Dave Filipi: Good evening, everyone, I'm Dave Filipi Director of Film Video at the Wexner Center.

It's my great pleasure to welcome you to tonight's conversation between pioneering artist and filmmaker Lynn Hershman Leeson and Kris Paulsen, Associate Professor in Ohio State's History of Art Department.

In a career that spans more than five decades, Lynn Hershman Leeson has explored the intersection of technology and humanity and is widely regarded as one of the most innovative media artists of her time, with work that has incorporated AI, VR, DNA-based art and much more.

She is a recipient of a Siggraph Lifetime Achievement Award, a Guggenheim Fellowship and a USA Artist Fellowship, among many other honors, and she is currently the subject of her first museum solo exhibition, “Twisted,” at the New Museum in New York, which is up through October 3rd.

This month at the Wex, we've been showing her three narrative feature films, all starring Tilda Swinton, “Conceiving Ada,” which was our first in-person film since March of 2020, “Teknolust” and “Strange Culture,” which screens Friday at seven o'clock and Saturday at 4:00PM.

And I was just mentioning to Lynn what a pleasure it was to be able to see all three films in such close proximity to each other, and all three will be available beginning August 1st on the Criterion Channel.

In thinking of the most appropriate person to join Lynn in conversation, our friend and colleague Kris Paulsen immediately came to mind. Like Lynn, she is focused on the role of technology in art, and she is the author of “Here/There: Telepresence, Touch, and Art at the interface,” which was published in 2017.
Before we begin, I want to note that my colleague Chris Stults will be posting relevant links in the chat during the conversation, and that there will be a Q&A at the end, so if you could please wait and then post your questions in either the Q&A or chat function, we will do our best to get to you.

I would like to thank Marcus Hu and all of our friends at Strand Releasing for working with us on the series and the conversation. And finally, I would like to thank my colleagues, Steve Jones, Katie Laux and numerous colleagues in our marketing department for supporting tonight’s program.

Now, I’d like to turn it over to Kris Paulsen and Lynn Hershman Leeson.

(Kris smiles, she excitedly gestures with her hands, fingers pointing up near her face)

Kris Paulsen: Hi. So Lynn, it’s great to be with you tonight, and I’ve of course would have loved to be in person, but it strikes me that this format is actually really appropriate to you and your work, (Lynn chuckles) and so if it’s gonna happen this way, I actually think it’s kind of fortuitous, and given that, I want to think about and get you to talk about the role that screens and mediation play in your films.

In both “Conceiving Ada” and “Teknolust,” this kind of mediated (Kris gestures with her hands up with fingers splayed open wide) in moves interface interaction is at the center of the stories, but also it’s a formal device in the films and part of the narrative, and so, yeah, I’d like you just talk about how you got interested in kind of this screen based interaction and to also think about how this transition to a screen-based life in COVID affect, what it’s meant to you and your work.

Lynn Hershman Leeson: Well, I did something called “The Electronic Diaries” (Kris nods) that I started quite a while ago in, I think, 1984, and then in the very first one, I said that we’d become a society of screens, and in a way, the screens kept us from knowing each other, that it was a device of separation, and the screens are a natural part of moving images in trying to tell stories through a process of time, and I really liked the effects that are, that were available and are available and I like to explore and exploit them so that they would have, in a way, a resonance that you’re looking at that could either counter or underline what the actual story was about.

You know, it’s a device, but I think it’s a language that is receptive to amplifying the deeper meaning of what a project is.

And as for COVID, you know, for me, it was a way to get back to work I hadn’t done for a long time, to be in one place and to look at things that were sitting on shelves since 1974 that I finally had some time to look at, but also in using technology in order to navigate the world and realizing that we didn’t have to travel as much as I did in the future, which I found more and more debilitating.
So in a way, there was a lot of freedom that came with this kind of restriction, and that's something that restriction does that allows me to be creative about what your choices are.

Kris: Well, and it's, I'm just thinking about it in relationship to say the Emmy character in “Conceiving Ada.” I mean, she's time-traveling, essentially, through her screen, (Lynn nods) and it becomes this absolutely (Kris gestures both her hands with fingers slightly splayed moving back and forth) transformational connection, not just between, you know, two different presents (Kris moves her hands from side to side with her palms facing forward) like we're having right now, but between someone who she has kind of deep, (Kris moves her hands in small circles with fingers, she brings her hands together with fingers closed) affective connections to in the past, and they use this screen to kind of come together and infect each other's lives. And then in “Conceiving Ada,” excuse me in “Teknolust,” even though Rosetta is an, like a clone (Kris moves her hands with fingers slightly splayed) of these, of the her three kind of progeny, she almost never interacts with them through, and they're like in her house (Kris and Lynn chuckle) somewhere, (Kris with her hands sideways with fingers pointing together moves them forward and back) but only ever through through a screen. You know, it's her microwave doubling as a screen and it, but, you know, there's something, they're so close (Kris moves her hands to interlock her fingers) and yet they're so far, and there's these really interesting ways that, you know, so much intimacy is produced through the screens, but also, you know all these levels of distance that you really get to in both of those films kind of long before our commonplace lives (Kris moves her hands around with her finger slightly splayed) became all about, you know, kind of these tele-mediated live interactions, you know?

