>> Bob Smith: From WXXI News, it's 1370 Connection.

[Music] I'm Bob Smith and art used to be something we looked at or listened to. Now, it's interactive and can be a relationship between the artist and audience. Well, that's the point that my guest for this segment Golan Levin wants to make. He's the latest in RIT's Carolyn Werner Gannett Visionaries in Motion lecture series speakers. Here with us now in advance with the presentation he'll give this evening at eight at the web auditorium. He is a professor of electronic time based art at Carnegie Mellon University in Pittsburg. He's going to tell us where he sees art, technology, and the audience coming together. It's great to have you with us.

>> Golan Levin: Thank you so much. I'm glad to be here.

>> Bog Smith: Now, one thing I'd like to do is, for the sake of those who may not have ever seen it before, is this from the get go a marriage of the visual the oral technological all in one?

>> Golan Levin: I think so. The work that I do is primarily interactive. And so, I present using software that I write, situations that people experience with their full bodies. There's often a sound component, there's almost always a visual component. And there's a heavy kinesthetic component as well. And, the exact outcome is the result of what's brought by the visitor or participant in combination with what I, the situation that I've presented.

>> Bob Smith: I'm imagining something in my mind's eye almost like the experience of being in the movie Tron. Am I close?

>> Golan Levin: That's a really immersive kind of augmented reality or virtual reality. The systems that I create are not quite so immersive as so to surround you in a sort of surround way. But, they're more like someplace half way between that and a, and a painting that you can experience interactively that maybe changes as you interact with it. I can give you an example. One is a project called the Interstitial Fragment Processor. And, this is a project where, when you cast a shadow on a wall, any close forms that you make with your shadow, by close forms I mean specifically negative spaces, the holes in your shadow get filled in with light that then forms its own kind physical body, when these things when you then release the hole from your shadow by lifting your arm, or what have you, then, these forms bounce around on their own. So, it's an experience in which you suddenly are made aware of all the negative spaces around your body by kinds of augmented projection.

>> Bob Smith: What happens if you break into a dance in the middle of it all?

>> Golan Levin: People do and it's a lot of fun.

>> Bob Smith: I'm trying to imagine what the visual impact would be to sort of like flying colors all over the place, or what?

>> Golan Levin: Yeah little particles, or, you know, wherever you made a negative space in your shadow. So, everything's, these shapes end up flying all over the place. But, the work I do is also sonic. I have a project from a number of years ago which is a performance entirely conducted through the carefully

choreographed ringing and dialing of the audiences on mobile phones. That's a, basically, a pure sound work. And, I've also done a lot of work with visualizing he voice where different kinds of people, whether they're participants or performers, get to see representations of their voice computed in real time that are really tightly coupled to what they do and how they do it with their voice.

>> Bob Smith: Is that kind of like a voice print writ large or what?

>> Golan Levin: That's part of it. A voice print is, you know, one way of representing the voice. There's a lot of different ways of representing sound. And, a voice print is a way that this conforms a lot to what we think about when we think about writing, you know. It goes from left to right. There's a kind of, there's a pitch axis there's a time axis. And, that's one way of representing the voice. And there are some visualizations like that that I've done. A different visualization is when I convert the sounds that you make with your voice into little shapes. And, this is one where hard and rough sounds that you make with your voice make, sort of, hard and rough shapes and smooth sounds make, sort of, round shapes and things like that. It's a project called Remark done with Zach Lieberman, a collaborator of mine, such that it presents the fiction that speech cast visual shadows. When you step into a magic light, you, the fiction is, you see the shadows of your speech immerge from your head.

>> Bob Smith: And it, I'm trying to imagine what that would look like. I've seen speech, I've seen sound represented on a screen because I work with digital editing equipment.

>> Golan Levin: Sure.

>> Bob Smith: All of the time. And it looks like waves, spikes going along a timeline for the duration of the audio file. And then, you do your editing cutting some of those spikes and peaks out of there.

>> Golan Levin: Well Bob, you're thinking very diagrammatically. You're thinking that there's a time axis and a pitch axis. And, this is much more like a painting or an animation where it's an abstract image that you're, that you're in front of and you literally see your own shadow, like the shadow of your head. And, out of the shadow of your head are flying these weird sparks and shapes and other kinds of objects that are tightly coupled to what you're saying and how you're saying it.

>> Bob Smith: And, they're not turning into word balloons or anything like that, I take it.

>> Golan Levin: Actually, it's funny you should say that. In this piece called Remark, when the system is able to recognize what you're saying, which is not that often because speech recognition is still pretty difficult, but when it's able to recognize what you're saying, it actually does spell it out.

>> Bob Smith: So, you can literally create a word balloon in real time that comes out just as if you're in the middle of a comic strip.

>> Golan Levin: And I have done. I have done, yeah, absolutely, I've created a literal word balloon. There's a project I done called the, called Ursonography which is a performance that was done with Dutch sound poet Jaap Blonk. And he's a world expert in performing this amazing sound poem from the 20th century

called the Ursonate by Kurt Schwitters. And, I highly recommend checking into it. It's a, it's an amazing poem that took Kurt Schwitters ten years to write. He wrote it in the early part of the 20th century. And, it's a half an hour completely structured nonsense. And, it's, it's basically, pure gobbledygook very rhythmic gobbledygook for half an hour. And, we developed a performance together where, pretty much, as he performs the Ursonate, he's one of the, probably, half dozen people in the world who's performed it more than a thousand times and has memorized it. He, as he, as he, as he says the poem, the words that he's saying, as he says them, comes out of his head in something like word balloons.

>> Bob Smith: I'm almost imagining, in a way, when you talk about that particular work just presented verbally.

>> Golan Levin: Yep.

