

... And the Kitchen Goes Electronic

By WENDY SMITH

A TELEVISION MONITOR SHOWS two dancers leaping past each other, then moving together to whirl around in a circle, their bodies seemingly melting into one. But this is not a taped concert with special effects: each woman is actually dancing at the same moment on a stage hundreds of miles from her partner.

A composer plays one of her works on a keyboard in New York, and the keys move on a piano across the continent in Santa Monica, Calif., so people there can hear her fingering on an actual instrument. "It's as if my arms were 3,000 miles long," she comments.

These are not sci-fi fantasies but actual

Wendy Smith is the author of "Real Life Drama: The Group Theater and America, 1931-1940."



examples of the "virtual stage" created at various outposts of the Electronic Cafe International, a network of sites around the world linked by teleconferencing systems, videophones and computers. The equipment enables artists to collaborate face to face across great distances, to exchange drawings and other visual material almost in-

Curling up with a cup of coffee and something nice on the virtual stage.

stantaneously, and to explore ways in which the technology itself can become a new medium for artistic expression.

For the public, an Electronic Cafe is a place to stroll into, buy soft drinks, coffee, sandwiches or dessert at a counter, then grab a table and chair from which to observe the action, whether it is a scheduled

event or an informal experiment.

This season, after 10 years of expansion to London, Paris, Jerusalem and Tokyo, among other places, the Electronic Cafe finally gets a New York outlet. The Kitchen, the experimental performance space founded in 1971 by the video artists Woody and Steina Vasulka, is turning its second-floor theater into an Electronic Cafe. There, today's artists can push the limits of systems not even dreamed of 23 years ago.

"A lot of people approached us," said Sherrie Rabinowitz, who with her partner, Kit Galloway, created the Electronic Cafe concept in 1984. "But it really came together with the Kitchen." The couple, both artists, have been experimenting with communications technology since the mid-70's. "Going to the Kitchen was like going home," Mr. Galloway said.

Dedicated to supporting and presenting the avant-garde, the Kitchen has nurtured performers as diverse as Laurie Anderson,

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DANCE

Weegee's tabloid photographs from the 40's and 50's, which examined the morbid attraction to tragedy, find a new life in Susan Marshall's work.

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Robert Pandya/University of Texas, Austin

The Susan Marshall Dance Company performing "Fields of View"—Private loss.

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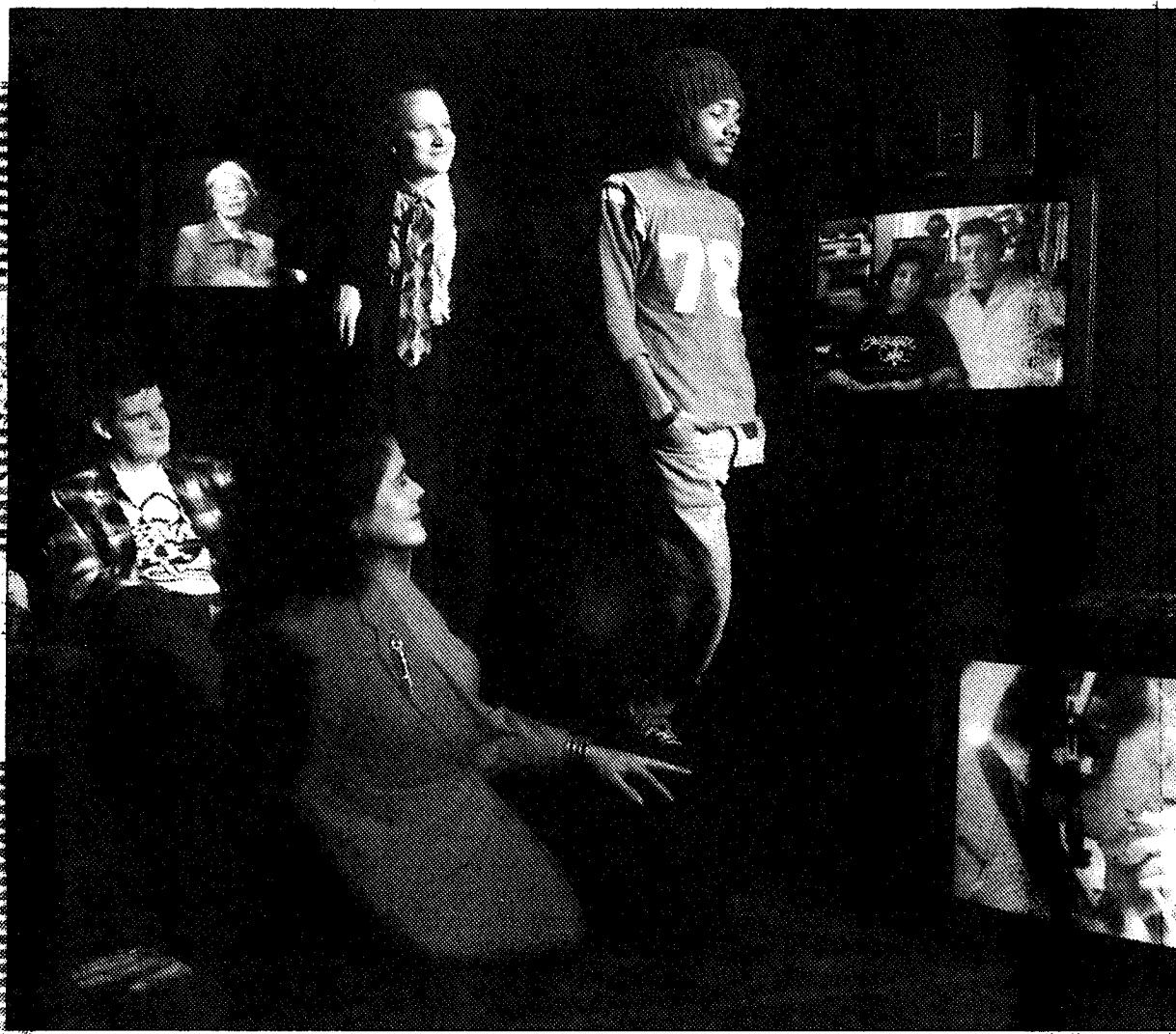
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Fred R. Conrad/The New York Times