And so I think it's really interesting to think about just what you put forward there in the ways we either connect or throw distance into our lives with those screens.

Lynn: Well, they also invited other ways of thinking. I mean, for instance, with “Conceiving Ada,” I had a very tiny budget and I had to a film in five days that was a Victorian setting and, you know, invited the virtual sets. So we invented virtual sets in 1994 in order to tell that story by just going and photographing old bed and breakfast places, Victorians in San Francisco and dropping them in as we shot, and with “Teknolust,” that's what really the expanded cinema of “Teknolust” became, really, the first AI chat bot that anybody did, which was 14 years before Siri. So, you know, again is the mimicking of the narrative into an interactive format that could be more accessible to people, which is what the point is.

Kris: Yeah, maybe Chris can put up the Agent Ruby chat bot in our chat here, so if people are interested in checking it out, but that's another interesting, I think, aspect of these works, that they have (Kris gently flaps her hands) these kind of multimodal components to them, which you know, it seems really kind of advanced in its moment.
You know, it's kind of, you know, Agent Ruby is kind of a character in the film and then she exists in your real world too, since your world through the computer, you know, and so it's an interesting kind of blurring of the boundaries between the narrative and our lives and.

**Lynn:** Between the fictional and the real and where the edge is, and I really wanted to do something where people would be watching the film in a theater and the program for Agent Ruby would drop onto their Palm Pilot, which is what people used in those days, and they'd be able to talk to her as they left the theater, so that it wasn't just a cutoff discipline of this is a film and this an experiment in art, that those all integrated, and I figured at the time that if you could think of these things, there must be a way to do them, and that became the process of figuring it out and that became the process of figuring it out.

**Kris:** Well, you know, bringing up the ways in which you were really being innovative with your filmmaking process. I mean, just even the, you know, you said the virtual sets in “Conceiving Ada”, which are really incredible, and Tilda Swinton’s acting, like carries it so well, you know, I think in the scenes, and (Kris slowly flaps her left hand and raises it up) all multiple versions of Tilda Swinton that exist in “Teknolust,” like, you're doing a lot of innovation in there, and one of the things that I think is a strong theme between those two films is this role of kind of renegade female innovator in, you know, we have this figure in both of them, who’s a scientist, but not a run of the mill researcher in any way, but this person who’s really pushing boundaries of what's possible, but also what's conceivable, and that’s the case, whether it’s a historical figure like Ada Lovelace, the 19th century mathematician and mother of computer programming, or if it’s your characters that you’ve invented, Emmy and Rosetta, and, you know, they get into really far out there projects and that get into ethically kind of sticky places, in both cases, and so I'm wondering if you can talk a little bit about that kind of figure of the female scientist and kind of this renegade innovator in your work, and.

**Lynn:** For Ada, I get it because nobody ever heard of Ada when I did it. They all know, she kind of grew into cognizance with the internet itself when it started to flourish, and I just felt that people should know that this kind of computer language was invented by a woman, and so, you know, the basis, and also to have roles where were women had strong presences and they were agents, they had agency and they could affect the world in varying ways, and so that’s, you know, that was kind of the basis.

And when you think about Mary Shelley and artificial intelligence, and you think about Ada and computer language and Hedy Lamarr with spread spectrum technologies, women have really led the way in the forms of our time and without being noticed.

**Kris:** There’s some wonderful, you know, you said some wonderful things here, and I want (Kris brings her hand to her chin and looks down) to pull out on some, pull out some of
them. One of them, you know, is the Ada figure in “Conceiving Ada.” Some of the most
effective moments in the film are Swinton playing that character and her talking about, you
know, not being heard and not being seen, and that kind of total alienation of all of this
work and not being recognized and not only not being recognized, but being called a
hysteric, essentially, for it, and her pain being ignored and, you know, being, her cancer
being blamed on overexerting her mind in a hysterical way.”

There’s this real kind of tragedy to this story and the constant marginalization of women,
which I think still has an incredibly kind of important narrative in tech, in Silicon valley
today, you know, whether we’re thinking about Gamergate or just the general lack of
representation in women, this kind of intense abuse and marginalization that can
sometimes happen to women who are in this field. And one of the other things, oh yeah,
no everywhere.

Not limited to this for our conversation here, but obviously it’s an expansive place to get
into, and the other thing you mentioned is “Frankenstein,” and you know, there’s
something quite Frankensteinish about both of these films where the, these female
scientists (Kris moves her around with fingers bent) do create these kinds of other beings
in some way, but they don’t disown them or, you know, throw them out, they embrace
them.

