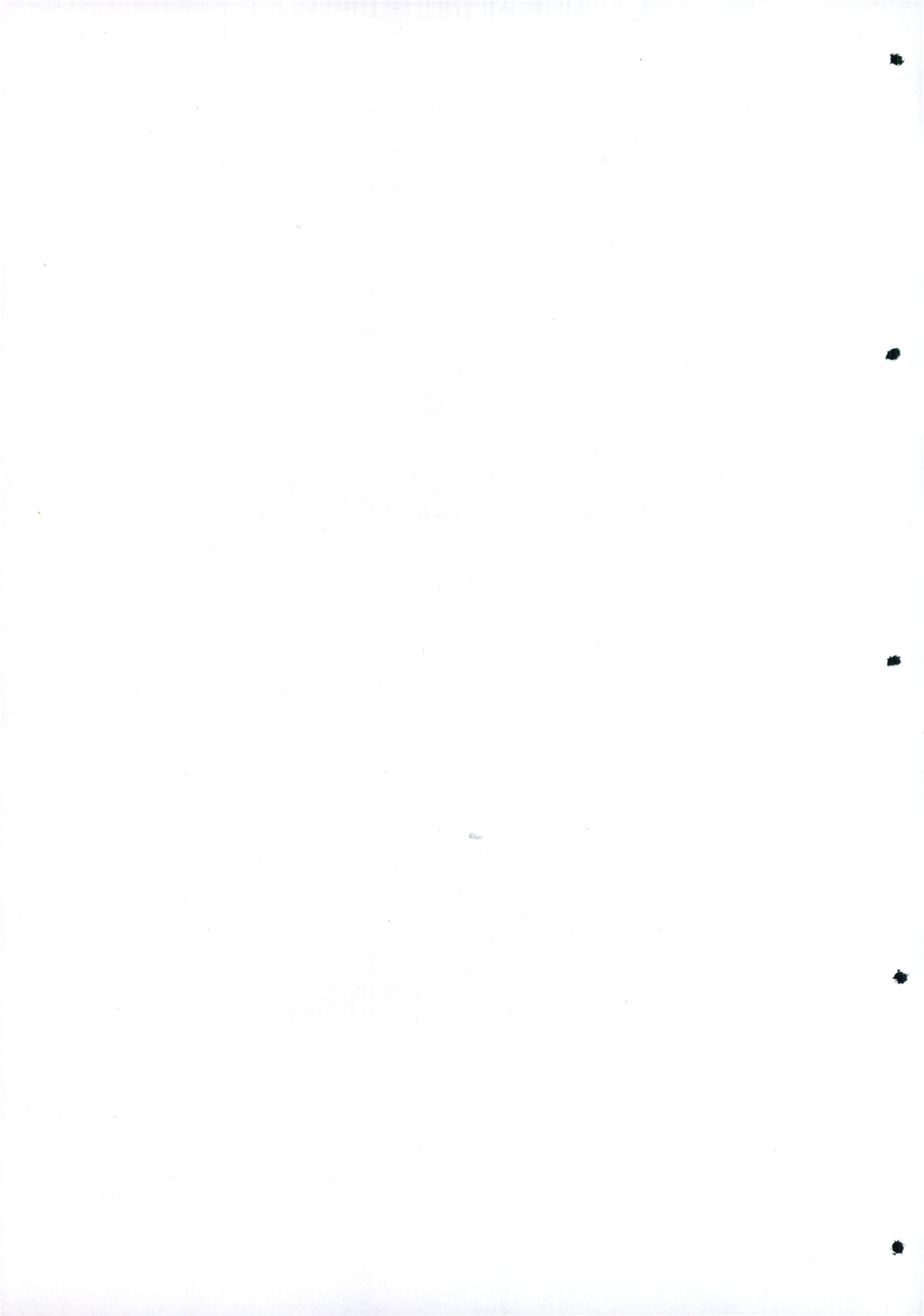


which evokes loss of self, becomes displaced onto violence and destruction (Springer, 1993, p. 317). SRL indeed protect themselves with a machine cocoon, not only in the case of their dingy warehouse where even other men find the proliferation of machinery intimidating, but during their performances it is their machines that are under scrutiny by the audience, not the creators - the machines act as a protective armour for SRL against the gaze of the audience, whose whole attention is concentrated on trying to avoid injury and watching the awesome machines destroy each other.

