



ARTS
ILLUSTRATED

A dark, atmospheric night scene. In the upper right, a bright, glowing moon is partially obscured by wispy white clouds. Below the moon, the dark silhouette of a building's roofline is visible against the night sky. The lower half of the image is mostly black, with some faint, blurry light trails and a small, out-of-focus green light source in the lower right quadrant. The overall mood is mysterious and contemplative.

Time passed with the grace of light.
And once again, a new story began
in the inside of darkness.

— Q&A —

The Artist, the Thinker and the Film Maker

Award-winning filmmaker and artist Lynn Hershman Leeson on how art and cinema are not two different entities meeting each other at middle ground, but intertwined deeply with the creator who converts the 'very personal to art', always

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Email interviews can sometimes be debilitating in its freedom. And I truly understood that when I set out to interview Lynn Hershman Leeson. Her website biography will tell you this: 'Over the last five decades, artist and filmmaker Lynn Hershman Leeson has received international acclaim for her art and films. She is recognized for her innovative work investigating issues that are now recognized as key to the workings of society: the relationship between humans and technology, identity, surveillance, and the use of media as a tool of empowerment against censorship and political repression. She is considered one of the most influential media artists and has made pioneering contributions in

photography, video, film, performance, installation and interactive as well as net-based media art. Her activist films on injustice within the art world and society at large have been praised worldwide'.

What it won't tell you is that Lynn functions in the realm of the succinct. If she can tell you something in one sentence, one shot, one colour, one character, one gesture, then that is what she will do. Her films and her art all resonate with that quality, where nothing is overt and everything is understated. And I mean that even when a scene (or a question, in my case) might demand it. For instance, in her film *Teknolust*, a science-fiction film dealing with

the difficult (and controversial) subject of genetics and, therefore, the difficult (and controversial) subject of identity, there is a scene where Tilda Swinton's character, that of a 'scientist specialising in biogenetics who has created three self-replicating automatons', watches them dance for her through a screen. They are each clothed in the same yellow-coloured robe, one with straight black hair, one blonde with a fringe, and one long-haired brunette, and dance with puppet-like movements in a room that is completely green, with large oval lights on the ceiling that disconcertingly remind you of an operation theatre. It was a scene that could have been more than what it was – it could have



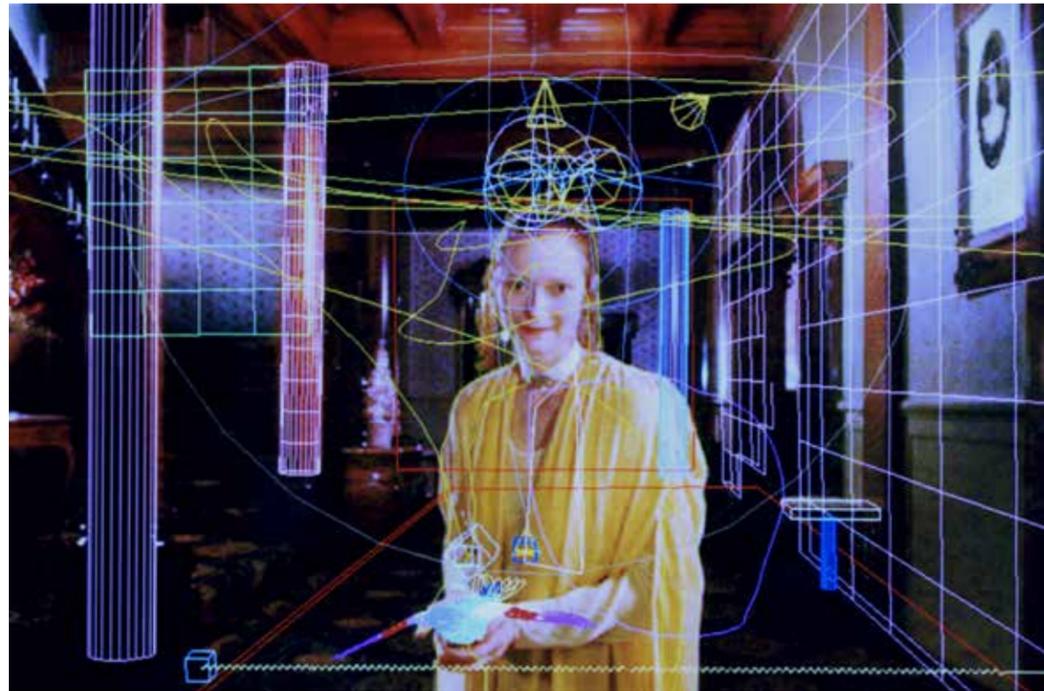
Stills from the film
Teknolust, 2002.

been lit dramatically, the colours could have been more saturated, and their apparent differences could have been more pronounced. And yet, in its quiet subtlety it attains its power. To me, it was the most defining moment of the film, when Rosetta (Tilda) actually 'sees' them for the first time as something more than just an experiment and the SRAs understand the desire of humanity – acknowledgement, acceptance and love.