There’s this kind of counter Frankenstein in some way where the doctors, (Kris quickly
brings her hands almost close together) you know, the Frankenstein embraces not their
monster, but you know, their progeny in this loving way that seems
to go against the
traditional way these narratives go, and it’s really, it’s something I really like, you know.

Lynn: Thank you, I mean, I just, this morning was, somebody mentioned the film “Her” and
Spike Jonze, and, you know, he was supposed to be in (Kris opens her eyes more and her
eyebrows raise) “Teknolust,” he had my script, and I also talked to him quite at length
about my program for having fallen in love with the AI character, because the one that he
looked at was Agent Ruby, and that’s when he wrote the script, even though I was never
credited with any of the discussions or the ideas for the film, and his film, you know, of
course did, left the female character as subservient and as a kind of slave to his wishes,
where the ones I do have agen
cy and intelligence and they’re leaders and they changed
the world.

And I think part of the problem is the way repressive culture has framed appropriate
behavior and accepts it. I mean, it should have been noticed and not accepted, you know,
and it’s in the future, I mean right now, and people should know that there are these
restrictions that happen in the artwork and in codes that are really mirrors of the culture
that we’re living in.
**Kris:** Yeah, I mean, I think we could certainly think about kind of algorithmic bias and all these, you known, contemporary issues that have crossed over, through major public debacles, into everyone’s kind of vision in the way in which we have kind of the codes of our culture literally recoding and reproducing in the background, authoring futures, not just collecting data on the past, and so, again, it’s this, I think it’s a really, you know, prescient and apt notes you make kind of on our culture and also toward the future, and that, I think, that leads me to one of my other questions, which is we can, you know, think about these two films we’ve been talking about as sci-fi films, you know, that’s maybe the genre they most easily fit into, and they have these strong speculative elements, and by that, I mean, you take a research trend or a technology that is kind of just emerging or nascent in our present moment, and you kind of amplify it into where it could go or what could happen next, and what kinds of issues might arise, and, you know, this comes up in your work around gene editing and cloning and AI and combinations thereof, you know, imagining this, this potential future, except for that one of the things I find so interesting in your work is that these sci-fi films aren’t set 50 or 100 years into the future.

They're set in our very present moment, and there's something I find really disorienting and you know, exciting as a viewer is that it's not some far off or, you know, a future place. I'm kind of like, can that happen? Is this possible?

Wait, is this, you know, there's something where you start second guessing what you know about kind of the possibilities in your present moment, and so there's something kind of really disorienting about that situation in the present, so I wonder if you can talk about like, why you don't use the future and why present is kind of the place for these speculations of what’s next.

**Lynn:** Yeah, I use the term sci-true, because most of the elements of these projects are true. I do a lot of research.

I talk to people, I interview them, I read. There’s nothing in them that hasn’t happened or that people haven’t said.

Sometimes I just reedit interviews and put them in as dialogue, and I think that the present is always what people think is the future, but you have to pay attention to what’s really going on at the time that you’re living.

Most people are living, you know, they’re lagging back like an amoeba foot, a decade or two in history, so it looks foreign to the, because they’re not aware, they haven’t gotten to the point of researching the moment that they’re actually participating in, and I think it’s really exciting, because what you do when you’re in that mode of understanding what the possibilities are, and the time you live, then you can really predict and make logical or illogical conclusions from the information that you have.
**Kris:** Yeah, it's, I mean, I'm thinking about some of your other work that's outside of film at this moment, your project “Shadow Stalker,” *(Lynn rests her head on her fist)* which isn't part of the New Museum show, I don't believe, but was.

**Lynn:** This museum show's only 10% of my work.

**Kris:** Yeah, well, it's such a recent work too, but it was at The Shed, you know, just recently, *(Kris points backwards)* and I saw it at the de Young in San Francisco as the part of the “Uncanny Valley” show, and for those of you who don't know it, I think Chris Stults just put a link up in the chat, but it's, you enter your email address into this, into the system, and it scrapes all this data about you, pining, you know, showing where you've been in the last few days, who all your relatives are, what your age is, your, you know, your phone number, all of this information, that's now just scrolling *(Kris moves her both her hands in a downward motion)* through the museum and literally kind of following you and tracking you through space, and there are sci-fi elements in kind of a film, in a film, a video that plays alongside of it, but you're also realizing that this isn't “Minority Report,” this is the report on you that's just coming up, and you're seeing everyone else who kind of came through the museum, and so I think that a lot of your work kind of does this *(Kris brings her hands together and moves them in a chopping motion)*, you know, whatever era it's, you know, whatever decade it's made in kind of shows us the present moment and how it feels a bit like a future.

**Lynn:** Yeah, and it's really shocking. It even goes to your mother's friends and who they are and where they are, and I think people were amazed at how much information they give away for free.

