

# Barbie as symbol, and target

By Robert Hicks

Barbie is no longer just a doll. As an image of 1950s middle class respectability, her 11.5 inches of broad shoulders, narrow hips and busty chest (and that long flowing blond hair) redefined servile housewifery into the plastic mold of an independent woman, who could change clothes, jobs and social roles as well as class and ethnic identity with absolutely unperplexed elan over her 35 years since being created by Ruth and Elliot Handler of Mattel in 1959.

Author M.G. Lord has written "Forever Barbie: The Unauthorized Biography of a Real Doll" (William Morrow) in part as a history of Barbie and the merchandizing wheels at Mattel, but more thoroughly as an investigation into the social, political and artistic questions about gender identity, ethnicity, class, sexuality, fantasies, behavioral codes and overall American values that Barbie has come to embody in the eyes of many feminists, artists, novelists and just plain

everyday people.

On Nov. 10, Cafe Barbie inaugurates The Kitchen as the New York "strong site" of the Electronic Cafe International, which links New York, Santa Monica, Calif. (where E.C.I. is headquartered by its founders Kit Galloway and Sherrie Rabinowitz) and Paris, through teleconferencing, "virtual reality" and an extensive Internet system to look at just what Barbie means to us.

Hosted by Lord, Cafe Barbie will bring to life the focal points of her book, with a freewheeling discussion of Barbie, featuring Lauren Hutton and Betty Friedan; New York Times fashion writer Holly Brubach, Whitney curator John Hanhardt, critic Roselee Goldberg, novelist A.M. Holmes, and The Lady Bunny, with "virtual" comments via video by Camille Paglia as well as Raquel Welch and performance art by the Barbie Liberation Organization, live from Santa Monica, and Cindy Jackson, who spent \$55,000 for 20 operations to make herself into a real-life Barbie, from Paris.

In conjunction with the intercontinental dialogue of Cafe Barbie and working from Lord's Chapter 13, "Barbie Out of Control," in which she investigates artists' reactions to Barbie, beginning with Andy Warhol's "Barbie" and Charles Bell's mural "Judgement of Paris," both from 1986, curator Alison Maddex has installed an exhibition of nearly 30 artists, mostly photographers, who either reverentially idealize the doll, or who use Barbie for their own social, political and sexual expression, camps spelled out in "Forever Barbie." "The focus of my show," says Maddex, "is Barbie Noir, the dark side of Barbie. 'Barbie Out of Control,' the more humorous side of her. There are reverential images of Barbie in the show, but overall, we give a sense of the image-bashers."

In the subculture of drag queens, cross-dressers, female impersonators and transsexuals voguing like the best of the supermodels down the runway, Wigstock



originator Lady Bunny holds up Barbie as a role model. Barbie collecting is popular and many people find it humorous and political when the Barbie Liberation Organization switches the microchip voice boxes for Barbie and G.I. Joe, so that G.I. Joe is saying "Math class is tough" and Barbie bellows "Eat lead, Cobra."

Lord points out that Mattel has an image to protect, which can lead to control, as with the co-opted agreement that Warhol's "Barbie" cannot be reproduced without the consent of both the Warhol Estate and Mattel. But there are always artists who rebel against any corporate management of their artistic expression. Grace Hartigan's "Barbie," also from 1964, is a highly abstracted version of the doll taken from a Life magazine illustration. Dean Brown places Barbie in the context of art history, revealing her as Olympia in a Manet painting. David Levinthal's photos of the first black Barbie,



M. G. Lord

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from 1972, cast her and other toys in a sultry, seductive light.

Videotapes, co-edited by Maddex and David Azarch, create snippets from Ru-Paul going shopping and Todd Haynes' controversial film "Superstar" (he uses dolls to show how rock star Karen Carpenter died from anorexia), with Barbie and Ken commercials interspersed. Russell P. Brown uses computer generated images to give a history of Barbie aging. Seattle photographer Barry Sturgill glamorizes Barbie in a highly stylized, dramatic way, while by contrast, sculptor Patricia Satterlee immerses Barbie in concrete.

"I'm taking personal images of Barbie," says Maddex. "I'm not preserving the doll in her pristine form as Mattel would wish. The artists are not only commenting on Barbie but on the society which brought us Barbie. I like to work with universal forms and ideas, things that are common to all human beings."

With that in mind, Lord has decided to start her Electronic Cafe discussion of Barbie with personalized accounts from the participants about how they first came to know Barbie. In the case of Lord, she'd played with Barbie dolls in La Jolla, Calif., but her rediscovery of the doll, which initiated her extensive research for her new book, came when her father brought her Barbie dolls out of storage three years ago.

"I found my dolls. They were cross-dressed. Ken was wearing something low-cut, a slinky, buggy outfit, with a tutu that came to Barbie's ankles, but fell mid-calf on Ken. Both Barbie and Midge looked like refugees from a boys' boarding school. I thought, my God, this is preserved in amber all my childhood dysfunction, or whatever," says Lord.

"The dolls in their cross-dressed status, which I had suppressed, sort of shook me up. What I realized is that my mother, when I was eight years old and doing this cross-

dressing with dolls, was dying of breast cancer. If I hid the breasts, this terrible disease would pass over the dolls."

*Cafe Barbie, at The Kitchen, 512 W. 19 St. (between 10th and 11th Aves.); Nov. 10, 8 P.M. \$12. 255-5793 or 307-7171.*

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