The machines created at Survival Research Laboratories are a powerful extension of their masculinity as the development of technology has always been a consequence of man's attempt to extend and perpetuate his dominion (Plant, 1993, p. 14). They are the mere things upon which they work and which are then destroyed. However, SRL do not accept that what they do is "macho", and become quite incensed when the question is raised, Mark Pauline replying testily:

"That's absolutely incorrect. How can you say that it's macho? Just because a woman's not here? That's not macho. What do you mean macho? " (Belsito, 1985, p. 21).

No matter how sophisticated the machinery that SRL produce is, it is still in a sense "nature" and therefore is understood to be lacking in self-awareness, agency and the ability to make history. SRL's work is a major element in the cultural images of machines in the late 20th century - along with films such as Robocop and Terminator, they establish technology as an agent of destruction. This image is in opposition to the widely perceived



view of technology as a system of order. These machines and images are essentially an attempt to counter the effects of natural decay. They do this by assuming the role of nature, and controlling the evolution of their machines through the premeditated destruction that occurs in their performances. Having control over the destruction of the machines allows them to dictate when and in what form the new machines will take. SRL are unique among developers of technology in that they have control over how their machines are designed, built and destroyed. SRL continuously try to attribute self-awareness and autonomy to their machines and have been very successful in this respect. This struggle against nature has been the suppression of the feminine; a drive for security inscribed in the militarisation of the planet (Plant, 1991, p. 14).

Unfortunately SRL are persistent in their refusal to address the perception of women and machines as being something "other" than man objects, things upon which men work. This severely stunts the ability of what they are doing to have a real and lasting affect on society, and segregates them from the mainstream art world. SRL want to subvert not only the art world but society at large, but ultimately their segregation prevents them from progressing both as an artistic force and as an effective subversive force.

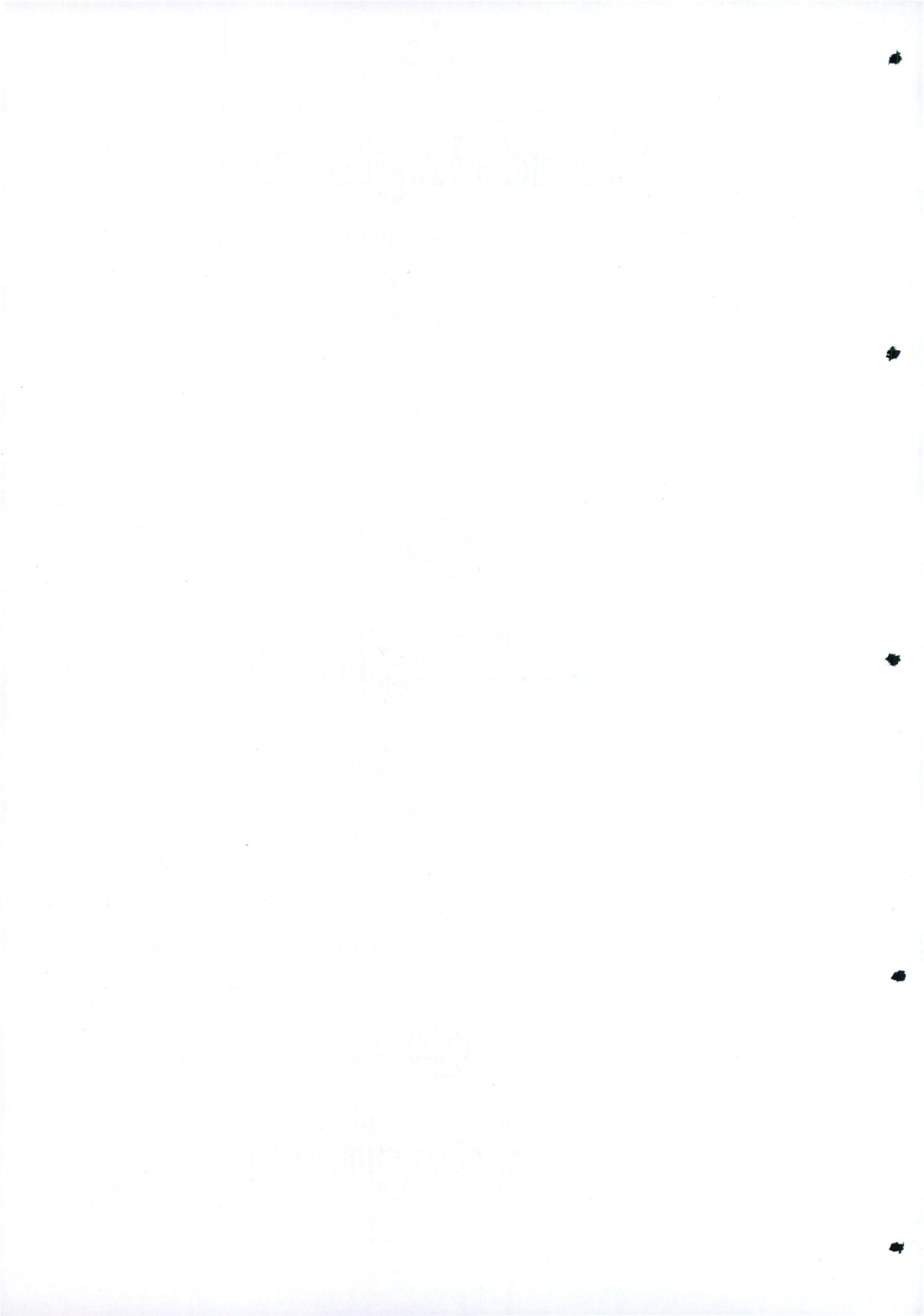
The members of SRL have referred to their work as "socio-political satire", but you are often left to wonder just exactly what their politics are.



