

by Gary Parks

Barbie in Cyberspace

The first thing I noticed was that no one wore pink. Barbie is known the world over, but she is better known in some places than in others. In early incarnations such as Busy Gal and newer models such as Uptown Chic and Savvy Shopper, she seems more at home on New York's Upper East Side than in Chelsea. After all, the number of all-black outfits in Barbie's extensive wardrobe is virtually nil. So when one of Manhattan's most important avant-garde performance spaces, The Kitchen, announced that it would stage an evening last November called Cafe Barbie, the doll seemed poised to conquer new territory. Hey, maybe the color of choice for New York's downtown elite would even change.

Cafe Barbie was planned as a multimedia spectacle, with no shortage of star participants. Actresses Raquel Welch and Lauren Hutton and authors Betty Friedan and Camille Paglia were scheduled, along with such luminaries as Joe Blitman, the Barbie expert and dealer; Holly Brubach, the style editor of the *New York Times Magazine*; and "real-life Barbie," Cindy Jackson. In addition to a panel discussion led by journalist M.G. Lord, whose book *Forever Barbie: The Unauthorized Biography of a Real Doll* had just been published by William Morrow, the evening was to include Salon de Barbie, an exhibition of paintings, photographs, sculptures, and other works by "Barbiecentric" artists. Most innovative of all, the evening was one of the inaugural events marking The Kitchen's affiliation with Electronic Cafe International.

Like any cafe, an electronic cafe is a meeting place. But instead of just buying a cup of coffee and talking with a friend who's also dropped by, you can gab with people on the other side of the globe at an electronic cafe thanks to live, interactive, audio and visual connections. Prerecording is also a possibility for those unable to be there at all—just tape your message to be played back later on a television monitor. The concept is similar to the electronic town meetings that some politicians have used, but The Kitchen hopes that its facilities will allow artists to explore new methods of performance, creating effects in cyberspace that could not occur alone in any single physical location.

For Cafe Barbie, New York was supposed to be linked with Paris and Santa Monica, California, in order to provide participants at all three sites with the opportunity to discuss the doll and her powerful impact on world culture. Imagine a Barbie convention held simultaneously in three cities, with everyone knowing what was going on every-

Photo: Tara Scarlett



where at the same time, and you'll get an idea of the imaginative (and technological) leap The Kitchen was attempting.

It didn't quite work out that way. People crowded excitedly into the soldout theater, but when one of The Kitchen staff members looked at my lapel button of an early Ken dressed in

Business Appointment and said, "Oh, I see you're a Pee Wee Herman fan," I knew something was wrong. What the audience didn't know was that the electronic link with Paris was down; The Lady Bunny, a well-known drag performer also scheduled to appear, had bolted down a hole:

Photo: Tara Scarlett



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Panel members in New York from left to right: Holly Brubach, style editor of the *New York Times Magazine*. John Hanhardt, the video curator at the Whitney Museum of Art and Betty Friedan. All photos by Tara Scarlett.



and Friedan, the pioneering author of *The Feminine Mystique* who had seemed to come to accept Barbie, had apparently changed her mind and decided, no, Barbie was bad after all. To top it off, no one dressed up—in pink or otherwise. It was regulation downtown black as far as the eye could see. Was I truly the only one who thought such an evening might prompt a few intrepid souls to put on the Ritz, Barbie-style? Lady Bunny, your glamour was sorely missed.

So the pressure was on Lord, as

ringmistress of this “untamed media event,” to improvise. A first-generation Barbie owner, Lord recounts the history of the doll in *Forever Barbie* and makes a serious examination of her importance as an icon of popular culture. Lord is very much a Barbie advocate, and has little patience with those who, in her view, harbor reactionary opinions about the doll’s ill effect on the nation’s youth. Obviously the product of much research, *Forever Barbie* varies in readability from absorbing to plodding (a full review of the book will appear in a future issue). Lord’s ability at moderating a panel proved equally unsteady. The catch, both for Lord and, unfortunately, the audience, was that Cafe Barbie participants not actually present at The Kitchen were only as available as the technology could make them.

In the case of Cindy Jackson in Paris, that meant practically not at all, though Lord assured us Jackson was wearing a pink ballgown and a tiara. (Hooray!) It turned out that both Raquel Welch and Camille Paglia had prerecorded videotapes, while Lauren Hutton, who had backed out at almost the last minute, had provided only a brief interview by phone. The electronic link to Santa Monica worked, but because the video portion of the signal was transmitted (via telephone lines) by means of what is called

a “slow scan,” the images had a slow-motion, underwater look. Sitting in New York, we saw a lot of Joe Blitman perched on a stool in Santa Monica, his voice never quite matching the movement of his lips.

