

In his mind he saw the whole world dying in a simultaneous automobile disaster, millions of vehicles hurled together in a terminal congress of spurting loins and engine coolant.

excerpt from J.G. Ballard's *Crash* (1973)

They had to treat me like both an object and a human.

Chris Burden referring to the activities of gallery staff during his 1972 performance *Bed*.

The introductory quotes opposite have more to do with my own experience of Arcangelo Sassolino's work than with his philosophy for making it. The first thing I was told when entering his studio was: "Be careful!" A 9-tonne slab of rust-encrusted steel hovered centimetres above the ground, a Cor-Ten Sword of Damocles that threatened to drop at any moment – no one could say exactly when. Anything caught between the immense weight and the polished ground would be pulverized in a careless instant. Immediately, a discomfort of unknown and inescapable violence was consummated in that sliver of space, which now lingered in the back of my head. The threatened crash was not unlike a head-on automobile collision, as might occur on the highway outside. Producing a gunshot of fear and impact as steel met concrete, the action further expanded the deep powdery gouge already scarred into the artist's studio floor.

Drifting thoughts between that narrow gap called to mind memories of the construction crews who would assemble and balance Richard Serra's heavy metal sculptures during installations at Gagosian Gallery in New York, where I was a receptionist. Brutish and stoic, these workers brought an air of nonchalance to a task that to them might be no different than putting up the I-beams that form a building's skeleton. Their goal, regardless of any seeming indifference, was to not fuck up and to get things balanced.

Serra's work always evoked an immediate self-consciousness of my body in space; hence the overwrought rhetoric of theatricality and objecthood in relationship to the viewer, especially emphasized by the exaggerated posture of forced looking, seeing, and experiencing of an aesthetic event within that theatre of an art gallery. Moreover, Serra's work made me, and I believe everyone else, into secret fantasist of imminent mortality – a sensation that became manifest when standing at the interstice

Aaron Moulton

Primal Structures



fig. 7
Andy Warhol
5 Deaths on Red, 1963
Acrylic and silkscreen
ink on linen
76.2 × 76.2 cm (30 × 30 in.)
Froelich Collection,
Stuttgart

of precarious balance. This near-erotic participation in one's own fate was safely relegated to flirtation by the 99.9% likelihood that these things would never fall. This was the real theatre: waiting for and wanting one of those awkward huge plates to gracefully fall, a drop of milliseconds drawn out into eons of pure crisp silence. Even as it warmly glided through the adjacent wall or spectator, no noise but wind would be heard, the speed of sound challenged in an extreme version of tortoise and hare. And then the plate would wobble flat as the booming echo and collapse of collateral damage scattered and crumbled in the seconds thereafter.

Sassolino's work takes this desire a step further without gratifying it, rendering the possibility of gravitational harmony and failure within each contraption. For Sassolino, art seemed like a staggering yet rational leap from his previous occupation as a toy designer for Casio; he has funded his Herculean objects with the spoils from this past life. Before and after working at Casio (his ideas about relationships between figure, ground, mass, potential energies, and inspiringly destructive intersections were evident even in his earliest university work). In one early yet quite mature sculpture, the back half of his figure was imbedded in a solid, monolithic block of concrete, as if demonstrating its emergence from engineered circumstances, biological and architectonic alike. Over the past year, his projects and production have kicked into high gear, driven by an interest in developing and refining a vocabulary in which a work is "something that is not symbolic but a fact".

Held by an electromagnet, the suspended plate of steel in Sassolino's studio took on a life of its own, no longer a secure piece of inertia like the static forms by Serra that it mimicked. Set on a random timer, the current would cut and the slab would drop. To "be careful" was good advice; with care the viewer could painlessly witness his

or her desire become manifest without becoming this unpredictable guillotine's hapless victim. There was a real level of shock and awe embodied in the work's promise, a guarantee that went beyond today's normal levels of synthesized and artificial experience.

Next to the plate was a giant concrete cube surrounded by a perimeter of circular groves and dusty rubble. The rubble was a result of the object spinning slowly on its central axis. An offhand nod to Robert Morris's *Box with the Sound of Its Own Making* (1961), this entropic work possesses the sound and action of its own *unmaking*. As it turns, it drags, struggles, and forces itself to nudge forward like a bruised Sisyphus with an end in sight, grinding itself to pieces. The auditory experience is like the sound of a catacomb portal being opened after 1000 years of closure – a pitched grumbling caused by the friction against the floor on which it resides. Too tall to see the top, the work is hollow. Inside are the gears that put it into motion and give it finite life. Again, the references to Donald Judd, Minimalism, volumetric time and space giving way to a stage of corporeal perspective are unavoidable. Instead of moving around the austere cube, this object pirouettes with a shaky suffering.

