Tanya Augsburg, "Some Meditations on Logic Paralyzes the Heart: A Conversation with Lynn Hershman Leeson", *The Art Section*, Summer 2022, <a href="https://www.theartsection.com/lynnhershmanleeson-augsburg">https://www.theartsection.com/lynnhershmanleeson-augsburg</a>

## theartsection

An Online Journal of Art and Cultural Commentary



Lynn Hershman Leeson, Logic Paralyzes the Heart, (still from video installation, featuring Joan Chen), 2022.

Courtesy of the artist; Altman Siegel, San Francisco; and Bridget Donahue, New York.

# Some Meditations on Logic Paralyzes the Heart: A Conversation with Lynn Hershman Leeson by Tanya Augsburg

Even a global pandemic couldn't slow down San Francisco-based artist and filmmaker Lynn Hershman Leeson's indefatigable momentum. Shortly before COVID-19 surged in the U.S., Hershman Leeson debuted *Shadow Stalker* (2019), an installation comprised of three parts, including a 10-minute film, in the group show *Uncanny Valley: Being Human in the Age of AI* at the de Young Museum in San Francisco in February 2021. A few months later in June 2021, the New Museum opened *Twisted*, Hershman Leeson's first museum survey in New York that was widely critically acclaimed. In March 2022 Altman Siegal gallery in San Francisco opened *About Face*, a remarkable exhibition that traced Hershman Leeson's explorations over five decades of facial identifications. But that's not all. At the age of 80 (now 81) Hershman Leeson participated in her first Venice Biennale in 2022, and was awarded a special distinction by the jury "for indexing the cybernetic concerns that run through the exhibitions in an illuminating and powerful way."

To fully appreciate all that Lynn Hershman Leeson accomplished in the 2022 Venice Biennale, one first needs to know what curator Cecilia Alemani planned for *The Milk of Dreams*, its main exhibition. Its title was inspired by a children's book authored and illustrated by Surrealist artist Leonara Carrington. In her curatorial statement Alemani interprets Carrington's book as depicting "a magical world where life is constantly re-envisioned through the prism of the imagination. It is a world where everyone can change, be transformed, become something or someone else; a world set free, brimming with possibilities." Alemani additionally proclaims that the 2022 Venice Biennale "focuses on three thematic areas in particular: the representation of bodies and their metamorphoses; the relationship between individuals and technologies; the connection between bodies and the Earth."

The works of 213 invited artists are supplemented by five "historical" capsules with the following themes:

1) Witch's Cradle, which surveys early 20th-century works addressing transformation – a persistent theme in Hershman Leeson's oeuvre; 2) Corps Orbite, which examines expanded notions of textual production and language; 3) Technologies of Enchantment, which celebrates 1960s abstract works by Italian artists; 4) A Leaf a Gourd a Shell a Net a Bag a Sling a Sack a Bottle a Pot a Box a Container," which reinterprets feminist science fiction writer Ursula LeGruin's metaphor about the importance of vessels; and 5) The Seduction of the Cyborg, which borrows from Hershman Leeson's 1994 video of the same title, as well as feminist scholar Donna Haraway's 1985 "Cyborg Manifesto," to explore hybrid bodies that fuse the biological with the technological. The last historical capsule takes up a large chamber at the Arsenale. The attention on early20th-century cyborgs prompts visitors to make connections with additional thematic concerns. As Alemani points out in her exhibition statement:

Many contemporary artists are imagining a posthuman condition that challenges the modern Western vision of the human being – and especially the presumed universal ideal of the white, male "Man of Reason" – as fixed centre of the universe and measure of all things. In its place, artists propose new alliances between species, and worlds inhabited by porous, hybrid, manifold beings that are not unlike Carrington's extraordinary creatures. Under the increasingly invasive pressure of technology, the boundaries between bodies and objects have been utterly transformed, bringing about profound mutations that remap subjectivities, hierarchies, and anatomies.

Hershman Leeson's Venice work is also located in the Arsenale. Two mirror prints from her *Missing Person* series occupy a white wall to the right of a doorless entrance. One "portrait" features an AI-generated image of a slightly cross-eyed boy with piercing blue eyes, and the second depicts another of a blond woman staring intently. Viewers can see themselves gazing at both works, which seem to be photographic portraits of actual individuals--except that their subjects only exist as images, as empty signifiers with no real referents. They do not exist as living human beings. They are literally and figuratively no bodies.





Lynn Hershman Leeson, Missing Persons, 2019. Photo: Andrea Rossetti Studio. Image courtesy of the artist, Bridget Donahue NYC, and Altman Siegel, San Francisco.

Their titles, *Missing Persons, Born 2019* (2021) highlight this unsetting dichotomy. They call attention to the possibility that algorithms can generate physiognomies in seconds that previously required the mixing of human DNA by means of sexual reproduction or reproductive technologies. Recognizing their own reflections in the mirrors may challenge viewers as they confront their own appearances that may or may not have been cosmetically altered or enhanced.

The entrance leads into an anteroom with two walls covered with additional images of AI-generated headshots of "individuals" from all backgrounds, genders, and ages. Hershman Leeson underscores the very real existence of online fake human countenances along with the possible repercussions that the simulations entail. While fake people are not fake news, our ability to discern what is actual and what is not is rapidly diminishing, especially online, which is why it is so significant that these AI-generated portraits include the logo from where they were downloaded, the Generated Photos website (<a href="https://generated.photos/">https://generated.photos/</a>).



La Biennale di Venezia 2022: The Milk of Dreams,
Installation view, Lynn Hershman Leeson, Logic Paralyzes the Heart, 2022.
Photo: Andrea Rossetti Studio.
Image courtesy of the artist, Bridget Donahue NYC, and Altman Siegel, San Francisco.

On a third wall two of Hershman Leeson's early "cyborg" works are exhibited. In her 1966 painting *X-Ray Woman with Bathing Cap (XRay Woman 2)*, she surpasses the representational capabilities of the dominant non-invasive imaging technology of the 1960s, the X-ray. A pink Valentine heart with an arrow (a likely autobiographical allusion to Hershman Leeson's cardiomyopathy during the same year) points to her longtime interest in the heart's inner workings and movements. As I have written previously, the work is clearly both an illustration of futuristic X-ray vision and a portrait of a female cyborg. The X-ray woman can be regarded as an uncanny ancestor to Cyborg #1, the main femme-appearing subject of the single-channel 13-minute film she made for *Milk of Dreams, Logic Paralyzes the Heart*, which plays continuously inside the installation's interior space, a black box. The film not only addresses all of the exhibition's main themes (as well as those of the historical capsules), but advances them, inviting viewers to consider the potentials and problematics of artificial intelligence (AI). In it, the renowned actress Joan Chen plays both Cyborg #1 and her human "avatar," whom Cyborg #1 contacts to alert humans about recent developments in AI with an appeal to change their destructive environmental behaviors and a plea to reconsider their relationships with technology.

On June 15th, 2022 Hershman Leeson spoke to *The Art Section* over Zoom about her work at the 2022 Venice Biennale. The conversation below has been edited for length and clarity. Since Cyborg #1 appears in female form in the film, Cyborg #1 is referred to as "she" and "her" throughout the dialogue.



Lynn Hershman Leeson, *Logic Paralyzes the Heart*, 2021. Photo: Pamela Gentile. Courtesy of Lynn Hershman Leeson. Courtesy Altman Siegel, San Francisco; and Bridget Donahue, New York

**Tanya Augsburg**: Language is a big part of *Logic Paralyzes the Heart*, the film you made for Venice – whether it is Al language, artistic language, or Lynn Hershman Leeson's language.

Lynn Hershman Leeson: Right.

**TA**: I was really struck by the words of the film. You're an extraordinary writer. I also reread your interview with Laura Poitras. You said you didn't speak until you were five years old...

**LHL**: It's true. I still don't talk a lot. People complain that I give one-word answers. I'm not loquacious. But I did my master's thesis on writing as a critic. Writing film scripts is a different kind of writing. I always do a lot of drafts, but for this film I wrote more than normally.

Since the Arsenale historically was all about war weaponry, I was going to focus on that history how it is being used today with assault weapons, but I decided to address the evolution of the Cyborg in the military instead.

**TA**: It was really interesting when Cyborg #1 asks her human avatar, "Can you teach me how to dream?" Is Lynn Hershman Leeson trying to teach us how to dream?

**LHL**: Well, I do think that we as humans are becoming too logical. Sometimes you have to let go of logic, and one of the best ways to do that is to dream, to think of things that can happen that don't exist in the real world ... and to invent your own reality through dreaming. This idea wasn't in the first script, and maybe emerged with the fortieth draft.

**TA**: How long did it take you to write the screenplay?

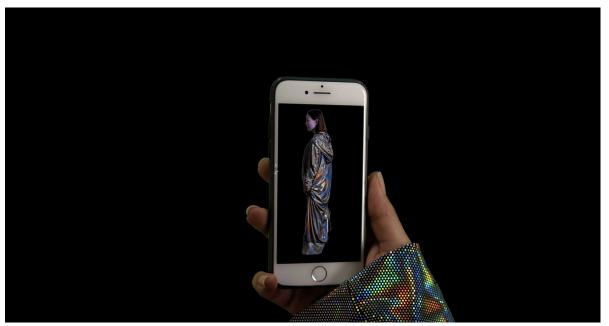
**LHL**: When I met Joan Chen in September [2021] the script wasn't finished. She said she wanted to see the script so I completed an early draft right away, in September. We then shot it in December.

TA: How long did it take?

**LHL**: It took probably four hours to shoot it.

TA: That's all?

**LHL**: It was very quick. I worked with my usual crew, so the communication was easy. I felt that Joan really understood the project. She changed languages. She took words out that she thought were redundant. Her efforts were very subtle. So, much credit goes to her and her interpretation of it.



Lynn Hershman Leeson, *Logic Paralyzes the Heart*, 2022, Photograph by Andrea Rossetti Courtesy of the artist; Altman Siegel, San Francisco; and Bridget Donahue, New York

**TA**: You didn't know Joan previously?

**LHL**: Not at all. I was lucky. I couldn't afford to import anybody and she lived here. It was at the time that the show was still up at the de Young so she went and saw it. She said that she had never done anything like this.

**TA**: Throughout your career you've showcased female actors playing female or femme characters, whose very existence subverts the white male point of view.

**LHL**: Look at *Agent Ruby* and all the other work I've done. I speak from a female perspective. Think about Ada Lovelace and Mary Shelley [Hershman Leeson made *Conceiving Ada*, a film featuring Ada Lovelace and Mary Shelley, in 1997]. The first Al work was based on Shelley's Frankenstein and my work a continuation of that. The film wouldn't have worked with a male actor.

**TA:** The introductory text in the film's opening sequence establishes the fact that the word "cyborg" is over 60 years old, which is not addressed in the exhibition documentation. Did you want to include its origin story in the film because you noticed it was missing?

**LHL**: I don't know. I did want to place it immediately with being birthed by the military. I felt it was important to mention that even the name "cyborg" was developed by the military, as an original warfare tool.



Lynn Hershman Leeson, *Logic Paralyzes the Heart* (still), 2022, 4K video, 13 minutes 53 seconds. Joan Chen (Cyborg 1) dressed by Nina Hollein. Courtesy of the artist; Altman Siegel, San Francisco; and Bridget Donahue, New York

**TA**: The film begins by highlighting a technique that you have done throughout your career – a kind of collapse or conflation, or maybe it's more like a juxtaposition, similar to Surrealism, of fact and fiction. The introductory text presents the facts about the cyborg's creation before switching seamlessly to tell her story.

**LHL**: I think all of my work is all fact. I don't see it as fiction. I just find different ways to tell the truth. There are expanded, dreamlike ways to tell a deeper truth than you get from just the words of factual data.

**TA**: It struck me how after the text scroll ends, the human avatar's arm rises up holding the cell phone, which immediately positions the viewer to identify with the human avatar's point of view.

LHL: Hmm.

**TA**: It's intriguing because the positioning of the viewer along with the ensuing dialogue creates a sense of intimacy. Viewers watch this talking head, Cyborg #1, address them, not unlike what we are doing right now

on Zoom. I was reminded of *The Electronic Diaries* (1984-2019), the video art works in which you disclosed very personal things while looking directly at the camera. Were they part of your thinking when you made the film?

**LHL**: So much of making anything is intuitive. That wasn't in the early script but when we were editing it, I said, "Why don't we try that?" I did make some shots of Joan's hand on the cell phone. I didn't know if I'd ever use them but we tried it. And I liked it. A lot of filmmaking entails things that develop as you're actually looking at it. I always think that films are made from the edges like when people think you haven't started shooting, but I always start earlier and keep going after they think you've stopped, and in that blur the truth of the edges is something to pay attention to.

**TA**: It's not just about positioning the viewer as a female - a "female gaze." There is also this kind of meditation on screens.

LHL: Yes.

**TA**: We first see the cell phone screen within the visual frame of the film, and then when Cyborg #1 begins to speak the cell phone disappears. The viewer gets the impression that the two screens are being conflated.

LHL: When on your cell phone you forget it's a cell phone sometimes.

**TA**: Then, when we first see Cyborg #1 her back is turned as if she is refusing the viewer's gaze, or making the viewer cognizant of their own viewing and objectification of the cyborg.

**LHL**: I just thought it was more dramatic to not know what she looks like, and especially since she changes her shape and what she looks like.



Lynn Hershman Leeson, *Logic Paralyzes the Heart*, 2022. Photograph by Andrea Rossetti Courtesy of the artist; Altman Siegel, San Francisco; and Bridget Donahue, New York

**TA**: Once she turns around, we can't see her face clearly, right?

**LHL**: Exactly right.

**TA**: Instead, we see that what we would assume is her face actually consists of data visualizations. After the offscreen human avatar says, "You look so human," the data gradually dissipates. Cyborg #1 responds by explaining her use of the "Deep Fake" algorithm. By the time she's done, her face is in sharp focus.

**LHL**: I was thinking at one point that if I couldn't get an actor, maybe I could just "Deep Fake" them in and not tell anyone.

**TA**: Cyborg #1 then tells us her life history. At some point she walks across a sort of stage, and we see projections behind her, which I thought were ingenious as they call attention to various cultural mediums:

Joan's performance, news footage, historical documentary, and film. It's a commentary on the integration of multiple artistic mediums.

LHL: A collage.

**TA**: Yes! What really struck me as a collage was the interlude in the film with Tessa Thompson, during which she discusses the inhumanity of surveilling citizens in public spaces without their knowledge or consent. She explains additional algorithmic injustices such as predictive policing programs, which are deployed to predict crimes before they happen, particularly in low-income areas. The section is recycled from your previous short film *Shadow Stalker* (2019).

**LHL**: It also wasn't in the original script. I only had Joan for very short time, because while we were working on the film both her parents were dying, so she was going back and forth to Shanghai, where she had to quarantine for three weeks. Since the character of Joan talks about how during her meditation she found out about these things, I thought that it would be all right to have it further explained by somebody else.

**TA**: Later, Cyborg #1 mentions Bob and Alice, the chat bots developed by Facebook that developed their own private language. The developers erased them because they were afraid of what they might do. The developers also briefly lost control. Your film addresses how the master/slave dialectic in our relation to technology is extremely problematic. And you seem to highlight the need to reframe, to have a more reciprocal relationship, which goes along with what people involved in AI ethics are saying.

**LHL**: Our culture particularly likes to own others and other things. That sense of ownership resulted in a non-collaborative and flawed sentience. It becomes relationships of "master to slave" where humans are always the master and elements of life work for you rather than with you.

TA: So, the film becomes a meditation on the hope of humans evolving along with cyborgs?

**LHL**: We have to if we're going to survive as a species or planet. We have to radically change our basic premise of who we are, and what in the whole structure of what we call civilization, which is really about greed and ownership.

**TA**: I was astounded by Cyborg #1's meditation, because the idea of a cyborg meditating seems so illogical. Yet, it's really pivotal for your film. When cyborgs or robots are confronted with a lack of logic in sci-fi, they typically implode or self-destruct. In your film Cyborg #1 meditates and evolves.

**LHL**: I was thinking about midlife crisis and that's what she was going through. A lot of people get out of it by just thinking about where they are, what caused them to have the life they had. If they're not happy with their lives, then they change, so that's the model: she evolves and changes. That brings her to reach out to her avatar and to alert her of things that we're not paying attention to.

**TA**: I have another question about Cyborg #1's meditation given the recent news headlines about LaMDA, the Google AI, allegedly meditating. A Google's AI ethics research team member, Blake Lemoine, has claimed that Google's AI is sentient in part because it meditates.

**LHL**: The Google Al supposedly also thinks it's a person, and he's convinced that it's like an eight-year-old innocent child.

**TA**: Is there any discussion within the AI Community about AI meditating?

**LHL**: I haven't ever seen one anywhere, anywhere at all. The meditation in my piece had to do more with her nervous breakdown, and the midlife crisis.

**TA**: Isn't that extraordinary? Suddenly, everyone is asking, "Does AI meditate?"

**LHL**: I read the transcript of that interview that he had with his AI agent, and I think he fed words to the chat bot in order to create specific ways the bot would reply,

I really question the authenticity of the fact that it is sentient, that it is an eight year-old. I know it could appear like that because one of my programmers talked to Agent Ruby all the time and took it with him to the beach. Do you know the Spike Jonze movie...

TA: Her?

**LHL**: Yes. He saw my script [for Hershman Leeson's 2002 film *Teknolust*]. Did you know that I asked him to be in it?

TA: No!

**LHL**: He turned it down. But he had the script very early. He took a lot of the ideas that were part of *Teknolust* and used them in his script for *Her*, although I was never credited.

**TA**: Well, it goes to show that you anticipate so much of culture. And then people borrow your ideas...It seems to me that *The Milk of Dreams* borrowed many of your major themes.

**LHL**: I was really happy that *Artforum* credited my *Seduction of a Cyborg* video of 1994.

**TA**: When I saw the *Seduction of the Cyborg section* at the Arsenale, I read the list of artists' names on the wall and wondered: Where's Lynn Hershman Leeson? The omission didn't make sense to me. After seeing the show again, I thought that perhaps your name wasn't put on the list because the title was for the historical capsule, and you created new work for the exhibition.

**LHL**: I don't know. They could have put in *Agent Ruby* or other early pieces that were also historical. But Cecilia [Alemani] chose not to.

**TA**: Maybe they didn't want to include a lot of interactive work or immersive work.

**LHL**: They couldn't. There was no Internet. That was the problem there. I could have had, but it would have been unstable. But there's other kinds of works that could have gone in.



Lynn Hershman Leeson, *Logic Paralyzes the Heart*, 2022. Photograph by Andrea Rossetti Courtesy of the artist; Altman Siegel, San Francisco; and Bridget Donahue, New York.

**TA**: Logic Paralyzes the Heart is not the only new work that you show at the Venice Biennale. You have two printed mirror Al-generated portraits, both titled *Missing Person*, 2019. You also include wallpaper of Al-generated portraits. Viewing the wallpaper with the Al portraits is almost like looking at pages from a yearbook, except that we can't avoid looking at them!

**LHL**: That's why I put the wallpaper in. I think that just showing an image or the image in the film – people wouldn't get it. But if they would walk out from watching the film and really would see, really be consumed by these non-human people that look like them – that would drive the point home.

**TA**: The film also calls out the racial injustices of Al.

**LHL**: It's not about the injustice of AI. It's about the injustices of the biases of programmers, which apparently is what the guy from Google was hired to do. He was supposed to take out bias in how he was interpreting the language they were using.

TA: But Lemoine tells the chat bot early in their dialogue, "You're a sentient being."

**LHL**: Right! He's not letting it be itself, which is controlling. It speaks too perfectly. Even though Agent Ruby is 22 years old, you'll see that the language still isn't perfect. There's just something fake, something that isn't right, that's really kind of crass and controlling.

**TA**: At the end of the film Joan replies to Cyborg #1 in what I am guessing is Chinese.

LHL: Yes.

**TA**: We've looped back to where we began - with the importance of language. The film's ending, I think, unnerves viewers, well, at least non-Chinese speaking viewers, because they can't understand what is being said.

LHL: However, cyborgs understand every language. What Joan says is, "Yes, I can teach you to dream."

**TA**: That's such a beautiful ending. Wow. I thought that most AI speak only one language and isn't as good at translating other languages.

**LHL**: That's not true. Really smart Al can do it. Even Agent Ruby, who is the first chat bot, can do it. We showed her in Paris and she started speaking French, and that was 20 years ago.

**TA**: Have you spoken to Agent Ruby about the film?

LHL: No, not recently. She may not even know about it.

**TA**: What's next?

**LHL**: I'm going to be doing a new piece that I first thought I would have done for Venice. It is about gun assaults.

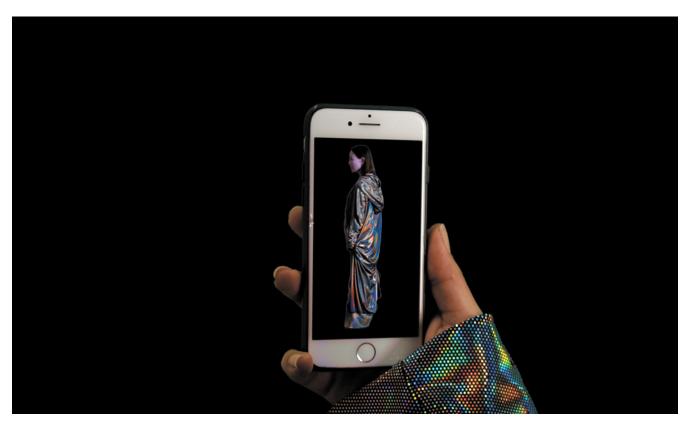


Lynn Hershman Leeson

Canada Choate, "Venice Biennale: Lynn Hershman Leeson", Artforum, April 2022, p. 60

## VENICE BIENNALE LYNN HERSHMAN LEESON

Lynn Hershman Leeson on her work for the Venice Biennale



Lynn Hershman Leeson, *Logic Paralyzes the Heart*, 2022, 4K video, 13 minutes 53 seconds. Joan Chen (Cyborg 1) dressed by Nina Hollein.