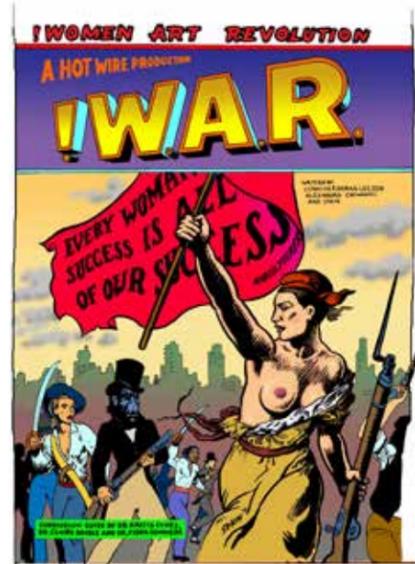
Even the documentary, *!Women Art Revolution* that won Lynn 'first prize in the Montreal Festival for Films on Art and was hailed by the Museum of Modern Art as one of the three best documentaries of 2012', you see the same subtle power at play. You sense the fearless and unrelenting energy of the feminist art movement in the United States, not through sloganeering or mega-phone wielding stalwarts, but through the unrushed and everyday

stories of the women intrinsic to the movement that Lynn has captured on camera for over 40 years. Lynn's journey as an artist too came full circle during the filming of *!WAR*, as we discover the art she couldn't sell at the time when women and art were like stranded survivors on a nebulous island of ideas battling history, was what finally helped fund the completion of the film.

My favourite film, though, of hers is *Strange Culture* a docudrama



Still from the film
Conceiving Ada 1996.



Still from the film *!Women Art Revolution*, 2010 and cover of the Graphic Novel *!Women Art Revolution*.

based on a true story of an art exhibition on genetically modified food that comes under the misguided microscope of terrorism in post 9/11 America. It was where Lynn's sensibilities as an artist and filmmaker, so seamlessly connected, shone through. A brave retelling of events, this film places a quiet but firm responsibility on us, the viewer, making us think of what

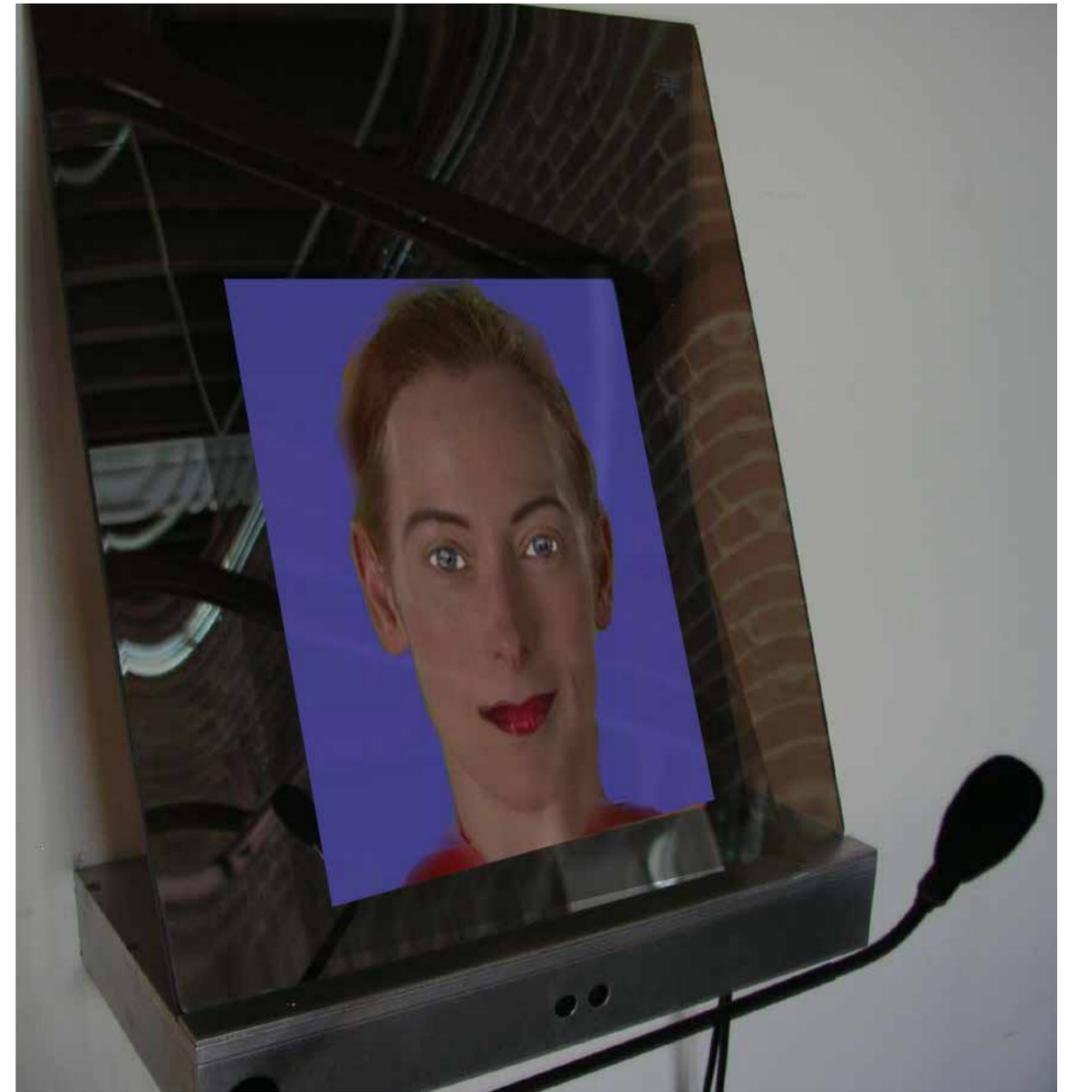
art truly means in the fabric of our life, and that it is quite true what Lynn says in *!WAR* that the personal is political, but the very personal is art.