In Kafka's *The Metamorphosis*, Gregor Samsa wakes up realizing that he has transformed into an oversized, cumbersome beetle. Sassolino decapitated the claw from a construction crane and enabled it to seethe a handicapped life previously unknown to its quotidian one. Stuart Gordon's cult horror film *The Re-Animator*, based on the text by H.P. Lovecraft, explores the realms and limits of life for a head detached from its host body (fig. 9). A writhing agony followed the waking life of the mad doctor's patients. Here in Sassolino's studio, a less dramatic but equally curious Frankenstein sits bunched like a 400-pound fist between the spinning cube and the hovering plate. Consisting of six legs whose tips meet

fig. 8
Installation of Richard Serra's *Sequence*
(2006) at the Broad Contemporary Art
Museum at the Los Angeles County Museum
of Art, 2007.

on the floor beneath, the creature stirs under its plastic cover. Extending its first leg marks an instant of awakening, a momentary disillusionment of self and an understanding of its new form. Subsequent movements test the waters. A high-pitched wail begins as the next finger begrudgingly extends along the floor, embossing the glossy surface and tattooing its mass anew on the concrete ground. Below the work are thousands of scratches, indicating that this process of spider-like awakening has occurred hundreds of other times. With a final swift motion the weight shifts and the machine fully extends into attack position. Though harmless, the need for distance is unavoidable – so long as it doesn't bring you too close to the suspended plate just behind you.

Sassolino has effectively lifted the veil from any aesthetic harmlessness once taken for granted within the inanimate or inert. That is not to say that any of his pieces lack visual sophistication; each communicates formally a very familiar if not historical language. Using a vernacular of minimalist design, traps, and references, the works draw the viewer into a web of preconceptions and deceit, one that is not conveyed through mere games, gimmicks, or trickery. He aggressively pushes beyond terrain already covered by Charles Ray's punk-conceptual jibes on Judd or Flavin, or Michael Sailstorfer's clumsy alchemical bricolage. This work has the hard-edged perfection of Judd's best efforts, combined with an engineer's seal of approval.

This last detail is especially important in terms of the polished cylindrical steel tube resting in the next room. Motionless and pristine, it seems by far to be the most harmless of anything seen in the studio thus far – a ruse since this contained mass is certainly the most destructive of all. It is a portrait of architecture as filtered through a process of bomb-making. With the help of patents and engineers, the artist has effectively compressed the world

onto a pinhead – or at least twenty-one cubic meters into a meter-long tube. The implications of this require a bending of perceptions, since what it means is literally what is stated. An industrial truck tire holds seven bar of pressure. If you stabbed it with a knife you would die instantly. This small object holds 250 bar. The work offers a new way of conceiving space; whereas Marcel Duchamp bottled an ampoule of Parisian air (fig. 10), Sassolino is working on ways to bottle the physical space of an arrondissement. A similar sensation is rendered photographically in Andreas Gursky's large-format images of vistas that the naked eye can otherwise never fully grasp in their entirety. Should this cylinder, delicate and fragile like any thermodynamic system in need of equilibrium, drop from its cradle, a shock wave of several dozen cubic meters would come screaming out with enough speed and force to blast the studio walls into the neighbouring property.

This work (pp. 50-51) was destroyed a few months after I saw it. The artist had begun a serious collaboration with a company called Pietro Fiorentini – a factory not far from the studio. The company's business is to create piping infrastructures for natural gas systems, harnessing the gas from the earth and bringing it across great distances until it arrives in your kitchen. They produce these networks for many countries around the world, and their business is first and foremost the technology of stabilized pressure. Understanding the principles involved in this discipline, Sassolino convinced a company that produces components in an assembly line production of objects in the thousands to now make a unique object – one that encompassed all of the technological ideas present in their profession. The result was a more refined and officially definitive version of the cylinder. The company requested that before beginning their work together, they wanted the artist to destroy the first version. He had made it under rather amateur circumstances and they did



fig. 9
Still from *The Re-Animator* (1985), directed by Stuart Gordon.

fig. 10
Marcel Duchamp
Air de Paris [*50cc of Paris Air*], 1919
Readymade: glass ampoule (broken and later restored)
13.5 × 20.5 cm, diameter (5¼ × 8⅞ in., diameter)
Philadelphia Museum of Art,
The Louise and Walter Arensberg Collection

not want to be liable or associated with something that would ultimately be perceived as a precedent for what was to come. In this way the collaboration became something more than interdisciplinary, considering that Pietro Fiorentini's seal of approval is one recognized by the European Community, and also means that the company assumes full responsibility for the object. While deemed completely safe, no amount of reassurance prevents anxiety while in the company of this object. Projected fantasies of possible tragedies and physical harm keep one at a conscious distance. It is hard not to anthropomorphize the potential energies within Sassolino's otherwise sterile and clinical contraptions as the qualities of a troubled personality at the threshold of unravelling.