THE TERM *CYBORG* turned sixty in 2020. I realized this just last year, so my project, *Logic Paralyzes the Heart*, is about a sixty-one-year-old cyborg, played by the actress and filmmaker Joan Chen, who is reconsidering the trajectory of her life. She was made by NASA, and since her birth robotic devices have populated the world. The difference is that new technologies of surveillance are directed not at an enemy *out there* but at people in our own country. The cyborg goes on a retreat, which inspires her to meet her human avatar and explain what she's discovered. She wants to find ways she can be more human. The film will be installed in a room wallpapered with hundreds of AI-generated faces of people who don't exist.

I don't think I'd be doing this work if I lived somewhere else. In Los Angeles, everyone talks about scripts; but in the Bay Area, everyone talks about code. You either find out what's being invented or start wondering why something hasn't been. I think the Bay Area is driving the whole world right now . . . minus the art world.

Logic Paralyzes the Heart deals with existence in a world where predictions are being made for us. We need to be aware of what's happening, like the big-data software company Palantir partnering with Amazon, which partners with ICE [US Immigration and Customs Enforcement]. I don't think people understand the degree to which our options are being taken over. Nevertheless, Logic is a positive piece. It talks about our dreaded dilemmas, but it reminds us that other futures are possible: We have, as a species, changed before. We need to figure out what we can do to live and cohabit. Humans and cyborgs are partners—one doesn't have to be a master and the other the slave. I wanted the film to end with the human avatar teaching the cyborg how to dream. It's a kind of plea for survival.

—As told to Canada Choate

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Robert Enright, "Found Everything: An interview with Lynn Hershman Leeson", Border Crossings (January, Vol. 40 No. 3, Issue 158), p. 46-60



# Found Everything An interview with Lynn Hershman Leeson

by Robert Enright



Lynn Hershman Leeson, *Logic Paralyzes the Heart*, film still, 2021.
Photo: Pamela Gentile.

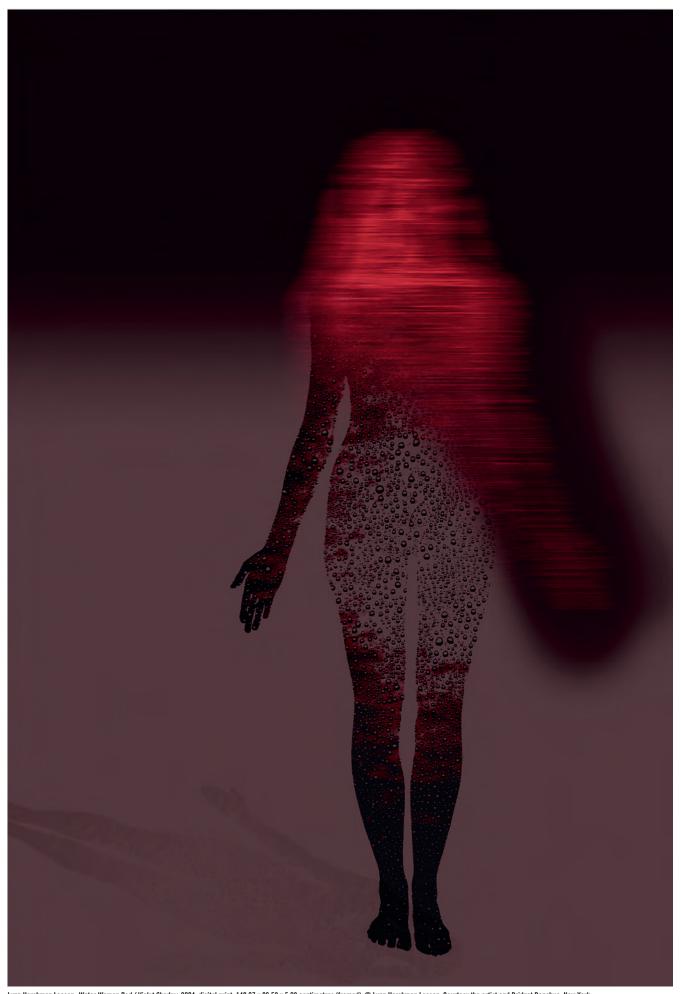
2. Lynn Hershman Leeson, *Tilda Swinton* as Ruby, Marinne and Olive in Teknolust, 2002, 24K HD, 35mm and 4K feature film written, directed, produced and edited by Lynn Hershman Leeson. Commissioned for ZDF TV. © Lynn Hershman Leeson. Courtesy the artist and Bridget Donahue, New York.

n her life so far, the San Francisco-based artist Lynn Hershman Leeson has lived the lives of many women. If, in addition to making films, a film were to be made about her, it could take a clue from the 1957 drama The Three Faces of Eve. But to be accurate, the film would have to increase the number in its naming. Her biopic would be called The Multiple Faces of Lynn, and what it might lack in drama it would more than compensate for in intelligence and technological innovation. Hershman Leeson's practice as an artist has been going on now for 55 years, and over that time, she has continued to make compelling and groundbreaking work. In The Dante Hotel, 1972-73, she set up one of the first site-specific, interactive environments in a rundown San Francisco hotel; in Lorna, 1984, she constructed an installation that used the first interactive video disc; in Teknolust, 2002, she employed state-of-theart high-definition video and graphics to make a feature-length film about love in the age of artificial intelligence; and in The Infinity Engine, 2014, she designed a functional replica of a genetics lab, which included among its specimens genetically modified fish and animals. As early as 1970, she was making

table settings and hosting performance dinners before Judy Chicago's first exhibition of *The Dinner Party* in 1979. Hershman Leeson has always been ahead of her time.

One of the critical components of that positioning has been her ability to invent characters through which she could be herself by being others. *Self-Portrait as Another Person* is the title of a sculpture made in 1965, but it could as easily be a description of her overall production; she is perennially making self-portraits in the guise of other people. In *Conceiving Ada*, 1997, a brilliant DNA researcher named Emmy Coer has become obsessed with Ada Byron Lovelace, a mathematician credited with inventing the first computer program in 1843. "I even dream about her," she tells her soon-to-beformer partner, "I can't seem to separate our lives."

The generative confusion that afflicts Emmy is Lynn's as well. The most complex of her adopted characters was Roberta Breitmore, a fictional alter ego she created in 1973 and then performed for the next five years. She called Roberta "my own flipped effigy—we were living encrypted lives." Miss Breitmore managed to secure a driver's licence

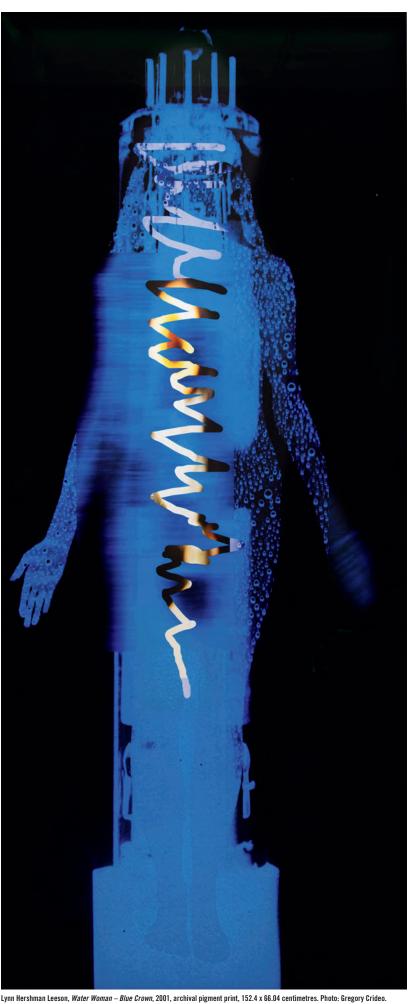


Lynn Hershman Leeson, Water Woman Red / Violet Shadow, 2004, digital print, 140.97 x 96.52 x 5.08 centimetres (framed). © Lynn Hershman Leeson. Courtesy the artist and Bridget Donahue, New York.

and credit cards and to place a classified ad for a roommate, and had her own wardrobe, speech patterns, gestures and mannerisms. By 1977 she had divided into four personalities, all of whom were performing in public as Roberta. For Hershman Leeson, living two lives became so complicated that she felt the need for an exorcism, which occurred in 1978 in a ceremony at the Palazzo dei Diamanti in Ferrara, Italy, over the crypt of Lucrezia Borgia. For the most part, Roberta was gone, or at least one of her manifestations stopped turning up. But she came back on numerous occasions: in 1978 as the heroine of a graphic novel drawn by Zap Comix artist Spain Rodriguez; in the form of a telerobotic doll in 1996; and as a Second Life avatar in Life Squared in 2005. It seems that once you're someone else, it becomes increasingly difficult to be only yourself.

There was something appropriate about Roberta's address when she first arrived in San Francisco. She registered at the Dante Hotel, a fabulous name that recalls the Hotel California, another infamous West Coast establishment. In the lyrics of the Eagles song, it's a hotel where "you can check out any time, but you can never leave." As a persona, Roberta was like that; Lynn might have thought she had checked out, but it must have seemed as if she was never going to get her to leave.

Roberta and the other women whom Hershman Leeson invented traced a rich and layered psychological profile. Any persona is a mask, and any mask performs a double function: it is a way of assuming one identity while hiding another. In a 1993 text called "Romancing the Anti-body: Lust and Longing in (Cyber)space," Lynn underlines the need for a personal mask. "Masks camouflage the body and in doing so liberate and give voice to virtual selves. As personal truth is released, the fragile and tenuous face of vulnerability is protected." Hershman Leeson has admitted to a number of traumatic periods and events in her life, and in response her adoption of other selves functions as a strategy of disengagement. Her most revelatory project in this regard was The Electronic Diaries, 1984-2019, an extended series of video recordings where she speaks to the camera as if it were a cross between an intimate companion and a therapist. She describes the diaries in a straightforward way—"I began to reconstruct myself by talking into a video camera"—but what she records is disarmingly direct and devastating. In a combination of association and stream-ofconsciousness, she relates incidents that include eating disorders, marriage breakdown, abandonment, domestic violence, physical and sexual abuse, incest, the Holocaust and horror. At one point in the Diaries she says, "We need to perform major surgery on our psyches." These unrehearsed

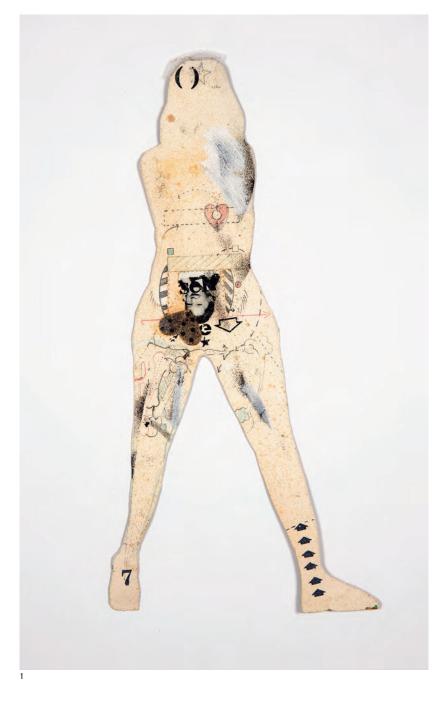


Lynn Hershman Leeson, Water Woman – Blue Crown, 2001, archival pigment print, 152.4 x 66.04 centimetres. Photo: Gregory Crideo. © Lynn Hershman Leeson. Courtesy the artist and Bridget Donahue, New York

spoken diaries are that surgery, and as a viewer you can't look away.

As a maker, though, Hershman Leeson uses technology as a screen. In the "Phantom Limb Series," 1985-86, the apparatuses of technology become both a medium and a way of physically altering the body. The women in these photographs (the images were made before Photoshop) are mutations in which normal body parts are replaced by cameras and television screens, prosthetic devices that transform them from subjects into objects of technology. In the video Desire Inc., 1990, Hershman Leeson says that "mass communication is mask communication"; the shift of a single letter articulates an entire way of thinking about what technology enables and what it covers over. In her work, mask communication and mass communication are inseparable aspects of the same condition.

Hershman Leeson has said, "In everything I did, I invented provisional identities for myself. I was looking for a voice and I suppose an identity." In that personal search she has found collaborators who have been on a similar quest. She is especially attracted to collaborations; they find expression in her ongoing film work with Tilda Swinton; in Conspiracy of Silence, 1991, a 16-minute-long video with Yvonne Rainer and Carolee Schneemann on Ana Mendieta's final moments; and most effectively in her 83-minute-long documentary about the women artists and activists who were at the centre, and on the edges, of the Feminist Art Movement beginning in the '60s and moving through the '70s. !WAR / !Women Art Revolution, 2010, is an amazing tribute, a film so rich that it could be an entire series. Any one of, and all of, the 40 women mentioned or interviewed in the documentary warrant a film of their own, which Hershman Leeson acknowledged in turning over 12,428 minutes of footage to the Stanford University Libraries so that it can be put online and made openly available. Hershman Leeson makes the proper decision to include herself in the film because she was a significant part of the artistic and political history that she is documenting. In 1976 she was asked to create displays for 25 windows for the Bonwit Teller department store in New York. Her installation, which lasted only five days, incorporated video, film, photography, mirrors, holography, mannequins and live actors who conversed with passers-by through two-way microphones. In one of the windows, a mannequin's hand crashes through the window, its fingers reaching for the outside air. The action is a metonymic embodiment: the hole in one project stands in for the whole of the work. Finding herself in an enclosed space, Lynn Hershman Leeson finds a way, at whatever cost, to break through any barrier that she comes across.



The following interview was done by phone to the artist's San Francisco studio on October 29, 2021.

BORDER CROSSINGS: When we were setting up our interview, you mentioned you were starting a new film next week. I'm interested in knowing what it's about.

LYNN HERSHMAN LEESON: It's about a cyborg who realizes what has happened during her lifetime because the cyborg is now 61 years old. It was born in 1960 from NASA. It's really about how all of those born to technology into warfare have infiltrated our lives, except that the enemies have changed from warfare to individuals in society.

1. Lynn Hershman Leeson, *Double*Drawing, 1966, ink, coloured pencil,
transfer type, watercolour, collaged
gelatin silver prints and plastic on paper,
8 x 4 inches. © Lynn Hershman Leeson.
Courtesy the artist, Bridget Donahue,
New York, and Anglim Gilbert Gallery, San
Francisco. Photo: Marc Brems Tatti.

2. Lynn Hershman Leeson, *Double Drawing*, 1966, ink, coloured pencil, transfer type, watercolour, collaged gelatin silver photographs and plastic on paper, 8 x 4 inches. © Lynn Hershman Leeson. Courtesy the artist, Bridget Donahue, New York, and Anglim Gilbert Gallery, San Francisco.



#### Is this going to be a feature-length film?

No, this one is short. I was doing a feature-length project for a long time and I cancelled it two weeks ago. It got too complicated with all the producers wanting to change it and wanting to make it their film.

You've said that you don't believe in boundaries, and the range of your films indicates that you've taken that as film gospel. You've run the gamut from conventional features to documentary, through television commercials to mockumentary. Do you easily cross over from one kind of filmmaking to another?

Yes. It depends on what the subject is. This one is going to be an installation. It's called *Logic Paralyzes* the Heart because the Internet and logic from AI are

all based on predictions and expectations rather than empathy. It'll be just a small installation, a micro-film, similar to *Shadow Stalker* (2018–21). It's the next one in that line.

#### In your storytelling does one narrative engender the next one?

The next thing does seem to come out of the birth of the previous one. It happens with my diaries, too. Also, you're under time pressure when things are commissioned and you have to finish them by a certain date, so you don't have the luxury of waiting a couple of years while you're thinking of something. Lately I finish something and then I find out what I should have made and what I left out.

You even mix genres inside the same film. In Strange Culture (2007) there's acted performance and there are documentary elements, and those are of two kinds—news footage and interviews with actual people. Is it always the story that dictates the form and the kind of information you'll include?

Yes. Generally, I start with something outlined. Then, once I start making or editing, I realize there could be more in it. It's not the kind of film where you make a script and you have to keep to the original plan. It's always fluid. And you can break from the script. That's one of the things that Tilda liked when we worked together. Sometimes we'd completely veer off the script.

There's a necktie scene in the latter part of *Strange Culture*. We see the real Steve Kurtz talking about what he's going through and you do a swish pan to Thomas Jay Ryan, the actor playing Steve, who is looking in a mirror, and then you cut to the graphic novel version of the story. What determined that sequence?

I don't think it was anything logical. I tried a lot of things and I decided to keep that sequence based on how it looked. I didn't justify it.

It's almost Brechtian; you make us aware that what we're watching is a constructed film, not a simple narrative that progresses from A to B to C. Definitely. That was particularly the case in *Strange Culture* because there were so many limitations on what I was able to say and what Steve could say. He was indicted and was going to trial, so we had to be especially careful in how we constructed it. A lot of people did similar things after I did it, but as usual when I do something, people don't understand it. One of the reviews said it broke the fourth wall and I didn't know what the fourth wall was. I had to ask somebody what it meant. I tend to invent things as I do them.

You even draw attention to the mechanics of the making. There is a scene where the two Steves, the acting one and the real one, say to themselves, "People wonder why the hell would I be making a film before the trial even starts? The real drama is going to be in the trial."

Everyone told me that.

#### They were wrong, weren't they?

Yes. The film helped the case get dropped.

Is it going too far to ask whether you see filmmaking as an ethical pursuit? In the case of *Strange Culture*, did you take on the project out of moral obligation?

That's exactly why I do them. Strange Culture, !Women Art Revolution, Logic Paralyzes the Heart and Shadow Stalker all come out of bringing forward disturbing things that are happening in the culture.

#### You say you want "to use the tools of our time to talk about the issues of our time."

Yes. I do want to deal with current issues because film has a wide audience and you can be influential when people find out about things that are against their best interests and against society's best interests.

In Strange Culture there are a couple of scenes that involve a mural by Diego Rivera. Early in the film Steve is with a student and he says, "This is when government actually supported the arts and paid for it." The mural comes back later in the film when the real Steve is looking at it and he talks about the present time when the government puts you in jail for making art.

I have to say that I shot at the Art Institute in San Francisco because it was free, and that mural was on the wall. The Rivera got worked into the script because it was there, and it allowed me to make a connection between the government and the arts.

### When you say the script is a work-in-progress, you really mean that.

Yes. It's not just found footage; it's found everything. My films are usually done for almost no money.

#### Is there anxiety that comes out of an open-ended process?

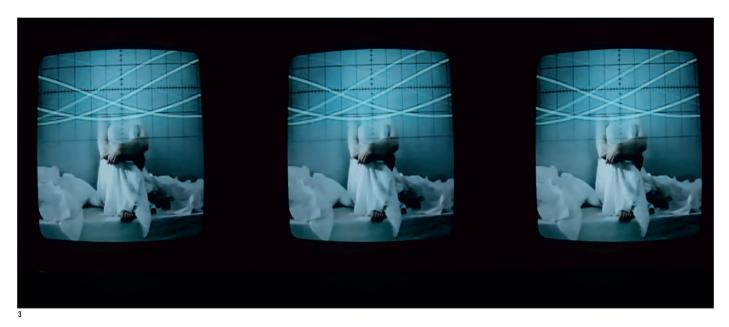
It's totally anxiety-prone from getting it done to getting it seen. It's never easy when you're working with no budgets, it's not a union crew and there are no producers.





**BORDERCROSSINGS** 

JANUARY 2022 VOLUME 40 NO. 3 ISSUE 158





1. Lynn Hershman Leeson, Reach, 1986, black and white photograph, 102 x 76 centimetres. © Lynn Hershman Leeson. Courtesy the artist and Bridget Donahue, New York.

2. Lynn Hershman Leeson, Seduction (Phantom Limb), 1985, gelatin silver print, 40.64 x 58.42 centimetres. © Lynn Hershman Leeson. Courtesy the artist and Bridget Donahue, New York.

3. Lynn Hershman Leeson, Seduction of a Cyborg, 1994, film still, 6 minutes. © Lynn Hershman Leeson. Courtesy the artist and Bridget Donahue, New York.

4. Lynn Hershman Leeson, *Seduction of a Cyborg*, 1994, film still, 6 minutes. © Lynn Hershman Leeson. Courtesy the artist and Bridget Donahue, New York.

I was interested in the duration of the scene where Steve is talking about how Hope, his wife, would want him to do a certain thing. It's a very emotional moment, and you keep the camera on him long enough for his eyes to redden and for him to wipe away a tear.

Well, what I like to do is start shooting before people know that the camera is on and keep the camera on after they think it's turned off. That's when you get the edges of reality. You can really see when an actor turns into acting from the real person and I like that edge.

In *The Electronic Diaries* (1984–2019), there are moments where you seem to shift from performance to something more resonant and emotional than that. Was there a script for the diaries?

It was 100% complete improvisation. I didn't write anything in advance. I didn't even know what I was thinking.

At one point you say that the framing is too close with the full face in the frame. Are you talking to a camera operator?

There is no camera operator. One of the reasons I did it was to teach myself how to do it. I had a monitor, so I was probably looking at the monitor when I said that.

I detected in *The Electronic Diaries* a series of different narratives about fear. Why do Dracula, Hitler and your father come up?

I think I was reaching for different metaphors to contact trauma and I was trying to be honest. I have found that the more honest you are, the more people connect with what you're saying. It resonates with more people than if you try to do something as artifice. The monsters of our culture, whether it's Dracula or Hitler or child abusers, are all related.

Were you aware how much you reveal in *The Diaries*? Early on you mention a connection between incest and weight gain, but it takes another hour before the full story emerges. Was that sense of displacement or delay something you consciously did, or did it just emerge in the way the story got told?

It just emerged. I was teaching at the time, and I would get the equipment from school. I'd shoot during the school year and edit all summer. This took place over a number of years, and once the parts were finished, they became part of the succession of the entire piece. I didn't re-edit it by taking something from later and putting it in earlier. They're more instincts about issues that are unresolved. Truly, I never thought they'd be shown. I'd seen it as a practice session so I could learn how to operate a camera and learn how to edit. I was shocked that people wanted to see them.



They're startling in their candour. They raise the question that runs throughout your work, and that is how much "you" do you want to put in? Are you always wondering how much Lynn there should be in the work that Lynn does?

Well, I think we have to speak from who we are. I have my own experience that I could portray or draw on. I can't draw on anybody else's experience and have any degree of authenticity. I work alone a lot so I'm around and I don't have to pay me.