Testing part of the Electronic Cafe are, left, Ben Neill, a music curator; Lauren Amazeen, seated, the Kitchen's executive director; John Maxwell Hobbs, operations director, and DJ Spooky, a musician.

Plugging In to the Future

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Philip Glass (both are members of the board of directors), Eric Bogosian and the visual artist Cindy Sherman. During its early years in SoHo, the Kitchen focused on the emerging field of video art and on music, particularly by composers exploring what was called the new tonality and the possibilities of electronic sound. Performance and dance were added to the mix in 1978.

By the late 80's the performance program was well known for the politically and sexually challenging work of Mr. Bogosian, who had been the organization's first dance curator, Karen Finley, Annie Sprinkle and others. A literature program was established in 1989, several years after the Kitchen had moved to its current home on West 19th Street near 10th Avenue in Manhattan.

The association with the Electronic Cafe comes at a decisive moment in the Kitchen's history. Seeking to make up for sharp cuts in Federal financing, the organization hopes to increase private donations and restructure the way it presents events. The goal is to attract a wider audience — older, wealthier and by definition more mainstream — than the youthful avant-garde performance crowd the Kitchen has traditionally drawn.

For example, the recent Ridge Theater production of John Moran's "Mathew in the School of Life," a new electronic opera with a score for digital samplers, was presented for a month to enable more people to see it. In the past, works have run for several nights only. Ticket prices for "Mathew" went up to \$20, significantly higher than the \$8 to \$12 norm.

Such changes have prompted criticisms that the Kitchen is becoming more conservative, but representatives of the organization believe that it can broaden its base without losing its edge. The new technology in the Electronic Cafe, they maintain, will provide another means to attract new artists and audiences.

Mr. Galloway agrees. "We wanted to build a context in which artists could experience new ways of collaboration and co-creation, where geography was no longer a boundary," he said from Santa Monica. "It's very important that artists have a role in this technology, so that we don't just end up becoming consumers of it."

Future events (for which cafe ticket prices will range from \$5 to \$15) will use the technology in a more performance-oriented fashion. At a "teleconcert" on Saturday, Steina Vasulka will play an electronic violin in her studio in Santa Fe, while controlling laser disk players in New York and Santa Monica that will create video images in conjunction with the music.

The same evening, the composer Morton Subotnick will perform from the Electronic Cafe in Santa Monica, where sensors attached to his body will send signals that activate a disclavier in New York. He will be playing an excerpt from "Angel Con-

Technology has invited art onto the dance floor at the Kitchen's Electronic Cafe.

certo," a work-in-progress. In its finished form it will be presented on two stages simultaneously. At location A, a pianist will send signals to a disclavier at location B. At B, another performer will control a "virtual percussion orchestra" of instruments at location A.

"The opera deals with the polarity between these two worlds," said the composer, who has been working with teleconferencing equipment for several years. "The whole idea is that this new technology can create new kinds of art. It opens up the possibility for new resources of human expression."

Laurie Anderson, who like Mr. Subotnick has been mingling technology with art for years, thinks the potential of the new forms has barely been tapped. Her forthcoming February tour, to be sponsored by a CD-ROM publishing company, includes a project she calls "The Green Room." It is, she said, "a kind of cyberspace area where people can do various things as we're touring the country: talk to the lighting designer on the Internet, or tap into our live feeds and get a Slow Scan," or videophone image.