Since the link to Paris was, at best, feeble, Lord decided to start off the evening’s discussion with Paglia’s videotape. According to the fast-talking author of *Sexual Personae* and *Vamps and Tramps*, playing with Barbie is a philosophical and spiritual exercise for girls. She is especially useful during puberty, when a “tidal wave of changes” hit an adolescent. Paglia compared Barbie, a “modernized, streamlined” doll, to “a tribal fetish of a great nature cult” and noted that women as diverse as Gloria Steinem and Nicole Brown Simpson have modeled their look, whether consciously or not, on Barbie. The doll enables girls to examine their own sexuality, which is all to the good as far as Paglia is concerned.

The panel members actually present at The Kitchen had a variety of responses when Lord asked them what their first encounters with Barbie had been. Holly Brubach recalled that when she was in fifth grade she played Barbies and Kens with a friend who, like her, was just becoming aware of sex. After dressing up the dolls and imagining that they’d been out on a date, the girls would return Barbie and Ken to their home, undress them, place Barbie face down on top of Ken, then tiptoe away so that the dolls could make love. Brubach pointed out that neither she nor her friend knew what sex entailed, physically, but they thought that Barbie and Ken could figure it out. Brubach didn’t identify with Barbie, however. “She was someone else; she wasn’t me.” Brubach said, adding that the doll she did identify with was Pitiful Pearl—quite a shock coming from a professional tastemaker who was also the chicest person in the room.

John Hanhardt, the video curator at the Whitney Museum of American Art, had brought along a Barbie and a G.I. Joe which had been “surgically corrected” by the Barbie Liberation Organization, several of whose members were present in Santa Monica. At Lord’s urging, he demonstrated the result of their operations: Barbie barked out “Vengeance is mine” while G.I. Joe chirped, “Want to go shopping?” As Hanhardt noted, it’s hard to contend that there is no gender stereotyping in toys when you hear how incongruous that sounds. Hanhardt maintained that such product-tampering is important because these acts help break through the official life of Barbie as promulgated by Mattel, her corporate parent.

The fact that Barbie has a life beyond the one Mattel has created for her shows how the doll has become more than a plaything. As Lord pointed out later, few children stick strictly to the storylines invented by Barbie’s maker; instead, creative children (like Brubach and her friend) make up their own stories about the relationships among Barbie, Ken, Midge and the other friends. Indeed, it is just this sort of creative play that makes Barbie a positive toy. Adult collectors have their own images of Barbie, broadening her roles in ways children cannot.

Barbie is a cultural icon with a life (or, better, lives) of her own, as well as toy copyrighted by a corporation interested in maintaining control over its product. This dual existence seemed to have escaped Betty Friedan. Herself an icon, Friedan challenged the stereotypes that restricted women’s lives at a time when doing so was truly revolu-

tionary. Barbie's early years coincided with Friedan's writing of *The Feminine Mystique*, and it is commonplace that the doll's voluptuous figure is inescapably a product of that time. But Barbie has grown beyond the bimbo characterization that some still use to tar her. Friedan likened Barbie to a training bra, "something else a girl doesn't need." In ways sanctioned by Mattel—Barbie first became an astronaut in 1965—and in many ways that are not, Barbie, like Friedan, had challenged the mystique of being female.

Art critic RoseLee Goldberg, who said she was raised in South Africa hoping that she would grow up to become a political exile, agreed with Hanhardt that Barbie is enhanced by her association with provocateurs. She gets a tinge of the avant-garde from them, something completely different from her official, wholesome image. A.M. Holmes, a lecturer at Columbia University and the author of the intriguing short story "A Real Doll" in the collection *Mondo Barbie*, remembered that as a child she didn't particularly like Barbie herself, but that Suzy, a girl she hoped to become friends with, did. Since the only way to play with Suzy was by playing Barbies, Holmes got one. But when Suzy wasn't around, Holmes didn't even talk to Barbie. For her, the doll was merely a means to a social end.

Still plagued by technical problems limiting contact with Paris, Lord decided to pull something out of a can, just as her mother used to do, she said, when dinner was burned. On audiotape, Lauren Hutton, one of the few models who has prolonged her career beyond the first flush of beauty (she's 50), made a confession that also appears in Lord's book: The only use she had for dolls was to cut off their heads to see how their eyes worked. But she likened Barbie's short torso and long legs to those of Nadja Auermann, one of today's hottest models. On videotape, Raquel Welch said she hadn't played with dolls, either, but when she became aware of Barbie she realized that this doll wasn't a mother, therefore not a wife, and therefore something new. For Welch, Barbie was a seductress, a sensual being, an indication of a woman's sexuality being acceptable. Like Paglia, Welch viewed the idea of a doll with a sexual component as healthy for children.