**Kris:** Yeah, I, you know, just as a personal note, I put in both my email addresses that I use and of the things that surprised me was the different information kind of coming up on both of them, and there was also this kind of alienation of being like, oh my gosh, *(Kris puts her fingers on her chin)* that's all wrong.

You know, like, are you, you know, a fear of being seen, but then also this fear of being misrepresented, which is, and captured inaccurately, or being confused with someone else, and there’s this, you know, kind of, you wonder what’s getting crossed and what’s happening in the background, and you know, there’s all of these anxieties that come up around it, but again, feels so kind of intensely about kind of our present and that just future that begins to take shape in it.
Lynn: And at least we could see the flaws. There are so many people whose lives are changed, who don’t know why.

They have no idea, one, that they’re being tracked, and two, that the information that’s tracking them is wrong and preventing them from going to college sometimes if they can’t get a loan or buying a house. It’s absolutely perverse, it’s really diabolical.

Kris: Yeah, and I think, you know, it’s something that, again, has come up across your career that kind of, you are your data points and that there’s, you were experimenting with this long before I think anyone was thinking about that with your Roberta Breitmore character, who you took, you got driver’s license and bank accounts and like, established a whole parallel identity that exists, because we exist, you know, in bureaucracy, kind of as much as anything else.

Lynn: She existed more than I do, (Kris chuckles) because for instance, you know she could get credit cards and I couldn’t because my credit was bad, and she had no bad credit cause she didn’t exist. So she was able to tap into a lot of the advantages of living, and if you go through time and look at the era she lived in, she’s much, she has much more evidence of being alive than I do.

Kris: That’s fascinating.

Lynn: Yeah

Kris: Well, and maybe that can, you know, be a transition to ask you to think about kind of given that you’ve really been on kind of the, the front end of thinking about all of these technologies and issues that have had such large kind of political and ethical and kind of social consequences, like, what’s in your view right now? Like, what’s concerning you most and how is it playing out in your work and ideas?

Lynn: Well, one thing I was thinking is that the cyborg’s now 61 years old. You know, cyborg was named in 1960 and founded by NASA, and you start to think about, I was thinking about all these assaults and the contagious assaults that are happening now you know, with gun control, but and or just not even control, gun no control and other kinds of assaults on each other, on the plant, on a system of living, and when you go back and look at all the things from artificial intelligence to cyborgs to the internet, to all of the things
that have been invented to help us progress, help us become more human, get us as a species back to dealing creatively, they’ve all been made by the military.

So, aggression and this kind of contagious aggression and the need to win is inbred, almost as if they have it in the DNA of their making, and how do we change that? You know, what, can we create another language that will give something back to us that doesn’t follow only logic.

Logic paralyses the heart, because it’s a system that doesn’t allow you to be free and think beyond what’s logical, and that’s what we need it in our culture to, you know, to become aware of the tremendous oppression that we’re living under and figuring out ways to become, as a species, more intuitive and more caring, and maybe even preserve the planet and life, in some ways.

**Kris:** Well, yeah, ‘cause it seems like, you know, so much of our present kind of news cycle is about this reaching toward Mars or kind of seeing Earth in the rear view mirror, and there’s this, you know, also thinking about how, while these are private endeavors, they’re funded a lot by taxpayers, you know, like we’re kind of authoring these futures too, and thinking about kind of what’s important to us and grounding ourselves maybe back, literally, kind of down to Earth and the planet and, you know, what potential futures are here and not sci-fi elsewhere, you know?

**Lynn:** I mean, I thought originality with AI that it could become like a human made root system like trees and mushrooms have, because it has to reach around the globe and they could tell when something’s in danger or something needs to be nurtured or let know or escape certain oppressions, but you know, it’s all controlled by either the military or corporate greed and, you know, those, anything that we’ve built up till now doesn’t work, so.

**Kris:** Well, maybe we can talk a little bit too. I think we’re getting near some of those topics her around, you know, kind of ideas of surveillance and the, you know, both the way in which Al is being kind of deployed in a lot of ways, which is, you know, whether you show show through “Shadow Stalker,” or kind of many applications, that we’re living in a surveillance culture and “Strange Culture,” your film that’s playing this weekend is, you know, really fascinating, I think kind of terrifying film.

I remember seeing it when it came out, about, you know, our lives being kind of surveilled and getting caught up in a net of mistaken identity, but mistaken intentions or something like that, and so for those of you haven’t seen this film yet and are looking forward to seeing it this weekend, it’s about Steve Kurtz, one of the members of the Critical Art Ensemble, (which is a well-known artist collective that does activist-based works, and it’s
set in this really tragic moment of Kurtz’s life in which his wife Hope, who’s a collaborator of his in Critical Art Ensemble, he awakes to find that she’s died in her sleep very young, and it turns out from heart attack but when the paramedics come, they call the police, (Kris moves her hands with palms facing up and fingers slightly bent) cause they see kind of biological equipment, petri dishes and microscopes and things like that, and instead of getting to mourn his wife’s death, he’s caught up in this early 2000s Patriot Act kind of horror being suspected as, under bioterrorism and you know, his life being taken over in this moment.

