

California Serves Up the Café as Art Form

By Diana Rico

LOS ANGELES — Because of their loose, convivial atmosphere, cafés have always attracted artistic types. But at the Electronic Café International in California, the café itself is art.

Since it opened in Santa Monica's 18th Street Arts Complex in November 1989, the Electronic Café International has offered not only the traditional quiches and coffees we expect to find in cafés but also a full menu of high-tech communications possibilities.

With its user-friendly video scanners and printers, electronic writing tablets, computers and monitors, this café is a place where visitors can create and exchange drawings, performances, verbal messages and video images with people at other Electronic Café affiliates around the globe.

The café has permanent connections via existing telephone lines with similar facilities in Managua and Seoul and plans are in the works to establish others in New York, Paris, Moscow, and many other cities as well as in more remote areas in Africa, Indonesia and Central and South America.

The café is open every Friday and Saturday night, and also organizes frequent special events that take advantage of the vast potential of electronic information exchange.

These have ranged from a teleconference between environmentalists in different cities to Hispanic artists in San Francisco and Los Angeles making collaborative electronic graphics to the music of a live marimba band.

"We're offering a collaborative medium where people get together and co-create," explains Kit Galloway, who conceived the Electronic Café International with his artistic partner and wife, Sherrie Rabinowitz. "People come into here with different expectations, but they always come away changed."

RABINOWITZ and Galloway, American telecommunications artists who met in Paris in 1975, operate under the name Mobile Image and think of themselves as "avant-preneurs." Although they are considered pioneers in their field (in 1988 they received the telecommunications industry's TeleSpan PACE Award honoring 10 years of leadership), their work is "not about technol-



The Electronic Café offers visitors a chance to "connect" via a global video network.

ogy — it's about people connecting," stresses Rabinowitz.

Their humanization of high tech is exemplified by an earlier version of the Electronic Café that became one of the most popular pieces of the 1984 Olympic Arts Festival. Communications equipment was installed at real cafés in ethnic communities across Los Angeles and at the city's Museum of Contemporary Art.

Now that the Electronic Café

has a permanent home, there seems no end to the possibilities. Among the upcoming events are four appearances by the avant-garde composer Morton Subotnick.

Another event is the second annual Electronic Café International New Year's Eve Party, with electronic hookups to other parties in Australia, Japan, Korea, Europe, South and Central America.

The goal of Rabinowitz and

Galloway is to create a global village by harnessing telecommunications possibilities at a grassroots level.

"A lot of people think the telecommunications revolution will be something you buy," says Galloway, "but there isn't time for us to wait until the end of the century for the world to be rewired."

DIANA RICO is a Hollywood-based arts journalist.