

An Essay on Los Angeles, Cliché and Palm Trees

Char Jansen

In a remarkable photograph from 1926 in the Security Pacific National Bank Collection at the Los Angeles Public Library, two workers dressed in dapper hats, slacks, and shirts, plant full grown, slender Mexican fan palm trees into the soil along Wilshire Boulevard, between Western and Wilton. In the background are the perfectly regimented rows of palms they have already installed to line the street—as they do today, but perhaps not for much longer.

The bizarre botanical history of palm trees in Los Angeles is hardly a secret. In 1931, an ornamental planting frenzy introduced more than 25,000 imported tropical trees to the Southern California landscape. Most of these alien species became ubiquitous almost overnight, and are now the region's most cliché icons, instantly associated with good times, good weather, and vacation vibes. A palm tree is the ultimate in easy aesthetics: pretty, finely shaped, and exotic.

Palms are, however, essentially useless. They promise a lot, but they offer very little, providing barely any shade from the pounding sun; they suck up copious amounts of water, which is a contentious ecological issue in a desert city. They're also dying. Many of the palm varieties planted 100 years ago are now nearing the end of their natural lives. They were brought to the US to be decorative, but now they are a reminder of displacement and of the brutality of man over nature, a kind of ecological imperialism. Walking around Echo Park Lake, they look eerie, waiting, so it seems, to act out some *Day of the Triffids*-style revenge as you contemplate a ride on a paddleboat.

The irresistible illusionism of LA's palms has kept them in fashion for decades, with appearances in Art Deco posters, David Hockney's paintings, to Kahil Joseph's film, *Double Conscience* (2014), presented at MOCA last year. For many artists who have lived, worked or passed through the city, the palm cliché inevitably finds a way into their work, ensuring preservation in the public subconscious. The more something is repeated, the safer it is to copy it. Ed Ruscha's iconoclastic 1971 photo book, *A Few Palm Trees*, uprooted the urban palm once again, planting them into the contemporary art's intellectual and visual discourse. His deadpan document of the varieties of trees found across the Los Angeles landscape, is, as Joan Didion put it in her catalog essay for his show at the 2005 Venice Biennale, a distillation: "the thing compressed to its most pure essence." The palm cliché is Los Angeles. In an email, I asked John Baldessari why he likes to dapple his work with palms. He writes back, "I like palm trees because they're unlike any other tree in their shape, and also because they're a cliché for Southern California."

As a synecdoche of West Coast culture—and a part of near-universal pop culture aesthetics—palms are naturally great material for artists. Yet they're not appealing only for their



Evan Holloway, *Plants and Lamps*, 2015. Steel, cardboard, aqua-resin, epoxy resin, fiberglass, sandbags, CelluClay, and paint, 89 x 82 x 38 inches (installation variable). Photograph by Lee Thompson. Courtesy of David Kordansky Gallery.



Laura Poitras, Installation view, Room 2, *A Way to Leak, Lick, Leek* (Foreground), 2016. Vinyl tiles, resin, various electronic items, paper sheeting, iPads, iPhones, tablet screens, foliage, metal, plastic, wood, cables, polyester seats. Courtesy of the artist and MOT International. Commission: Fahrenheit by FLAX. (Background) *Lick in the Past*, 2016. Video. Duration 8:23 min. Courtesy of the artist and MOT International. Commission: Fahrenheit by FLAX. © Jeff McLane.

omnipresence. Their dark past and equally glum future—where the artificial and the natural have been horribly reversed—given them a subtle political resonance. The cliché is turned back on its audience.

Ruscha's artist's book inspired Paris-born, Berlin-based Adrien Missika's photo series *A Dying Generation* (2011), presented in front of a giant wallpaper backdrop of waves at his solo exhibition at Galleria SpazioA in Pistoia, Italy. Like Ruscha, Missika is interested in the language of advertising and its exchange with the modern imagination: Do we really dream up the tropical vacation idyll all by ourselves? Ruscha's typology is rooted in the region while Missika—who looks at LA from a distance and was initially drawn to the city by its seductive image—considers the nature of representation of foreign things once they are removed from their context. For his series Missika, in direct reference to Ruscha, revisited and rephotographed the Los Angeles palms that Ruscha captured 40 years before. Hanging solemnly, the artist's photographs show the trees in the 21st century, inviting a laconic reflection on environmental change and the fragility of nature in the Anthropocene and the equivocal nature of images in capturing that reality when seen abroad. In 1971 and in 2011, both Ruscha and Missika give us pretty pictures that slowly turn into an ugly truth.