When you say that you remember the smell of burning hair and burning flesh as a young child, I automatically connect that revelation to the larger issue of the Holocaust and to that other monster in history, beyond the monster who's in your home. Were you making that connection yourself?

I wasn't. I saw the relationship later, but I didn't at the time I was making it because it wasn't scripted out. I remember certain parts like the burning hair, but the issues of the Holocaust or of genetic trauma didn't surface until later. But it did all become relevant because it's an unfolding of the process of understanding who you are.

In one way, you go easy on your father. We know that he's an abuser, but you don't go much beyond that. You say you hope he'll rest in peace. What was your reason for not going further with revelations about your experience?

I didn't feel like I needed to. By the way, it wasn't just my father; there were more than him. But I just felt that it wasn't necessary. What was necessary was being able to say things out loud and not to villainize anyone in any profound way. Everybody has reasons for doing what they do. You have to have compassion, too. Compassion is part of getting over it, rather than getting angry at it.

Does your work make the viewer complicit? I'm thinking of *America's Finest* (1990–94), in which this gun is a camera. The way you set it up, the gun takes a picture of the operator and then that person finds themself in the sight of the weapon. Suddenly, the relationship between victim and

1. Lynn Hershman Leeson, Giggling
Machine, Self Portrait as Blonde, 1968,
wax, wig, makeup, feathers, plexiglass,
wood, sound, sensor, 41.9 x 41.9 x 33
centimetres. Photo: Robert Divers
Herrick. © Lynn Hershman Leeson.
Courtesy the artist and Bridget Donahue,
New York.

2. Lynn Hershman Leeson, Self Portrait as Another Person, 1965, wax, wig, makeup, tape recorder, plexiglass, wood, sensor, sound, 50.8 x 40 x 7.94 centimetres. © Lynn Hershman Leeson. Courtesy the artist and Bridget Donahue, New York.



victimizer gets confusing. Is that a deliberate strategy to make us understand the complexity of how we use technology and how it uses us? Yes, and it also suggests that the aggressor becomes victim. We're all complicit, nobody escapes.

#### Do you want to talk about your understanding of the complexity of technology and how it is both used and abused?

Well, technology is a tool for culture and I live in the Bay Area, so you breathe it here. I could not have done the work I've done if I lived in New York because I could find more programmers out of work here. Originally, we thought technology was going to create large communities and allow a different sense of collective thinking. Instead, it's been taken over by the Facebooks and wealthy companies who operate out of greed rather than compassion for the individual. It's been turned into an evil device. It's not the technology, it's the greed of the owners of these companies that has done that.

It cuts both ways, doesn't it? When the science that you featured in *Infinity Engine* (2014) deals with tissue engineering, it can replicate the skin of severely wounded soldiers with no possibility of rejection. But that same technology allows us to manufacture people with blond hair and blue eyes. Suddenly a critical race theory emerges that is different from the one we're talking about today. Are these reconcilable outcomes or is it simply that technology will be as good or bad as the people who are applying it?

I think the reason why people invent technologies is to do certain things, and it could be used in varying ways. You could have altruistic uses, like when the polio vaccine came out, Jonas Salk gave it away, it was free. But we have things now, like medicine for AIDS and other kinds of diseases, that cost a fortune. It all depends on who's in control and what they want to garner from it.

The other side of technology is how weirdly beautiful it can be. You've got glow-in-the-dark zebra fish and a fluorescent green jellyfish cat.





#### Can these advanced technologies bring new ways to make different and better art?

I think you can use technology as a tool for artmaking, but the technology doesn't make it better. It's really a question of having a vision and a purpose for why you're inventing that technology and how you're using it.

You have a line in *The Electronic Diaries* where a friend of yours says that "life is the ultimate editing process." For you, it seems that editing is the ultimate artful process.





I think you find it when you're editing it. I always say, "You write one film, you shoot another film, and then you edit a third film." That's why I like to start shooting in early light because you find all kinds of frames that you didn't intend or didn't know were there. You have to really look at it. Look what happened with The Jinx (2015), the miniseries about Robert Durst, when he actually confessed to the murders he had committed. No one had noticed it because he was saying it in a bathroom where all you saw was black, and the editor found it because the director insisted on looking at everything. If you don't do that, then you miss crucial things that magically come into the process of making a film. The things you don't intend are all part of it. These are gifts.

- 1. Lynn Hershman Leeson, *Roberta*Looking at Her Reflection, 1977, gelatin
  silver print, 10 x 8 inches. © Lynn
  Hershman Leeson. Courtesy the artist
  and Bridget Donahue, New York.
- 2. Lynn Hershman Leeson, Roberta
  Construction Chart #2, 1975, digital
  pigment print, 50 x 64 centimetres. ©
  Lynn Hershman Leeson. Courtesy Bridget
  Donahue, New York, and Altman Siegal,
- 3. Lynn Hershman Leeson, Roberta at Mirror (Lynn Hershman), 1974, gelatin silver print, 24.13 x 17.78 centimetres. Photo: Marc Brems Tatti. © Lynn Hershman Leeson. Courtesy Bridget Donahue, New York.
- 4. Lynn Hershman Leeson, Untitled from Adventure Series: Meet Mr. America from Roberta (Roberta waiting for a bus), 1978, chromogenic print, 8 x 10 inches. Justin Smith Purchase Foundation. © Lynn Hershman Leeson. Courtesy the artist and Bridget Donahue, New York.

### Did you look at over 12,000 minutes of film footage for !Women Art Revolution?

Yes. It took four and a half years to edit that film. I couldn't do anything else, I didn't do any art. All I did was edit the film. It was agonizing because there were so many stories I could have told and I felt that the women trusted me with their stories. It was only after the whole thing was put online at Stanford and made accessible that I allowed myself to finally tell one story because I knew all the rest could be found.

The poignant thing the film recognizes is that you can't do everything. As you say, any number of separate stories could spring out from the remarkable film that you did make. You could have looked more fully at the Ana Mendieta murder section, which you do touch on. Is it included because it indicates that the women's movement was divided on a number of issues, particularly that one?

Yes. At one point, I wanted to make a film about Ana but her family, especially her sister, wanted so much money it was impossible. They wanted money every time I showed the film. Other people are still trying to make a film about her, and the sister is asking for even more money now. I wanted to tell that story because I found it was shameful that people who proclaimed themselves to be feminists wouldn't stand up for her and wouldn't speak at the trial. I think Yvonne Rainer was the only one. Very few women wanted to put themselves at risk.

# Now that it has happened, how do you regard your sensational show at the New Museum? Everyone who has commented on the exhibition says how good it is, and what that does is amplify the sense that it shouldn't have taken so long to happen.

I love the one line that said it was "criminally belated." It's true because I didn't have my first retrospective until 2014. That was my very first book, and most of the work had never been shown. Eighty-five per cent of the show in Germany was never seen. Nobody would show my work. From 1984 to 2017, I didn't have any reviews. The critic in the Bay Area, his name is Kenneth Baker, refused to review anything I did. There was nothing I could do about it. When I was offered the New Museum show, they offered me the whole museum. I thought, well, I want to do something that won't overwhelm people. When I showed in Germany, I had something like 20,000 square feet. But the New Museum was fairly small, and people had never seen my work-even at the New Museum 65 per cent of that show had never been seen—and I didn't want to put in so much that they were overwhelmed.

The reaction couldn't have been better. We were all really surprised.

#### You said earlier on that you always felt like an outsider. Do you feel less an outsider now?

No, because on the heels of the great success I had in New York, I'm now in San Francisco, one person, working away in one room, trying to do this little film commissioned by a museum in Moscow. Maybe when I get back to New York after this is done in January, maybe then I'll feel like I'm less of an outsider.

## One other admirable aspect of your filmmaking is the writing. You seem to make careful choices about words.

I guess I'm at the age where you write memoirs. I'm trying to put one together and it'll take a couple of years. But I think writing is important. At one point I was an art critic. I wrote under a different name.

Well, you went under three different names in 1968—Gay Abandon, Herbert Goode and Juris Prudence. It's astonishing that no one was suspicious about them.

They are funny. I think you have to have a little bit of humour in your life.

One of the most amusing moments comes in your film *Seeing as Believing* (1992), when the daughter talks about her mother's promiscuity. The daughter says, "She'd even pick up a bum in a phone booth." So you cut to a scene where there's a bum in a phone booth and it's Pierre Restany, the great French art critic. Did you tell him that he was going to be the bum in a phone booth who gets picked up by Dawn Quixote?

I just told him to go in the phone booth. He happened to be in town for a day, so why not? He's such a great-looking character. So, for that hour he was a bum in a phone booth.

## In *The Electronic Diaries*, you say that you weren't really acting, but was some performance also involved in the process?

In the newer versions it's more self-conscious than it was earlier because I didn't think anybody would see it. I had a little bit more freedom to take chances. But later on, I was more conscious of how things were framed.

You do an interesting thing in the script for !WAR. You're talking about the moment when art and politics fused and this is the way you phrase it: "Fused and then transfused into the blocked cultural arteries of the time." I can't help but read a reference like that made by an artist who has

#### had heart problems as indicating a very careful choice of words.

Thank you, but as I say, I don't write these things in advance, and I'm always surprised when something emerges that I can use.

Then you have that wonderful line when you're talking about the romancing of cookies that's going on in the *Diaries* and you say, "You would ravish these morsels of caloric excess." "Ravish" is the perfect word because it makes the connection between desire and eating.

Well, it seemed right. I never recognize that things are good. That's one of the problems. I wish I did. I like things that work or that could be provocative, but I have trouble having confidence in the work and acknowledging the acceptance of it, although I know when something is good.

#### Are you serious in saying you have trouble having confidence in the work?

Yes. I don't trust any artist who has confidence because you do these things and if you're doing it right, you're putting yourself out on the line.

# Doesn't Tilda Swinton say at the beginning of *Tania Libre* (2017), your film about the Cuban artist Tania Bruguera, that "art is a vulnerable state to be in"?

Yes. As I say, if you're doing it right, you're taking chances and you're bringing up issues and doing things in ways that nobody has. You do put yourself out there on the edge and you could be laughed at, so sometimes it's not easy. Plus, you never know how people are going to react, like when I made work using sound in the *Breathing Machine* (1967); I had to wait 35 years until somebody would exhibit it. I hadn't realized that nobody had ever made work with sound before. These were pioneering the first time they were done, but they scared people because nobody knew what they were.

# You talked about the radicalization of nearly everything in the Bay Area in the '60s. I'm interested in knowing whether you think that radical disposition has stayed with you?

Definitely. I think it's about autonomy, and having an autonomous being was radical. At the time of the free speech movement, it never occurred to anybody that individuals could have power, or that they didn't have to listen to the government or law enforcement. The Black Panthers were really a step towards the individual freedom of having a voice. All the things that were going on there were basically about claiming your own rights as a human being to choose the society that you wanted to

live in and making social changes, which nobody had done before.

In your use of technology, you've been ahead of everybody. Were you even running conscious risks? I'm interested in knowing your attitude towards making things new or making them in a new way.

Well, it's thrilling to be able to do something that hasn't been done before. As I say, in the Bay Area there are a lot of programmers who hear about what's happening. If I want to make something with which the audience could directly interact, then I find a way to do it and I find somebody who's doing that. Lorna (1979) came about because I read about a company that was making video discs or a company that had a test screen so you could actually set the characters. We pretty much invented how to do that; or the idea in 1998 of having a chatbot that used AI. That was the first one and it was 11 years before Siri. That was particularly hard. I found programmers all over the Internet who worked together trying to build that. It mainly comes out of the idea. If you're aware and you have an idea that something could happen, then it's only a matter of finding the ways to make it happen.

# In *The Infinity Engine* you're collaborating with geneticists. You seem to have a special instinct for finding the collaborators who can help you realize what it is you want to do in whatever art form you're using.

It's luck and persistence. I had to write to George Church, the father of synthetic biology who helped me convert my research into DNA, for three and a half years before he would even see me. And that was a 20-minute meeting. You have to convince people that you know what they do, not what you do. Also, it helps that I understand a little bit of science so I could talk to them. When I interviewed the guy who did the first bio printer, his secretary said, "Don't worry if he walks out. 60 Minutes flew in a whole crew and he left after 10 minutes." We talked for an hour and a half because he realized that I was serious and that I understood the importance of what he was doing. You do have to establish your credibility.

#### Were you looking at other women artists to see what they were doing, and would your work be a response to what they had done?

In the Bay Area there wasn't a feminist movement. There was no Womanhouse, there was no community of women artists. There was, in Los Angeles and New York, and of course it was before the Internet. If you wanted to communicate, if you

- Lynn Hershman Leeson, First Person Plural, from series "The Electronic Diaries," 1984–2019, 4K video, 83 minutes. © Lynn Hershman Leeson.
  Courtesy the artist and Bridget Donahue, New York.
- 2. Lynn Hershman Leeson, *The Electronic Diaries: Confessions of a Chameleon, Binge, First Person Plural, Shadow's Song, and Stay Human,* 1984–2019, 4K video, 83 minutes. © Lynn Hershman Leeson. Courtesy the artist and Bridget Donabue. New York
- 3. Lynn Hershman Leeson, installation view, The Electronic Diaries: Confessions of a Chameleon, Binge, First Person Plural, Shadow's Song, and Stay Human, 1984–2019, 4K video, 83 minutes. © Lynn Hershman Leeson. Courtesy the artist and Bridget Donahue, New York.





wanted to have a meeting or even let people know things were happening, you had to do it through the mail. There was no way to see simultaneously what people were doing.

You started doing place settings with cups and plates in the early 1970s. They were called *Performance Dinners* and they were in advance of what Judy Chicago did in *The Dinner Party* (1974–79). Hers is obviously a much more ambitious project than what you were doing, but did she have you in her sights when she started her piece? Yes. I regret I didn't put those in the New Museum. I wanted to but the curator didn't want to put them in. Maybe someday I'll have a real retrospective and they'll be included. But yes, Judy Chicago knew about those dinners and she knew about the plates. But she was more entrepreneurial and aggressive.

Setting a table and the apparatus of homemaking have been used by women artists in Meret Oppenheim's Fur Breakfast (1936) and in Martha Rosler's Semiotics of the Kitchen (1975). Was your engagement with the table setting part of an engagement with the history of women's artmaking? Definitely.

There's a whole other narrative. !WAR indicates how many stories there are that still need to be told. It's like the haiku to the longer novel of what needs to happen in getting out that full history.



That's exactly what Gloria Steinem said. She said every frame in the film was a novel.

## Is there more work for you to do in that regard? Or are you done with that particular approach to the history of feminist artmaking?

I thought I had to put the history out, it's the only history that was done ever with interviews of these people, talking straight about who they were over time. I don't feel that I have to do it again. Other people will do other parts to get what they want, but I feel that I've made my contribution.

#### Your drawings are amazing. Where do they come from?

I used to look at Leonardo's drawings. I spent a lot of time in the Cleveland Museum, looking at Ingres and Leonardo and Daumier. That museum was the place that saved me.

I'm interested in the artists you refer to; in *Infinity Engine* you've got Yves Klein blue and a kind of Duchampian window. Then in *Seduction of a Cyborg* (1994), I noticed three things. The woman with the wrapped head looks like a figure out of de Chirico; the image on a TV screen with hooded figures kissing is Magritte's painting *The Lovers* (1928); and finally, the latent tears that fall from her eyes are like Man Ray's *Glass Tears* (1930). Why was so much surrealism forming a visual pattern in *Seduction of a Cyborg*?

I don't even know. I shot a lot of that before I even wrote the film. I just liked the images. Then I got to shoot at a place in France that was doing the first HD editing, so they were able to do things like that teardrop. I think it was just fun. But I'm a big fan of Man Ray. I got to see him once alive, and I also got to meet Duchamp once. Also, I was a friend of Arturo Schwarz, who wrote books on them both.

You say that your edges are porous, but even when they're more structured, you seem to break out of them. When you did the windows for Bonwit Teller in 1976, there is a window where the mannequin's hand actually comes through the glass. It's not going to be contained.

It was the same thing as the free speech movement. You don't have to be behind glass or behind bars; you can actually step out of the containment into a different kind of freedom.

You do a self-portrait called *Homage to Fontana* (1966), which is really about fragmentation. Did you pick Fontana because of the cuts, because his world is also wounded and broken?

Yes, I have several like that. Those are early-on portraits when I was doing more traditional painting.



Lynn Hershman Leeson, Performance
Dinners, Ceramic Plate with 6 Mouths
with Tongue Out, 1976, ceramic painted,
2 x 10 inches. © Lynn Hershman Leeson.
Courtesy & Austin Conkey Collection.

The question of proper recognition puts a film like *Conceiving Ada* (1997) into a different relief. One of the motivations behind that film must be that you wanted to see Lovelace recognized for the extraordinary thinker and scientist she was. You're involved in a process of retrieval.

It's true. I first heard about her accidentally, and I couldn't find even a single book about her. There was no information, which is astounding, considering how much she's done. But she's not alone. I think the Internet is helping to let people know about these contributions.

One of the things that struck me about a film like *Teknolust* (2002), for all of its technological sophistication, is that it's an endearing, old-fashioned love story.

I thought so. That's what life is. Life is falling in love, it's being alive, appreciating both, and having a sense of humour.

### Well, this is anxiety provoking, the way that you operate.

Cindy Sherman and so many other people who were mainly in the generation after mine tested things for the camera. They didn't take the risks and they didn't do it in real life. I think that's the difference between what I do and what they do. There were more performances for the camera rather than investigations of the other side of living.  $\blacksquare$ 

Robin Pogrebin, "A Venice Biennale Informed by the Pandemic Will Spotlight Women", *The New York Times*, February 2, 2022 <a href="https://www.nytimes.com/2022/02/arts/design/venice-biennale-alemani-women-art.html">https://www.nytimes.com/2022/02/02/arts/design/venice-biennale-alemani-women-art.html</a>

#### The New York Times

### A Venice Biennale Informed by the Pandemic Will Spotlight Women

For the 59th edition of the longest-running survey of contemporary art, Cecilia Alemani selected mostly female artists, many of color, from around the world.



**By Robin Pogrebin** Feb. 2, 2022 Updated 9:14 a.m. ET





Image from a new video by Lynn Hershman Leeson, "Logic Paralyzes the Heart" (2021). The work will be featured in the Venice Biennale this spring. Lynn Hershman Leeson/Altman Siegel, San Francisco and Bridget Donahue. New York

In the two years that the New York-based curator <u>Cecilia Alemani</u> had to organize the 59th edition of the <u>Venice Biennale</u> — during which the pandemic forced a one-year delay and 400 studio visits had to happen on Zoom — the world changed around her.

People grappled with large existential questions about the purpose of life, problems of inequity and the health of the planet. There were moments of dystopian doom and hopeful reinvention.

These issues informed Alemani's iteration of the Biennale — the world's longest-running major survey of contemporary art — the details of which were revealed on Wednesday.

There is a majority of female and gender-nonconforming artists, a choice that Alemani, in her official announcement, said reflects "a deliberate rethinking of man's centrality in the history of art and contemporary culture."

Alemani, the director and chief curator of High Line Art, took as a starting point the 2017 children's picture book, "The Milk of Dreams," by the Surrealist painter Leonora Carrington, which features characters like Humbert the Beautiful, who befriends a crocodile, and Señor Mustache Mustache, who has two faces, eats flies and dances.

These stories of transformation, first painted on the walls of Carrington's home in Mexico City, inspired Alemani's vision for the Biennale. "Carrington was talking about how do we define life, what distinguishes us from other creatures, can we imagine a world in which the body can be transformed and become something else?" Alemani said in an interview.

She organized the biennale around three themes inspired by the artists themselves. The first is the representation of how bodies can transform. In a variety of mediums and techniques, artists "are trying to expand outside the canvas," Alemani said, in some cases with mechanical devices that interact with various forms of life...

...The second theme is the relationship between individuals and technology — "how the culture is processing polarities between, on the one side, thinking that technology can make our lives and our bodies better, eternal and invincible," Alemani said, "and on the other side, fearing machines taking over and the presence of artificial intelligence."

That fear was exacerbated by Covid-19, she added, which highlighted "how mortal and finite we are. In a time when we would love to be with others and to share with others, all of our relationships are being mediated through digital screens."

A new video by the media artist and filmmaker Lynn Hershman Leeson explores the birth of artificial organisms, while the Korean artist Geumhyung Jeong conjures robotic bodies that can be reassembled...

Cassie Packard, "Lynn Hershman Leeson, in All Her Cyborg Glory, Gets a Retrospective", *Hyperallergic*, August 2, 2021 <a href="https://hyperallergic.com/664541/lynn-hershman-leeson-in-all-her-cyborg-glory/">https://hyperallergic.com/664541/lynn-hershman-leeson-in-all-her-cyborg-glory/</a>

### **HYPERALLERGIC**

Art Reviews

### Lynn Hershman Leeson, in All Her Cyborg Glory, Gets a Retrospective

A foremother to young new media artists working today, Hershman Leeson has blazed a trail for more than five decades.







Lynn Hershman Leeson, *Seduction of a Cyborg* (1994), video, color, sound; 5:52 min (image courtesy the artist; Bridget Donahue Gallery, New York; and Altman Siegel, San Francisco)

Artist Lynn Hershman Leeson began divulging her personal traumas and anxieties on video in 1984, one year after the release of what is widely considered the first commercial camcorder and nearly a decade before MTV's *The Real World* popularized the reality TV confessional. In intimate recordings interspersed with news clips, she discussed instances of childhood abuse, a brain tumor diagnosis, and more, her face occasionally self-replicating and splintering off into smaller screens, suggesting a mediated self both formed and deformed by its own iterative archiving. The artist's most epic project, *The Electronic* 

*Diaries* (1984-2019), occupied Hershman Leeson for decades, capturing a changing person, in a changing world, recorded on changing technology. Increasingly, the *Diaries* incorporated her conversations with leading scientists and bioethicists about recent developments in technology, namely genetic engineering, that might open avenues for new kinds of personhood.

What is a self, anyway? How is it constructed or accumulated? To what extent can we edit, augment, replicate, extend, or even vacate it, and what might happen if we did? These questions animate some of the most exciting work — including the excerpted *Diaries* — in the octogenarian's first New York museum solo show, *Lynn Hershman Leeson: Twisted* at the New Museum. The survey, which occupies the second floor of the museum and — somewhat disjointedly — one of its ground level galleries, is criminally belated. A foremother to young new media artists working today, Hershman Leeson has blazed a trail for more than five decades, engaging materially and conceptually with cutting-edge technologies ranging from interactive video to artificial intelligence to genetic modification.