>> Bob Smith: Do you know who I thought of? This may seem strange. I thought of Sid Caesar because he used to do that kind of rift as, when he played his professor character on television, if you've ever seen Ten from Your Show of Shows, you know what I'm talking about. And I had a chance to interview him a few years back when a collection of his video work came out. And he talked a little bit about that and he did a little bit of that rift for me as a matter of fact as well.

>> Golan Levin: The gibberish, the gibberish.

>> Bob Smith: The gibberish yeah.

>> Golan Levin: You know, it's funny you should say this. I think, this is a, this is a conjecture on my part, but, I think, there's something to it. Right around the middle of the 20th century, there was a really strong interest in gibberish that cut across a lot of different domains. You had the Dadaists of which Kurt Schwitters was one in Germany working on the Ursonate, you had the bop artists like Ella Fitzgerald inventing scat, and you had Sid Caesar with his, sort of gibberish. And there were other strains as well. My only conjecture is that it may have something to do with just trying to wrestle with the absolute absurdity of the atomic age and thinking that there was no other reaction then sheer nonsense.

>> Bob Smith: In a way, yeah, he said something very similar to me and said you can have fun with this. You can have fun with the absurdity of our existence. And, I like to do that. You suppose he was really onto something here?

>> Golan Levin: I think the atomic age plunged people into a kind of existential crisis to which one response was absolutely, you know what, we have to just enjoy things because it's all absurd.

>> Bob Smith: Do you think it's all absurd?

>> Golan Levin: Well, I really like absurdity in my work. It is a source of humor and pleasure for me. A lot of the work I do is particularly concerned with nonverbal communication. And, I think that one way you can, you can jolt people out of the constant, you know, little voice in their head is to engage people with, in different ways with their bodies physically or just visually or with pure sound. And, a lot of my work is an attempt to, to get people out of their

heads verbally and to think, to think nonverbally with their bodies gesturally with their bodies in ways that they, maybe, aren't accustomed to communicating.

>> Bob Smith: You create movement, create, you engage other people, getting them to do it and take part in the art.

>> Golan Levin: That's right. Well, I also really think that, that, you know, we don't quite move around as we should. And, we have really expressive bodies that we should use to explore and discover new things about our own identities and about ourselves.

>> Bob Smith: How did you get started with this and moving along in this direction? Was it something that you've been thinking about for a long time or how did it happen?

>> Golan Levin: You know, it's funny, I've been trying to think about, like, how I became interested in the things I'm interested in and the person I am. And, it's a few different things. I knew, from a very young age, I think, five years old maybe, that I wanted to combine art and technology. This came from a visit that I had just seemingly randomly to MIT but at a very young age where I visited something called the Center for Advanced Visual Studies. And this was a place where they had artists and residents, where they had artists working with technology. And some amazing things were being invented there in the late 70s. But, more recently, I've been thinking about images that kind of stuck with me from when I was a child. And, one of them is this amazing Swiss dance group called Mummenschanz. They toured New York City in the late 70s and I got to see them as a kid. And they did these profoundly absurd nonverbal sort of mime type performances involving creatures and that they would, sort of, wear these costumes and do these kinds of, these very gestural and abstract performances. These are images that have stuck with me from when I was a child and I'm still doing dealing with them today.

>> Bob Smith: I remember seeing Mummenschanz on television when it was starting to make the rounds. I guess they're still performing as s troop, and I.

>> Golan Levin: They are.

>> Bob Smith: I tried to sort of grasp it. I've got to admit.

>> Golan Levin: Me too.

>> Bob Smith: Yeah, I've got to, I've got to admit, I had trouble grasping exactly what they were doing and what they were about, coming from an earlier age when I was used to seeing everything depicted, not only in terms of motion, but, in terms of sounds and words.

>> Golan Levin: I think, when you're six years old, they make perfect sense.

>> Bob Smith: Yeah.

>> Golan Levin: Yeah.

>> Bob Smith: I guess so. Well, the thing is, I was in my 20s by the time I saw it.

>> Golan Levin: I think of another, of another image that kind of stuck with me from when I was, when I was a little kid. Some of my projects have to deal with writing systems and transcription of sound particularly in an abstract context. And, I have one project called the Alphabet Synthesis Machine which is a piece of software that people can visit online. It's been running now for almost ten years. It's a project that allows people to genetically evolve the hypothetical alphabets of nonhuman civilizations. So, it's a project that, basically, you go to it, you sort of start doing these sliders and these knobs, and after a little while, you end up with a set of characters that are basically like squiggles, if you will. But, they form a kind of coherent set. There's something that looks like a family about them in a way that our letters look like a family and syllabary looks like a family in the Chinese, Chinese, you know, writing system looks like a family. So, you end up with this, this set of squiggles. And you can download them and use them on your computer. God knows what for. And, I realized, you know, that that came from an impression, an experience that I had when I was very small. My family was not religious, so, we did really go to Synagogue hardly ever. But one time it was, I guess, it was an appropriate time to go or the High Holiday or something. And, I was maybe four or five years old. I was very precocious. And, I'd learned how to read. I thought I knew how to read. And, you know, there's the prayer book or whatever, and I opened it up and it's all Hebrew. And, I've never seen Hebrew before. And, although I was aware there were other languages that were spoken, I wasn't aware that there were other writing systems. And, I got very distressed. And I was like, you know, what is this? This doesn't look like English.

>> Bob Smith: Where are my 26 letters?

>> Golan Levin: Pretty much, I mean.

>> Bob Smith: Yeah.