And so one of the ways that it seems real, it seemed really terrifying to me for, well, in many ways in the moment, but it was mirrored in the film is that the actors that are playing the characters are kind of dealing with kind of learning the extent of this invasion into Kurtz’s life, but potentially kind of any critical person’s life through, you know, this overreach of the state, and, you know, maybe you can talk a little bit about that film, how you made it to, like, get people ready for it and the way in which the actors kind of interact with the story throughout it.

Lynn: Well, when I heard about the story (Kris wipes her face with a handkerchief) of Steve being arrested, I didn’t know him at the time.

I was in a carpool and somebody who did know him told that story and I felt, this is horrible. People needed to know that this was happening.

I just decided to do something like a DVD I could send out to people so that they could help them or send money to them, but it turned it in, instead it turned into a film, and it was difficult to do because Steve, the protagonist couldn’t talk, because he was indicted, and he was not allowed by the judicial system to talk in any way about the film, so I had to get a double for Steve to play him with Thomas D. Ryan, and to, you know, then I realized that’s exactly what the media does.

It creates this person they want you to be, and put it in, put a fictional story out to that person so that they don’t have to deal with the underlying truth about I mean, in this particular system of Steve, is that the prosecutors got kickbacks, they got raises every time they found a bioterrorist, so they’re out there looking for people that either didn’t know the language or didn’t even have any money or even artists, they couldn’t defend themselves, and you know, that’s what was uncovered in telling this story.

Much of what I did was effective in the film was shooting before and after people thought the camera was off, and then using that.

I mean, it was just such an interesting discussion, that was far more interesting than anything I wrote, so that changed the whole perspective of how the story was told. The actors agreed to let me use their off comments of the, you know, the actors were very
smart about what was going on, and that was to me, like, a life vital force that told a better story than something that was scripted.

I was shocked at how effective the film was. It was, when I showed in New York. So, they said it was a perfect film.

It opened the doc, that panorama section of the Berlin Film Festival, and Steve says that it was that film that got a lot of eyes looking at it, is what we got the charges released for him, so I was really proud to have done it.

And we did it on a shoestring, I think under $20,000. I had Tilda for two hours, (Kris smiles, she leans back and laughs a little) and yeah, and, but you know, we did it and got it out into the world, and I think that, you know, these are examples of when you really believe passionately about something, you find a way to do it.

It doesn’t have to have a million dollar budget or be done with script, just go out and do it.

**Kris:** Yeah, there are these great moments in it where Tilda Swinton breaks character and starts talking as herself, (Kris slightly leans her head to her left hand) you know, kind of head in her hand, just kind of grappling, trying to get into character and understand what’s going on, but realizing the magnitude of what’s, you know, been unfolding in Kurtz’s life, and it’s this really kind of wonderful switching in and out of character that isn’t hard to follow at all, but you see that kind of contractedness of everyone in it, the way that the media is making Kurtz out to be a bioterrorist (Kris gently rises and then sits back down) rather than an art professor, you know, and so it’s an, and demonizing what are really kind of banal activities or personal habits become the traits of a nefarious character, and it’s really.

**Lynn:** In a way, you know, we’re all Steve Kurtz, you know, especially with when the Patriot Act was just signed and written without many people having even read it. You know, it turns all of us into these victims that don’t know what our options are, you know, just like “Shadow Stalker” shows that we are victims of technology that tracks us.

**Kris:** Yeah, it’s one of the things that you’re bringing in up that (Kris brings her right finger to her head) moves through, I think, so much of your work and the work that we’ve already talked about is this idea of the double. I mean whether it’s the double that we see in “Shadow Stalker,” we literally see our own outline kind of projected onto the wall with all of our gleaned information in it, but in all of your films, there’s this doubling of characters and in in kind of multiple roles, having multiple kind of versions of themselves out there, and it seems, again, so appropriate to our own lives where we’re curating our kind of public personas through social media feeds or the, what we kind of choose to represent ourselves with, and then there’s this incursion and kind of other stuff (Kris circles her left hand) that slips through maybe you don’t want out there, or you wish you could scrub, or,
you know, and there’s, so there’s this way in which I think, again your work tends to really
kind of capture something about the way our lives are going and how we’re living them,
but often in, especially in “Teknolust,” like this very wacky, like, it’s really kind of wild and
fun and strange way, but it’s, when you take a step back from it, it doesn’t feel that far
removed from, you know, the way we do things and how we live our lives and these
multiple (Kris moves her left finger from her head and wiggles her fingers) kind of threads.