The group proffers a nihilistic attitude where "everything is reduced to primal forces, power, fear, survival, death and destruction". This stance is reminiscent of the Reaganesque policies of "might is right", and "peace through power". Their reliance on destruction and death as a theme for their work is similar in essence to the teachings of Nietzsche, in that he believed that "everything good is instinct" and "that which constitutes the painful voluptuousness of tragedy is cruelty... and derives its sweetness solely from the ingredient of cruelty" (Nietzsche, 1973, p. 140). As stated in the previous chapter, they also claim to be the vaccine for the total destruction of the planet either by war or the breakdown of the eco-system. Either way the earth will be thrown into turmoil and destruction on a grand scale will be rife. However nauseated or alarmed observers seem to be, the members of SRL seem unconcerned. Their politics are their own, and they have little good to say about an existing political system (Durland, 1988, p. 20-21).

However, SRL also embody disturbing proto-fascist elements. The most obvious of these is their creation of super-performing machines for their spectacular shows, reminiscent of the super-armour of fascist philosophy and its predilection for spectacle. The performances of SRL are pure spectacle, and because they do not have a firm conceptual basis (due to the omissions discussed above) could be termed shallow and base.

Also, within an increasingly reified and rationalised social and political sphere, revolutionary action is no longer possible, so art, which once had to assert a false unity in the face of social contradiction, is expected to create a realm of acceptable rebellion (Hewitt, 1993, p. 135).



This is probably what in real, lasting terms SRL perpetrate in their work: a form of acceptable rebellion that ceases to exist after the performance.

The proto-fascist aspects of SRL's work may be coincidental, but more likely than not they are due to the circumstances in which SRL work. As they are part of the popular underground, i.e. the avant garde, they are burdened with the philosophical affinities of the avant garde and fascism:

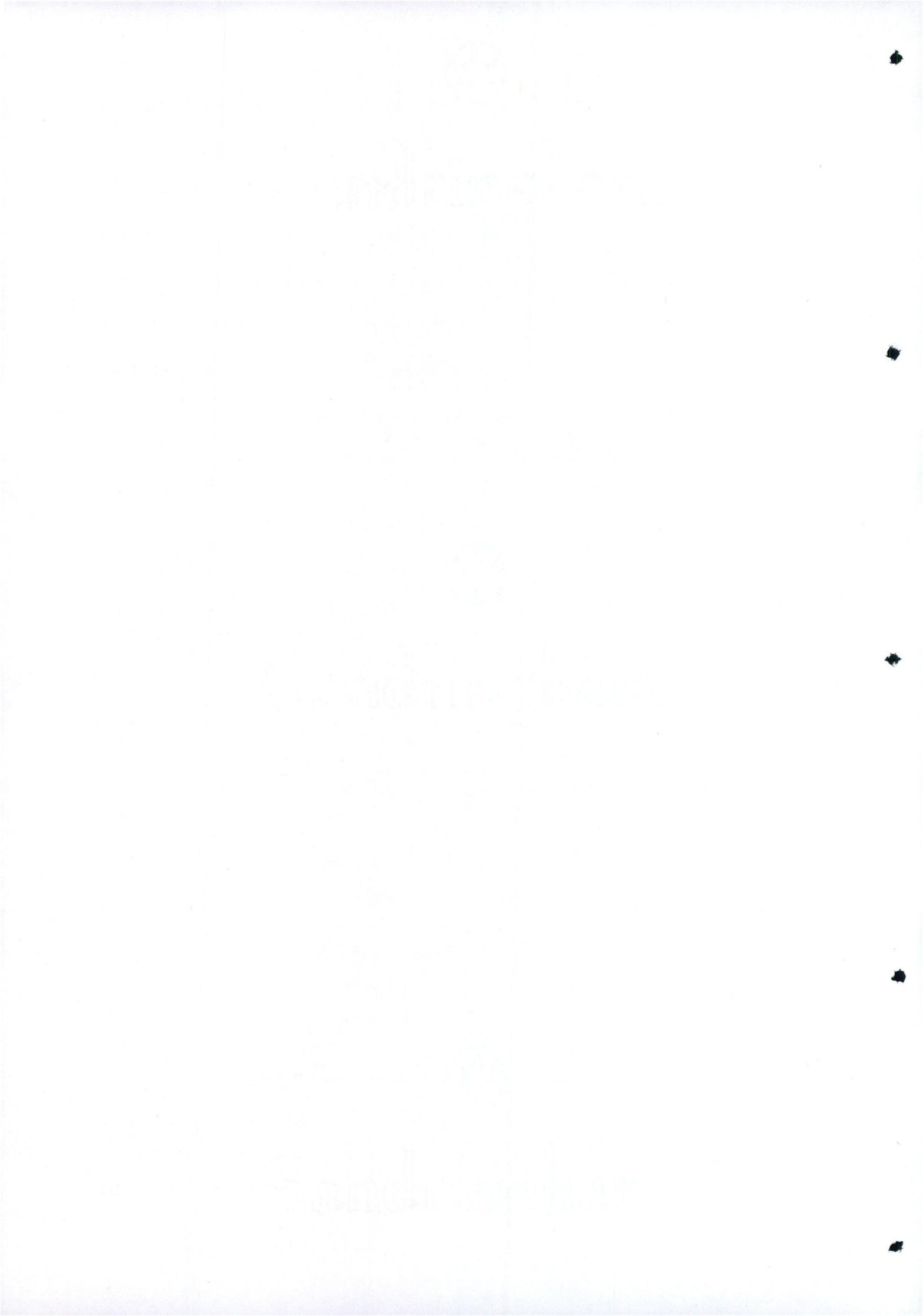
A discourse which we seek to escape but cannot - fascism - is carried on in terms of a lamentation over that which we seek to retain but cannot; - the avant garde. (Hewitt, 1993, p. 163)

This paradox is apparent in SRL's unconventional treatment of machines and their use of machines as the basis of their aesthetic. The problematic basis for their aesthetic (machines) was also used by the Italian Futurists, who had very definite links with fascism. Both SRL and the Futurists glorify destruction and the instruments of war in their work:

artists continually glorify - they do nothing else - They glorify all those conditions and things which have the reputation of making man feel for once good or great or intoxicated (Hollingdale, 1977, p. 130)

