It looks like something out of LOST IN SPACE-rigged on a late-60's TV budget and production schedule. This incredible metal contraption, about the size of a telephone booth, has a ring of vertical poles inside. The poles carry propane gas and, when lit, spin around encircling the lucky occupant in a column of fire. Obviously this sort of thing requires a controlled environment.

Standing in his workspace, surrounded by homemade guillotines and Oly empties, Kal Spelletich is not what one would call a controlled environment.

A boyish 38 with a narrow Affleckian face and wearing a heavy cotton workshirt, Spelletich looks very much like the punk-rock scenester he was a decade ago in Austin, Texas. There he used to hang out with the likes of the Butthole Surfers and Scratch Acid. Now he makes machines like the Fireshower. He has offered me a test drive. "Man, I fuck myself up once a week making this stuff," he says when queried on his safety record. "Its just me, bumbling." Ah.

Spelletich kneels down by the spigot of a large propane tank, connected to the fireshower. "Hold on a minute," he tells me. He stands up and steps away to retrieve a fire extinguisher. "Just for some semblance of safety." He looks down at the machines base. "Hmm..I should prop this up, its gotten really wobbly. Let me get a wedge..." He fiddles with the bottom. "Okay," he says, looking at me. "You're not wearing polyester...Your hair is short...Good" He tells me to get inside.

"Move forward a little," Spelletich says. "Okay, don't move. If you want me to stop, just go 'STOP!' "And you will want me to stop."
I offer that I already want it to stop.

"No, its cool. You'll like it."

He turns the valve by the propane tank and suddenly the sickly smell of the gas is everywhere. I seem to remember a public service announcement about this.

"Okay, just a second," says Spelletich. He reaches up with a pilot lighter. Flick, flick... It ignites. Big plumes of flame billow all around me.

"Don't worry," Spelletich says, smiling distantly. Then he spins an electric switch, and the flaming cage starts spinning around me. A curtain of fire is spinning inches from my face. My eyebrows are getting singed. My ears are burning. Combustion seems imminent.

"Stop!"

Spelletich doesn't appear to hear me.

"Stop!"

The flames go out. The cage slows its spinning. I have not combusted. Spelletich, grinning informs me that some women have done this naked.

Kal Spelletich is neither sadist nor pyromaniac. But he does fit a certain psychological profile. There it is in the DSM-IV: Robot Maker (see also, mechanical Artist). More specifically, Spelletich is one of the creative technicians currently toiling in the late-'90s wake of Survival Research Laboratories, now 20 years old. They are a distinct social group. It is late century folk art, it is industrial culture. A technological subculture. Time, industry and invention are invested in something that has no practical application at all.

Inside a former auto-repair garage, Kal Spelletich reflects on life in the world's biggest robot scene. "What I like is that it's not market-based," he says, "Here, people are working in this really crazy, pure way. A place like New York, you can't just go there, set up a shop and start cranking out robots."

Spelletich may be partially a product of S.R.L.-having worked there for years-but he is also a different, recognizably old-school sort of folk artist. The son of an Iowa construction-company owner, he was raised around tractor pulls and demolition derbies. His homegrown mechanical expertise later meshing with art-school exposure to dadaists and Duchamp.

While he cites Greek mythology and French surrealists, Spelletich's work shows a much more apparent influence: the quirky humor, lo-fi production values, and roughshod emotionalism of American punk rock.

Spelletich says, "for one thing, audience participation is key. I get people involved in running the machines," he says. His latest works are grisly carnival rides, steel cages that spin around audience volunteers and flaming angels slamming into the cages. "My thing is for the individual, to get people to feel more alive, to witness their mortality," he explains. "Like, oh my God, I can't believe I'm running
this giant mechanical arm that can swing around and kill me."

For another Spelletich's machines reveal a soulful humanity. With his mechanical performance group SEEMEN he tells a story about each machine, why he built it, what he hopes it will do for the audience and then asks them why they want to operate it. Some of the stories are devastating. The Suicide Chair is a steel chair with a hydraulic arm that slams a huge bed of spikes down onto the seatback. A medieval simulacrum of Dr. Jack kevorkian, it was inspired by the death of Spelletich's brother Andrew who languished with AIDS in the "AIDS-who?" Reagan era. "It was really fucked-up," Spelletich says, standing next to the suicide chair. "Just to see him waste away like that. So I made this." He releases the hydraulics, and the spikes come down with an echoing clang.

This artist is no Ludite, opposed to the changes and incursions of the 21st-century tech-so much as an old school mechanical connoisseur, an aesthete of technology itself.

Hans Moravec, a principal research scientist at Carnegie Mellon's Robotic's institute, respects this eccentric mechanical disposition. "If they wanted a high-paying job in high-tech, they could get one for the asking," he says. "They could work at Pixar, say and still do artistic things and make money and we would all watch it on the big screens. Obviously that's not what they want to do. They like their big pieces of metal that thrash around and blow fire. I think they're artists at heart."