Adrien Missika, *A Dying Generation #4*, 2011. Black and white laser print, 49 x 39 centimeters. Edition of 5. Photograph by Martin Argyroglo. Courtesy of BUGADA & CARGNEL.

For artists who spend time in Los Angeles—the need to confront the palm tree cliché is inevitable, a way to question the way the city has been constructed and the way it continues to be perceived. Following her residency in Los Angeles last year, Laure Prouvost's installation at Fahrenheit—titled *A Way to Leak, Lick, Leek*—drew out the darker roots of the flora and fauna of Los Angeles. In a 360-degree installation, inspired by the surroundings and substances she encountered while in the city, the plants created a post-apocalyptic atmosphere, sinister and plastic, overbearing rather than protective. Their leaves glowed thickly in a twilight ambience. Similarly, LA resident Evan Holloway presents the charm of the palm as both alluring and fake. His *Plants and Lamps* (2015) a sculptural installation made out of steel, cardboard, resin, fiberglass and sandbags presented at David Kordansky in the spring of 2016, carried connotations of a distorted Californian ideology—the paradox of neoliberalism that begs for biodiversity and sustainability, yet feeds from an artificial, polluting light. The mystifying, terrifying, and pathetic tale of the palm tree, as shown to us in the art of Los Angeles, is the guts of what Richard Barbrook and Andy Cameron refer to in their 1995 essay, *The Californian Ideology*, as the "West Coast's Extroian cult"—the hell-bent desire to improve human life with technology. As the last palms of Los Angeles sway in the desert air, I can't help but wonder what will happen when they're gone forever, and exist only in images? In another hundred years, if the palms disappear from the landscape, the cliché will shift to the status of idol. Or perhaps, this immigrant community of trees will resist their fate somehow, reemerge, and like so much life that has passed through LA, survive.

De-Manufactured Machines: A Profile of Survival Research Laboratories

Ceci Moss

Mark Pauline, founder of the Bay Area's legendary Survival Research Laboratories (SRL), houses his impressive personal archive, robotics workshop, and business in a garage in a non-descript industrial section of Petaluma. Hunkering CNC machines, boxes of tools and equipment, and half-built machines populate this former auto detailing shop. The large parking lot out front allows him to test and maneuver his epic machines (sometimes to the chagrin of his neighbors). For decades, Pauline has dedicated his career to building dangerous, elaborate robots for his performances. A commentary on the military industrial complex—the development of which is a determining force in the Bay Area's own history—as much as a dystopian vision for a post-apocalyptic future, SRL's acclaimed shows push experiential and technological boundaries.

Pauline's practice reflects a kind of resilient integrity; his work grew over the years outside of the constraints of the mainstream art market and without much institutional support. A pioneer in the recycling and reselling of biotech equipment, he's been, in large part, able to support his art through his business, which also provides him with additional materials. His corporate sounding persona "Survival Research Laboratories"—a name he pulled from a 1970s issue of the mercenary magazine *Soldier of Fortune*—captures the critical ethos of his work. Building from detritus, waste, and cast-offs from the military and tech industries (particularly those in the Bay Area), his work illuminates a deep unease with these powerful developments and how one might exist with and after them. The risk on display in an SRL show is never a mere spectacle or entertainment, but rather a confrontation with the destructive capacity of human invention.

The first SRL robot ever built was *The De-Manufacturing Machine* in 1979. Installed at a gas station during the oil crisis, the machine puréed and flung dead pigeons dressed as OAFEC dignitaries into the audience. Shock, disgust, and fear have always been part of Pauline's performances. An early video with the industrial music group Factrix features one of his pieces—a suspended pig carcass animated by flailing robotic arms and metal bars, being disfigured on stage by a dentist's drill. The industrial music scene in San Francisco yielded a space for interdisciplinary experimentation and transgression, in response to Reagan-era discord and conservatism; SRL was initiated within this community, and its attitude carries through in the work.