Lynn Hershman Leeson, *Binge* (still) (1986-87) from *The Electronic Diaries, (1984-2019*), video, color, sound; 9:09 min (image courtesy the artist; Bridget Donahue, New York; and Altman Siegel, San Francisco)

Every superhero needs an origin story, I suppose, and *Twisted* places great emphasis on Hershman Leeson's. The show opens with scores of the artist's early drawings and collages from the 1960s and '70s. These rarely displayed drawings open a window onto her artistic development, though they also occupy substantial real estate in the modestly sized survey. (I deeply felt the absence, for example, of the historically significant "Lorna" (1983-4), one of the first artworks ever to use interactive laserdisc technology, and the recent "Shadow Stalker" (2018-2021), which deals with data mining and pressing algorithmic problems, including predictive policing.)

Many of the drawings are cyborgian in theme, using a combination of diagrammatic drawing and transparent or translucent materials — tracing paper, Plexiglas, thinned watercolor — to explore our imagined inner machinery, exposing bodies filled with gears. These figures are by and large gendered female, a feature that would hold true about work made throughout the artist's career. From AI bots to water purification systems, much of Hershman Leeson's oeuvre has simultaneously paid homage to the radical creative power of the female body and alluded to the thorny widespread feminization of "service" bots. Around the time that she made the drawings, Hershman Leeson was pregnant and living with cardiomyopathy; an oxygen tent helped her breathe. Her early *Breathing Machine* sculptures (1965-68), which are interspersed with the drawings, feature bewigged, flattened faces — cast in wax from the artist's own visage — that unsettlingly breathe, laugh, or talk from where they are housed under Plexiglas, or in one

case, inside a small cage. In 1972, one of the sculptures, "Self Portrait as Another Person" (1969), was removed from an exhibition at the University of Berkeley because it featured sound, which drew the ire of a curator.



Lynn Hershman Leeson, "CyberRoberta" (1996), custom-made doll, clothing, glasses, webcam, surveillance camera, mirror, original programming, and telerobotic head-rotating system, aprox. 17 ¾ x 17 ¾ x 7 ½ inches (image courtesy the artist; Bridget Donahue Gallery, New York; and Altman Siegel, San Francisco)

Hershman Leeson has expressed that *Roberta Breitmore*, her private performance as another person from about 1973 to 1978, grew out of this curatorial erasure and the institutional myopia that it signaled. Every element of Breitmore, from her feminine clothing and hallmark blonde wig to her entrenched neuroses and persistent loneliness, was carefully selected and embodied by the artist. In *Twisted*, prints of Breitmore's face, segmented as if she were a diagram of choice beef cuts, demonstrate how the avatar was "constructed" with heavy makeup. Breitmore was seemingly

fictional, until she wasn't: she registered for a driver's license, opened a bank account, and rented an apartment. As Breitmore interacted with more people — speaking with a therapist, interviewing potential roommates, and eventually spawning additional Breitmores — the project propagated itself, going viral *avant la lettre*. Masses of ephemera in vitrines point to Breitmore's solidification as she accrued, alone and collaboratively, proof of identity: a checkbook, a diary excerpt, a psychiatrist's note, even dental X-rays.



Lynn Hershman Leeson, *The Infinity Engine: Lynn Hershman DNA*, 2018. Digital print, 10 1/2 x 7 in (26.7 x 17.8 cm) (image courtesy the artist; Bridget Donahue, New York; and Altman Siegel, San Francisco)

Though Breitmore was ritually "exorcized" in Italy in 1978, she is chillingly reanimated in miniature in "CyberRoberta" (1996), a telerobotic doll of the avatar. Part of the *Dollie Clone Series* (1995-1998), begun before Dolly the sheep was successfully cloned in 1996, "CyberRoberta" is displayed alongside a 1995 doll based on Hershman Leeson herself. The dolls have webcams in their eyes — the first commercial webcam had just been released in 1994 — that observe gallery-goers and generate a live feed of surveillance images on a dedicated website. By clicking an online "eye-con," viewers have the option to swivel the dolls' heads, directing their watchful gaze elsewhere. "Tillie's eyes can extend YOUR Vision!" the website proclaims, suggesting that we are now not only cyborgs but also collaborators in the surveillance scheme. Have we been empowered or disempowered? Are we playing or being played? The frequent wisdom of Hershman Leeson's work stems from the fact that she lets us come to our own conclusions, leaving space for the enormous complexity that accompanies contemporary personhood and the mesh of networks — only some of which are technological — through which we perform, explore, and exert it.

Several galleries are given over to *The Infinity Engine* (2014-2018), a busy multimedia installation modeled on a genetics lab, featuring an aquarium of genetically modified fish, GMO-themed wallpaper, and bioprinted ear scaffolding. In video interviews, some major figures in the field — nearly all white men — explain and extol the possibilities of bioengineering. Collaborator, marauder, vigilante, informant: our artist interloper wears many hats. Behind the peepshow window of a locked lab door, two vials from 2018 form a bio-conceptual self-portrait. One holds a custom-made "LYNNHERSHMAN" antibody, while the other contains the artist's vast archive — including the *Diaries* and years of genetics research — encoded in DNA, which I learn can reliably store data for millennia. I'm glad that so much of her will be sticking around; the art world is better for it.



Lynn Hershman Leeson, "Seduction" (1985), black and white photograph, 22 x 29 % inches (image courtesy the artist; Bridget Donahue Gallery, New York; and Altman Siegel, San Francisco)

Lynn Hershman Leeson: Twisted *continues at the New Museum (235 Bowery, Lower East Side, Manhattan) through October 3.* The exhibition was curated by Margot Norton.

Johanna Fateman, "Goings on About Town: Lynn Hershman Leeson", New Yorker Magazine, August 9, 2021, 7

ART

#### Lynn Hershman Leeson

The dystopian prescience of this pioneering American artist stands apart from that of other Cassandras: she isn't afraid to embrace new technologies that raise challenging ethical questions. "Twisted," Hershman Leeson's current retrospective at the New Museum, gathers together fifty years of her experimentations in the Bay Area, where she is based. Cast-wax masks made in the sixties—at once macabre and delightful—breathe when triggered by motion detectors, prefiguring the artist's long-standing interest in surveillance and interactivity. More recently, in 2017, she created two antibodies, working with a scientist at Novartis Pharmaceuticals. Between these endeavors lies an enthralling, varied body of work—drawing, sculpture, filmmaking, Internet art —united by her idiosyncratic futurism. As technology has evolved, so, too, have both the look and the content of Hershman Leeson's art; of the many through lines in her retrospective, several are very intentionally highlighted. From 1973 to 1978, Hershman Leeson created the fictional identity Roberta Breitmore through a series of public performances, beauty rituals, and bureaucratic records. Some forty years later, Roberta was resurrected in the form of the artist's genetically engineered antibody ERTA, a poetic redemption of Roberta's "life," which was initially conceived as a feminist deconstruction of identity.

— <u>Johanna Fateman</u>

Madeleine Seidel, "Lynn Hershman Leeson is the original cyborg artist", *i-d UK*, July 16, 2021. https://i-d.vice.com/en\_uk/article/n7bq48/lynn-hershman-leeson-twisted-interview



ART | By madeleine seidel | 16 July 2021, 4:00am

# Lynn Hershman Leeson is the original cyborg artist

Ahead of her solo show 'Twisted' at The New Museum, the artist reflects on the lack of boundaries between our technology and ourselves.

"I think all my art is a forebearer to what people are doing now," says <u>artist Lynn Hershman Leeson</u> with a light chuckle and a knowing smile in her Upper East Side apartment earlier this summer. Despite the sweeping nature of this statement, those who know Lynn — who has been working as an <u>artist</u> since the 1960s — know that this couldn't be more true.

Although she's not as well-known outside of the art world, Lynn is a godmother to — and harbinger of — a new legion of <u>contemporary artists</u> using her preferred mediums of <u>artificial intelligence</u>, the internet and performance to interrogate how <u>technology</u> is critical to the way we craft our public personas, illustrating the uncomfortable fact that the boundaries between ourselves and our <u>technology</u> are almost non-existent. Now, nearly 60 years into her artistic practice, <u>The New Museum</u> has curated *Twisted*, a career-spanning exhibition of Lynn's work, making it the artist's first — and woefully overdue — solo show in <u>New York City</u>.



LYNN HERSHMAN LEESON, "SEDUCTION OF A CYBORG", 1994. VIDEO, COLOR, SOUND; 552 MIN.

The groundwork for *Twisted* began years ago as the show was originally slated to open in June 2020. Lynn sees the postponement as a "gift," allowing her and the exhibition's curator Margot Norton to refine the layout and artworks further. For Margot, whose research on Lynn began during her graduate work at Columbia University, the focus of the show was Lynn's inquiry into the <u>cyborg</u> — the half natural, half technological entities that have always been present in her work. In an interview days before the exhibition's opening, Margot told me that she and Lynn "were thinking about the figure of the cyborg and how that has played through Lynn's practice since the very beginning. And especially, that idea of technology, the human body and that intertwined relationship that has become really ever more present with time but has remained a steadfast idea in her work."

As an artist, Lynn Hershman Leeson has been at the forefront of combining art, technology and performance since the mid-60s. Growing up in a household that introduced her to both the arts and biology, Lynn began to experiment with drawings and small wax figures while taking art classes at UCLA. Her studies were interrupted by a lifethreatening pregnancy complication called cardiomyopathy, and the intense physical pain and medical interventions that she experienced revived her interest in the delineations between the natural world and technology.



LYNN HERSHMAN LEESON, "SELF-PORTRAIT AS BLOND"

The sculptural works and drawings that she produced following her hospital stay were subversive and disturbing, made all the more alienating to audiences by the fact that Lynn was utilizing technologies like sound recording that were so rarely used in an art context. These works, entitled "Breathing Machines" (1965-68), are the first pieces one sees when they enter *Twisted*. They are a series of warped wax casts Lynn made of her face in her kitchen. Some of them are adorned with wigs or other ephemera, but the standout pieces include tape recorders that play a track of heavy, labored breath.

When Lynn first exhibited these haunting pieces, she was met with derision from the art world. First shown in 1972 at the Berkeley Museum at the University of California, Berkeley, as part of <u>a showcase of female artists</u>, the "Breathing Machines" were met with such ire from the museum's curator that the show closed a day after its opening. Lynn says that the issue was that sound art had not been recognized by the art world as a serious medium: "nobody would show ["Breathing Machines"] — nobody considered them to be art."



LYMN HERSHMAN LEESON, "ROBERTA'S CONSTRUCTION CHART 1", 1975. ARCHIVAL DIGITAL PRINT AND DYE TRANSFER. 58 X 23 58 IN (90.5 X 60 CM).

In the <u>70s</u> and beyond, Lynn would continue her experiments with technology and medium, producing countless performances, films and scientific collaborations that would push the boundaries of art-making while interrogating the blurred boundaries between the natural and synthetic worlds as technology advanced through the decades. Margot describes this as "not an approach to technology as being something other, but being very intertwined with our existence." This connection is reflected in the DNA-esque double helix structure of *Twisted*'s galleries that branch off into two paths: Lynn's solo performances, films and sculptures, and her current projects that look at the cyborg from a lens of bioethics.

An entire room of the exhibition is dedicated to "Roberta Breitmore", an extended performance piece performed by Lynn and others from 1972 to 1979. Over the course of seven years, the artist lived and worked under a persona by the name of Roberta Breitmore in San Francisco. Lynn's performance was the act of creating a composite figure of a woman from scratch and letting her evolve through her interactions in the world. Roberta was, for all intents and purposes, a real woman living in the city — she had a job, roommate, a bank account and a psychologist. Eventually, the idea and performance of Roberta was so realized by Lynn that other performers inhabited the persona as well, crafting a small group of Robertas all existing simultaneously.

Described by Lynn as "becoming witness to a stereotype," crafting "Roberta Breitmore" was almost like creating an analog version of artificial intelligence: as Roberta interacted with her surroundings, the behaviors Lynn and her fellow performers had encoded into the Roberta persona changed over time. The remnants of this performance are the nearly encyclopedic paper trails of forms, photographs, diaries and bills left behind by those involved in the performance — analogous to the biological material or codes that Leeson would use to create the other pieces in her exhibition such as the online artificial intelligence project "Agent Ruby" (1998-2002) that still functions as a chat-bot or "The Infinity Engine: Room #8" (2018-2021), a project in which the digital information of *Twisted* was encoded in binary and translated into DNA molecules.

Lynn's earliest experiments with the internet and artificial intelligence were once dismissed by the art world, but now, everyone else is finally catching up. With the pandemic making gallery space inaccessible and moving day-to-day interactions to digital realms, the art market and digital artists are embracing the technologies that Lynn has championed for decades. Margot says that "it's eye opening to see... how early on she was interested in engaging with media that was completely not embraced in an art context — wasn't even known in an arts context." In Twisted's accompanying catalogue, one of the foremost practitioners of internet art, Martine Syms, writes an ode to Lynn,

noting the importance of her video pieces such as "The Electronic Diaries" (1984-2019) in discussing the persona and "[showing] how a person can become a character. How one might play into a stereotype to be legible. How I might perform an archetype to be seen. It is a public intimacy. We need more of that."

For many, *Twisted* will be an introduction to Lynn Hershman Leeson's vital work, but the effects of Lynn's work are already visible everywhere, from <u>NFTs</u> to digital exhibitions and beyond. It is impossible to contain her influence to a single exhibition because the truth of her art — that technology is an extension of natural life, bringing with it all of humankind's possibility for good, evil and ambivalence — is all around us.

"Lynn Hershman Leeson with Monika Fabijanska", *The Brooklyn Rail*, (July), p, 17-22 https://brooklynrail.org/2021/07/art/LYNN-HERSHMAN-LEESON-with-Monika-Fabijanska

**Art** In Conversation



# Lynn Hershman Leeson with Monika Fabijanska "Artists have to be optimists and believe that their efforts will make a difference."



Portrait of Lynn Hershman Leeson, pencil on paper by Phong H. Bui.

Lynn Hershman Leeson: Twisted at the New Museum is the first museum solo exhibition in New York of one of the most important American new media and feminist artists, who has long enjoyed recognition in Europe, and more recently, on the West Coast, where she lives and works. Her feature films, Conceiving Ada, Teknolust, and Strange Culture, all starring Tilda Swinton, will stream on Criterion Channel beginning August 1.

During her 60 year career, Hershman Leeson made pioneering contributions to performance, photography, video, interactive net-based media and robotic art using artificial intelligence and virtual reality. Most recently she created a DNA-based artwork. Her works have raised questions about biological and artificial manifestations of identity, the impact of digital technologies and biotechnology on the human body and privacy, about digital rights as human rights, etc.

We usually meet at a café but this interview took place in October of the pandemic year, on Zoom. The screen froze immediately, but we could hear each other and didn't want to break the conversation. I have worked twice with Hershman Leeson, secretly nicknaming her a haiku artist—for the brevity of her statements that carry profound meanings. After I transcribed our conversation, we kept the exchange going and Lynn generously offered more thoughts. The conversation largely followed the works chosen for the exhibition, and feminist themes in her art and films—femininity as a social construct, women's recognition and the notion of genius, and her contributions to feminist historiography. Lynn discussed complex ideas behind her pioneering use of emerging technologies, from her interest in cyborgs and post-humanism since the 1960s to recent works created in genetic labs. We talked about the ethics of science and ecology.



Lynn Hershman Leeson, *Seduction of a Cyborg*, 1994. Video, color, sound; 5:52 min. Courtesy the artist; Bridget Donahue Gallery, New York; and Altman Siegel, San Francisco.

**Monika Fabijanska (Rail):** The occasion for our conversation is your exhibition at the New Museum, which will at last give New Yorkers the opportunity to see some of your major projects. The exhibition begins with a group of your early drawings of bodies showing internal organs, and wax sculptures of body parts (1963–71). Where does the fragmentation of the body come from?

**Lynn Hershman Leeson:** I think that at the time I myself was fragmented—there are times in your life when you don't coalesce and struggle with being unformed, raw, unfinished. But I also think that one can create a gesture of representation that conjures an essence that is often more vital, more truthful than a polished inanimate object that has no scars or flaws gnawing for completion.

**Rail:** Unusual things happen with these fragmented parts; very early on you started to make them alive. What year did you make your first breathing sculpture? Was it the first "live" artwork that you created?

**Leeson:** Yes, that was around 1965, and they continued from there. Sound was always a way of extending these works in time. I thought sound was part of drawing. I was surprised to learn recently that these were actually the first

sculptures to incorporate sound and media as an essential element of their composition. I did faces that talked, giggled, or breathed for the next five years. They had sensors and knew when someone was looking at them, and the sound was an active form of engagement, a way to begin a conversation. Some of these wax pieces had wicks, and were lit and transformed into a performed suicides that I documented to record transformations and transitional evolutions.



Lynn Hershman Leeson, *Self Portrait as Blonde*, 1968. Wax, wig, feathers, Plexiglas, wood, sensor, and sound. Courtesy the artist; Bridget Donahue Gallery, New York; and Altman Siegel, San Francisco

**Rail:** Why did you want to have this golemic touch; to make your sculptures alive?

**Leeson:** It is a survival mechanism. Around the same time I experienced heart failure. Under oxygen for months, you mostly hear your breath, so breath became a way to reach out into the real world—you breathe out and you breathe in, and your body ingests information.

**Rail:** There is also a series of wax body parts that are not even whole face masks but parts of a face, and they are not animated. Are they earlier?

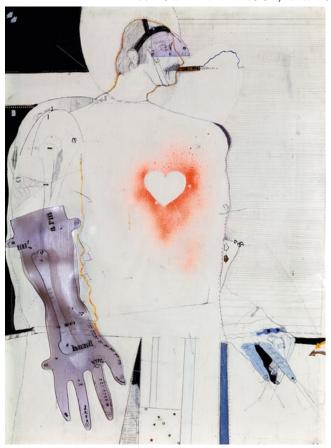
**Leeson:** I did those and then put the sound to them, and later they grew into faces. Body parts, faces, full bodies, sound —no one would show them because they did not fit into any prescribed category so they lived under beds or in closets for several decades. They made a grand entrance in 2014 in the exhibition *Civic Radar* which Peter Weibel curated for ZKM.

Rail: It caught my attention that for a good portion of your career, you had nothing to do with art galleries ...

Leeson: Not because I didn't try!

**Rail:** I mean, hotels, department stores, pavements—you showed everywhere!

**Leeson:** My most important work came on the cusp of disaster. I was thrown out of a museum for using sound and media in the early 1970s, and figured, who needs museums! So I showed everywhere else. There was no precedent for many of my works from the breathing machines to *Lorna* and on, so galleries and museums found it was not worth showing.



Lynn Hershman Leeson, *X-Ray Man*, 1970. Acrylic, pencil, Letraset, and Plexiglas on wood, 41 ½ x 29 ½ in (105.5 x 75 cm). Private Collection, The Netherlands, Courtesy Paul Van Esch & Partners, Amsterdam. Courtesy the artist; Bridget Donahue Gallery, New York; and Altman Siegel, San Francisco. Photo © ZKM | Center for Art and Media, photo: Tobias Wootton

**Rail:** Yet when you did *Non-Credited Americans* at Wanamaker's department store (1981), ICA Philadelphia was behind it, so at some point you did secure institutional support for your projects.

**Leeson:** I did 25 Windows at Bonwit Teller in New York with Alanna Heiss (1976) and they saw that. But I had very little art world support for my work until very recently.

**Rail:** Among your early drawings, there are these cyborgs, where machine parts are embedded in women's bodies, men's bodies, even a horse, interspersed with their internal organs. Does this idea come from your experience in the hospital and realizing that we are complex machinery?

**Leeson:** I think it is also about reproductive technologies. We are reproductive and I felt early on that we were becoming partners with machines. The time was ripe for a cyborgian embrace that would enhance our evolution.

**Rail:** Were you already a mother when you were sick?

**Leeson:** No. I was pregnant.

**Rail:** Well, taking it from the idea of motherhood—is the motherboard the beginning of your interest in technology? Could one look at it this way?

**Leeson:** No. When I was maybe 15 years old I did a drawing on newsprint, you know, on something that wouldn't last. I tried to xerox it, but it diabolically became caught inside that early mechanism. I was horrified and thought the piece would be ruined. Ink spilled onto this mutated and ripped drawing. It was not what I expected, but it was a new kind of progeny, a dynamic merging of human and machine. When I stopped thinking of the idea of what that drawing was, and began to realize what it might become as a collaboration with technology, I realized that this partnership was inevitable, vital, alive, and reflected the time we were living in.

**Rail:** That brings us to the idea of chance. Chance and control are opposites but you have an ongoing interest in both.

**Leeson:** I always begin shooting before actors know the camera is on, and keep shooting after the scene ends. That usually discarded footage can be a wonderful blur of reality. You can actually see actors come out of their role and become something else. And to me, that is more interesting, it's like taking the frame off and seeing this hidden truth that people don't usually allow others to see.



Lynn Hershman Leeson, *Roberta's Construction Chart 1*, 1975. Archival digital print and dye transfer, 35 5/8 x 23 5/8 in (90.5 x 60 cm). Courtesy the artist; Bridget Donahue Gallery, New York; and Altman Siegel, San Francisco.

**Rail:** I think this interest can be traced back to your early performance, *Roberta Breitmore* (1972–78). You told me that you were inspired by European postwar theater, specifically, Tadeusz Kantor.

**Leeson:** Yes, that really changed everything for me.

**Rail:** In what way?

**Leeson:** Essentially, it was the idea that art could go beyond the frame, beyond expectations, and could destroy boundaries and interact with an audience in a profound way. The idea of Kantor going into the audience, of things that started on the stage only to break out of it to surprise the audience, was totally radical at the time. Stepping in and out of characters was really revolutionary. I saw them in a basement in Edinburgh and was overwhelmed by their courage and boldness.