>> Golan Levin: You know, something's wrong, I thought, what I actually thought was that something was wrong with my eyes because I was trying to resolve this as letters that I knew and it didn't work. And, I was like what's going on? And, I got very alarmed. And I said to my father, Dad, what is this? This is really kind of alarming, something like that, you know. What is this? And he says, you know, it's the middle of the ceremony or something, he's like, shhh, that's how God communicates with us. And, and this idea that this was how God speaks with us through these abstract letters that I couldn't understand has set up for me this, I think, a longstanding idea that, that there's a kind of a mystical, a connection to a mystical reality through abstract patterns that I hadn't other, otherwise known.

>> Bob Smith: And, of course, that was before we also had to deal with the fact that it's read the other way, that it goes from right to left instead of left to right.

>> Golan Levin: Oh I didn't even know that. I just knew that I was looking at squiggles that made no sense to me.

>> Bob Smith: Yeah.

>> Golan Levin: Yeah.

>> Bob Smith: And so, in a sense, when we make these other squiggles and we're creating a new alphabet, can we do anything we want with it, make it represent anything we want or sound like anything we want it to?

>> Golan Levin: In this project, yeah. I mean, this project produces sort of this family if you will of related squiggles that sort of have a certain character that you've helped engineer as a visitor to the site. If you want to download that and use it, go ahead. The strange thing about it is that, actually, something like 20,000 people have done this. And I have no idea why. I just made it to kind of gratify this urge I had to like see more, to have that experience again. I wanted to have that experience again of looking at an unfamiliar alphabet and not understanding it and that mystery of being confronted by a meaning that I knew was there but that I didn't have access to. And I, I just needed to make it for myself, speaking as an artist. And I put it up so that maybe other people could have it. And 20,000 people, apparently, want that and find something to do with these thoughts. Maybe they're involved in Dungeons and Dragons or something, I don't know.

>> Bob Smith: Or, maybe they're trying to replicate the experience that Gene Roddenberry had when he invented Klingon.

>> Golan Levin: Yeah, actually there's, there's a whole community of online people who are so called interested in something called Conlang, constructive languages. And they do make up these languages exactly that, you know, are their attempts to create, create new writing forms and new writing systems. I'm kind of a writing system buff. And, one of the most interesting ones to me is Hangul which is the Korean writing system, which I, it was late before I found out that the entire Korean writing system was invented in the 1450s by the king of Korea at the time. And that, it was, it actually was a completely constructive languages which is, it's one of the most elegant writing systems because it's completely designed. Like, none of this evolved thing like where, you know, it came out of Phoenician and this thing, you know, A used to be alpha which represented an ox or any of that. It was none of that. It was actually like, you've got these vowels, you've got these consonants and you have this whole matrix and the way they combined that's like completely beautifully designed. And, it's the only language I can think of where it's in common use and it's basically a designed artifact. The king said this is how it's going to be from now on.

>> Bob Smith: Because he didn't like using the Chinese script?

>> Golan Levin: There was something about that, yeah. There's another, actually, there is another example, but it's more mystical. Brigham Young whom, I believe, founded the Mormon religion, had an alphabet that he tried to impose on the early Mormons in the 1850s out West. And it was called the, it is called the Deseret Alphabet. And, there's still a few people who know it. And, if you look around on, you can find these rare books that are printed in Deseret. And, the idea was, it was, again, an attempted language reform. He wanted to get an alphabet for the Mormons that would unify the Mormon tribes or the Mormon populations around the world because he had big ambitions for how Mormonism would be, you know, a global phenomenon. And it is. And, at the same time, he also wanted to keep out outside influences. So, he wanted to make sure that his flock would not be distracted by other kinds of influences. So, he hoped that they would only read Deseret. And so, this alphabet looks crazy. It's, it's, it's kind of like, kind of like portmanteau alphabet where every letter's been

bashed together with every other letter. And, it's a very bizarre little phenomenon.

>> Bob Smith: It almost sounds like George Orwell's Newspeak, I don't know.

>> Golan Levin: Yeah, but, but, but the letter forms are not, are not, I think, as well thought out as Korean, the Hangul writing system. I think it might be, according to what I've read, they came to Brigham Young in a dream rather than having been something he sort of sat down with his advisors and designed.

>> Bob Smith: So, it just popped into his head, and.

>> Golan Levin: Basically yes.

>> Bob Smith: Mystically.

>> Golan Levin: Yeah.

>> Bob Smith: Of course, whatever your spiritual beliefs are like thereof may be, we'll sort of leave to another time. But, I guess, the one thing that's interesting about it is the implicit message is anybody can conceivably design just about anything if he wants to and make it art and make it expressive.

>> Golan Levin: Well, I think it's, I think we're all designers in our everyday lives. And, I think, we don't often appreciate the extent to which we are designers. A friend of mine had a project she did which was trying to investigate what she called vernacular design, design in everyday life. And, she did this by asking people to empty the contents of their purses or pockets and to actually get them to talk about, talk through and discover for themselves the ways in which they really carefully designed how they carry what they carry, why they carry, and for whom. I remember there was one example she gave where, her name's Rachel Strickland and the project was called Portable Effects. And, the, she interviewed one woman who carried two wallets. And, one wallet was always empty because she had a lot of friends who wanted to borrow money. And so, you know, they'd say hey, can I borrow a dollar or whatever? And she'd say sorry man look I'm broke. And then, she'd pull out her empty wallet. And they'd go oh I guess you are. But this, you know, this is a design strategy and we all have, you know, many, many, many, many design strategies that govern how we carry what we carry, how we design our homes and so on. And, that's not even talking about, you know, designs that, that reach further out into influencing other people in terms of what you might call inventing new culture.

>> Bob Smith: and, if we're designers in a way of ourselves in our own lives every single day, are we interacting with other people's designs too and maybe becoming interactive artists without even knowing it?