As the agent of production, the machine spills over into the realm of social organisation, with the result that antagonisms centred around hierarchy and class become mere questions of technical functionality (Hewitt, 1993, p. 136). SRL perpetuate this concept by inoculating people against the destructive forces of machines, therefore re-establishing and re-inforcing the concept of machines as social organisers that only remain





"safe" when not in the hands of artists and "social commentators" as SRL describe themselves. Had SRL not taken the position of a social commentator, then perhaps the proto-fascist aspect of their work would not have become so overtly detrimental to their artistic integrity. However the combination of the overt "machismo" of their work, and their proto-fascist affinities, has displaced their technical expertise and their subversive capabilities from apocalyptic messages to merely a "rusty carnival from hell" (Belsito, 1985, p. 5).

1911

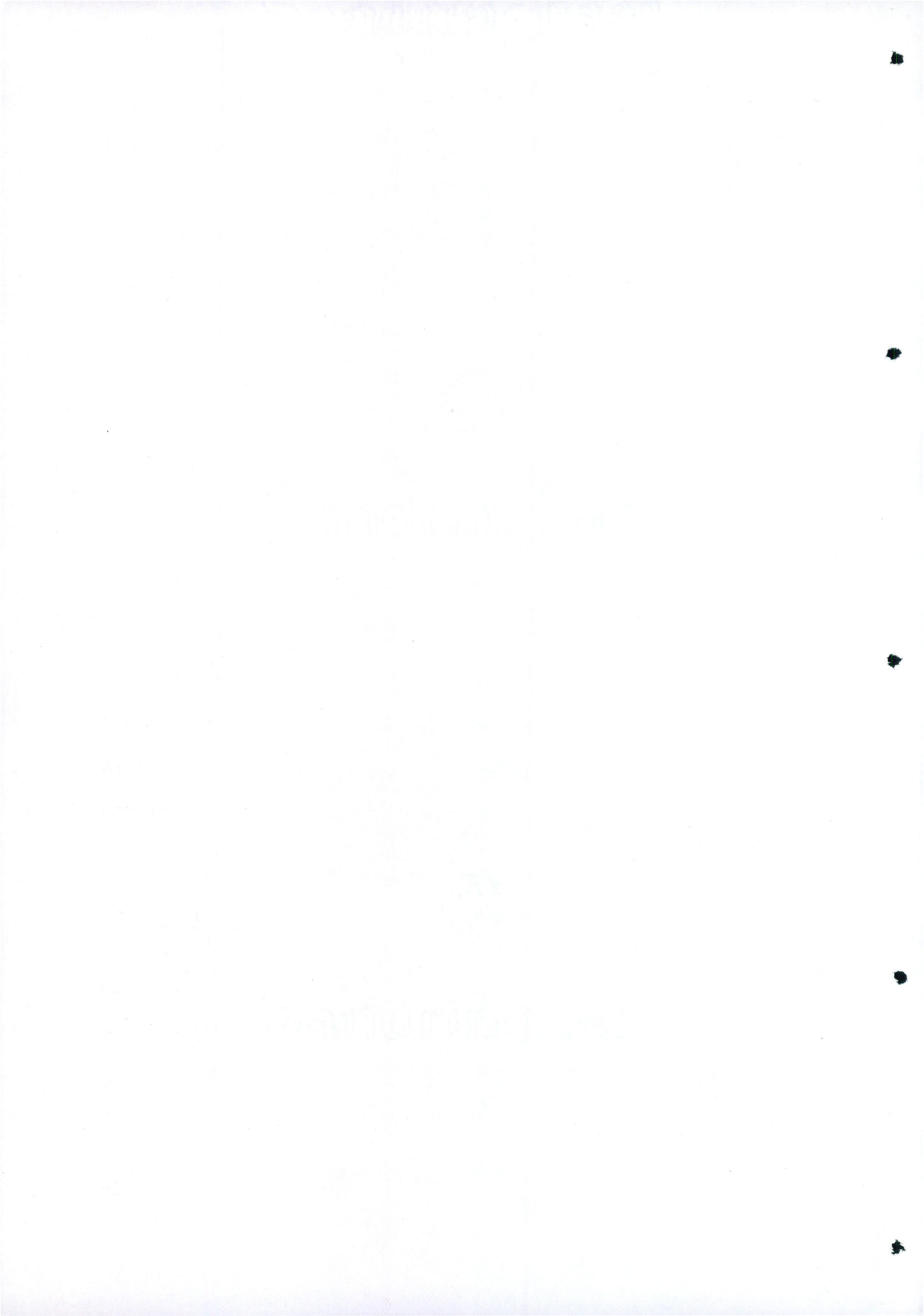
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## Conclusion