Lynn: Yeah, “Teknolust” is a special story because we lost my, the attorney (Kris moves the
mic on her headphones up more) who was a producer on the film announced the night
before Tilda came on a pay or play contract, that there was no funds, (Kris moves her head
mic again) the funding he said he was in the bank wasn’t there, and so we had to
completely cut most of the scenes again, you know, and invent something as we were
shooting it in a minimal, (Lynn laughs and leans her head down a little) and them when I
showed it, people hated it, they booed it.

I mean, literally they practically threw us out of the theater for making that film. I mean, it’s
something, you know, with most of my work, it takes, you know 15, 20 years for people to
get it or to be able to see what it was intended to be at the time, so.

Kris: That must be a frustrating theme to have in your career, being so far ahead (Kris
raises her right hand, curves it back then up again) of the curve that it takes people a while
to kind of recognize.

Lynn: Well, what’s shocking is when things are accepted when I first make them, that’s
something I’ve never dealt with before.

Kris: Does that make you nervous, or do you question what you’re doing or do you?

Lynn: I really wonder if I’m doing the right thing so.

Kris: Well, you know, you brought up kind of Tilda Swinton’s contract there, like bringing
her in, like, how did you get involved with Swinton who, you know, when you first started
working with her in the 90s, her career was just kind of coming up.

I mean, I remember seeing her in “Orlando,” (Lynn rests her head in the palms of her
hands) you know, before “Conceiving Ada,” but like, you know, you, you are working with
someone who was emerging (Kris raises both hands, she pulls her right hand back a little)
as a major star, but now is, you know, kind of one of the most respected and renowned
and kind of cult-like kind of actresses.
You know it seems that you guys, you know, she has a real kind of commitment to your work and your trajectory, so I’m wondering if you could talk a little bit about, you know how that emerged and.

**Lynn:** Well, it’s all serendipity, you know? When I saw “Orlando” and when I had written “Conceiving Ada” with the two timeframes on it, I thought she was the only one that could play it, so I asked her agent, he said, what’s your budget, and then he said, she couldn’t do it, and I was showing my diaries in Berlin, and I happened to sit right next to somebody and we started talking and it turned out, it was Tilda’s best friend ([Kris smiles and chuckles]), and Tilda was looking for an interesting project, so this other woman put Tilda in touch with me and she called and said she wanted to do it, and then her agent said, okay, she’ll do it if we could shoot the whole film in five days, which is what we did.

**Kris:** And then you eventually ([Kris raises her left up her right arm and moves it back]) got her down to two hours, like in your working.

**Lynn:** Well, Tilda was coming to San Francisco for something else, because most of my films aren’t funded and, you know, and she was able to get the morning off for the thing that paid her there to be. So that’s how we do them on low budgets.

**Kris:** They, well, they come out, it comes off really well. And I think, again, you’re saying like that, that performance you get from her in “Strange Culture” where she’s playing herself in those moments. I mean, that’s, those again are some of the most interesting parts of that documentary.

**Lynn:** Well, I think it’s the job of directors to see what’s there, you know, not only to see what’s there and not only to see what’s there in the time that they’re living, but to see when actors are more interesting than the script, take advantage of that. So Tilda’s always more interesting than anything I write, so.

**Kris:** Yeah, well, I mean, she’s really marvelous in the films, and I think it’s probably exciting for people who are, you know, into her as actor ([Lynn rests her head in her right fist]) to find these deep cuts, like this series of, of really, you know, interesting and out there films that she’s made over the course of her whole career.

So, we are opening up the chat at his point, if people want to start putting in questions for Q&A.
If you have questions for Lynn, (Dave appears again on screen) you can pluck them in there, and I think Dave is gonna help us moderate them, but maybe while we’re waiting for people to get up the courage to type them in, maybe I can ask you, I’ve read that “Conceiving Ada” and “Teknolust” are, you know, (Kris raises her right hand and points two fingers up, then a third) a pair and meant to be a trilogy, and so I’m wondering, you know, is there a third, a third film in that series?

**Lynn:** I’d like there to be. I’ve been working on one for 20, over 20 years. Every time I have an idea and get close, somebody else does it with big budget, (Lynn chuckles) and then also science and culture changes, and what I am dealing with becomes obsolete. (Kris and Dave nod)

Because the idea was to make one film with a woman over time, you know, so that you could see her aging, and each film was going to be about the technology of the time in which the film was made, so my hope is that I get to do it.

I don’t know if I will or not. You know, I felt more in the past that I was going to be able to do it, but it just seems, to get harder and harder to, you know, do that.

**Kris:** Well, I.

**Dave:** I was gonna interject. (Kris raises her left arm in a respectful manner) I think some people are watching through our website, and I think you have to be registered through the Zoom chat in order to ask questions, so it’s impossible it’s too late, but if you want to get in a question and you’re watching through our website, you might have to do that very quickly. Sorry.