>> Golan Levin: Yeah. I think so, I mean, one thing that is really important to me as a professor and as an artist, particularly an artist who writes software in order to make my art, is the notion that more people should be writing software for whatever purposes to make, to explore their own ideas of what's possible. We tend to assume that software is something that's written by somebody else. And, I think, this is a really big problem in the United States today where we need to, we're really writing more of our own software, particularly with a device like this. I'm holding up my phone, where, you know, it really almost feels like a closed system and everything that's on here should

be something that comes from somewhere else. In fact, it's actually not that hard to write software. It's never been easier than ever, it's never been easier than now. It's the easiest time in history to learn how to write software because of fantastic open source, free, cross platform tool kits, particularly for the arts, by which artists and designers can learn how to write software on their own. Projects like processing, open frameworks, Arduino, Pure Data, Maximus P. These are, these are environments that people can use to learn how to write their own software. And, I think, the really important thing about it is that when you're using someone else's software, you're living in someone else's dream. You're, you're living in, this is a quote from John Maeda who spoke in this lecture series a couple of years ago. You're, you're, you're only experiencing the very limited slice of what a computer can do that that particular software manufacturer has elected to make possible for you to use. And, in fact, the computer's capable of vastly larger number of things. And, when we have our own ideas about how things should be, we should take these things into our own hands. And so, part of what I do is, I teach artists to not be subject to the system and to be able to make their own software so that they can be designers of things in their everyday lives.

>> Bob Smith: I would be curious as well, to know which language is the best programming language, which programming platform is the best? Do you like Windows? Do you like MAC? Do you write in C plus plus? Do you write basic? Are these all decisions that you have to make as an artist?

>> Golan Levin: Sure, these are absolutely decisions that I make all the time every day. Let me say, as a new media artist, I don't really have a choice as to sometimes what environment I use. I do and have to use MAC, Windows, and Linux. I happen to prefer MAC these days, but, I regularly use Windows and have many, many projects that require the use of Windows, and Linux is really good for some things too, especially instillations I have to run for a really long time without any human attention. As far as what languages I use, I use a variety of different languages. And, you know, I asked a student of mine, which languages do you know? And he said the right answer. He's like, which ones do you want me to know? These languages are all fundamentally the same. And, it's important to know that there's no best language. There's languages that are better for this or that. For teaching I often use Java and an environment called Processing which is a free environment for teaching interactive media arts based in Java that's real easy to get started with.

>> Bob Smith: Do you run into that a lot on the web?

>> Golan Levin: Yeah, processing's used all over the web, yeah exactly. And, for my more high performance work, performances and installations that have to run really fast, I tend to use C plus plus which his, for me, used in a programming toolkit called Open Frameworks that's another free programming environment for the arts that runs on MAC, Windows, and Linux as crossed platform crossed compiler.

>> Bob Smith: And these all give you a chance to do just about anything that you want to do pretty much or, do you hit limits nonetheless?

>> Golan Levin: Oh you always hit limits. Every project I'm doing is constantly hitting the limits of what's possible which makes it fun. But, the purpose of these toolkits is to basically be Swiss army knives that regularize and simplify certain kinds of things that you want to do all the time. Like, I shouldn't have

to reinvent the wheel every time I want to talk to some kind of interesting device over the serial port. I shouldn't have to reinvent the wheel every time I want to, you know, load a video or load an image or send a signal of sound out, out of the speaker, you know. So, that, they make that kind of thing really easy. And, that makes it possible to hit the edge of what's possible.

>> Bob Smith: What about the hardware?

>> Golan Levin: I'm not sure what you mean.

>> Bob Smith: Well, let's put it this way, when you're looking at is the hardware, the computer itself, powerful enough to do everything you want it to do to your sub tabs is it limited in terms of what the hardware can do and how fast it can do it and how much it can do?

>> Golan Levin: Not anymore, I think now the limiting factor's the human imagination. I think that today's computers are, we haven't even caught up in our minds with what these new computers are capable of in terms of speed. Amazing things can be done with a really inexpensive chip called NarDuino that a lot of people make things with. It costs 30 dollars and you can, basically, make any object interactive with it. And, I think there, the limitation is not really the harder so much as, you know, what's the concept that someone has to work with?

>> Bob Smith: By Intel, MAC, anything, all's fair?

>> Golan Levin: Yeah, what I really wish at this point now is that people would design a computer that's designed to last ten years. I think that would be, that's my challenge to the industry. Can you, can they do that? Especially as we, we're looking ahead towards, you know, a future with less and less oil, and, you know, we need less disposability in these projects. Apple can't guarantee a computer for three years, for more than three years, you know. And, I have arts collectors who's saying, you know, like how could, how can I, you know, purchase this artwork if you can't even guarantee it for three, fort three years? What we need now is a future where it's much easier to repair computers ourselves and to have computers that are designed to be, designed to last.

>> Bob Smith: You know what occurs to me? That's back to the future because a lot of the older computers were very durable. I have one that has worked since 1996. It's an old Pentium, an original Pentium, still works, can't do all that much these days with today's software, but it still works. And another one that's probably a good six, seven years old that works just fine. But, yeah, I wonder if they're becoming flimsier now and if that's going to be a limitation on what you can do and how long it'll last?

>> Golan Levin: I don't know. I think some things are getting better at the same time. We tend to take one step forward and two steps back at the same time.

>> Bob Smith: Oh boy, that's scary, that's scary. What do you want to do next? What's the next step do you think?

>> Golan Levin: I am following my own, you know, drummer and whatever that means right now. At the moment, I'm really interested in eye tracking. A lot of my friends have been working with that. My friends on the Eye Writer crew have been developing an open source inexpensive practically, you know, practically free

eye tracker that can understand where someone is looking and how they're looking at something. I'm interested in lasers because I think that they're really a unique form of display medium that can project at great distances with great accuracy and different kinds of graphics that we normally see from today's video projectors. And, I'm continuing to be, to be interested in robotics, even though it's a very unstable medium that tends to fall apart literally. But, robotics is definitely, there's an, a very interesting future there. Probably, for me, the most immediate future that I'm really interested in is the so called make society, people who are, who are making and hacking and beginning to explore self-made 3D printers that can print out objects, you know, inexpensively and things like that. There's a fantastic future right there in maker communities. I wonder if we're going to get, someday, to the point that the Star Trek vision of holodeck will be real.