"You have to understand the  
language of society before you  
can start stretching and subverting it  
and ripping and tearing it  
and burning it"

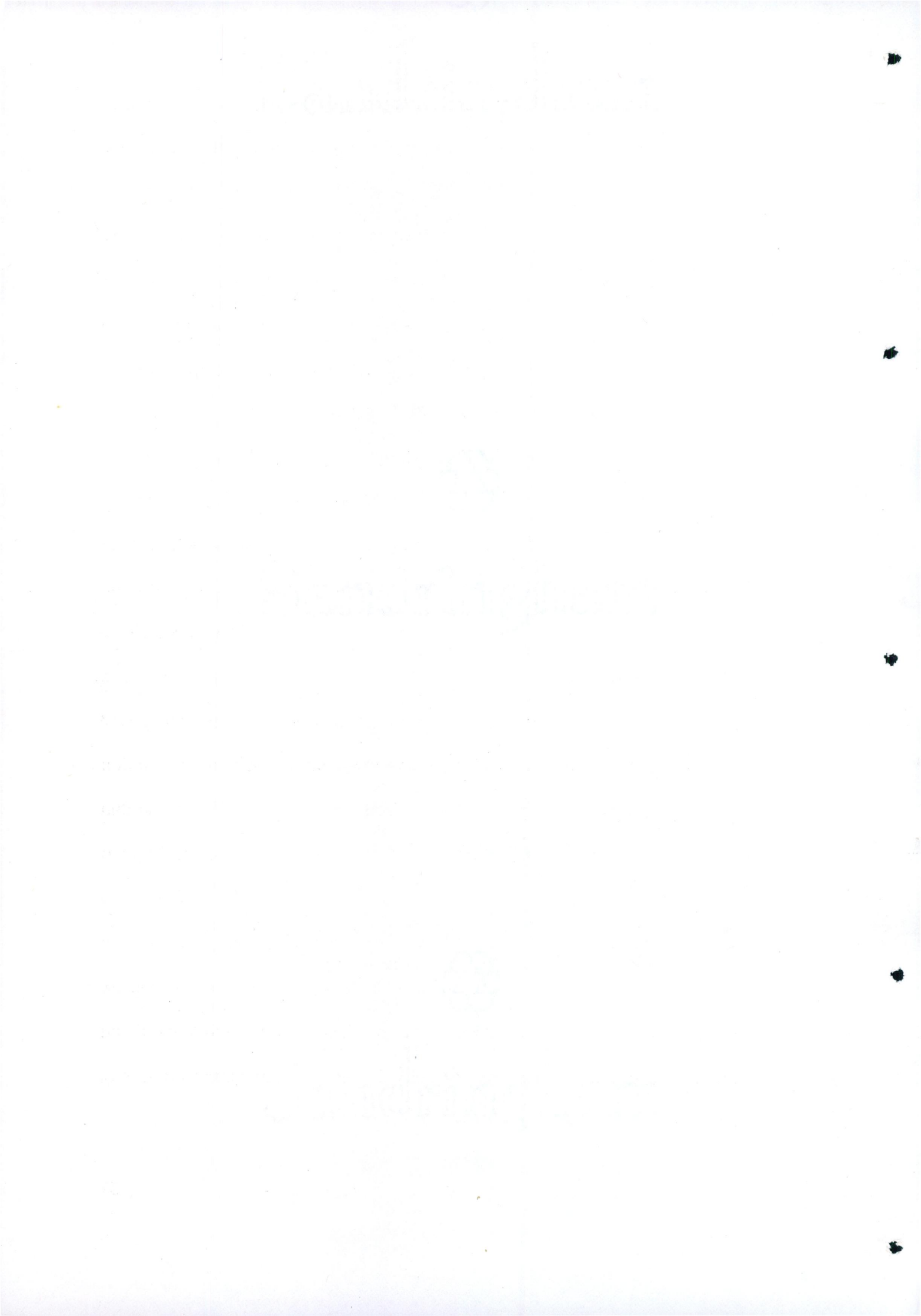
Mark Pauline  
(Coupland, 1992, p. 71)



