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 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 instantaneously, 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 25 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, Wendy Smith is the author of "Real Life Drama: The Group Theater and America, 1931-1940."
Teasing 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 members of the board of directors), Eric Bogosian and the visual artist Cindy Sher- man. During its early years in SoHo, the Kitchen focused on the emerging field of video art and music, par- ticularly by composers exploring what was called the new tonality and the possibilities of electronic sound. Performance and dance were added in 1982.

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 cura- tor, Karen Finley. Annie Sprinkle and others. A literature program was established in 1989, several years after the Kitchen had moved into its 1969 location at 195 Thompson Street near 16th Avenue in Manhat-

The association with the Electron- ic Cafe comes at a decisive moment in the Kitchen's history. Seeking to make up for sharp cuts in Federal work of Mr. Bogosian, who had been what was called then the new tonality and particularly by composers exploring the music.

The goal is to attract a wider audi- ence — older, wealthier and by defini- tion more mainstream — than the youthful avant-garde performance crowd the Kitchen has traditionally drawn.

For example, the recent Ridge Theatre production of John Moran's "Mathew in the School of Life," a digital opera with a score for artificial samples, 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, signifi-
cantly higher than the $8 to $12 norm.

Such changes have prompted criti- cism that the Kitchen is becoming too conservative, but representa- tives 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 want to build a context in which artists can experience new ways of col- lation and co-creation, where the strategy was no longer a bound- ary, but he said from Santa Monica, a very important that artists play a role in this technology, so that they don't just end up becoming con-

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 "telecon" on Saturday, Staisa Vasila will play an electron- 1ic violin in her studio in Santa Fe, while controlling laser disk players in New York and Santa Monica that will create video images in conjunc-
tion 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 dis- c linker. In New York, he will be playing an excerpt from "Angel Con-

Technology has

invited art onto

dance floor

at the Kitchen's

Electronic Cafe.

certo," a work-in-progress. In its final form, it will use two stages simultaneously. At loca-

DIY, a pianist will send signals to a disc linker at location B. B, an-

other performer will control a "vir-
tual percussion orchestra" of instru-

ments at location A.

"The opera deals with the polarity of 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 expres-

sion." Laurie Anderson, who like Mr. Su-

botnick has been musing technolog-

ology with art for years, thinks the potential of the new forms has bare-
lly been tapped. Her forthcoming February tour, to be sponsored by a CD-ROM publishing company, in-

cludes a project she calls "The Green Room." It is, she said, "a kind of cyberpace area where people can do various things as we're touring the country: talk to the lighting de-

signer 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 re-

ceive a black-and-white equivalent via teleconferencing.

"It's a field that's really taking off," said John Reaves, executive director of the company's Perform-

ance 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 com-

puter graphics software and telecon-

ferencing helpful to members of an artistic network that has been growing over a long period of time; they can hold production meetings, even ex-

change sketches or designs, while scattered across the country work-

ing on other jobs.

Because the technology is new and relatively unfamiliar, manufactur-

ers have sometimes lent or donated equipment to groups exploring its potential. "At the beginning," Mr. Galloway said, "the Kitchen has acquired this way: a Panasonic videophone, an Audi- dio Codec (which processes sound information into digital form for the computer) from Dolby, several Pan-

asonic telephones with high-

speed black-and-white videophone work through phone lines). Nynex gave the Kitchen free teleconferencing equipment that carry video and audio signals, and installed them free of charge.

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

Money is a concern to the organi-

zation, which saw $35,000 cut from its National Endowment for the Arts grant this year — only a small per-

centage of its $750,000 annual bud-

get, but a sizable hit nevertheless.

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HE KITCHEN'S PROB-

lems with the endowment go back to 1990, when in the midst of a fierce Congression-

al controversy over the financing of art deemed obscene by some, it be-

came a lightning rod for the endow-

ment's critics by virtue of its associ-

ation with confrontational perfor-

mance artists like Ms. Finley.

Since the arrival of Mr. Amazon in 1991, however, the organization seems to be cultivating a new ati-

tude, prompting charges from its conserva-

tives that this new technology is making the organization more permissive, prompting charges from its conser-

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vatives that this new technology is making the organization more permissive.
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 videophone, 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.

"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 back-grounds 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.”