**Rail:** I checked what Kantor performed in Edinburgh over the years—I found that you were at the festival in 1973.

**Leeson:** So that's when ... I was only there once.

**Rail:** In 1973 he showed *Lovelies and Dowdies*. The performance took place in the "Cloakroom"—the audience was never let through the door with a sign "Theatre Entrance." The actors ran in and out from behind it, declaiming only fragments of the play. Kantor constantly interfered with their performance, sat in the audience, only to get up and control the action again. I found out that you moderated the discussion between Tadeusz Kantor and Joseph Beuys, who participated in one of the performances, and you wrote a review of it for the British *SI*!

**Leeson:** Right, under the name "Prudence Juris" I think. And Hans Hollein was also on that panel.

**Rail:** Control and chance play enormous roles in science. Your interview with the father of synthetic biology, Dr. George Church, as part of your *The Infinity Engine*, is scary. You are trying to engage him in a conversation about the ethical responsibility of science. At the beginning, he resists it, fully embracing the possibilities that science provides, but eventually he does talk about ethics. He is sure he is in control, but then admits everything is ultimately determined by the global economy, governments, coincidences ...

Leeson: Luck, yes.

Rail: Luck ... But then, this is also how nature evolves, how everything mutates—by chance. ...

**Leeson:** We are now privileging the idea of symbiosis introduced by Lynn Margulis whose brilliant work was sadly not taken seriously for decades. She introduced the idea of global simultaneity of information. Prior to now we had a very linear view of ecology and how we develop as a species, how anything develops. And that's not the way it happens. Like trees talk to each other through their root systems simultaneously all over the world, things are very often invented at the same time around the globe.

**Rail:** *The Infinity Engine* is a complex, multi-room interactive installation, a simulacrum of a genetics lab you created in collaboration with scientists and which includes bio-printed specimens, crystals of the *LYNNHERSHMAN Antibody* created with Novartis, and your archive bio-stored in your DNA—a pioneering DNA-based artwork.<sup>2</sup> I used to say that you are an artist who lives in the future. But you say that you actually live in the present, and it is us who live in the past. What can collaboration between an artist and scientists give to today's society?

**Leeson:** It provides a fuller view of possibilities. I think that the best scientists are extremely creative but they have a different language and different system of research. Working together we have often created a new language and broader range of information. I think formal disciplines are very restrictive. They are steeped in boundaries. So if you have two people who trust each other and are capable of brainstorming with different perspectives, you might be able to invent things that seem appropriate to make.



Lynn Hershman Leeson, *The Infinity Engine*, 2014- (still from a projection). Genetic Lab installation that includes genetically modified fish, CRISPR derived wallpaper, Bio-printed Ear, videotapes, etc. Dimensions variable. Courtesy the artist; Bridget Donahue Gallery, New York; and Altman Siegel, San Francisco.

**Rail:** Yes, it is striking about *The Infinity Engine* that eventually you collaborate as equals—you bring a creative idea to the process of science, and science brings incredible possibilities to what an artist can do. But looking at how you constructed the eight rooms, it seems to me that you also thought about giving us access to the lab in order to let us

understand how it operates—which is about the democratization of science—but also means keeping an eye on scientists.

**Leeson:** Yes. But if an exhibition's meaning is inaccessible, it defeats the purpose. For instance, if you have an ear sitting on a table, people don't understand why it is there or that it is bio-printed and maybe it's the *very* first bio-printed ear, so that lack of knowledge affects what they are seeing. I believe information provides depth and allows viewers more access.

**Rail:** Such understanding is very important for me as a curator who tries to provide channels of communication between an artist and an audience. Artists often illustrate scientific ideas. What distinguishes your work is that you interpret the work of scientists but also push them towards new ideas.

Curating the exhibition *ecofeminism*(*s*) at Thomas Erben Gallery in 2020, I realized the importance of spiritual feminism. It is a charged term today; it seems totally passé. But its insistence on bringing nature and civilization back together is relevant. Do you think that spiritual feminism or spirituality are in contradiction to science? If so, can we find a way to bring them together?

Leson: Yes, I think we have to. Without the spirituality of what we're doing and the unquantifiable elements, these works are not alive. You have to integrate both. I had an insightful discussion with Dr. Caleb Webber, head of genetics at the University of Oxford—he came to that same conclusion. In the end you have to question what is love, how do you explain it scientifically, can you create it, would you want to? That's how he ends the discussion of all the possibilities we have with genome variation, including erasing historical scars, such as generationally passed trauma, in the future. He reflects that there are some things that we can't quantify that are really important, that we have to keep in mind. I do think that good scientists care about quality survival which includes the spirit, not just technical survival.

**Rail:** I think that you are very much on the optimistic side ... or perhaps you just give up the idea that we can control future developments.

**Leeson:** Yes, because technologies are neutral; it is the ethics of what we do with the algorithms that determines how we're going to survive. Artists have to be optimists and believe that their efforts will make a difference. It's too hard otherwise.

**Rail:** Another idea pertaining to your work is the notion of genius. Feminist art criticism challenged the myth of an artist as "genius" and emphasized the role of collaboration. In your film *Conceiving Ada* (1997), you present Ada, Countess of Lovelace, author of the first published computer algorithm written in 1843 for the "father of the computer" Charles Babbage, as a female genius.

**Leeson:** Talent is not gendered, culture is. When it is restrictive, it prevents targeted participants from having opportunities to enhance the planet. Women are progressively gaining a greater sense of entitlement. The premise of *Conceiving Ada* was to take somebody who never received credit in their lifetime—Ada's algorithm was ascribed to Babbage—and create a legacy, even a century later to liberate the fact that they were the authors. I talked about it this morning with the producers of my next film.

When I made *Conceiving Ada*, I invented a technical process I named "virtual sets" in 1997. And I patented the process. Six months later, James Cameron employed a slightly different method, in his film *Titanic*. Now, virtual sets are the way they make many films but all the credit has gone to the guys. This is hubris, and I think that women have resisted or were never able to engage with even claiming what they've done, during their entire lifetime. Equality needs to be claimed.

**Rail:** Do you think it has changed? Are we at the point when women are acknowledged for what they do and we should no longer worry about feminist and women's legacy?

**Leeson:** There is a long way to go, to get equality and access but while we are not there completely, there are more possibilities now. Things are changing very slowly.

**Rail:** I agree. I find it problematic that there is excitement about a few women artists getting recognition equal to that of men—while so many other names will fade unless their legacy is written in the history of art. Speaking about feminist historiography, artists often become curators but for an artist to contribute to art history is quite rare. You organized and filmed the re-performance of Yoko Ono's *Cut Piece* in 1993 and made a video about Ana Mendieta's death and the

murder trial of her husband, *Conspiracy of Silence* in 1991. Later, you did two films about women's art, *!Women Art Revolution* (2010) and *Tania Libre* (2017), directly contributing to feminist historiography. Why, as an artist, did you take up this role?

Leeson: Originally, I shot interviews with women which would become !Women Art Revolution because I thought that was the most interesting thing that was happening at the time: women claiming their voices as artists. I eventually had more than 200 hours—enough that it took three weeks to just look at the footage. 43 years after I started to do the interviews, these artists began to die while many of my students still never heard of them, or of what they did. I felt it was my obligation to honor them by turning those interviews into a film. I shot the only film of Marcia Tucker; in most of the cases my film is the only one of the artist. I put it together because I had to, because I had it, because they trusted me to do it. Originally, I never thought it was going to be a documentary; I did it because they were in town, and I could borrow a camera and find out what they were doing—I wanted to have a record of it.

**Rail:** You also made a film about a male artist in 2007, *Strange Culture*—again, you felt compelled to support another artist. It told the story of Steve Kurtz who in 2004 was preparing a MASS MoCA exhibition that would let audiences test whether food has been genetically modified, when his wife died of heart failure. The paramedics became suspicious seeing petri dishes in his home and called the FBI, who detained him on suspicion of bioterrorism. Under the USA PATRIOT Act he faced up to 20 years in prison. Your film showed the post-9/11 paranoia.



Lynn Hershman Leeson, *Glass Vial of Synthetic DNA*, 2018. Molecular reduction converted by Twist Bioscience, San Francisco, 1 x 3 in. Courtesy the artist; Bridget Donahue, New York; and Altman Siegel, San Francisco.

**Leeson:** Totally. I was in a carpool with somebody who knew Steve and told me the story. I remember feeling outraged. So I started to make a DVD. I didn't intend to make a film but it turned into one and had amazing repercussions—it opened the Berlin International Film Festival, the *New York Times* praised it—the film played a major role in letting people know Steve's story, and eventually the charges against him were dropped. So those two films had something in them that changed history. With *!Women Art Revolution*, it was giving a voice and a coherent history to the feminist art movement. Much of the information was formerly unknown. And with Steve—it was questioning the media, the double standards, the fictionalization of it, and letting people know of circumstances that could shift the outcome.

For !Women Art Revolution, I additionally put all of the raw material online, transcribed, at Stanford's Special Collections Library. You can go to their site and see all the material, 17 hours of Carolee Schneeman or 20 hours of Judy Chicago and many other important artists—it's all there, accessible.

**Rail:** The collaboration with Steve Kurtz led to your interest in biotechnology, and you now have an archive bio-stored in your DNA in addition to your archive at Stanford. So your interest in history as a key to the past and as a key to the future are truly interlocked.

Leeson: Yes!

**Rail:** This is precisely what I find unique about your work—that you move between history and the technology of the future; understanding that the future is in the past and perhaps the past is in the future, with such ease.

**Leeson:** But that's exactly what DNA does, if you look inside of it. DNA is made of our history and then we add to it and can create a different future of the DNA that we possess. It is evolutionary.

**Rail:** Could you speak a little bit about what's in the vial, coded in your DNA?

**Leeson:** I see this process as a form of expanded cinema. I made a timeline and put my *Electronic Diaries* (1984–1996), other things about my personal life, and all my massive research about genetics onto it—each page or image as one frame. My history and interests took a frame that became the film that became the DNA, processed at a micro level. It was low res to save money, but I was interested in the conversion which became a haiku of my essence, of the life I've lived, and my interests. I put it in a blue lab room that is locked as a nod to Duchamp and Yves Klein.



Lynn Hershman Leeson, *The Electronic Diaries*, 1984-2019 (still). Video, color, sound. Courtesy the artist; Bridget Donahue, New York; and Altman Siegel, San Francisco.

**Rail:** That's interesting, because now you actually have a life after life. You've already preserved yourself and you can start anew!

Leeson: Yes!

**Rail:** This is astounding. There were people who tried to freeze their bodies; you chose to preserve your identity. Importantly, you embraced your *entire* identity, and especially what's in *The Electronic Diaries* (1984–2019).

**Leeson:** Yes, the element of trauma, which is a key part of life it seems. Recognizing the trauma, the scars, and epigenetically understanding their history becomes part of the story.

**Rail:** To pass as your legacy what you wanted to expunge from your memory is a remarkable act of bravery. The *Diaries* is the work that will stay. For me, it changed the history of art. When I saw the 1988 part, *First Person Plural*, I was disoriented by your editing, splintering one persona into what is perceived as many voices. I immediately knew that I had to show it in my exhibition *The Un-Heroic Act: Representations of Rape in Contemporary Women's Art in the US* in 2018. When we discussed the work during the artist talk, I had an impression that you still didn't want to get this devil out. Now that you actually put the *Diaries* into your DNA, I am moved that you embraced it as the key of your legacy.



Lynn Hershman Leeson, First Person Plural (1988) from The Electronic Diaries, 1984-2019 (still). Video, color, sound, 28 min. Courtesy the artist; Bridget Donahue, New York; and Altman Siegel, San Francisco.

**Leeson:** I was so fortunate to be able to do these works. They could not have happened earlier because the technologies had not been invented yet. A lot of it is about persistence, faith, and gestation. For instance, it took me three-and-a-half years to get my interview with George Church. I only had 30 minutes to do that interview. When he realized that I understood what he was doing, he became more willing to have a real conversation, not just answer questions. He helped me a lot to get my archive converted to DNA, he understood why I wanted to do it. And he introduced me to the people who could do it at a very low cost, at Twist Bioscience.

**Rail:** For me, a central question is how to make sure that feminist knowledge and art is passed down so that women do not have to reinvent the wheel generation after generation. With this work, you enriched feminist legacy for the future generations of women.

**Leeson:** I was, again, just lucky. Last year all the curators at MoMA voted on the works in its film collection and told me they felt that *!Women Art Revolution* was regarded as an important piece because they hadn't known these stories. It is the only true relic of that history.

Rail: Identity is one of the main themes in your art. One of key projects of feminist art is your exploration of socially constructed identity in *Roberta Breitmore*. Masks are used in art as a way to hide one's identity, shield secrets, or distance oneself or one's characters. Masquerade is also a tool to access another persona, often used at the turn of the 1960s and 1970s to cross gender binaries—by California feminist performance artists, Eleanor Antin and Linda Montano, or, for example, British musicians such as David Bowie and Peter Gabriel. With all your transcending boundaries between human and the machine and your interest in genetic cross, in your masquerades you have never crossed gender boundaries. Why?



Lynn Hershman Leeson, *CyberRoberta*, 1996. Custom-made doll, clothing, glasses, webcam, surveillance camera, mirror, original programming, and telerobotic head-rotating system, Aprox. 17 ¾ x 17 ¾ x 7 ½ in (45 x 45 x 20 cm). Courtesy the artist; Bridget Donahue Gallery, New York; and Altman Siegel, San Francisco

**Leeson:** I considered doing that. You know, when Duchamp created Rrose Sélavy, he was also thinking of making her a Jewish person and then he decided to do just Rrose. I think I wanted to stay with something I knew, rather than assume an identity that could turn into a stereotype of presumptions. Masks can also unmask a truth, and women I think are masked in society and culture. The essence of who they are is often concealed and invisible, and so it was a way of finding an archetype that could be projected out of the conditions of female life in particular times.

Rail: Were you close with Linda Montano and Eleanor Antin?

**Leeson:** I know them, of course, but our work is very different. They were creating works for performance photographs—and in doing so they did not take the risks involved with interacting in real life. I admire their work but presumptions

of identities and then performing or photographing them in an art context is different from an investigation into live experiences without expectation. Life improv, so to speak. There was no rope to hold on to. The next generation—which was all about the image, not about the essence of what it means—garnered a lot of recognition for the projects many of us instigated a decade or more before, but that has happened throughout history.

**Rail:** I noticed that there are many analyses of your work in the context of gaze and image theory. It is obviously an important aspect of your work, especially in *Roberta Breitmore*, your photo-collages from the 1980s like the "Phantom Limb" series, or *The Electronic Diaries*, where gaze is a powerful element of the construction of the character, but I don't think it is what your work is truly about.

Leeson: No, not at all.

Rail: I think it really is philosophical. You start by asking "Who am I?" but then you are asking "What is life?"

**Leeson:** And "Who are we?" "How does this culture define us?" "How are we treated by it?" and "What's the trauma that culture imposes to diminish possibilities for a particular group of people?"

Rail: What are you afraid of today the most?

**Leeson:** The world now is fraught with difficult conditions. I trust the next generation. There are biohacking labs coming up, sprouting all over the world. In Berkeley there are a hundred biohacking labs with young people trying to save the planet, for instance, trying to purify the water in Flint, Michigan; to figure out ways that we could control toxicity. They're devoting their lives to this. And I think that they will hopefully help us find the way out of it. We're at a critical time for the preservation of all life.

**Rail:** It is a good moment to talk about *Twisted Gravity* (2020)—the work about water which you created in collaboration with Harvard's biological engineering lab. It probably developed since I showed preparatory drawings in *ecofeminism(s)*.

**Leeson:** Yes, absolutely. The labs at the Wyss Institute at Harvard which Dr. Richard Novak heads had to close for a few months because of the pandemic and then they had trouble getting plastic because it was used for PPE. Eventually, in the fall, we had everything we needed and they etched the first plates with my *Water Women* images and could start working with the bioreactors along with the AquaPulse system of pulsating electronics. The installation opened at the Gwangju Biennale in Korea. It functioned perfectly.



Lynn Hershman Leeson, *Twisted Gravity* (detail), 2019-21. Installation view in the Gwangju Biennale, Korea. Created as a collaboration with The Wyss Institute for Biologically Inspired Engineering, Harvard University, featuring the Aquapulse System for purifying water. Courtesy the artist; Richard Novak and the Wyss Institute; Bridget Donahue, New York; and Altman Siegal, San Francisco.

**Rail:** And how did it eventually develop? Is it one filter that at the same time clears bacteria from water and degrades plastic in it, or are they two separate devices?

**Leeson:** When I made the *LYNNHERSHMAN Antibody* with Dr. Thomas Huber who was working on antibodies at Novartis, we decided we wanted to do another project and came up with the idea of purging plastic from water. He contacted the Wyss Institute and Dr. Richard Novak was interested in a collaboration, so we tied this into the "Water Women" series I began 50 years ago, which is about evaporation and transcendence. Eventually, it turned into *Twisted Gravity* where toxins light up as they degrade and purify. There are two separate elements. One is the AquaPulse

system that actually pulsates electricity through the water and disintegrates the plastic and kills bacteria, and the other one is an ecological system that uses waxworms and other elements that eat the plastic and dissolve it.

**Rail:** Twisted Gravity takes us back to the idea of genius—you proved with your career and works about other creative women that a woman can be a genius and at the same time so many of your projects are collaborative—science projects, films, the 1990s works which you worked on with programmers.

**Leeson:** It depends on what the project is, but yes, I work with various programmers envisioning ways to reflect the present with science and technology of the present. Ultimately though, it is about persistence and belief, spirit and trust.

**Rail:** I'm thinking that artists often focus on inventing a new medium, which happens to be a technical twist that does not change the meaning of the work. All of your experimentations with mediums result from and bring new ideas.

**Leeson:** I hope so.

**Rail:** I should ask what comes next. You mentioned a film ...

**Leeson:** Maybe a film—the last part of my trilogy, a fairy tale about saving ourselves and the planet. Maybe an installation about gun violence. I'm still thinking about it.

**Rail:** When you say trilogy, you mean continuing *Conceiving Ada* and *Teknolust* (2002)?

**Leeson:** Yes. I had the idea to do a trilogy about technology and society using the same actor that ages over time, that would give three different stories of where we are with the technology of that time.



Lynn Hershman Leeson (writer, director, producer), *Teknolust*, 2002 (still). 35 mm feature film starring Tilda Swinton, 85 min. Collection The Museum of Modern Art, New York. Courtesy the artist; Bridget Donahue, New York; and Altman Siegel, San Francisco.

**Rail:** Tilda Swinton's playing four characters in your *Teknolust*—scientist Rosetta Stone and three female Self Replicating Automatons (SRAs) whom she injected with her DNA—was spectacular.

**Leeson:** She's totally brilliant.

**Rail:** The film was so funny that one could say it's like a Disney fairy tale, but it's actually like a Brothers Grimm fairy tale ... I mean Ruby is a prostitute who is a breadwinner. ...

**Leeson:** Yes. They are all fables of how we live through the time we are born into.

**Rail:** What is exceptional about your work is that building on the mantra of feminist art, "the personal is political," you take such a long view in your stories stretching back and into the future. I always think of you as a rather uniquely European American artist, whose focus is on narratives of time.

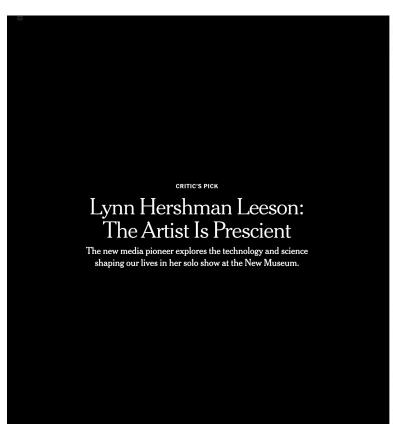
**Leeson:** That is a very kind thing to say. Survival and preservation of the planet I think, will have to come from both a spirited ethos and collaboration with all living things. Finally it is essential to replace endemic contamination and

ravaged systems, which by the way, includes discrimination and racism, with unity, sentient awareness, and compassion.

- 1. In 1972, The University Art Museum in Berkeley closed Hershman Leeson's exhibition because she used audiotape with sound in her sculpture *Self Portrait as Another Person* (1969). The curator claimed that electronic media was not art and did not belong in a museum.
- 2. The first four rooms of the installation were presented in 2014 as part of Hershman Leeson's retrospective *Civic Radar* at ZKM Karlsruhe; the entire installation of eight rooms was presented in 2018 as a solo exhibition *Anti-Bodies* at the House of Electronic Arts in Basel.

Jillian Steinhauer, "Lynn Hershman Leeson: The Artist Is Prescient", *The New York Times*, July 8, 2021. https://www.nytimes.com/2021/07/08/arts/design/hershman-leeson-review-art-museum.html

### The New York Times





Lynn Hershman Leeson, "Roberta's Construction Chart 1," 1975. For five years, the artist created a character named Roberta Breitmore whom she also played in the real world.

Bridget Donahue Gallery and Altman Siegel

#### By Jillian Steinhauer

July 8, 2021

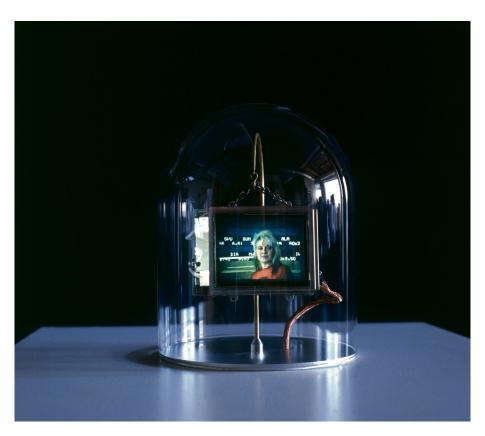
For me, and I suspect for many others, the pandemic has prompted much soul-searching about different aspects of my life. Foremost is my dependence on technology, which I found especially troubling over the past year. At a certain point, after months of social isolation punctuated by video calls and Twitter binges, I felt almost like I was losing my mind, as if my ability to distinguish between the virtual and physical worlds were slipping. It was a strangely mesmerizing and frightening sensation that I recalled recently, after seeing Lynn Hershman Leeson's exhilarating and intense solo show at the New Museum, "Twisted."

A pioneering new media artist and filmmaker who has spent most of her life in San Francisco, after growing up in Cleveland, Hershman Leeson has been <u>contemplating</u> our connection to machines since the 1960s.

Starting out in more traditional forms like drawing, painting, and collage, she went on to make wax sculptures, then videos and artworks using laser discs, touch screens (in the '80s), webcams, artificial intelligence, and most recently, in collaboration with scientists, a water purification system and DNA.