Survival Research Laboratories are in some respects descendants of the Italian Futurist movement. The machine is the basis not only of their performances but of their aesthetic also. SRL have, like the Futurists, utilised machines to convey many of their more abstract and often confusing concepts. In using machines as the basis of their work they inherit the preconceptions that are attached to both Futurism and technology. It is unclear whether SRL are aware of the implications of their inheritance but it appears that they have embraced fully the positive aspects while ignoring of the negative implications of their medium.

Briefly stated, the negative implications of SRL's work are their allegedly proto-fascist affinities and the apparent pacification and objectification of women through the metaphor of the machine. Within their framework women are seen as weak and due to the perceived loss of self defiling through sexual intercourse, and machines are used to protect men from this embodied weakness. SRL's inherent association of women with a subordinate position has frequently created quite considerable criticism and as a result the ability of their work to achieve their aims is reduced.

The primary motive for the members of SRL to continue working, in what are sometimes very dangerous situations, is their overwhelming desire to have fun. They enjoy what they do and are able to make a living doing it (something that is quite difficult to do). Unfortunately the things that they derive pleasure from, guns, gore and war, are not usually connected with



pleasure and this often leads to relegation of their work to the mere ranting of delinquent adolescents. However, to make this assumption is to belittle the technical achievements of SRL, who have been very successful in developing artificial intelligence in their machines called Swarmers. SRL most definitely know the capabilities of their work to influence the world; but unfortunately they themselves are the stumbling blocks that prevent their work from enabling widespread cultural change in mainstream society.

Many of the factors that prevent their successful subversion of the "system" stem from the nature of their work, which is often too nauseating to the squeamish and too alarming to pacifists for it to gain widespread acceptance throughout the mainstream. Without access to the mainstream, SRL are fated to continue working within the popular underground, which will remain the boundary of their subversive abilities. However, regardless of their ability to influence mainstream culture, they are an extremely well regarded development group among conventional billion-dollar laboratories who often consult SRL on the various projects they are working on. Within this exchange of information and ideas SRL have the ability to subvert technological development for many years to come. On the other hand they may be aiding institutions like the US military to create machines with undreamed of destructive and coercive capabilities. This may seem unlikely, but the machines known as Swarmers have, as already mentioned, the abilities of an autonomous tank and are attracting a substantial amount of interest from the military.





As discussed earlier the "macho" inclinations and their dubious political affinities have a considerable effect on the work of SRL. Unfortunately these effects are mostly negative and hinder the success of their work. If SRL were to resolve the situation of their work in relation to both women and fascism, the many positive subversive aspects of their work, such as the undermining the role of technology and its relationship to mankind, would be increased. SRL would ultimately be capable of achieving their primary goal which is to subvert the "system" while using the tool which has predominantly remained under the direct control of the "system", technology.

At the moment SRL are deadlocked within the popular underground and as a result within the "system". If they are to progress in their chosen field of machine performance and exert a real and lasting subversive force within mainstream society, SRL must resolve the inconsistencies that occur in their work. However, if this does not happen, and perhaps they do not wish to resolve these inconsistencies, it will not detract from the positive and extremely successful achievements they have had to date. The researchers, artists and developers of technology who have come into contact with the work of SRL have undoubtedly been impressed and perhaps influenced by the experience. In years to come, as society becomes more and more technocratic, the efforts of Survival Research Laboratories will no doubt continue to undermine the perception of technology as the regularising force within society and expose its negative and destructive qualities. Perhaps this

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will help to undermine the current over-reliance on technology for the ordered continuance of society's existence.



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