I wish there could have been a way to reach across the length and breadth of the Internet and have a face-to-face conversation with Lynn (not Skype that still puts the distance of time to

shame), but I am beginning to believe that I may have still remained in the realm of the succinct.

Excerpts from the interview

Women Art Revolution has been in the making for 40 years.... it's almost as if you put different pieces of a jigsaw together to make a complete film. But what I am



DINA, artificial intelligence bot, 2004. Original software, computer, sound, voice recognition.

curious to know is when did you tell yourself, 'Yes, okay, now is the time to put this together'.

I felt this when the women began to die. The history had to be put together and also because the younger generation had no idea about this movement. It was a big responsibility to tell this story.

What shifts inside you when you approach a subject as an artist as against a filmmaker? Or is that dialogue in a constant state of flux?

Yes, it is a different media and context which means a shift as to what is being seen and how. One can have a dialogue with each other, as in expanded cinema elements of *Teknolust* and *Dina* (an artificial intelligence bot), and *Conceiving Ada* (another science fiction film released in 1997) and the *Difference Engine* (a site-specific installation with bi-directional browsing units).

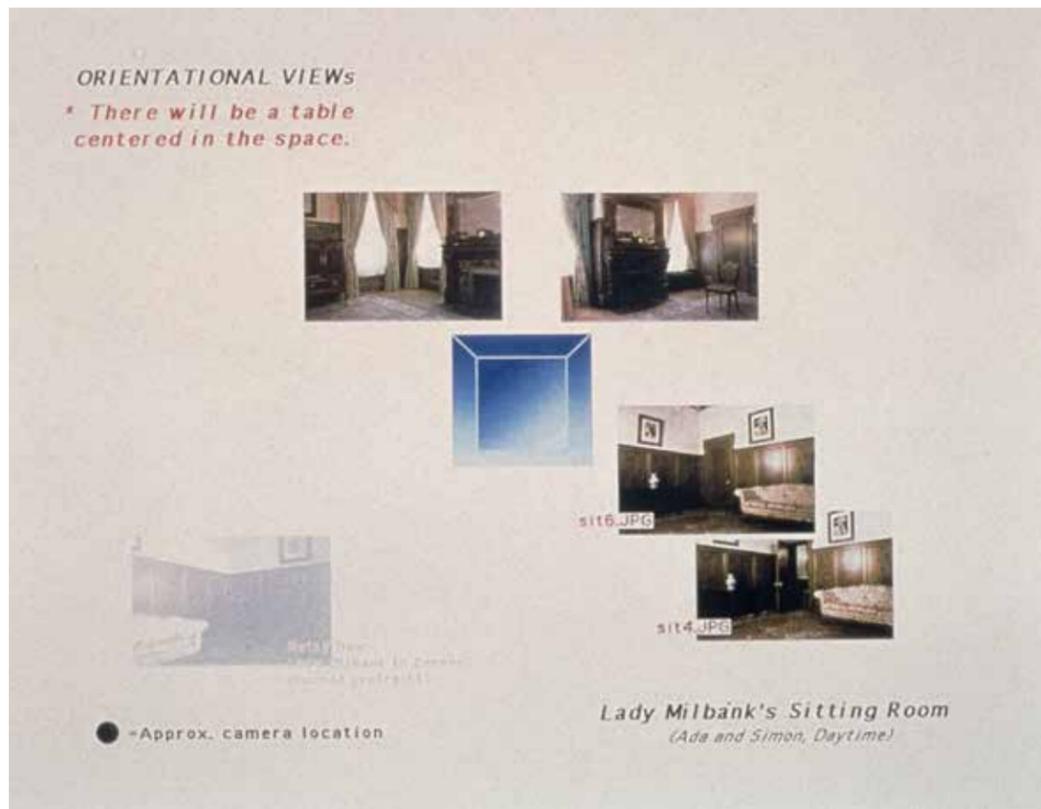
Do you think, as a medium, filmmaking is more liberating because of the kind of reach it has?