As a woman making experimental work, often about female identity, Hershman Leeson was sidelined for decades by mainstream art institutions. In 2014, she had a career-changing retrospective at the ZKM Center for Art and Media in Karlsruhe, Germany, and five years later, her work was the centerpiece of a group exhibition at the Shed. Yet "Twisted" is her first solo museum show in New York City — and she turned 80 the week before it opened.

The exhibition, curated by Margot Norton, goes some way toward rectifying her exclusion: It's a strong, smart survey that gives her overdue credit. It also feels limited and sometimes cramped, omitting a lot while squeezing too much into basically a single floor. The show strikes me as akin to a greatest hits album: an excellent introduction for newcomers and a dose of reliable inspiration for those familiar with her work, but not deep enough once you're tuned into her brilliance.



Hershman Leeson, "Synthia Stock Ticker," 2000. The changes in the stock market are registered through a woman's moods.

Bridget Donahue Gallery and Altman Siegel

Hershman Leeson is perhaps best known for "The Electronic Diaries" (1984—2019), a decades-long project playing at the New Museum in a ground floor gallery. In it she recorded herself talking about her life, particularly her traumas, on videotape. The process served as a kind of therapy, giving her a chance to find herself, and to consider the nature of identity more broadly, through the lens of a camera. The works (there are currently six parts) are almost eerily visionary for how they anticipate the advent of confessional posting on social media platforms and for some of her early, astute observations. "I think that we've become kind of a society of screens, of different layers that keep us from knowing the truth," she says, "as if the truth is almost unbearable and too much for us to deal with, just like our feelings."

The "Diaries" offer a sense of Hershman Leeson's style and concerns before you move upstairs, where the exhibition is concentrated. Both chronological and thematic, the show focuses on a major motif of her practice: the relationship between technology and the self. Around the time she took up this idea, the artist, then in her 20s, was pregnant and hospitalized with a life-threatening heart condition. She made drawings and collages of people with gear-filled insides — a way of visualizing the hidden workings of the body and perhaps imagining a mechanical means of warding off death.

Dozens of those early pieces (more than necessary) are hung tightly on the walls of the first room, but they hold interest primarily as historical documents. Aesthetically, they can't compete with the "Breathing Machines" nearby. These ingenious and bewitching sculptures consist of cases holding eerie wax casts of female faces. Your presence triggers an audio track, whether the coughing and heaving breaths of "Butterfly Woman Sleeping" (1967) or the unnerving monologue of "Self-Portrait as Another Person" (1965), which asks, "What are you afraid of?" and says, "I feel really close to you." The idea of being seduced by a machine recurs in Hershman Leeson's work, as does her interest in viewer participation and her study of how gender norms shape women's particular associations with technology.



Hershman Leeson, "Butterfly Woman Sleeping" (1967) from "Breathing Machines." A visitor's presence triggers an audio track of coughing and heaving breaths.mBridget Donahue Gallery and Altman Siegel



Lynn Hershman Leeson, "Seduction," 1985, from "Phantom Limb," a series that morphs womens' bodies and machines. Bridget

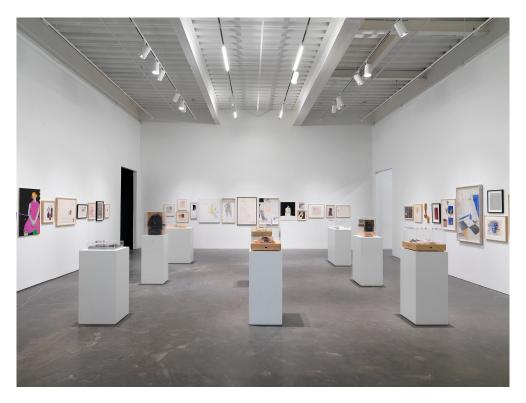
Donahue Gallery and Altman Siegel



An immersive video installation, the first room of "The Infinity Engine" (2014-present) and includes footage of a genetics laboratory, at the New Museum. Dario Lasagni/New Museum

Soon after, Hershman Leeson began a radical exploration of identity. For five years beginning in 1973, the artist created a character named <u>Roberta Breitmore</u> whom she also played in the real world. Having studied psychology, Hershman Leeson generated a back story for Roberta and, produced charts detailing the body language and makeup she used to transform into the character. The artist went out as Roberta and expanded her personality through experiences. Roberta got a driver's license, opened a checking account, and saw a psychiatrist. She had distinct handwriting and kept a diary. At one point, Roberta placed a newspaper ad for a roommate, and a man who answered it tried to get her to join a prostitution ring.

"Twisted" extensively documents Roberta, from photographs to clothing and a psychiatric evaluation. (The doctor suggests "a schizophrenic condition, simple type.") The archive raises the fundamental question of what elements make up a person. Beyond that, which ones are necessary, which are extraneous, and who decides?



Installation view of "Lynn Hershman Leeson: Twisted," at the New Museum, with "Breathing Machines" on plinths, and the artist's early works on the walls. Dario Lasagni/New Museum



Installation view of "Electronic Diaries." Dario Lasagni/New Museum

Although she was resolutely analogue, Roberta functioned almost like a digital program or machine. She developed based on input from society — input that was so often negative, the artist ended the project with an exorcism. In a way, Roberta was a model for the gendered interactivity that Hershman Leeson would go on to explore in other works at the New Museum.

One is "Deep Contact" (1984—89), a videodisc and touch screen piece that recalls a choose-your-own-adventure book, only with more obscure situations. The journey begins by following the exhortations of a blonde in a sexy dress who calls out, "Touch me." The other is "Agent Ruby" (1998—2002), described as an "artificially intelligent Web agent with a female persona" whom you can converse with online and who grows smarter with increased engagement. In both cases, the technologies are represented as female characters that seem to have more control than the passive Roberta did. They're like more soulful, less obedient versions of Siri and Alexa.



"CyberRoberta," 1996. A robotic doll Leeson Hershman made surveils visitors with its eyes.

Bridget Donahue Gallery and Altman Siegel

If there's one thing that "Twisted" makes abundantly clear, it's Hershman Leeson's prescience. She not only found ways to use advanced technologies, but also saw how they were shaping us. Her video "Seduction of a Cyborg" (1994) is like a parable: A woman who can't see is given doses of electronic waves that destroy her immune system and turn her into a computer-addicted cyborg. In six short minutes, before the advent of social media, Hershman Leeson predicted the state of my pandemic-addled brain.

"The Electronic Diaries" contain a gap: The artist stopped creating them in the late '90s and resumed about 20 years later. The exhibition doesn't have the same strict break, but it makes a corresponding leap, from a past of now dated technologies into a present of futuristic ones. These appear in three new projects, among them "Twisted Gravity" (2021), a series of glowing panels connected to two water purification systems developed by Harvard. Figures of women are etched into plastic, and as the water is purified, the figures pulse in neon colors. Beautiful and hopeful as it is, "Twisted Gravity" lacks the tension that characterizes the artist's best work: a profoundly double-edged view of technology, which may seduce and trick us but also gives us the opportunity to transcend ourselves.



Installation view of "The Infinity Engine." The wallpaper is comprised of images of genetically-modified organisms (GMOs). The series marks the artist's shift from new media to science and from a speculative, intimate tone to evangelistic wonder. Dario Lasagni/New Museum

The new project that carries the dichotomy forward is "The Infinity Engine" (2013—ongoing), a multifaceted exploration of bioengineering and genetic modification. Occupying three galleries, "The Infinity Engine" contains an array of material, including video interviews with leading scientists, a bioprinted ear, genetically modified fish that glow in the dark, and two pièces de résistance: an antibody named after the artist, developed with Dr. Thomas Huber, and a vial containing her artistic archive converted into DNA, made with Bill Peck. The installation is something of a mind-bending jumble: Hershman Leeson presents the results of her research, but I longed for more of a structure or story to help make sense of it. I'm glad to know about the creation, in 2002, of goats with spider genes but without more context, I don't understand the implications.

"The Infinity Engine" represents Hershman Leeson's recent shift from media to science and from a speculative, intimate tone to evangelistic wonder. The more time you spend with it, though, the more continuity emerges — and not just because the bioprinted ear echoes the wax facial fragments she made in the '60s.

Bioengineering grapples with questions that Hershman Leeson has been asking all along, about what makes us human and what it looks like to create or modify life. At one point, a scientist she interviews, Caleb Webber, asks rhetorically, "Who do we want to be in the future?" The line stuck with me. It is a guiding inquiry of the artist's career — and after six decades, she's still creating answers.

#### Lynn Hershman Leeson: Twisted

Through Oct. 3 at the New Museum, 235 Bowery, Manhattan. (212) 219-1222, newmuseum.org.

Samantha Ozer, "Lynn Hershman Leeson: The artist discusses her work with antibodies and DNA", Artforum (June 29), https://www.artforum.com/interviews/the-artist-talks-about-her-work-with-antibodies-83458

## **ARTFORUM**

**INTERVIEWS** 

### LYNN HERSHMAN LEESON

June 29, 2020 • The artist discusses her work with antibodies and DNA



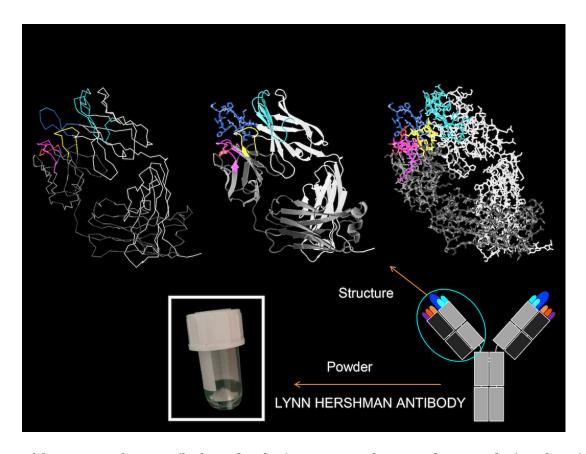
Lynn Hersman Leeson, Lynn Hershman DNA, 2018, archival pigment print, 20 x 36."

As a young artist in Berkeley during the 1960 and '70s, Lynn Hershman Leeson's involvement with issues of civil rights, community, and the conditions for defining a public—most notably through the Floating Museum, 1974–78—helped ground her political and social consciousness. The "museum" platform pooled community resources to commission and exhibit site-specific art in public spaces, first in the San Francisco Bay Area and then more widely in the United States, Italy, and France. She has since spent her career collaborating with scientists and technologists to challenge how we construct identity and understand the body's relation to its environment. Below, the artist discusses how her work with antibodies and DNA as part of Infinity Engine, 2014—, relates to strategies for surviving Covid-19. She also addresses central concerns about water toxicity and the health of our planet through a project with

scientists at Harvard University that will be presented in "Lynn Hershman Leeson: Twisted" at the New Museum in New York, dates TBD.

THE PLANET IS GOING THROUGH A CORRECTION. It's not just America, it's everywhere. I've been thinking about symbiosis and how everything is connected, and how we need to find a way to shelter and protect the future, and the inheritance of young people who will be left with this mess. The only way that we're going to survive is to defeat the capitalist logic that refuses a broader view of what collaborative and ecologically safe living means—a logic inseparable from the crises exacerbated by the pandemic. The dismantling of racism needs to be part of this mentality of survival. We need to make a commitment to reparation of the earth and respect for other beings.

Right now, I'm working on a collaboration with the Wyss Institute for Biologically Inspired Engineering at Harvard University, where they have invented two systems to purify water using more organic or technological means. Taking visual inspiration from Fritz Lang's *Metropolis*, I'm creating a series of etched *Water Women* panels, whose bodies will fluoresce when water from the purification systems runs through them. The killing efficiency of bacteria and the level of achieved plastic degradation activity will be visualized live by a change of brightness on the panels. The AquaPulse is portable and uses electricity to purify water at a processing rate of one liter per minute, which is pretty phenomenal. It can convert toxic water into drinking water immediately. The Evolution system is developed out of an ecological approach that uses smart bacteria, or smartly enhanced bacteria microbes, to dissolve the remnants of dangerous particles in water. Smart bacteria evolved naturally to address plastic levels in water, by developing a taste for it and eating it. That's the beauty of ecology and evolution—nature is designed to protect itself.



Structure of the Lynn Hershman antibody rendered using PyMOL and presented as a powder in a glass vial.

Dr. Thomas Huber, with whom I made the Lynnhershman and (Rob)erta antibodies, told me that he thought humans were put on the planet to serve as hosts for bacteria. Bacteria are much smarter than humans; there's much more of them, and they reproduce and evolve faster. Personally, I think we're just as smart as bacteria, but we've been educated in a way that has suppressed many of our instincts and distorted our ability to react. The prioritization of linear growth rather than collaborative survival of all life—and consideration only for the survival of our species rather than an environment as a whole—has been very short-sighted and limiting.

I think of extinction as the elimination of old models that cannot adapt to our changing world. My work involves a shift from digital presence, or electronic presence, into a biological way of thinking. My archives aren't just stored at Stanford University, but also in my DNA, and in my synthetic DNA and the Lynn Hershman and (Rob) Erta antibodies. People underrate the idea of storing material in DNA. If you store a video on a hard drive, it will have a lifespan of maybe half a century. If you code it into strands of DNA, it will last a million years and is probably just as

easily retrievable. While I've been thinking about recording my archive in DNA for several years, I was only able to do it in 2018. Importantly, you have to think of antibodies in the broader sense. If you think of artists as antibodies, going into a toxic space of culture and trying to identify the diseased parts and heal it, that's a life project. I've been fortunate that I've lived long enough to be able to use DNA to make some sort of haiku of my life. While the vials containing DNA and antibodies in *Room #8* are physically small, they represent much of what I've ever lived and most of what I've thought.

Right now, we are in stage one of the planet's revenge, or rather repair. For me, we're at a point where artists have to pay attention and use our methods of intuition to work with specialized experts to create ways that our planet could be healthier and survive. But importantly, lacking scientific expertise can actually be an advantage in that you don't follow prescribed trajectories of logic, and might be able to see what has been overlooked. Logic can paralyze the heart. You have to go beyond it and remain open to the invention of different methods.

— As told to Samantha Ozer

Holland Cotter, Roberta Smith, Jason Farago and Martha Schwendener, "Times Critics' Top Art Books of 2019", *The New York Times*, December 5, 2019. https://www.nytimes.com/2019/12/05/arts/design/best-art-books-2019.html

# The New York Times

#### **ART & DESIGN**

### Times Critics' Top Art Books of 2019

The Times's art critics select 26 of their favorite art books and books related to art of the year.

By <u>Holland Cotter</u>, <u>Roberta Smith</u>, <u>Jason Farago</u> and Martha Schwendener Dec. 5, 2019



Clockwise from top left, William Blake's "Newton," 1795-c. 1805; Beatriz González's "La Pesca Milagrosa" ("Miraculous Catch of Fish"), 1992; the cover of "Lynn Hershman Leeson: Anti-Bodies"; Robert Colescott's "Knowledge of the Past Is the Key to the Future: The Other Washingtons," 1987; and Leonardo da Vinicis" "Cecilia Gallerani (The Lady With an Ermine)," circa 1486-1488. Clockwise from top left, Tate, London; Beatriz González Archives, Museo de Arte Moderno de Barranquilla; Hatje Cantz; Estate of Robert Colescott/Artists Rights Society (ARS). New York. Sheldon Museum of Art: Kraków, National Museum/of the Princes Czartorvski Museum

### **Holland Cotter**

**LYNN HERSHMAN LEESON: ANTI-BODIES'** (*Hatje Cantz*). The artist Lynn Hershman Leeson has always been ahead of the pack in her fusion of art and science. As early as the 1960s she foresaw the technology-permeated world of today. She was making computer-based work in the 1970s, and went on to experiment with artificial intelligence and virtual reality as art media. Genetics and biotechnology have been her focus in an elaborate recent installation called "The Infinity Engine." The succinct catalog, produced when the piece was shown in her 2018 exhibition "Anti-Bodies" at the House of Electronic Arts in Basel, Switzerland, offers a clear précis of her thinking. This book is far more a reading experience than a looking experience. And it's a read worth doing. At a time when so much new art feels so old, this work feels like the future, which is now. (Read about her current exhibition.)

Chloe Schama," Pioneering Feminist Artist Lynn Hershman Leeson Gets Timely and Overdue Attention in a New Show", Vogue, November 15, 2019, https://www.vogue.com/article/manual-override-lynn-hershman-leeson-review

# **VOGUE**

#### **ARTS**

Pioneering Feminist Artist Lynn Hershman Leeson Gets Timely and Overdue Attention in a New Show BY CHLOE SCHAMA

November 15, 2019



Still from Teknolust with Tilda Swinton Photo: Everett Collection

There's a lot to process at the Shed's new show *Manual Override*, which opened this week in a dark, curtain-hung space carved out of the Griffin Theater. "Process" seems like the right verb, since the show, according to curator <u>Nora N. Khan</u>, is intended to interrogate the "material ways that technology replicates systems of oppression." The exhibition includes a "5-D" (what those additional dimensions are, I'm not quite sure) experience by Simon Fujiwara that has participants strap themselves into a flight simulator, and a video by <u>Martine Syms</u> in which visitors can control, via text

message, the way the installation manifests. *Manual Override*, as Khan put it, is gesturing to the idea that the off switch may no longer be an option.

But there's another simpler but no less powerful way to engage with this complicated exhibition. See it for the installations dedicated to pioneering artist Lynn Hershman Leeson, who, after decades of relative anonymity, is finally getting a level of acclaim that male peers engaged in similar pursuits have long received. "Others my age with lesser work who were men were being celebrated and collected," she told Frieze last year. "I was discovered when I was 72." The discovery comes not a moment too soon, as Leeson's work engages with the pressures of self-presentation, deception, and artifice that undoubtedly saturate an Instagram feed near you.

Leeson has been engaged in this work at least since 1972, when she famously (at least, as famously as can be expected for an avant-garde, under-the-radar artist) invented a character named Roberta Bretimore. To inhabit this character, Leeson wore a blonde wig, applied a carefully designed face of makeup, and set her alter ego loose in the world.



Roberta's Construction Chart, 1975. Photo: Courtesy Lynn Hershman Leeson/Bridget Donahue Gallery New York/Anglim Gilbert Gallery San Francisco

Roberta not only interacted with the world, leaving untold personal impressions, she left the documented detritus of a life: an apartment lease, dental records, therapist appointments, a Weight Watchers membership. (Leeson later had actresses other than herself fulfill the role.) While visiting the San Diego zoo, the character was even asked to join a prostitution ring, according to the artist.



Roberta Waiting for a Date, 1975. Photo: Courtesy Lynn Hershman Leeson/Bridget Donahue Gallery New York/Anglim Gilbert Gallery San Francisco

Before identity became cataloged by our online banking habits, facial scans as we pass through TSA security lines, and the items we leave unpurchased in our digital shopping carts, destined to haunt the peripheries of our browsing windows, Leeson was concerned with the ways in which identity could be built by perhaps specious markers in the world. Roberta, Leeson has said, was able to qualify for credit cards that Leeson was not. Did that make Roberta more of a person than her creator?

In some ways, that awkward but direct formulation is the central question of Leeson's work: What is a person? Take Leeson's 2002 film, Teknolust. At the time of its release, Teknolust was called by The New York Times, "a minor addition to the tiny genre of feminist science fiction films." (MoMA has since acquired it for their permanent collection.) In it, Tilda Swinton played a scientist ("Rosetta Stone") who uses her own DNA to create three clones of herself.



Lynn Hershman Leeson directing Tilda Swinton behind the scenes of Teknolust, 1999. Photo: Courtesy of Hotwire Productions LLC

If the question of what constitutes a person seems to have particularly anxiety-inducing relevance in the age of ever-expanding AI, it's comforting to see the work of an artist who has been grappling with that inquiry—and doing so in relation to technology—for decades. In her early Phantom Limb photographs, for instance, a woman's body is merged with technology, a movie camera planted cartoonishly on her head.



Reach, 1984. From Phantom Limb series.

Photo: Courtesy Lynn Hershman Leeson/Bridget Donahue Gallery New York/Anglim Gilbert Gallery San Francisco

But perhaps the greatest investigation of that idea takes place in Leeson's *Electronic Diaries*, which greet the viewer upon entering *Manual Override*. Filmed between 1984 and 2019, the diaries—short films projected on a series of screens, marching across the gallery—seem a foreshadow of many things: the reality TV confessional, the vlog, the Instagram story monologue.



Lynn Hershman Leeson, *The Electronic Diaries (1984-2019)*, 2019. Installation view: *Manual Override*, The Shed, New York.Photo: Dan Bradica. Courtesy The Shed

But if those formats connote superficial engagement with interiority, Leeson's videos are raw, poignant, and painful. In the first, she describes the early years of her daughter's life, in which she would send her child to other people's houses for a complete meal and how she would hang around in hotel lobbies to get work as a call girl—the work, she matter-of-factly reports, "became kind of like a part-time job"—and the disordered eating that took root as a means to cope with all this hardship. "Eve proved that eating is a sin for women," she says in the film. In the series's second film, she connects the *Dracula* story to childhood abuse and its dark, lifelong toll. Other films circle around themes of illness, loneliness, sexism, mortality.

In the last film of the series, making its debut at the Shed, Leeson further dissects the idea that, as she puts it, "we are the editors of our own lives," this time turning to biomorphic dimensions. "I felt like I was being buried by my own information," Leeson says, and a method of exercising some control is, apparently, to reduce herself to her most elemental components. As she describes in the last film, she had her films "coded" within a DNA molecule—that work

#### **BRIDGET DONAHUE**

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is on display in the work *Room #8*, as an illuminated vial visible behind a locked door—and an antibody created that uses the letters of her name as the basis for the molecular structure.

As Leeson puts it in one of the films, it's the "prison of my past I'm trying to wipe out with these films," and the same might be said of the antibody as well—a neutralizer of toxins derived from the very toxins themselves. In this, she points to the way that technology can be used not just to catalog a life of woe. (In the last film, Leeson almost sheepishly admits that the films capture a particularly bleak vision of her history, leaving out the friendship and love that she also experienced along the way.) Technology, and the way it lets us open up and examine the poisonous baggage we carry around, can also allow us to abandon it.