>> Golan Levin: This comes back to your Tron comment from earlier. You really want to be in this immersive virtual reality.

>> Bob Smith: Would love to see it.

>> Golan Levin: Yeah, I think that, that one of the things that happens with these virtual realities and the ways that that concept has evolved, is to, is away from virtual reality per say, but toward augmented reality where we have layers of information that overlap our real world. And this is this idea that, that, you know, I could look at something without necessarily having to wear a big goggle or headset or helmet or anything like that and see virtual information that's superimposed over the real world in ways that we realize there's this higher multivalent quality to the universe and there's extra information that becomes brought forward to the surface in ways we couldn't see before. I think that the real world's good and it's just nice to know that there's lots of other data we can add to it. So, yeah, the way I think many people think about it now is that there's, there's an augmented reality. I'm sure that there'll be something that comes after it as well.

>> Bob Smith: Can't wait to see it Golan. I have a feeling you'll be a part of it. My thanks to Golan Levan who is here with us as part of the Carolyn Werner Gannett Lecture Series Visionaries in Motion, he'll be speaking this evening at eight o'clock at RIT's web auditorium and he'll be delivering workshops tomorrow afternoon, tomorrow morning and tomorrow afternoon on the RIT campus as well. Thank you very much for joining us and sharing your vision.

>> Golan Levin: Thanks so much for having me.

>> Bob Smith: And thank you all for being with us on this portion of 1370 Connection WXXI.

[Music]

>> Bob Smith: 1370 Connection continues on WXXI. I'm Bob Smith and one of the more unusual artistic competitions in Rochester is just ended with the awards

and the winners, the annual mind to movie competitions for creators of short films staged by Rochester Movie Makers. The organization's Stan Main and Vanessa Tobis are here along with two of this year's winners, Paul Tracey, Mike Davidson. And ladies and gentlemen, thank you so much for joining us appreciate it.

>> Thank you for having us.

>> Bob Smith: Now, first of all, and Stan, I got to ask you up front, how was the roster of competitors chosen, the films which you decided to submit or how did it happen?

>> Stan Main: Well, it was a 72 hour film competition. And a couple three weeks ago, we all got together on a Thursday night. And, there were 15 teams that registered this year. And the 15 teams got a character, a situation, and a prop that was assigned randomly. And, you could take the first assignment or you could spin again. But, if you spun again, you had to take what came up. And so, I have, just for example, we had a job where the job well done was one from the friendly Viking team. They got an ill-informed sales person a bouquet and receiving unsettling news. My team got an insensitive detective, ill-fitting pants, and it was the end of a relationship. Vanessa, I can't remember what, what your team, do you remember what your team was?

>> Vanessa Tobis: Team Inception, its right below yours.

>> Stan Main: Team Inception got an enthusiastic dentist.

>> Vanessa Tobis: Yeah.

>> Stan Main: A time machine and a proposal.

>> Vanessa Tobis: And the important thing to mention here too is that the elements were picked with the idea in mind that they were, they were up for interpretation. So, a proposal didn't have to be a marriage proposal. So, you had some creative movement there with that.

>> Bob Smith: It could be an indecent proposal.

[Laughter]

>> Stan Main: And ill-fitting pants could be ill fitting underpants as the case may be.

>> Bob Smith: Okay.

>> Stan Main: Mike Davidson can talk a little bit about how he wrote. How did you come, who came up with that idea?

>> Mike Davidson: Well, it was really at the beginning a group effort. We got together after we got our elements and sat around the table at Stan's house and brainstormed for, wow, a good two or three hours. But, when we came out of it, we had a great, great idea and a skeleton of a story and just hammered it out from there.

>> Bob Smith: And, and Paul, how did, how did you come up with yours?

>> Paul Tracey: Well, ours actually was a kleptomaniacal alien. We had the ill-fitting pants too, randomly drawn, and searching for a lost pet. And, we did the same thing. We did a brainstorm session the first evening. And we decided to kind of say let's let our minds cook this overnight and get together the next morning to do the writing. So, we got up bright and early the next morning and came up with some kooky crazy ideas, some that had to do with actual space aliens, because we had a nice guy on ours set named Craig Roberts who knows how to do prosthetics. But, we decided not to go the root of the traditional alien and actually make him a kleptomaniac from another country and to talk about that aspect of him being in this country.

>> Bob Smith: Interpreting the alien a different way.

>> Paul Tracey: Exactly. And I think that was the strength of this year's process was we were able to be a lot more creative with those elements than we were last year. And, last year we kind of had to shoehorn fix elements into the story whereas this year we were able to really come up with some very creative ideas.

>> Bob Smith: Okay, tell me a little bit, then, about the process of coming up with a few minutes of story and character and situation and image all of which come together and what it's like to have try within 72 hours to come up with that little gem.

>> Paul Tracey: And during the worst snow storm of the season.

>> Vanessa Tobis: Yeah.

[All talking]

>> Paul Tracey: Had to deal with. And, we were fortunate. We got together. Everybody was available that Friday. So, we were able to start very early in the morning on Friday before the storm hit. So, the storm hit and we were making the film in the location which happens to be my house. And so, we brainstormed like Mike said and they stayed up. I went to bed after a while. They stayed up and typed it all out. And, of course, there was just a little technical problem there during the course of the night. All of the work that they did didn't save.