The contribution from Santa Monica, where Electronic Cafe International is headquartered, was limited, both by technological confusion—people trying to talk at the same time, or appearing only partly within range of the cameras—and by Lord's visibly growing anger with it. Blitman's expertise was wasted. In response to one comment, he mentioned that what Mattel sold was fantasy. But when Goldberg tried to pursue this line of thought, Lord ignored her, turning to one of the other New York panelists to broach a new subject.

Later, after a young woman in Santa Monica showed off her rather idiosyncratic collection of Heroin Barbie, Anatomically Correct Barbie and Ken, and Prostitute Skipper, a poet began reciting an admittedly puerile piece of work. She only got as far as wondering why Barbie had

breasts when Ken had no penis (don't they know the difference between genitalia and mammaries in California?) before a hostile Lord abruptly cut her off. This provoked hisses from some in the New York audience, shocked at Lord's rudeness. Brushing aside calls to take questions from the throng, Lord decided to conclude with Welch's videotape, then declared the electronic cafe closed.

Salon de Barbie, the art exhibition curated by Alison Maddex installed on The Kitchen's second floor, proved more consistently interesting. Beginning with a dictionary definition of "idol" superimposed over a photograph of the doll, the show included a wide variety of views of Barbie, many of which are reproduced in Lord's book. As Maddex noted in her introduction to the Salon, some people just can't live without the doll and some can't live with her.

As an invented object which has acquired a personality, Barbie provides a special kind of subject matter for artists. (It's worth noting that all the Cafe Barbie participants, whether they thought highly of the doll or loathed her, referred to Barbie as "she," not "it.") The high technical gloss of David Levinthal's Kodalith prints, "The Barbie

Series 1972-73" provided an appropriately disturbing contrast to their unsettling subject matter. Violence was taken to fascinating extremes in Maggie Robbins' sculptures "Barbie Fetish" and "Berlin Barbie," but I found Susan Daboll's Polaroids titled "to wait," "to act," and "I Watched My Mother Hitting My Sister and It Scared Me" had a

particularly strong force. A piece called "Figure, 1959" consisting of a headless, armless Twist 'n Turn doll posed in a classic *contrapposto*—and set in concrete—was beautiful, if misnamed.

At the evening's conclusion, as audience members streamed out of Cafe Barbie into the cool November night, I overheard a woman (dressed in black) talking with her male companion. "I'm tired of all the Barbie bashing," she said, perhaps reacting to some of the more gruesome incarnations of the doll

on view upstairs. "When I was a kid, our choices were Barbie, Chatty Cathy and Betsy Wetsy. Barbie had the others beat by a mile." When future scholars consider Barbie's resonance in our culture, they could do worse than begin with that evaluation.

Gary Parks is the Reviews Editor of *Dance Magazine*.

Maggie Robbins' unsettling sculpture called "Barbie Fetish."

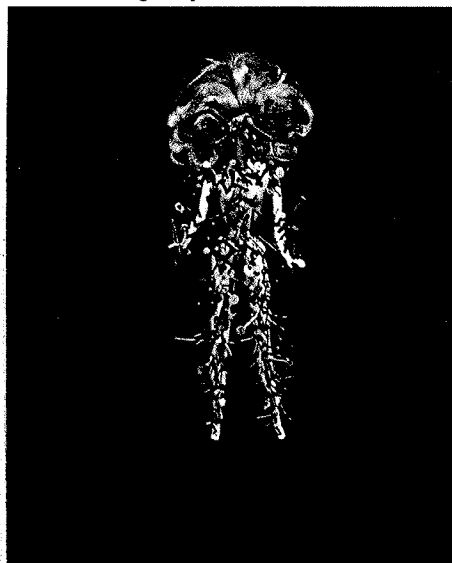


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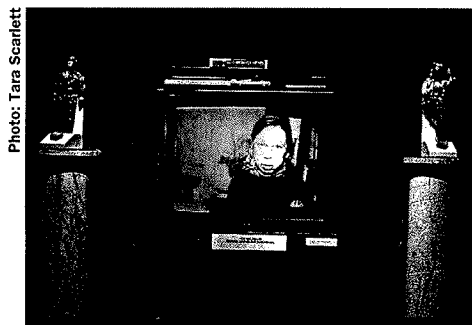


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From the Salon de Barbie "Surgically Corrected G.I. Joe and Barbie." Artist: Igor Vamos/Barbie Liberation Organization.