**Kris:** Well, and so one of the, in, when I was kind of looking for traces of what this third film might be when I was kind of poking around in articles and interviews about you, it came up as being potentially named “The Infinity Engine,” which I know has, is also a work of yours now, though, like a rather expansive artwork, ‘cause, you know, we’re talking about your films and how, you know, whether they’re gonna get made or not, but of course, you know, as you said, you have this survey up at the New Muesuem, and it’s an incredible amount of work.

Like, you’re constantly making new work that’s operating in this parallel track of kind of the white cube rather than the black box of the movie theater.

So, I was wondering if there’s a relationship to that, the narrative that you’re pursuing in these films and what’s emerging kind of in your gallery work.
Lynn: Yeah, I mean the, I think one of the titles early on was “Killer App,” (On Dave’s screen a cat is slightly seen to the left poking it’s around it's) and then I wanted it to be “The Infinity Engine,” which was about CRISPR editing, and both have the installation that was part of the film itself, that they would interact with each other, but most of the things that in those past iterations had become obsolete, so you can’t make a film about something that, you know, that’s happening, cause everybody knows them now, although when I started eight or nine years ago, nobody had any idea about DNA conversion or the genome or CRISPR, you know, it was just being invented, so, you know, we'll see what the future brings and, you know, but most of my works do have an art component, like Agent Ruby or “The Infinity Engine.” You know, they’re duets.

Kris: Yeah

Dave: I have a question.

Kris: Okay, I can’t see them in the chat, so.

Dave: I have a couple. (Dave fixes his glasses) Well Lynn, just to kind of go back to something Kris said, if it’s frustrating to have produced, you know, decades of work that doesn’t seem to be always appreciated in the moment, (Lynn Nods) and it’s only possible when you look back, if you think that, if you’re happy with the exhibition at the New Museum and you know, if it’s, you mentioned, and I didn’t realize this, that you said it’s only a fraction of your body of work and just kind of of your thoughts on having kind of cumulative, well, it’s not really cumulative, it’s a fraction, but this, this career assessment of your work kind of in the context of having produced a body of work that you look back and it all makes sense, but maybe in the moment it’s not, it’s people aren’t understanding it.

Lynn: Yeah, well, I had, seven years ago, I had a big show in Karlsruhe in CKM that Peter Wibel put together and had the courage to do, and that show had 800 works in it, and none of the, I would say like 85% of those works had never been seen.

Nobody would ever show the breathing machines or things that are being lauded now as being the first media works or setting a different tone, you know, for cyborgs, and it was really, really important to get my first book and to have that exhibition, but it’s not happened in the United States.

I mean, and particularly in New York, well, anywhere in the United States, so I think that there’s a wonderful curator who came to me surprisingly and had done their master’s
thesis on my work and wanted, and was working at the New Museum, and she did a very cohesive and smart and beautifully installed exhibition that tells us a particular narrative, and the whole exhibition is designed like a double helix, so I think that this served both of us really well in, and then it clarifies a particular aspect of my work.

But I do think, I would like, I mean, you can’t go back into the past and you can’t go back to the fact of all rejections and not being able to show anywhere, you know? Women weren’t shown in Museums when I first started, which is why I created critics to write about myself, and it’s changed now, because you have a lot of young women that are coming up that feel empowered and have taken control of the dialogue, and that means taking control of who gets to show it and where you are.

I mean, I was automatically, you know, just wiped out of most United States exhibitions or possibilities or grants or funding, which is how I devised all these ways of doing it anyway. So, I hope it can still happen that in the United States, there could be retrospective and that comes out.

I’m not giving up hope on that, but in the meantime, because of the one that happened in Germany, it really does this, and even in New York, it really has established many precedents that I did, and also a timeframe for when they happened, that was often credited to people two generations down for me who never told.

**Dave:** Yeah

**Lynn:** So

**Kris:** Well, I think one of the things that is interesting about that too is that so many of the group shows that you’ve been in recently, you’re being situated among artists who are many decades younger than you, and so you’re in, there’s something really interesting that you’re, you’re a keystone figure, it seems, for a generation of artists that are coming up too, and there’s an interesting, you know, and I can think really wonderful and honorable aspect of that too, where you were for new generation of artists you’re being resituated kind of in the center for them, and I’m thinking of, you know, people like Martine Syms and Sondra Perry and others who seem to have like kind of you as part of their thoughts in how they’re seeing kind of the history of the work that came before them, but also you as a peer working in the present.

**Lynn:** Well, I think I really needed the millennials to be born for anybody to understand what I was doing, so I just had to wait 30 years for that to happen, and not just the artists, but you know, the people who are now working as curators and critics, and museum directors, you know, the whole, the whole ecology of the field, so yeah, it’s a good time.
Dave: I have one more question, if I could ask. I don’t think I ever knew or had read until recently that you did a graphic novel with Spain Rodriguez about Roberta.