No, it is a different medium and one can have accessibility on the internet.

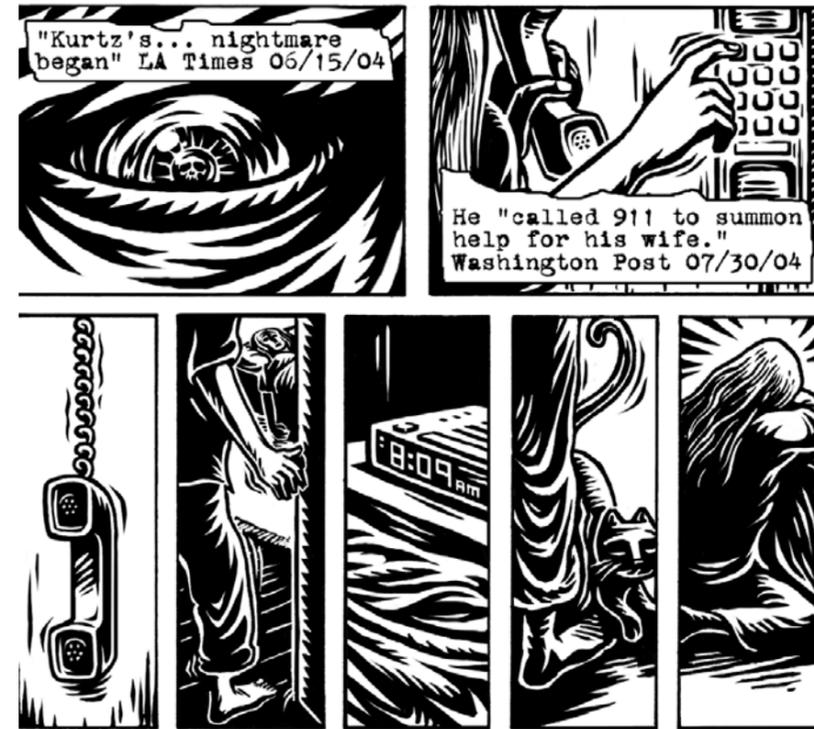
For you, what really makes an image? How do you actually construct it?

It actually depends on the context, and content that determines what is made.

What about how an image is viewed? For instance, watching !WAR in the comfort of my home



Drawings for virtual sets, from the film *Conceiving Ada* 1995.



Lynn Hershman Leeson, Photograph by Lisa K Blatt, 2014.

Still from the film *Strange Culture*, 2007.

is very different from watching it at a gallery screening. How much does this impact the work you create – this dichotomy of how the image is seen as against how it is made?

I think the creator is always the viewer, but how it is seen varies. The creator is a witness and needs to extract herself from how things are seen and try to be objective in the way it can be perceived.

What drives you to create?

It is a compulsion, like breathing. And the things I need to say that no one else can.

What takes precedence for you as an artist – the essence of the subject that is at the centre, or the filmmaking process that is around it?

The essence of the subject, the process follows that.

How would you define your identity as an artist? Is it, somehow, tied to the identities you created in the course of your artistic journey?

I have multiple identities; I don't like labels or to be said I am only one thing.

Finally, in the spectrum of filmmaking as an art practice, where do you imagine the director/writer/creator within the memory of an image?

At the core.

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