>> Bob Smith: Ah oh.

>> Paul Tracey: And.

>> That's the advantage of having only five minute or a five page screenplay, we pretty much remembered all of it so.

>> Bob Smith: So you could recreate it.

>> Exactly.

>> Paul Tracey: Mike was there at 6:30 in the morning, a half hour before call time. I'm like what are you're here kind of early, he said well I've got a read and we've got to fix this whole script because it's lost.

>> Oh man.

>> Ooh.

>> Oh.

>> Vanessa Tobis: It was horrible.

>> Bob Smith: Good luck with a 90 minute film if you're going to try and do that. That's what backups are for. But, and I guess, did each of, everybody had kind of a similar experience in going through this because it seems like you've got to do an awful lot in a very short time.

>> Paul Tracey: There is, and quite honestly, we decided early on, we wanted to put an actual new music score from a gal named Chrystal Asmos [assumed spelling] and she's actually a PHD student as Eastman. And she was like when am I going to see something to put the music to? So, that was a little rough on her to kind of get her there on the last, you know, 24 hours and to put it together. She had an idea of the flavor, the theme, the thinking behind it. So, she started entering some things into her software, whatever that is that does the music. And, it was pretty cool to see her working. And then, having to time it out, because, our editor made a six and a half minute version and he's like wow, I've got the six and a half minute rough cut done, that's Craig Peterson. He's fantastic. He was the editor and the cameraman. And then, we had to cut it down to the five minutes for the contest. So she, Chrystal, was trying to figure out how to make that theme fit properly.

>> Bob Smith: Now, when you talk about five minutes.

>> Paul Tracey: Yeah.

>> Bob Smith: Does it actually have to fade to black at exactly five minutes?

>> Yes if, anything over five minutes was cut during the showing and cut for the DVD for the judges. I believe. Is that right?

>> Vanessa Tobis: Yeah, so, if your story was still going on at five minutes, we would just truncate it right at five minutes, so.

>> Bob Smith: Oops sorry.

>> Vanessa Tobis: Yeah, we really had to make sure that people would really adhere to that rule because last year, it being our first year at the competition, you know, some people came in with, you know, an extra 30 seconds. And it's, it being the first year, we don't want to turn everybody away for something, you know, for 30 seconds. So, this year we tried to really be sort of streamline with how we handled the rules and stuff like that.

>> Bob Smith: Because, five minutes, when you got to have titles in the end and everything else, you're not really five minutes. You're really about four and half.

>> Actually these, we, these were, we decided not to put titles on it. So, there, aside from an opening title, there weren't any credits.

>> Vanessa Tobis: Yeah, no credits, Derek Petrush, our co-chair for Rochester Movie Makers, he was able to generate all the credits for everybody so all the

film makers and team leaders would send in their stats on who did what and he provided that.

>> At the showing last night, after all the films showed without credits, then there was a whole thing that showed all the films again the, an image from the film and then all the credits after that. So, that was really good, Derrick did very wonderful.

>> Vanessa Tobis: Yeah it was very well designed.

>> Wonderful job, he does it every year.

>> Bob Smith: One thing I have to say, having served again as one of the judges, this year's competitors did an even better job than last years. They were all well-crafted, they were entertaining, they were watchable. Are these folks, all of you, professionals in some aspect of the visual arts or is this a hobby?

>> Well, I can answer that. A lot of the actors we have, they do some theater work and they've done some work at [Inaudible] Community Church and they've worked together. So, it's kind of that synergy of that, I know, helps with the process of, you know, directing the actor and getting them to feel comfortable with each other. But, you know, no one's really made movies. They made, they made some DVDs for like the church every so often, every year. And they're really pretty nice looking. I was blessed to come involved with them a few months back to say hey let's try to do something bigger. And that's when we reached out to do this competition as well. I've been doing video but just little short subject things and corporate stuff for about 16 years in town.

>> Bob Smith: So, I'm not, so I'm not seeing, if I'm watching all of these, the product of somebody who makes his living in say television or an ad agency or anything like that.

>> We had, we had some that were supposed to sign up. I think one of the teams may had been from the television station that didn't complete, but, or never did warrant registering. But, no, as a rule, I think, most people are sort of, you know, interested in film but are not in the business professionally.

>> Vanessa Tobis: Yeah, that's most of them. I mean, the other, the other things is sort of define professional.

>> Right.

>> I mean, for me, I'm a freelance filmmaker. But, freelance doesn't mean a whole lot at least not in Rochester because there's not a whole lot of volume here. But, but because that's what I spend most of my time doing, I was able to play more roles on my team's project. So, I think it, I think the teams sort of create themselves based on who, who has the time, who has the interest, who has the expertise, if there is any in that kind of thing. So, I don't know, I feel like most of us have day jobs, but, I think professionally we, this is what we want to be doing.

>> Yeah.

>> Vanessa Tobis: Yeah.

>> Bob Smith: But the independent film making, either in short films like this or elsewhere, we're not talking about people who are just clocking off at five o'clock from channels eight, ten, thirteen, twenty one or thirty one, I take it.

>> Now again, there was one team that I had heard was going to write a story. And, I'm not sure if they actually did and they were one of the ones that didn't.

>> Vanessa Tobis: I'm not sure either.

>> Complete, but not as a rule. Last year there were no real professionals. There's a couple of professionals that are teams that have professionals that work in commercials or, but, for the most part I think not. I think a lot of these teams are just people that just go out and get a handheld camera and shoot the film.

>> Vanessa Tobis: Or a compilation of different people. I mean, like you said, some of them would be professionals and maybe that person would say, well, okay I'll help this high schooler who wants to do the competition and I'll be on their team. So, you have just sort of a, sort of a melting pot of people and from different areas and what they do.

