Community Puppeteer

As a CONCENTRATOR in visual and environmental studies, Alex Kahn '88 presented a senior thesis that showed off his talent, but also left room for the spectator's inventiveness. He created a "mock bedroom, with a wardrobe that led to a giant ribcage with animation loops," he explains. "It was highly interactive, so it was up to the audience to create the procession through the scenery. Each person's experience was different."

Kahn still gets excited when the art and the spectators form a greater connection than that provided by simple observation. During a year in Nepal, he discovered that his feelings about art harmonized with the ideology of the Tibetan Buddhist painters there. "They believe that artwork can take on an animate presence," he says of the Tibetans. "Their images of deities are not so much pictures as *places* that deities can inhabit."

This idea of art containing life—rather than serving merely as a backdrop—led Kahn to his current leadership of Superior Concept Monsters, the official puppeteers of the Greenwich Village Halloween parade, an annual event that attracts an estimated two million spectators. Kahn's group consists of six core members who since 1998 have decided on a theme for each year's parade and then developed the theme by refurbishing old puppets or crafting new ones.

When the Halloween parade began in 1973, it involved 100 participants. Today it draws 30,000 performers and marchers, all embodying the theme in some fashion. Kahn's group has begun soliciting help to build more puppets as the parade grows bigger. "We've started holding community workshops in upstate New York," he explains. "Anybody is welcome to help assemble the puppets." In recent years, several hundred volunteers have materialized.
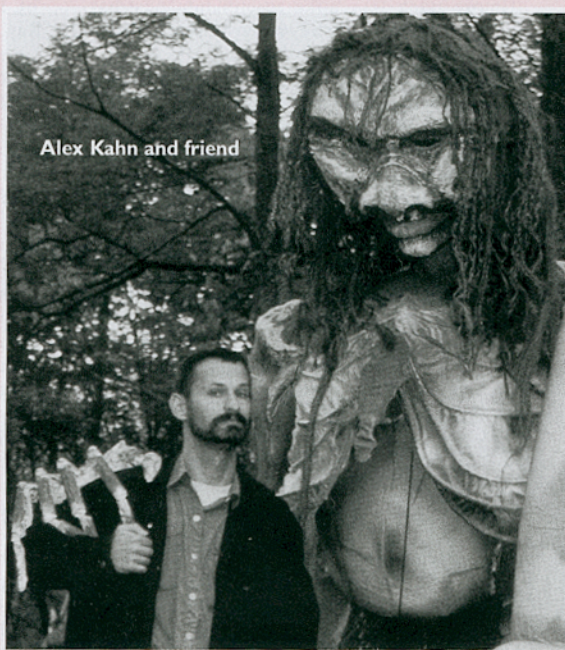
"A parade like this really can be as much made *by* the people as it is *for* the people," Kahn says. When ordinary people make the puppets, he says, they feel a greater sense of responsibility. And the puppets need quite a few people to operate them, as

Alex Kahn and friend

SUPERIOR CONCEPT MONSTERS

well: one giant caterpillar, for example, required 30 pairs of hands. "You have total strangers who come together and, collectively, have to become one *group* of strangers."

Kahn calls that one of the most rewarding aspects of his work. Two years ago, his group helped inspire enormous cohesion within Morinesio, a Northern Italian village, when a Greenwich Village parade regular suggested that Kahn hold a large-scale puppetry workshop there. Most of the participants were Americans and Germans, but locals could sit in anytime, free of charge. "Morinesio has been largely abandoned in the last 30 or 40 years," Kahn explains. "The younger generations have left the difficult life of farming and herding to work in the cities. One older man lamented that television had supplanted and killed the rich tradition of storytelling that used to pass the time through the long winters."

Kahn's group asked the villagers about their folktales, their agriculture, their family histories, their division of labor, "even how they baked their bread," he says. "From the answers, we were able to conceptualize the puppets and other elements: one farmer's tales of violet-picking became a forest of giant articulated flowers. Pretty soon, more and more locals started popping by to see what we were up to. Villagers, their families, and distant friends often helped build and paint. They were fascinated that we were fascinated.

"Our event in Morinesio was an impetus for a regrouping of the village, a reunion of its families, and a reaffirmation of its identity," Kahn says. "The same is true of the Halloween parade: when 30 total strangers find themselves carrying bamboo poles under a giant worm, they form an instant community. The physics of puppetry make it a concrete, if ephemeral, reality. Puppets are a perfect metaphor: many people coalesce to form one being. I often compare our puppet workshops to barn-raisings, because they are reminiscent of a time when communities acted—indeed, had to act—in concert toward a shared act of creation." ~ELLENOR J. HONIG