In an interview for the 1983 *RE/Search* No. 6/7: *Industrial Culture Handbook*, Pauline describes the early days of SRL, where he scavenged and stole material for his works from junkyards and factories to stage performances, often in parking lots and warehouses. He talks about his interventions as a process of "taking equipment and remanufacturing it, turning it against its engineer's better wishes. Making things out of it, it was never intended to do." These efforts reassemble and redirect, taking apart tools and equipment towards a different end. But Pauline's robotic creations have been highly innovative over the years as well. For the 1997 performance *Increasing the Latent Period in a System of Remote Destructibility* at the InterCommunication Center in Tokyo and SRL's studio in San Francisco, Pauline, along with Eric Paulos and Karen Marcello, created the very first firing system operated by users over the web. Three machines—one in San Francisco and two in Tokyo—were operable by online users using free software. Participants controlled the movements of the Track Robot, whose arm pressed buttons on the Epileptic Bot at the ICC, which then sent commands over the Internet to the Air Launcher in San Francisco hitting a range of exploding targets. That same year, SRL also produced a live online stream of video and audio wirelessly from a performance in Austin, Texas entitled *The Unexpected Destruction of Elaborately Engineered Artifacts*. In order to carry out this early instance of video livestreaming using wireless technology, volunteers built a 60-foot tower that brought Internet connectivity over a microwave wireless network to the show's site at the Longhorn Speedway. Other pioneering moments are more playful. For instance, in the 1980s, Pauline created the *Stu Walker*, which was operated by his pet guinea pig Stu, and probably the first

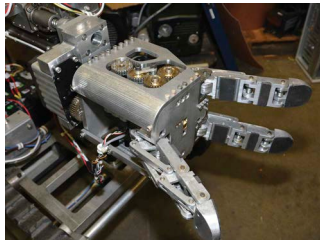
animal-controlled robot in performance. A video from a 1985 performance at the Area Nightclub in New York shows the *Stu Walker* in action, where the spider-like construction awkwardly creeps across the floor and shoots flames in accordance with the guinea pig's movements.

While Pauline is always building and repairing his cadre of machines, he's currently developing two new robots. The *Motoman Flamethrower* mounts a lightweight flamethrower capable of generating a 20-foot flame on a robotic arm known as the *Motoman UP50*, a popular device for automating assembly lines. Another, as-yet-untilted robot, balances on a single wheel while maneuvering a large arm; it is the first single-wheeled robot Pauline has come across in his research. 2016 also brought other major breakthroughs. In April, in conjunction with CAPITALS *Black Standard* exhibit at Minnesota Street Project, Pauline staged one of his first legal public performances in the city in years. He felt that the San Francisco Entertainment Commission understood his work as an artist for the first time, after they issued all the proper licensing permits for the April event. This is after San Francisco had practically banned all SRL performances, a major obstacle and one that Pauline branded as a badge of honor for some time. If he can find the financial support, he's hoping to stage another San Francisco performance in the near future, bringing his difficult, commanding performances to more audiences, once again.

¹ V. Vale and Andrea Juno, "Mark Pauline" in *RE/Search #6/7: Industrial Music Handbook* (San Francisco: *RE/Search Publications*, 1983), 35.



A Complete Mastery of Sinister Forces, Amsterdam 2007. Pulsejet spins a large rotating image prop. Photograph by Jessica Hobbs. Courtesy of Mark Pauline.



SRL Underactuated Gripper. Courtesy of Mark Pauline.



A Complete Mastery of Sinister Forces, Amsterdam 2007. Screw Machine lifts Rotating Wheel Prop. Photograph by Jessica Hobbs. Courtesy of Mark Pauline.



"Hangin' with the Prez" at the Whitehouse Christmas Ball 2012. Courtesy of Mark Pauline.