>> I think that's also the heart of what this organization, Rochester Movie Makers, is all about is to make available and accessible the ability to do filmmaking if you've had that passion for it and you're just not sure who else can, you know, show it or edit or do that other skill that you may be lacking. You can team together and do something and really wet the creative appetite.

>> Bob Smith: That is, in a way, stunning because, the people who do these have clearly learned their craft and clearly know what they're doing in a way that you didn't used to see from anybody who wasn't working in the business seven days a week. It's astonishing.

>> We have a, we have a high school, one of the teams is a high school team. And it's actually a little annoying to me how good [inaudible] because they're a little too young.

>> A couple of the girls on our team, Juliet Surro [assumed spelling] and her sister Sophie, she actually said, and they're from Fairport High School, I believe, and she said this was just a thrill for her to be able to be involved as acting in this competition. And she herself is really interested in filmmaking. And this has given her a great boost to set her sights and goals even higher now, so.

>> Vanessa Tobis: This other great thing, I think, about the group is not just who you meet and who you can have fill in the holes in terms of, you know, where you may be lacking. But, like you said, these films are much better than last years, and that's part of our goal and our objective at Rochester Movie Makers is to actually teach people in the community. You know, if you're, if you're not sure how to do production sound, work on one of our summer shorts this summer. And, you know, and by next year they're totally comfortable handling a boom or operating different things that they didn't know anything about before. So, we are an educational organization.

>> Bob Smith: And you don't necessarily need a full switcher audio board.

>> Vanessa Tobis: Right the whole digital revolution.

>> Bob Smith: Cameras the whole the whole deal. But, you know, you mentioned digital revolution. You can do an awful lot with relatively inexpensive portable equipment nowadays.

>> Right.

>> Bob Smith: That you didn't used to be able to do in a professional television studio.

>> Yeah the technology is so cheap.

>> Vanessa Tobis: Exactly.

>> And accessible to everybody.

>> Vanessa Tobis: That's the only way, I think, an organization like ours could, could function the way we do is because it is so accessible. You just need a laptop. You don't even need one, your friend needs one.

>> Right.

>> Vanessa Tobis: And, you know, and someone can bum software off of somebody and you're totally mobile. I mean, everybody is mobile. It's not like you have to go into a film lab and, you know, and actually cut and paste film anymore. So, it's really, the digital revolution has really made it a bit more possible.

>> And there's even little apps that you can use on your iPhone for doing your storyboard cutting. You can take still pictures of your production, stick them together, and I don't remember the app and I'm not promoting it. But, it's really cool, you can search for it. And it's some kind of a storyboard app that really kind of visualizes that storyboard. So, all the barriers to entry for the technology are so low that it makes the creativity immerge.

>> Bob Smith: Are most of these films actually edited on laptops shot on small handhelds?

>> A lot of them were. Some of them were shot on the, you know, semi, or what do they call prosumer [assumed spelling] type.

>> Vanessa Tobis: Yeah, some, some were shot on higher grade cameras. But, you know, if you don't, if you have an eye for it, you'd notice it. But, otherwise, if you, if you don't, if you're general public and we had a really good showing last night at the screening, you would never notice the difference between some of these little handheld cameras and maybe a step up from that. So, it's nice because it's not like you're being completely robbed of quality.

>> And the thing is story drives everything as we all know. So, because story drives everything, if you have an engaging story for people to listen to and watch, it's not going to matter that something looks a little, you know, amateurish or, that's not even the right word, just.

>> Vanessa Tobis: It almost helps.

>> Yeah you're right.

>> Vanessa Tobis: It almost helps depending on the story, it looks great.

>> Yeah it's definitely a style that looks.

>> Bob Smith: It's kind of a [inaudible].

>> Vanessa Tobis: Yes exactly.

>> Yeah loose camera moving around wiggling. Little Theater, by the way, just did a fabulous job for us last night.

>> Vanessa Tobis: They did.

>> I was happy.

>> Vanessa Tobis: Yeah Kelly Foster was our sort of liaison with them. And she made the event pretty exciting. So, for those of you who came out last night, thank you so much.

>> Yes, full house.

>> Vanessa Tobis: Yeah.

>> Bob Smith: One thing I noticed too, looking at all of these films, they've taken advantage of something there seems to be a good supply of here. There seems to be a lot of acting talent out there.

>> Yeah, I think the theater community really helps that. I think we've got a very, I mean, I don't know, I don't remember, even in Austin when I was there, having as vibrant a theater community as many actors were available. And, for my film, I just posted on Craig's List and had all sorts of actors that were interested, auditioned, and basically took them all. And that way we had a lot of actors we could write around.

>> That's good.

>> And it worked. We wound up using every single one of them.

>> And there's a lot of creative talent and we were talking about the technology earlier. And, the technology has also allowed groups of people like us to get together. I mean, unlike a lot of the fine arts, filmmaking is, at its core, collaborative. You, and, you know, I can go out on my little mini cam and film something. But it's not the same as when I have a group of people. And, I know, for our story, some of the best time was sitting around that, that table brainstorming about the story and its elements and where it was going to go. So, the technology has also allowed us to improve our talent and improve over time.

>> Bob Smith: What you're talking about is collaborative in every respect from start to finish.

>> Right. And even at the writing stage, I know the Rochester Movie Makers has a writing group every other Sunday. And they get together and they read each

other's scripts, and, you know, get feedback on those scripts. So, you know, you add another way that I can help improve my, you know, passion.

>> Bob Smith: And, at the same time, of course, that you're, that you're looking at all this, you obviously have bigger ambitions. You all would like to be doing something in the longer form, maybe even a feature film realm, right.

>> Vanessa Tobis: Absolutely. I think, ultimately, most of us, that's on the horizon. That's sort of my next big thing is trying to start the beginnings of screenplay for a feature. So, but, I can't even stress how much, the more shorts you do, really you always learn from your shorts.

