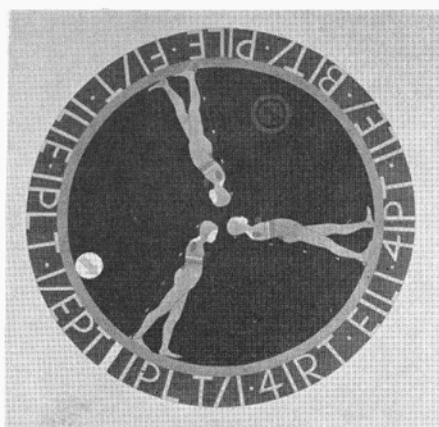


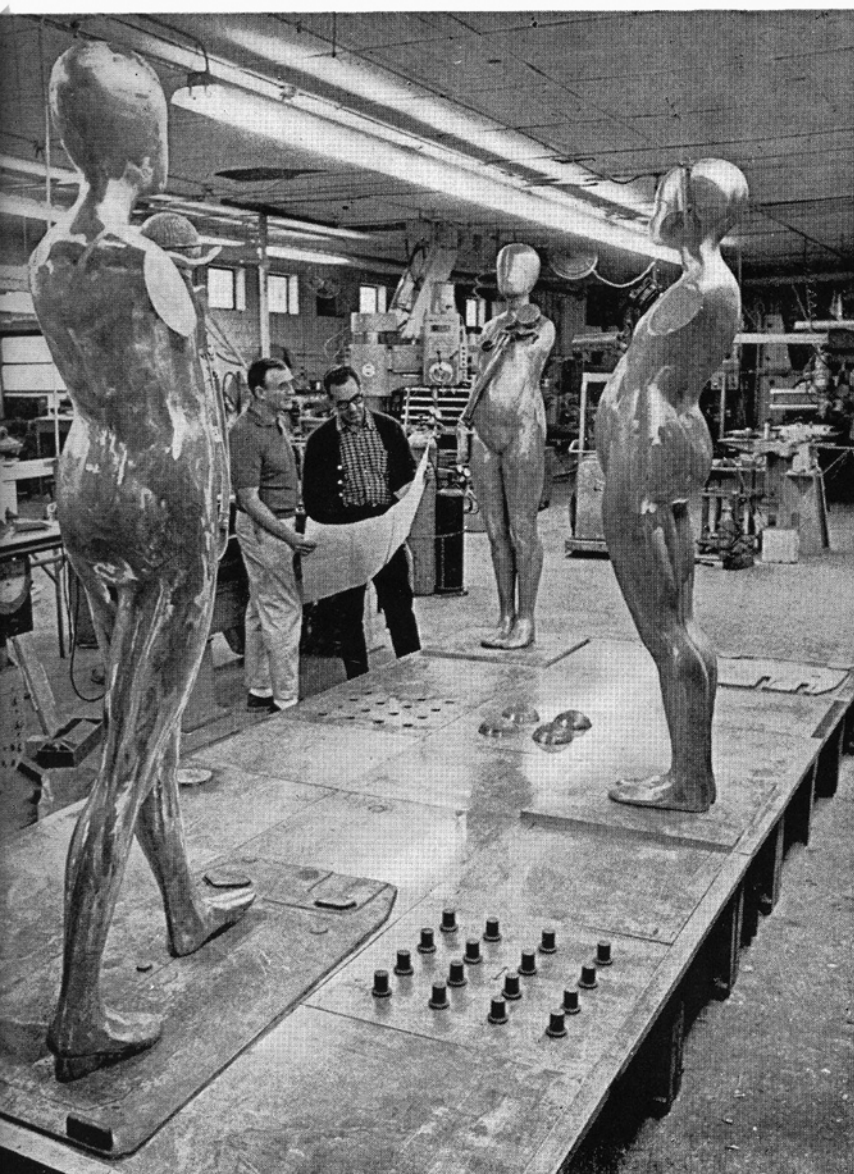
# IDOLS FOR THE COMPUTER AGE

Jan van Der Marck

For the past six years Ernest Trova has explored the Falling Man image with a single-minded intensity, creating a yet unfinished parable of man's condition in the contemporary world



Study Falling Man: #104, latex on canvas, 1963-64. Collection of Larry Aldrich



Study Falling Man: Large Landscape, bronze, 1966 (work in progress).

Ernest Trova, thirty-nine, is a native and resident of St. Louis, Missouri. A self-taught painter, he first earned a living in window display and advertising design, but since 1959 Trova has been able to freely pursue the professional life of an artist. After his early figurative paintings, he made a number of assemblages with erotic, often morbid imagery. Then, in 1960, the Falling Man entered his work in bold emblematic compositions—painted, collaged or both. A unique opportunity for sculpture and constructions arose when the Famous-Barr Company, a St. Louis department store, allowed Trova unlimited access to its inventory, equipment and workshops. This enlightened initiative resulted in the hybridization of Falling Man and the world of mechanical gadgetry. First exhibited in 1964 as a special feature of the St. Louis Bicentennial celebration, Trova's sculptures, constructions and machines were shipped to New York for a second viewing at the Pace Gallery (see "Strong New Talent," *Art in America*, No. 1, 1965). Since 1963 Trova has participated in numerous group exhibitions, was given two one-man exhibitions at the Hanover Gallery in London and, while continuing to live in St. Louis, has just finished the most ambitious project of his career as a sculptor, a larger-than-life landscape with three figures (see below), which will be shown in "Eight Sculptors: The Ambiguous Image" at the Walker Art Center in Minneapolis this fall.

It is a truism that the art of the 1960s is more readily identified by its images than by its style. We have, in fact, become so image-conscious that, putting our capacity for free association to the test, an American flag, a Campbell's soup can and an EAT sign along the road instantly relate to Jasper Johns, Andy Warhol and Robert Indiana.

A new icon, similarly a capsule representation of a complex oeuvre, is Ernest Trova's Falling Man. Like flags, signs and national-brand ads, the *Study Falling Man* series somehow reminds us of what we have already seen. Since Trova's imagery has been developed in relative isolation and through reflection on the condition of man in our contemporary world, it is not surprising that it owes more to the history of art and ideas than to the stock in trade of today's communications media. Falling man evokes many familiar things: Leonardo's and Dürer's anthropometry; the surrealist inhabitants of de Chirico's city squares and the anonymous ascending crowds in Schlemmer's stairwells; display dummies, the radiator mascots of vintage automobiles, statistical pictograms and the mock victims in simulated car and airplane crashes. If we pursue Falling Man's lineage *ad absurdum*, we may take into account those Victorian figure types as justified by art nouveau esthetics, the "streamline" and "airflow" concepts as typified by the "baroque modern" style of the 1930s and that great proto-pop monument, the Academy Awards Oscar.

What is most apparent about Trova's Falling Man is his lack of face, arms or sex. His facelessness deprives him of individuality, the truncation of the upper body thwarts his powers to act and to articulate, and the suppression of sexual characteristics makes it impossible for him to function and communicate on the biological level. By the standards of health-studio instructors and dietitians Falling Man falls short of being an ideal specimen. The sway-back posture clamors for regular calisthenics, and the protruding abdomen, well beyond dietary remedy, reveals what looks like the false pregnancy of an elderly eunuch. Notwithstanding appearances, Falling Man's physical constancy is illusory, for Trova does change the silhouette of his manikins, however gradually.

Formally, Falling Man has progressed from his hesitant poly-

Study Falling Man: "H-Box," chr plated bronze and plexiglas, 1966. Fergus/Pace Gallery, Los Ang