In other words, anyone with a computer and a videophone can hook up to "The Green Room" and receive a black-and-white view equivalent to that from an orchestra, but in

via teleconferencing.

"It's a field that's really taking off," said John Reaves, executive director of the company's Performance Research Group. "Every day on the Internet we find messages from people all over the world who are looking for collaborators." The Gertrude Stein has also found computer graphics software and teleconferencing helpful to members of an artistic team developing a project over a long period of time; they can hold production meetings, even exchange sketches or designs, while scattered across the country working on other jobs.

Because the technology is new and relatively unfamiliar, manufacturers have sometimes lent or donated equipment to groups exploring its possibilities. Among the material the Kitchen has acquired this way: a PictureTel 4000 unit (the teleconferencing equipment), modems and digital products from Motorola, a Kurzweil 2000 synthesizer, an Audio Codec (which processes sound information into digital form for the computer) from Dolby, several Panasonic picturephones (the low-tech black-and-white videophones that work through phone lines). Nynex donated the communications lines that carry video and audio signals, and installed them free of charge.

Installation costs the Kitchen has assumed have been relatively modest compared with the estimated \$100,000 it saved on the major pieces of technology, said Eric Latzky, the communications director.

Money is a concern to the organization, which saw \$55,000 cut from its National Endowment for the Arts grant this year — only a small percentage of its \$750,000 annual budget, but a sizable hit nevertheless.

THE KITCHEN'S PROBLEMS with the endowment go back to 1990, when in the midst of a fierce Congressional controversy over the financing of art deemed obscene by some, it became a lightning rod for the endowment's critics by virtue of its association with confrontational performance artists like Ms. Finley.

Since the arrival of Ms. Amazeen in 1991, however, the organization seems to be cultivating a new attitude, prompting charges from its constituency that it encourages safer work as it chases a larger audience. The recent departures of the performance, media and literary curators also raised concerns that Ms. Amazeen wanted to take a hand in

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THE KITCHEN'S INAUGURAL cafe event on Thursday, "Cafe Barbie," if not exactly a performance, is expected to gather some famous names — both in the flesh and on the monitors — to dissect the doll's cultural significance. M. G. Lord (author of the book "Forever Barbie: The Unauthorized Biography of a Real Doll") is the ringmistress, with Camille Paglia; Betty Friedan; Lauren Hutton; Holly Brubach, the style editor of The New York Times Magazine; Lady Bunny, a drag performer; and John Hanhardt, the video curator at the Whitney Museum, scheduled to take part.

The twist is that some panelists will be "virtual guests." Cindy Jackson, a London resident who has had 20 operations to make herself look like Barbie, will beam in from the Electronic Cafe in Paris via teleconferencing, which transmits near-television-quality audio and video with little time lapse. Others will appear through the more low-tech telephone, which works over a telephone line and provides small black-and-white images that move slowly every three seconds or so. Some may simply be heard over a phone line and not seen at all.

up to "The Green Room" and receive a black-and-white view equivalent to that from an orchestra seat in the theater at which Ms. Anderson is performing.

"I hope that the renegade spirit on the Net can develop into another art form," Ms. Anderson said, "because otherwise it will just be more pre-packaged entertainment on demand. I think artists can use this technology to make the audience more than just consumers, to demand more from them — that would be really exciting. Then a performance could be more than just a show."

It is not yet clear what kinds of events — with or without audience participation — the Kitchen will be presenting at the New York Electronic Cafe, or what its operating budget will be. "It's developing organically," said Lauren Amazeen, the executive director of the Kitchen. "I don't want to structure it too much, because we want to encourage the artists to really collaborate with each other and the curators on how to use the cafe."

Other arts organizations have deployed teleconferencing and computers in more structured settings. The Gertrude Stein Repertory Theater in New York has given performances with partners in other cities that mixed live action, computer animation and actors appearing on screens

performance, media and literary curators also raised concerns that Ms. Amazeen wanted to take a hand in programming, traditionally the prerogative of the curatorial staff.

"I don't look at myself as being involved with programming," Ms. Amazeen said. The music and dance curators remain, she pointed out, and she has hired a "hybrid" video-performance curator. "I'm the catalyst, not the programmer."

She doesn't deny, however, that she wants the Kitchen to be known as more than a home for in-your-face art. "I think it's really important to get as many ideas, as many backgrounds in here as possible. I believe in the Kitchen's founding mission, which was that it be a model for democracy, where you bring in new voices all the time."

According to Paula Cooper, the SoHo gallery owner who heads the Kitchen's board of directors, "Of course we'd love to have a broader-based audience."

Ms. Cooper supports Ms. Amazeen's contention that the curators control the programming. "It's the art that's the priority. Being broader-based doesn't mean that we're going to do certain things to appeal to certain people; that's not it at all. We all believe that good art will draw. It may be a little slow at first, but ultimately people will recognize it." □