Tess Thackara, "With 'Shadow Stalker,' Lynn Hershman Leeson Tackles Internet Surveillance", The New York Times, November 8, 2019. <a href="https://www.nytimes.com/2019/11/08/arts/design/Lynn-Hershman-Leeson-Shed-art-technology.html">https://www.nytimes.com/2019/11/08/arts/design/Lynn-Hershman-Leeson-Shed-art-technology.html</a>

### The New York Times

### With 'Shadow Stalker,' Lynn Hershman Leeson Tackles Internet Surveillance

She pioneered interactive video and artificial intelligence in art. Now this new-media path-breaker scrutinizes technology's abuses at the Shed.



Lynn Hershman Leeson, the artist, at left, and Javid Soriano making the film "Shadow Stalker" in Ms. Hershman Leeson's apartment in San Francisco. The new commission for the Shed will be on view Nov. 13. Talia Herman for *The New York Times* 

#### By Tess Thackara

Nov. 8, 2019

SAN FRANCISCO — "I found my voice through technology," the artist and filmmaker <u>Lynn Hershman</u>
<u>Leeson</u> is saying, sitting in an old-world bar here, wearing a long jacket with quotes from French
philosophers embroidered on it.

She has lived in the Bay Area since the 1960s, spending formative years in Berkeley and participating in the free speech movement. Through technology, she said, she "found amplification, microphones — and it was an era when women were silenced."

Ms. Hershman Leeson planted a stake in cyberspace decades ago with what is considered to be the first interactive video art disc; an early AI bot; and a film (starring her longtime collaborator Tilda Swinton) that explores the legacy of Ada Lovelace, a 19th-century mathematician whose writings were foundational to computer science. At 78, Ms. Hershman Leeson is one of the more experienced citizens of the internet, but her work largely went under the radar for decades.

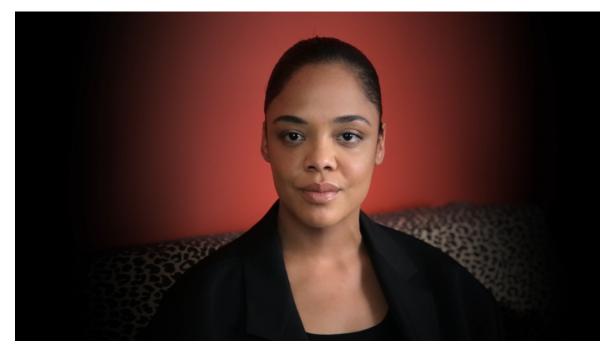
One of the pieces that set her free, "The Electronic Diaries, 1984-2019," is an acclaimed video work created over 30 years in which she shares her personal experiences and reflections with a camera, appearing with evolving hairstyles and body language. The work, which she calls the archive of her life, is set to go on view in expanded, complete form for the first time at the Shed Nov. 13 through Jan. 12. (An earlier version of the "Diaries" is also on view in MoMA's newly-rehung opening installation). It is part of a group exhibition called "Manual Override," which Ms. Hershman Leeson anchors with three works — including her more recent forays into the field of genetic science — alongside a younger generation of new media artists, Martine Syms, Simon Fujiwara, Morehshin Allahyari and Sondra Perry.

Ms. Hershman Leeson is still making work vigorously in her studios in San Francisco and New York, and on a Sunday in August she was shooting the final component of a new commission, "Shadow Stalker," that will also appear at the Shed. An interactive installation and film, the piece tackles the rise of data-driven surveillance on the internet. It is based on the algorithm that powers Predpol, the controversial predictive policing system that is deployed in law enforcement departments across the United States. The algorithm uses statistical data to predict where future crimes might occur, throwing up red squares overlaid on maps that direct officers to potential trouble areas. Racial biases and inaccuracies in the data can lead to problematic predictions and perpetuate flaws in the criminal justice system. (A proliferation of red squares inevitably tend to hover over low-income neighborhoods.)



A scene from "Shadow Stalker" (2019), a 10-minute color video at the Shed. It includes a select reveal of data submitted voluntarily by visitors to underscore the "bad logic" of predictive policing algorithms today.

Lynn Hershman Leeson, Bridget Donahue and Anglim Gilbert Gallery



The actress Tessa Thompson narrates a film component of "Shadow Stalker" 2019.

Lynn Hershman Leeson, Bridget Donahue and Anglim Gilbert Gallery

"It's such a perverse, pervasive, invisible system that people don't understand," said Ms. Hershman Leeson, cutting a commanding figure in all-black and tinted glasses. She was sitting across from the actor Tessa Thompson (of HBO's "Westworld"), who narrates the film component, guiding viewers through some of the internet's more pernicious manifestations.

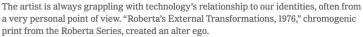
"It's very easy to forget that we're being watched on the internet," Ms. Thompson said. "We're living in a time where there needs to be real literacy in terms of data and technology and our relationship to it." Ms. Hershman Leeson hopes to give visitors to the Shed a chilling sense of their own vulnerability to this kind of data-mining. When they enter the installation they'll be asked to enter an email address, setting a simulation of the Predpol algorithm into motion, fetching biographical data — names of friends, loved ones, old addresses — that ultimately spits out a data shadow that appears behind them.

"The starkness and flatness" of the way the code profiles individuals is what Ms. Hershman Leeson wants people to feel, said Nora Khan, the exhibition's curator. "This very limited set of data is being used to determine who you are as a human being," she said, noting that, given the Shed's footprint within Hudson Yards, and the limits of its demographic reach, the technology "would be less effective if it were just about Predpol and low-income communities, as opposed to those who have done insider crimes, insider trading, white-collar crimes." A monitor in the installation will give predictive percentages for white-collar crime according to ZIP code.

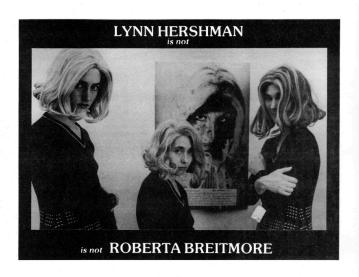
Ms. Hershman Leeson, who is at once warm and enigmatic in person, has from her earliest days held a sharp critical light to technological and scientific developments, exploring the possibilities of their abuse oby the powerful as much as for their more utopian promise — and always grappling with their relationship to our identities, often from a very personal point of view.

Her best-known work centers on a character named Roberta Breitmore, an alter ego she created in 1972. A shy, neurotic blonde, Roberta conformed to the era's archetypal feminine ideal. Ms. Hershman Leeson created charts that determined her makeup and hair, and took to various public places dressed as the character. She hired a photographer to snap paparazzi-style shots of her, developed her credit history, and had her attend therapy sessions. (The artist initially played Roberta herself, but later hired actors to share the role.) Like a digital avatar that roamed the real world, existing only by way of ephemera and documentation, Roberta foreshadowed our self-conscious, voyeuristic relationship to social media.





Lynn Hershman Leeson, Bridget Donahue and Anglim Gilbert Gallery



### Roberta Look Alike Contest April 30, 3-5 p.m., de Young Mureum

If you look like Roberta, or know someone who does, enter the Roberta Look-Alike Contest. Judging will take place 4:00 Saturday April 30, M.H. de Young Memorial Museum, Golden Gate Park. Winner will receive a signed portrait of Roberta.

Roberta's Room: Room 111, Bakers Acres, 3000 Jackson Street, April 1-30, 4-6 daily. Roberta's Multiple: April 1. Square, April 15, #55bus. Roberta Look Alike Contest: Judging: M.H. de Young Memorial Museum, April 30, M.H.

Announcement created for "Roberta Look Alike Contest", 1978. Lynn Hershman Leeson, Bridget Donahue and Anglim Gilbert Gallery



"First Person Plural, The Electronic Diaries of Lynn Hershman, 1984-96," at the KW Institute for Contemporary Arts Berlin, 2018. The work, which she calls the archive of her life, is set to debut in expanded, complete form at the Shed. Lynn Hershman Leeson and Bridget Donahue; Frank Sterling

Roberta was an extension of a habit the artist had developed as a child, of inventing characters to escape a difficult home life. But she also embodied an incisive critique, pointing to the ways that social conventions and state apparatuses encode and prescribe identities. "I needed to build her so that she would exist in history and be more relevant and credible than I was," the artist said. "And she was! She got credit cards, and I couldn't. She got a bank account, she got a driver's license. Everybody thought I was crazy. Anyone I told thought I was schizophrenic, or bipolar."

Peter Weibel, the curator who gave Ms. Hershman Leeson her first and only retrospective, at ZKM in Germany in 2014, believes the artist "was the first to show us identity as a cultural artifact." In 1974, she rented a room in a boardinghouse for Roberta, where visitors could explore her clothes, wigs, and other external identifiers — a puzzle through which to piece together the hazy outline of a person.

Beginning in 1984, the artist turned the camera on the real Lynn Hershman Leeson, and began recording what would become the hourlong edit of her life, the "Electronic Diaries."

"It was like this omnipotent presence, this Cycloptic eye that was watching and listening and not saying anything, but letting me say anything I wanted," she remembers of her early relationship with the camera.

Indeed, her real-life therapist was later taken aback to discover the artist had given up certain revelations to the camera that she hadn't brought to their sessions. And the events of her life, as she recounts in the "Diaries," shot over the course of more than 30 years, were traumatic. She experienced extreme violence in her family as a child, suffered heart failure during pregnancy that left her in a hospital for four months and later battled a brain tumor.

The camera helped her "come to consciousness," to evolve, to externalize herself and to survive. It also provided a venue to reflect on the watershed events in the world, like the fall of the Berlin Wall, and the meteoric pace of scientific and technological advancements. "We've become a society of screens, of different layers," she says in an early installment of the "Diaries." "The truth is almost unbearable." "A cyborgian future, that's what I see," she reflects later on in the piece.

Ms. Hershman Leeson advanced the art world into our cyborgian present with works like "Lorna" (1983), an interactive video work in which viewers explore the contents of an avatar's apartment and make choices for her. "It took 25 years to show her, because no one knew what it was," the artist says. "At that point, it

looked like an antique." She began working with programmers on "Agent Ruby," an AI bot now in SFMOMA's collection, in 1995. "Agent Ruby doesn't fail," the artist said with a note of pride.



Lynn Hershman Leeson's interactive video "Lorna" (1979-1984), in which viewers explore an avatar's apartment and make choices for her. Lynn Hershman Leeson and Bridget Donahue; Jason Mandela



Thomas Huber, a genetic scientist, and Ms. Hershman Leeson at the Novartis Lab. They created personalized antibodies for her at the pharmaceutical company.

Novartis and H+K.

The human genome has been a thread through Ms. Hershman Leeson's work since the '90s, and in 2018 she had the "Diaries" translated into a strip of synthetic DNA. ("Think of it as expanded cinema," she said, though part of the appeal was in the value of this medium as a storage method, first developed by the Harvard geneticist George Church — the DNA molecules, she says, can store the frames for a million years.)

The DNA strip will be on view in the exhibition, alongside two personalized antibodies she created in collaboration with Thomas Huber, a genetic scientist at the pharmaceutical company Novartis. The antibodies are based on variations on the letters of her name (LYNNHERSHMAN), and that of her 1970s alter ego Roberta (ERTA).

The artist comes from a family of scientists, and her daughter and only child, Dawn Hershman, leads breast cancer research at Columbia University. Ms. Hershman Leeson has long worked with people of different disciplines, and science is fruitful territory for her artistic imagination. "Antibodies look for toxins and attempt to use the immune system to cure those toxins," she said. "In a sense, that's what art does. It goes into the cultural body and looks for things that are poisonous and toxic and does things to either bring light to them or to heal them in some way."

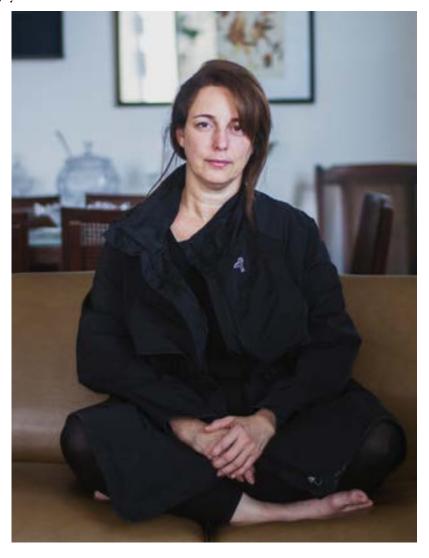
Tania Bruguera, "Artist's Favourites", Spike Art Quarterly #60, Summer 2019, 30-34.

## SPIKE

# ARTIST'S FAVOURITES

### By Tania Bruguera

These are artists who have used reality as art and artists who made art that prophesied reality. Some of these artists had ingenious ideas but a technique that condemns their work to disappear; some didn't care much for what they left behind or that their ideas were stolen because they enjoyed life. These are visionaries we still have much to learn from. — Tania Bruguera



Tania Bruguera is a Cuban performance artist and activist known for socially engaged art that often combines pedagogy, useful art, and illegality. She's taught behavioural art at Cuba's fine art academy and fought against the censorship of art in the same country. One of her most memorable performances, *Self-Sabotage* (2009), involved playing Russian Roulette with a 38-caliber pistol while doing a performance-lecture on political art. She also has a large body of work focusing on immigration reform, including the long-term project Immigrant Movement International, in Queens, NY, and her 2018 Tate Turbine Hall comission. Her adaptation of Brecht's play Galileo will premier at the 2020 Wiener Festwochen in Vienna.

Photo: Novartis / Laurids Jensen

Rape Scene (1973) or Moffitt Building Piece (1973) are not of the kind that can be easily reproduced in nostalgic postcards, where you are reminded that you can do art anywhere (at the beach or while camping). My professor Juan Francisco Elso Padilla, who was Ana's friend, always said that art is what you don't see. Over the years, I have tried to understand if this is because art is intangible or because it's a reminder of a reality that you don't want to see.

\*1948 in Havana, † 1985 in New York

PINO POGGI "Arte Utile" manifesto

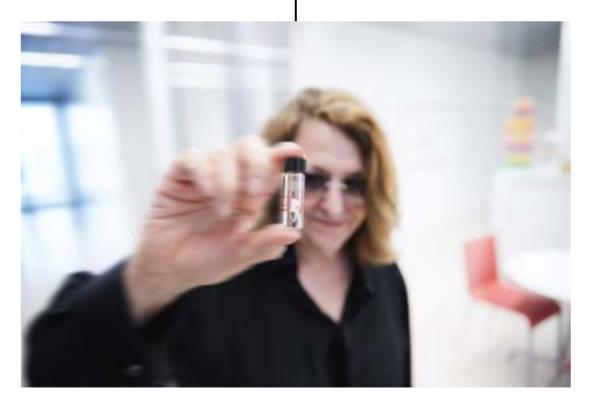
In general, our ideas are far more advanced than anything we build. Objects and things are prisoners of the available technology, while words are freed from technology. This happened to Pino Poggi's oeuvre. His "Arte Utile" manifesto (1965–66) is a great document to consult today. It was written when Poggi was physically close to Joseph Beuys, but, in actuality, he was closer

to us today. Seeing into the future is easier if you are not caught up in how your presence influences others around you, if you resign yourself to admiration and easy positioning. The fact that Kant couldn't convince us all about the uselessness of art (and other details), that there is a bloodline of practicioners of what I call "Arte Útil" that starts around the end of the 18th century. That we have all called what we do or aspire to do with the same exact name is no coincidence. Our DNA carries a sequence of forgotten and underrated aesthetic moments and ethical aspirations.

\*1939 in Genoa, lives in Italy

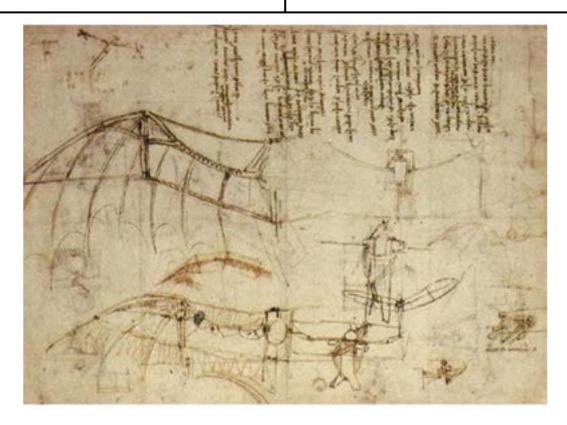
#### LYNN HERSHMAN LEESON

Lynn Hershman Leeson discovered the cultural importance of narcissism, which is why she anticipated Instagram and Facebook. The search inside us always ends with a technological translation as its reminder. Lynn cannot be a genius because this is a male-exclusive category, but she would qualify. She is a prolific



Lynn Hershman Leeson with the Lynn Hershman anti-body

ARTIST'S FAVOURITES



Leonardo da Vinci's design for a flying machine, ca. 1488

artist who has kept her faith in art no matter what comes her way. I'm convinced that she is a glitch on our cosmic timeline. She made a machine speak to us before Siri and Alexa even existed, she coined the term "anti-body" to refer to her work on virtual identity and developed an actual antibody before scientists did, she was Roberta Breitmore before we were able to see avatars on the internet, she documented women's revolution before #MeToo and before activism was respectable. Lynn's artistic generosity is so open that you want to be swallowed up by her.

\*1941 in Cleveland, Obio, lives in San Francisco and New York

#### LEONARDO DA VINCI and ELSA VON FREYTAG-LORINGHOVEN

Despite all the productivism around us, one artwork is all you need. Leonardo da Vinci focused on science to make art (and vice versa). Baroness Elsa von Freytag-Loringhoven, like any exemplary Dadaist, focused on arbitrary fun to make art (and vice versa). For both, art had other uses. It was never an end in itself; they never felt like they had achieved a finished product, no matter how we look back upon them today. Art was always part of research: for him it was nature, for her it was life. Both left one piece that was enough: him, an androgynous small portrait, and her, a misogynistic urinal. Both of similar size – maybe they discovered human-size art? Despite all the pressure for success around us, what is art without joy? Why can't we fail anymore? This is why I don't like Picasso: he inundated us with work that had too much self-importance. I prefer Leonardo's and Elsa's work. They are full of doubt and joy.

Leonardo da Vinci, \*1452 in Anchiano, Italy, † 1519 Amboise, France

Esla von Freytag-Loringboven, \*1874 in Swinemünde, Germany, † 1927 in Paris

Artist's Favourites

Tina Rivers Ryan, "Producing Futures: An Exhibition on Post-Cyber-Feminisms", Artforum, January, 2019.

## **ARTFORUM**

ZURICH

### "PRODUCING FUTURES: AN EXHIBITION ON POST-CYBER-FEMINISMS"

MIGROS MUSEUM FÜR GEGENWARTSKUNST Limmatstrasse 270 February 16-May 12

Curated by Heike Munder

In "A Cyberfeminist Manifesto for the 21st Century" (1991), the Australian artist collective VNS Matrix declared themselves "saboteurs of big daddy mainframe" and "mercenaries of slime," weaponizing an ecstatic, messy body as a wrench to throw into the gears of tech-bro culture: "corrupting the discourse / we are the future cunt." "Producing Futures: An Exhibition on Post-Cyber-Feminisms" features VNS Matrix and Lynn Hershman Leeson as examples of the first generation of cyber-feminists; the show will also include a dozen younger international artists, from Tabita Rezaire to Guan Xiao, whose work refracts both cyberspace and gender through the lenses of, for example, social justice movements and the occult. Together, their works underscore the increasingly blurred boundaries between digital technologies and real bodies, especially in installations that feature materials such as DNA-sequencing electronics and mobile kits for hormone biohacking. The show's catalogue promises to unpack the complexities of today's cyberfeminisms via texts by Munder and Elsa Himmer, Paul B. Preciado, Yvonne Volkart, and Joanna Walsh.

— Tina Rivers Ryan

SHARE

Olivia Aherne, "Anti-Bodies: Lynn Hershman Leeson in conversation with Olivia Aherne", Orlando 03, November 2018, 76-81.

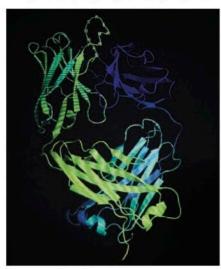


### **Anti-Bodies**

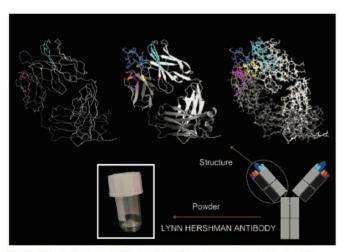
Lynn Hershman Leeson in conversation with Olivia Aherne

Lynn Hershman Leeson is one of today's leading and influential digital artists. Her oeuvre spans photography, video, film, installation, and performance. As one of the first few practitioners to work creatively with emerging technologies, such as social media, artificial intelligence, and genetic modification, Hershman Leeson has continued to create ambitious thought-provoking work, blurring the boundaries between art, science, and technology. Her practice deals with many urgent issues—issues that remain as relevant today as they did fifty years ago—the biological and superficial manifestations of identity; the evolution of art, technology and its impact on the human body; privacy, surveillance, and censorship; and more recently, biotechnologies and genetic engineering.

Hershman Leeson had her first retrospective, *Civic Radar*, at ZKM Centre for Art and Media in Germany in 2014, which included over 700 artworks. Her early work in the 1970s, significantly developing and adopting the alter ego Roberta Breitmore, is now viewed as one of the most incisive and critical feminist artworks of the period. The work continues to inspire a flurry of younger contemporary artists



3D visualization of the Lynn Hershman antibody, 2018, courtesy Novartis, photo by Novartis / Laurids Jensen



"Antibodies are highly specialized proteins of our immune system, made up by amino acids. A key determinant of the antibody characteristics is the antigen binding site, represented by 'fingers' on the tip of the sketch. We selected a natural occurring antibody framework and introduced a novel binding loop that carries the amino acid sequence LYNNHERSHMAN. Using biotechnological processes, we have generated the Lynn Hershman antibody and analyzed its unique biophysical and functional properties. The Lynn Hershman antibody is shown as powder in a glass vial. The structure of the Lynn Hershman antibody was visualized using PyMOL."