Near Vicenza, where his studio is located, most of Italy's heavy industrial equipment is produced and assembled. Sassolino isolates many components from their destined functions to set them on a new trajectory. Off in the corner of the studio, a high-power hydraulic pump, dismembered from its source anatomy as a bulldozer scoop or forklift, seems at home amongst the spread of aestheticised and displaced machinery. The cylindrical tip of its extendable arm is pressed firmly into the centre of a large rectangular block of chestnut. Bound by steel coil straps on either side, which wrap around the pump's tail end, the piece of wood is held hostage. Upon approach, the machine turns itself on as the arm almost imperceptibly begins to force its way through the block. On the ceiling a motion detector connects to the work, giving it awareness and activating it when anyone comes close. Once activated, it slowly unleashes its six tonnes of force.

The stress inflicted upon the wood and the clear tension that the steel straps exert inspire close observation. One is forced to become a voyeur, a participant, and an

accomplice in the destruction of the block. And it is this participation that actively closes the gap between reality and desired fantasy. Chris Burden's proposed critique of institutional stability by risking its ruin was the tagline of *Samson* (1985, fig. 11), a hefty assemblage of huge wood planks, cranks, cogs, and gears that hooked directly into the turnstiles through which a museum visitor had to pass in order to enter the complex. Originally installed in Seattle's Henry Art Gallery in 1985 and then recently at Zwirner and Wirth Gallery in New York, no amount of visitors and clicks on the wheel would have ever let those hulking arms fully stretch through the white walls. The thrill of contributing to such an iconoclastic event was enough to believe it could happen; however the bluff was never called and after six weeks the show concluded as visitor's attentions moved on to the next placebo contract.

Chestnut is a wood that will give everything of its composition under varying circumstances. It burns the hottest, brightest, and longest, and is structurally one of the most durable. Any number of products are forced to their breaking point in durability tests. The sport of it is experienced in hunting or vandalism. And torture brings men to a similar breaking point. A series of cracks echo through the studio and the smell of burning wood is discernable. A sudden pop blasts through the gallery, converting your body into a tuning fork. The first sign of the wood's internal defeat sends a shrill of aggression and primal, gut-wrenching screams through your entirety. The otherwise cubic form seems to go soft and begins to bend. The taut steel cords would easily slice through your legs should they slip free. Invisible fissures in the surface cause the wood to bleed moisture and occasionally gush spurts of sap onto the floor and onto the machine itself. A dark shiny pool forms. One by one, long splinters of wood burst free, sharp talons of structural exhaustion. You have no choice but to stay and watch as your



fig. 11
Chris Burden
Samson, 1985
Turnstile, winch, worm gear, jack, timber, steel.
Dimensions variable.
Installation view at Henry Art Gallery, Seattle, 1985.

presence now carries the block to its end. An anticlimactic cough brings this right-angled torture to its end, a sigh of relief comes from you and it, and everything goes limp. The sexuality of it all is unmistakably present, yet the regret of your responsibility for this forced penetration begins to overshadow.

This body of work becomes, somehow without meaning to, emblematic of the clichéd but actual “political climate” and the effect of media-induced trepidation on the human psyche. Yet neither the news, reality TV, nor even reality itself has brought a viewer to the doorstep of such tangible yet controllable mortality. It’s made for viewers brought up on train wrecks, *Terminator 2*, Daniel Pearl, YouTube, David Cronenberg, semaphores of color-coded terror, channel-flipping ADD, and a push-button control of needs, disasters, and desires. The encounter is an alarm clock that shatters the distance of safety given by the glass screen or from the usual avenues of mediation – an *actual* event, something desperately needed in art, culture, and life: an undeniable stroke of reality, the invaluable realization of the present moment.

Sassolino’s work evokes an eroticized fear of physical and psychological junctions, a portrait of how far you will go and how far you’ve already gone. Condensed within each of these works is a dynamic that resonates with the fragile conditions by which we are all surrounded. The effect becomes more about the viewer and his or her own states of vulnerability. The only harmful thing about experiencing Sassolino’s work is this text. Anticipation has been formed and surprises unveiled. No second-hand experience can suffice for what is on offer here: a terrifying gift. In searching for facts over symbols, the same rules apply as to any phenomenological, psychological, or relational event: you have to be there.



fig. 12
Arcangelo Sassolino’s *Afasia 2* (2008)
during its production at the factory
of Pietro Fiorentini, Arcugnano, 2008
(see pp. 48-55).