>> Yeah [inaudible].

>> Vanessa Tobis: I don't care how much you know, the next short you shoot, you're going to learn something from it. And, it's so nice because you don't have to give a year or two of your life away to this short. You give, for example, a summer and you walk away with a finished short film that taught you a whole lot and probably makes you real, look really nice. So, you know.

>> Bob Smith: Speaking of which, what's next in terms of the projects now that this project has happened?

>> Well, I'm glad you asked that question Bob.

[Laughter] Because, starting in our March member meeting, March 28th, we will have screen writers ascending on the meeting with their ten page screenplays, up to ten page screenplays. And, we will do group readings of those screenplays and vote for the coveted Rochester Movie Makers Summer Short Screenplay of the Year. Some luck writer will walk away with that the evening of March 28th.

>> Vanessa Tobis: Well, and not only do they walk away with that award, but, they will likely have their screenplay adapted into a movie. And we will produce and shoot it this summer. And so, they actually get to see their story come to life which I think is a pretty amazing thing.

>> Bob Smith: And this one will be, I take it, no holds barred. There'll be no prop there'll be no character.

>> Vanessa Tobis: right.

>> Bob Smith: Nothing signed.

>> Anything you want. Last year we did a running theme that the writers could opt in on called The Red Lunchbox. And a lot of the films were shot around this magic red lunchbox. I think one of the films is called The Red Lunchbox.

>> Vanessa Tobis: Indeed it is.

>> And I'm sitting right next to the director of that film.

>> Bob Smith: A riff from the Red Shoe Diaries or something like that or what?

>> No it was, I don't know where they came up with it. It was the writer's group that came up with that, Mike Bois, I think.

>> Vanessa Tobis: Yeah Mike Bois did design images for it. And, it's a great prop and I mean, having one prop as opposed to three, it leaves quite a bit of room to, you know, come up with this story that can go any direction.

>> There's probably four or five films that were shot with the red lunchbox in them last year. But, this year that's not happening. This year it's just going to be whatever you want to write on.

>> Vanessa Tobis: And it's open to anybody. You do not have to be a member. So, if somebody out there has a screenplay they've been sitting on, bring it in. We'll read it for you. The actors will read it for you at the meeting. And, the other important thing to note is, if we do vote and yours is not voted on by the group, that does not mean it won't be produced. We can still produce it.

>> A lot of them didn't really do, get that many votes one getting shot almost, I think, almost all of them got shot last year, so. And it is first come first serve we should say. And, there is a voting member. If you're a voting member, then you do get the little bit of preference in that queue. But, but we will most certainly try to get you a screenplay if you come.

>> Bob Smith: It's, it's kind of, in a sense, exciting but a little bit scary to put yourself and your creative kind of out and up for evaluation by others by your peers and the rest. Some people might be scared of that.

>> Vanessa Tobis: Absolutely and I totally understand that. I think that the nature of the reading that we'll have on March 28th is not necessarily to critique your script. It's literally almost like a showcase. And so, directors like myself or actors that are at the meeting listening to the script being read can decide whether or not they want to be a part of producing it that summer. It's not sort of a well this is what you need to change about your screenplay. It'd be more like if heard something I liked and I would go up to that writer later that night and say listen I'd really love to direct this this summer. So, it's not up for critique. It's a showcase.

>> That's what the writer's workshop that Mike mentioned before. It's a much smaller group and they get together every other Sunday. And they get phenomenal feedback. But, they can be brutal, you know, sometimes people come in with some screenplays that are a little out there. And they don't pull punches.

>> Bob Smith: Well, how, when you talk about ten pages, how much actual time is that?

>> About ten minutes. It's usually about a minute a page.

>> Bob Smith: A minute a page. So, if somebody comes in with a 60 minute screenplay.

>> It's an good hour.

>> Bob Smith: That's a full length, that's, that's not going to happen.

>> Well, 90 minutes is considered a.

>> Vanessa Tobis: If it's good it might happen.

>> Bob Smith: But, I guess, let your imagination run wild as long as it looks feasible and doable.

>> Vanessa Tobis: Exactly.

>> Bob Smith: At a low budget.

>> Vanessa Tobis: A very low budget.

>> Bob Smith: Right.

>> Yeah it's basically food. The Writer's Group deals with a lot of people that aren't working on features. I mean the Writer's Group's not limited to just reading screenplays that are ten pages long although they do. If you have a feature film and they say bring your first ten pages and we'll critique your first ten pages and find out where the rest of it goes.

>> And I was in that same position last year where I didn't know anybody in the group. And so, as you said, you come to it and you're a little hesitant. But, you know, the group was welcoming. And, you know, you are dealing with something very personal in your writing. So, it was great to have kind of welcomed with open arms and yes brutal but you know, we're writers, you have to be a little thick skinned so.

>> Bob Smith: But, anybody who loves it and wants to give it a shot, I guess, can walk in and kind of cross your fingers and go.

>> Vanessa Tobis: Absolutely, and you might really have your story brought to life by the end of the summer. I can't ask for more than that.

>> Bob Smith: Fascinating, a vibrant film scene happening. Thanks for sharing it with us. My thanks to Stan Main, Vanessa Tobis, and Paul Tracey and Mike Davidson from the Rochester Movie Makers annual Mind to Movie Competition, congratulations to everybody who created some really great five minute movies and thank you all for being here and sharing with us today here on 1370 Connection.

>> Thank you very much.

>> Vanessa Tobis: Thank you.

>> Bob Smith: Thank you all for listening here on 1370 Connection WXXI AM and FM HD2 Rochester for Dave Campo our technical director I'm Bob Smith. It's been a pleasure.

[Music]