Lynn: Two

Dave: Well, I knew you did one around “WAR,” (Dave points his fingers and moves them around) right, but then the Roberta Breitmore one, that was, and I’ve just been furiously looking for it the last week or so, and is that, or maybe talk about it a little bit, but then ultimately.

Kris: And tell Dave how to get it, too.

Dave: And how to get it, yeah.

Lynn: Well, actually I wanted to make a Zap Comics of Roberta, and so we did it, you know, the same way we did “WAR” by the same publisher, it’s, put it together, and I just asked him and I was basically hired him to do it, and he was fascinated. He’s I mean, here we’ve got this biker guy that eventually became a feminist because of these two projects. It was never published as a book. It was put into a catalog that’s really rare.

Dave: Oh okay

Lynn: The original photographs, I actually gave to MOMA. They bought a couple, they bought some Robertas and they never heard of the graphic novel or Spain, so I thought this, you know, if they’re going to be collecting a significant amount of Roberta, they really have to have this as well, so that’s where they are, but maybe it’s a good idea to put that together right now.

Dave: Oh, I mean, and he just passed away, you know, not that long ago, and there might be some people who are watching. I mean, Spain Rodriguez is one of the great underground, you know American comic artists ever during that kind of really sweet spot of American underground comics.
Lynn: Did you get the “WAR” graphic novel?

Dave: Um, (Dave tilts his back a little) I actually, I don’t know if I have it or not. That’s a good question.

Lynn: I can send that.

Dave: Lynn, Dave and Kris laugh) We showed it when it came out and I’m trying to remember if we had some copies in our store anyway. But yes, I would love to see it. Let’s see if we have any other.

Kris: Well Dave, you can let me know if there’s a question in the chat, but.

Dave: Very shy audience tonight

Kris: One of the things I was just thinking of, you know, you’re trying to get these copies of media that might be out of print, but I was thinking about how, Lynn, you were using really kind of cutting edge technology at the time video discs to make interactive films and or something that would be very kind of easily situated on the web now, but at the time was, you know, something that would happen on video disc and, you know, that’s not a media that people kind of play anymore, or maybe even they’re, you know, they don’t have a CD drive, a DVD drive or anything like that, so I’m wondering if you can talk a little bit about those projects that you did too that crossover between kind of the gallery space and cinema in this strange area that is now a little bit kind of shut off from time because of the, you know, media expiring and people not having kind of this ability to either it anymore, or.

I recently saw one at the Whitney, you know, just a few years ago in a great setup for it, but maybe you can talk a little bit about those interactive film projects.

Lynn: Well, again, you know, nobody understood what I was doing and, at all, so I showed “Lorna" once and then I didn’t show it for 23 years ‘cause nobody could figure it out what it was, and then when it showed in Germany, we migrated everything, so it’s now, when people show it, they have original DVD, the glass DVD, but I mean, glass disc that it was first pressed in, but we also have the migrated conversion with all of the mistakes that we did originally, so you could pretty much feel how much time it took to make a change or kind of the underlying language of that structure, but it was hard to convince people that
it was, I saw it as kind of a sculptural form to use because it used time and choice and all kinds of other options that were just being invented at that time.

**Kris:** Yeah, it's, “Lorna” was set up at the Whitney a few years ago as part of their kind of survey, I think, of media, their media art collection, yeah, and you know it was a whole built environment of a living room and you’re controlling what essentially feels a lot like a web browser or, you know, normally people today, through a remote, and it’s this kind of fantastically immersive experience that brings you back to, instead of pushing you forward, kind of actually kind of brings us back now into like a technological moment in our just recent past that the can feel a little locked off, so I really appreciated it and enjoyed it.

**Lynn:** Thank You

**Dave:** Well, I think, like I said, we have a shy audience tonight, but just to remind everyone that the exhibition “Twisted” is up the New Museum through Oct 3rd, and the films “Conceiving Ada,” “Teknolust” and “Strange Culture” will be streaming on the Criterion Channel beginning August 1st, and people can see “Strange Culture” here at the Wexner Center tomorrow night at 7:00pm and Saturday at 4:00pm, and I would just like to thank Kris, wonderful questions tonight, and Lynn Hershman Leeson. It’s really been a great conversation, and Kris you were the perfect person.

**Kris:** Oh, thanks for asking me. Yeah, I was delighted to get a chance to talk to Lynn.

**Dave:** And Lynn, it’s just, it’s such an honor to have you with us tonight, and I really hope I can get to New York to see the exhibition before it closes. It just sounds amazing.

**Lynn:** Thank you

**Dave:** Yeah, thank you so much, and thank you everyone for who joined us on Zoom and the other ways, and yeah, good night and thanks everyone.

**Kris:** (Kris and Lynn wave goodbye.) Thank you, Lynn.

**Lynn:** Bye
(They all disappear from screen.)