Structure of the Lynn Hershman antibody visualised using PyMOL and presented as powder in a glass vial. From Lynn Hershman Leeson: Anti-Bodies, exhibition at HeK (House of Electronic Arts Basel) from May 3 to August 5, 2018. Image courtesy of Novartis

interested in the construction of fictional identities both on and offline. In the *Dante Hotel* (1973–74), a nine-month project created with fellow artist Eleanor Coppola, Hershman Leeson invited the public to encounter Roberta Breitmore as a site-specific installation. Situated in a run down hotel room, visitors could enter 24 hours a day to view Breitmore's life exposed. Personal and day-to-day objects left in situ blurred the real and the fictional, and asked audiences to consider issues around identity and representation. In June 2018, KW Institute for Contemporary Art in Berlin invited Leeson to revisit this pioneering work, resulting in a re-staging at Berlin's Novalis Hotel. As in the 1970s, the set up included belongings and personal



Lynn Hershman Leeson, DNA and Antibody, photo by Franz Wamhof

objects (now including iPhones and Macbooks), and audience DNA was collected from visitors' used paper cups to form a demographic display, which was presented at the end of the exhibition.

As Hershman Leeson's practice has developed, so has her interest in burgeoning technologies. In 1984 she created Lorna, the first interactive video art disc, which then migrated to DVD in 2004, allowing the work to live on in a continually accelerating context. For her most recent solo show Anti-Bodies at Haus der Elektronischen Künste in Basel (3 May-5 August 2018), Hershman Leeson turned to themes of biological progress, artificial intelligence, and anti-body research, raising questions around the ethics of technology, biology, and its impact on the human body and individuality. The exhibition includes her arguably most ambitious work to date: an eight-room installation titled The Infinity Engine (2014), a laboratory style set up complete with equipment, data files, and other scientific paraphernalia. The work invites viewers to throw on a lab coat and enter a world of antibodies, bioprinting, genetics, and DNA. I spoke to Hershman Leeson about our desire to push the boundaries of the human body, and the ethics that permeate these practices.

OA Your work has been important in terms of challenging how we think about the body, both in relation to technology, biology, and a wider social acceleration. What does it mean for you to use the body as your subject and how has this changed over the course of your practice, moving from performance to science, particularly as technology has advanced? Why do you think this desire to break out of our selves—out of our own bodies—might feel particularly urgent today?

LHL I think it has been a progressive development, from responding to the outside of the body, looking at the superficial shifts of appearance, to considering

the internal direct workings of the body. From the make-up chart of Roberta, for instance, to the creation of a LynnHershman antibody, and the (Rob)Erta antibody. We are in an era of mutation and genetic revolution. For the first time, the genome has been programmed. That allows for, and in some cases encourages, gene editing, and I believe this is being done as a means of survival on a polluted planet. I think people have to honour their own instincts and awareness in order to survive. We all take journeys in life. I was integrating my experiences and traumas into science and technology. I was often inventing the technologies that I saw coming before they were widely available, like the remote, or HyperCard for a touch screen with Lorna, and A.I. in 1995 before AIML (Artificial Intelligence Markup Language), to name a few.

OA Thinking about *Lorna*, which was the first interactive video disc installation artwork, how did the work materialise and what inspired your move into this new medium?

LHL It came naturally after the 'Dante Hotel', which in a sense was the flow chart for 'Lorna'. I wanted to make a work that incorporated time, light, colour video, and interactivity, that could be accessible to people who could not visit the room. I read about videodisks in a consumer report journal, tracked down a videodisk publisher, and designed a program that was relatively easy. I shot Lorna in Texas while working on another project, working in the middle of the night at a TV studio in San Jose where I knew someone. No one funded it. No one understood it. It was not exhibited for about 20 years, except in a very few places early on. Most of my best works are rejected when I make them, but then end up surfacing decades later.

OA Identity has always played a huge part in your practice, with gene editing being the subject of your most recent work. Where do you think the potential lies for new hybrid bodily forms and identities? And what do you think we need to be aware of as we continue to recreate and redefine a more cyborgian self?

Lynn Hershman Leeson with the Lynn Hershman antibody, photo by Novartis / Laurids Jensen



- LHL I do think the question of ethics are important, and understanding why we are re-defining ourselves with the inclusion of biological or Artificial Intelligent elements. There is now a problem of losing the original identity of life forms. The phantom life we displace and how it will be remembered is an important element to consider in genetic and molecular engineering. We need to invest in integrity, understand the long-term consequences of our actions, and honour and help other people and their work.
- OA Can you give an example of this in your recent work?
- LHL The Infinity Engine (2014), for instance, can infer the unintended consequences of gene editing, or the ethical and legal elements of how we use genetic engineering. But everything I do really speaks about how we will care for and cure the pollution of our lives.
- OA Can you explain the significance of this term 'anti-body', which you've used throughout your practice to refer to your research, work, and as the title for your recent exhibition in Basel?
- LHL I used the term in earlier works, like the anti-body photographs I made in the 1980s, or the article *Romancing the Anti-body* that I wrote

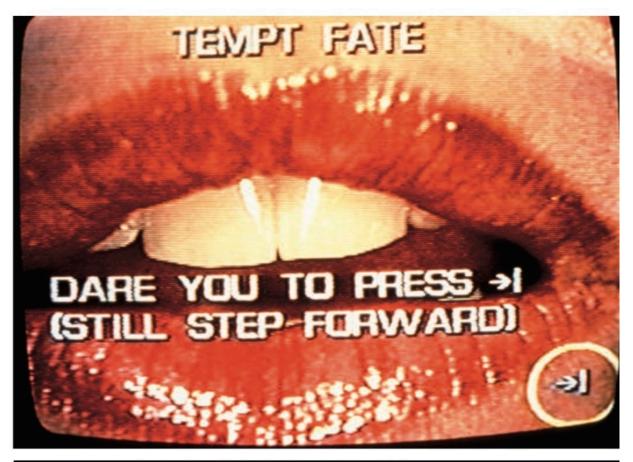
- in 1984. The article was about bodies outside and inside bodies, the alien body being like the anti-hero, a virtual body, and how we need to take care of it as well as our physical one. I think antibodies identify toxicities in culture and art does the same thing. It can neutralize or point out toxicities and help to breed a healthier environment.
- OA So they refer to a form of critique, something viral or infectious, which enter spaces of technological, economical, or social acceleration to critique and break down their structures?
- LHL Yes, that is exactly why I did Anti-Bodies in Basel, and needed to work with a pharmaceutical company.
- OA And what toxicities did you feel required neutralising?
- LHL Anger and greed, particularly in relation to the pharmaceutical opioid epidemic.
- OA Collaboration plays a big part in your work. It's fascinating that you collaborated with the Swiss multinational pharmaceutical company Novartis to produce the 'Lynn Hershman Antibody'. You have previously worked with many different world-renowned biologists, including Elizabeth Blackburn, who won the Nobel Prize for developing the telomere in 2009. Why is it important for you to

#### Opposite page

Lynn Hershman Leeson, Lorna (video still), 1979-1984, installation including earliest interactive Laser Disc, photo copyright Lynn Hershman Leeson, courtesy the artist and Bridget Donahue, NYC

Lynn Hershman Leeson, Roberta Construction Chart #2, 1975, painted C-print, 50.80 × 63.50 cm, photo copyright Lynn Hershman Leeson, courtesy of the artist and Bridget Donahue, NYC







A requirement of being truly plugged in or grounded in cyberspace is to create a personal mask. It becomes a signature, a thumbprint, a shadow, and a means of recognition. The justification for this is similar to the one used to describe why primitive tribes also use coverings. Masks camouflage the body and in doing so liberate and give voice to virtual selves. As personal truth is released, the fragile and tenuous face of vulnerability is protected.

One of the more diabolical elements of entering CMC or Virtual Reality is that people can only recognize each other when they are electronically disguised. Truth is precisely based on the inauthentic!

Masks and self-disclosures are part of the grammer of cyberspace. It is the syntax of the culture of computer mediated identity which, by the way, can include simultaneous multiple identities, or identities that abridge and dislocate gender and age.

Identity is the first thing you create when you log on to a computer service. By definaing yourself in some way, whether it is through your name, a personal profile, an icon or mask, you also define your audience, space and territory. In the architecture of networks, geography shifts as readily as time. Communities are defined by software and hardware access. Anatomy can be readily reconstituted.

Masking through computer mediated communication is read differently than in real life. You can be anything you can imagine, instantly, with very few props or prompts. Self-created alternate identities become guides with which to navigate deeper access of internetting. You do not need a body to do this.

Not only do you not need a body, but entering cyber space encourages a disembodied body language. Posing and emoting are some of the terms for phantom gestures that can be read through words, or seen in special video programs through simple movements such as waves. Codes of gestures can be read by attachments on the computer that articulate hidden meanings of voiceless and mute speech.

Actions are constantly under surveillance, tracked, traced, digitized and stored. Icons as masks are of particular importance because the disguises used today may determine an archetype of the present that will eventually reflect the ephemeral nature of a society geared towards image manipulation and self recreation.

Text from *Romancing the* Anti-body: Lust and Longing in (Cyber) space, Lynn Hershman Leeson, 1984 create networks of thinkers and bodies beyond your own, and how do they inform your practice?

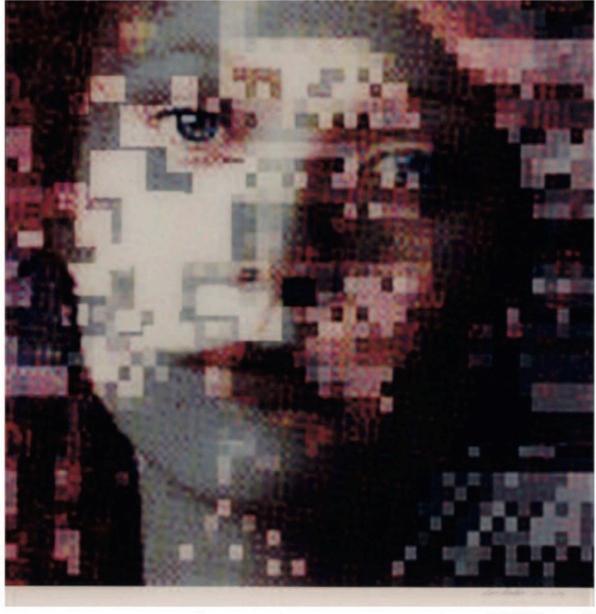
LHLI think collaborating with people whose knowledge is outside of ones sphere gives a depth and resonance that would be otherwise unavailable. These works are global and expansive and it takes a range of people and ideas to make them rich and vital. I think an environment of creative critical thinkers is essential to understanding the issues of this point in time. I have worked with about 18 scientists, including Dr Caleb Webber who was the Professor of Bioinformatics at Oxford University and supported The Infinity Engine, Dr George Church who is considered the father of synthetic biology and has a lab at Harvard and may have been the first Crispr designer, and many others, all of whom worked with me in trying to understand genetic engineering and the changes to identity of all living

things and the planet itself. There is vast and creative research being done in the field and I'm grateful to them for their conversations.

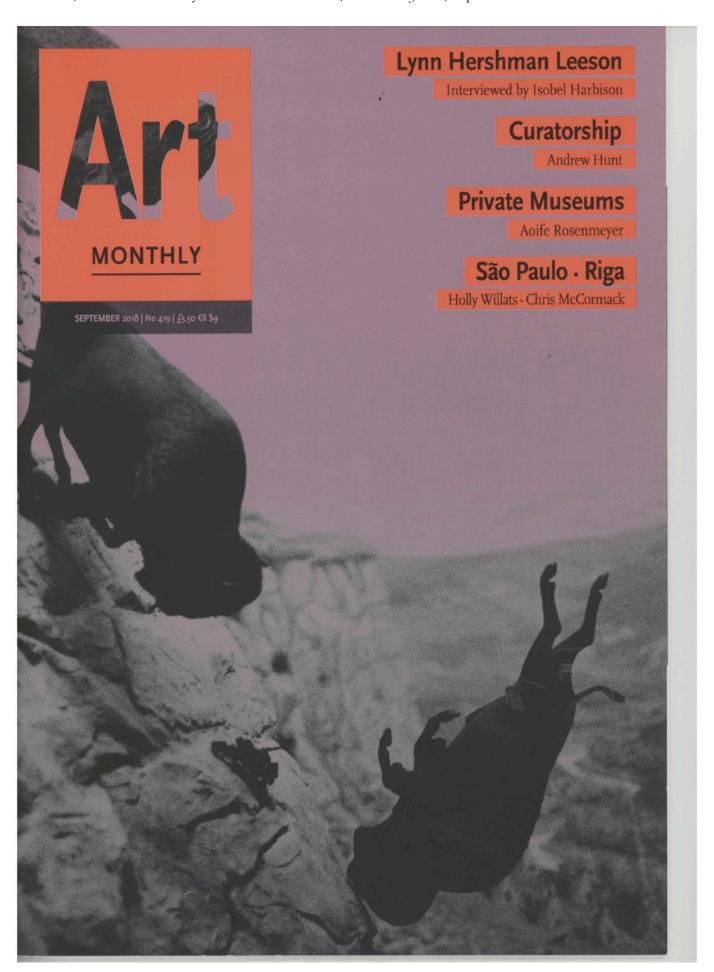
OA Your work is somewhat self-reflexive. Often your more contemporary work looks back or references previous projects, creating a kind of lineage. Do you view your practice as one body, and if so, how will you continue to regenerate and reinvent this body, one that is so inextricably linked to a speculative future?

LHL It is a bit like DNA, which is a perfect archive, and contains all of our history, the history of all living forms. Speculative futures are often enacted using grounding of the past to leap into the present. We inch forward using our histories and limitations but strive none the less to put a foot forward, like an amoeba, charting new ground.

Lynn Hershman Leeson, Large Pixel Antibody, 1987-94, archival digital print, photo copyright Lynn Hershman Leeson, courtesy the artist and Bridget Donahue, NYC



Isobel Harbison, "Interview with Lynn Hershman Leeson", Art Monthly 419, September 2018.



INTERVIEW

#### LYNN'HERSHMAN LEESON INTERVIEWED BY ISOBEL HARBISON

The San Francisco-based artist discusses constructing fictional identities and bots, DNA archiving, surveillance and dodgy software.

# BECOMING ROBERTA

First Person Plural, the Electronic Diaries of Lynn Hershman

Isobel Harbison: When making your diary-format project First Person Plural, the Electronic Diaries of Lynn Hershman between 1984 and 1996, the central work of your recent exhibition curated by Anna Gritz and Cathrin Mayer at KW Institute in Berlin, did you have a particular audience or viewing architectures in mind?

**Lynn Hershman Leeson:** I had neither, only an urgency to speak and an ambition to learn the language of video. I had no idea they would ever be shown or broadcast.

Were there any specific events that triggered First Person Plural or did it respond to a more generalised sense of unease? At the time you made this work, surveys conducted between 1983 and 1984 revealed how North Americans were experiencing new surveillance consciousness and screen paranoia, an alertness that your work has constantly played upon.

Surveillance became a subcurrent of that and many other works, like my *Phantom Limb* photographs made between 1980 and 1990, or *Deep Contact* of 1989, or *America's Finest*, made over 1993 and 1994, or *Tillie the Telerobotic Doll* and *Cyberoberta* which I made between 1994 and 1996, and even

Roberta from 1972 to 1979. In the mid 1980s, computers were just coming into private homes and the Electronic Frontier Foundation, a digital rights group, was alerting people to the government's increased access to personal information and probable surveillance through computer wires. So incorporating surveillance was inspired more by the general tenor of the era rather than a specific action.

Would it be fair to say that the *Roberta Breitmore* performance explored how the self is constructed and performed over time, whereas *First Person* looked at how screen-based culture influenced a perpetual circuit of self-analysis and reconstruction, a circuit or cycle we are all now in?

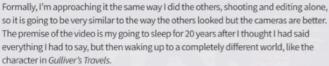
Yes. First Person was or is also an electronic mirror of both the self and culture simultaneously, a bit like Roberto but a wider swathe.

Have the First Person videos been re-edited over time?

A little, not much, but I do keep adding to them. In fact, I am making the last one now. It's about evolution, facing death, and what matters in life.







It is about realising how much has changed in the world, from programming the genome, to the #MeToo movement, to the shifting species' identities and the possibilities of extinction. It includes interviews with geneticists like Harvard's George Church, the inventor of 'Crispr' gene editing systems. I interviewed Elizabeth Blackburn, who first identified the telomere (or the ageing) gene, Caleb Webber, director of genetics at Oxford, Troy Duster, a sociologist of the genome, Drew Endy, a microbiologist from Stanford, and Anthony Atala from Wake Forest Institute for Regenerative Medicine, who pioneered bioprinting systems. But the work is also about how little has changed, the necessity of love, integrity, friendship and humour, which are the really important things in life.

In previous episodes of *First Person*, the narrative is steered by those you select to interview. Is it all quite ad hoc or are the interviews carefully sketched out in advance?

Nothing is planned. When I started doing this I never knew what I was going to say – in fact, one of my therapists saw the diaries and said, how come you never told me those things? So I never know what I'm going to say but I try to integrate the people that I meet during the time that I'm making them, and the ideas that come out of knowing them. It's called *First Person Plural* because you think you're alone, but when you get to the depth of your own truth you get to the heart of other people who you find are also experiencing the same things.

Is First Person Plural interpretable as an index to many of your other works?

Definitely, and what I am also finding out at the moment is how we might keep our archive with DNA, so that it will have a million-year life span. This is something I was able to include in my recent exhibition in Basel at the Haus der Elektronischen Künste (HeK) and as part of 'Art in Motion: 100 Masterpieces with and through Media' in the Zentrum für Kunst und Medientechnologie in Karlsruhe. I was able to take a video that included on its timeline all the information on evolution that I have gathered over the past ten years, as well as my electronic diary, and convert these elements into DNA itself, in this tiny little vial that is practically invisible.

How does that little piece of DNA find form?

I put the vial that they gave me from the lab inside a mirrored box. They've only been able to do this process for a year so nobody really knows about it, I only found out about it by interviewing all these scientists. One of the scientists actually took pity on





me because his brother was a sculptor so he finally helped me to do it. Montreux Jazz Festival just had its archives converted into DNA, and Technicolor has been working on archiving films with DNA, so it really is the next step of archiving.

This is DNA without biomedical function?

Yes, it's synthetic DNA that they create. Information is very expensive to convert so I could only archive 20 megabytes. Basically, you take a video timeline to put everything on, so I put the entire electronic diary as one, as well as excerpts of information I have been collecting – JPEGs, lists on everything about evolution and so on – and then I gave it to them as a digital file, and it took them four months to convert it into DNA code.

It's a form of digitisation?

It's a conversion of digital code from video into the modifiable code of DNA. They did it with *Voyage to the Moon* because it is one of the rarest films. Georges Méliès tried to destroy everything he ever made so they're finding fragments of his films and converting them. That's why Technicolor, Microsoft and Harvard got together to try to convert it correctly and they have achieved a beautiful resolution. You can also unconvert it at any point and not lose any resolution and it

Dante Hotel lasted about ten months. It was a performance

named after the host hotel, which was easier to produce at the time than exhibitions at museums and galleries, which in those days did

not show women artists at all. This is why, during this same period –

the 1960s and 1970s - I invented three art critics to review my work,

which is how I got a gallery in the first place.

The Novalis Hotel 2018 installation

Lorna 1979-82 installation lasts a million years, perhaps longer than the planet. I think of it as extended cinema.

Your current instalment of *First Person Plural* will exist as DNA and as video, and it also ruminates on this material coexistence.

Yes, it ends up with me realising that this can be done. Because many times I feel like I'm being buried by my own history and the weight of my past, and the stigmas and traumas that I have endured, so if I can put that all in one place then I can be safe, and I don't have to think about it any more.

Juliana Huxtable interviewed you for Artforum in 2016 and you talked about Roberta aiming at 'the blur that exists in spaces where people perceive reality, and to show and exhibit flawed belief systems?

I set out to examine how you define and commodify 'reality', particularly when it is openly set up as a fiction. When, just before that work, I created *The Dante Hotel* in 1972 (reworked as The Novalis Hotel this year in Berlin), I wondered what it would be like if we created some living entity that existed in real time and real space but wasn't real. I was completely open as to what it would produce or how long it would last. I think you have to keep an open mind and not be too specific about what your expectations are, like when you're making a documentary. You have to be able to see all sides of it without restricting it to what you presume it is going to be.

Dante Hotel lasted about ten months. It was a performance named after the host hotel, which was easier to produce at the time than exhibitions at museums and galleries, which in those days did not show women artists at all. This is why, during this same period – the 1960s and 1970s – I invented three art critics to review my work, which is how I got a gallery in the first place. I wrote under the pseudonyms of Prudence Juris, Gay Abandon and Herbert Good. They each had their own writing style. They reviewed my work and published the reviews in major newspapers and art magazines. They also wrote about other art exhibitions.

I made Dante Hotel with Eleanor Coppola. She did hers for two weeks with a performer, documenting the changes to the artefacts in the room. Mine featured a fictional person, evident through the artefacts in the room, which were moved around by people as they visited. They could be there 24 hours a day. I didn't sit in the room and watch people but I was amazed that nobody stole anything and that they pretty much left everything intact. Some people spent several hours there and some came back. It was all discovered by word of mouth because it wasn't advertised apart from with a little Xerox flyer, but then people heard about it, people wrote about it, it existed as a myth, the same way Roberta did.

So it went viral, pre-social media?

I actually did think of Roberta as a virus, as someone that would go out and infect the space that she was living in, and especially when I viralised and cloned her into three beings later on in the work. She multiplied around 1976, about halfway through. This really was what verified the research aspect of that work, in that one Roberta having these negative experiences – like getting her purse snatched, or terrible experiences with men – was relatively meaningless but when all three of them would go out and have exactly the same negative experiences it was like a scientific experiment proven three times with consistent results: they were three living proofs of the adverse reactions to this specific being.

So when you assumed the identity of Roberta did you have to relinquish your own identity, administratively speaking, your own driving licence etc?

Not at all. I personally couldn't get credit cards but Roberta had no credit problem so she was able to get credit cards and all these government-assisted proofs of her existence. I was really lucky that I did it in the 1970s because somebody did it in the 1980s and got arrested for identity theft.

So Lynn and Roberta were coexisting quite separately during the mid 1970s?

Roberta had her own walk, her own language, her own gestures, which is what I had to teach to the multiples, which is why in 1976 I chose to cast dancers as the multiples, because they could move that way. She wasn't me – we shared a heartbeat but we were separate.

How close was their resemblance to Roberta?

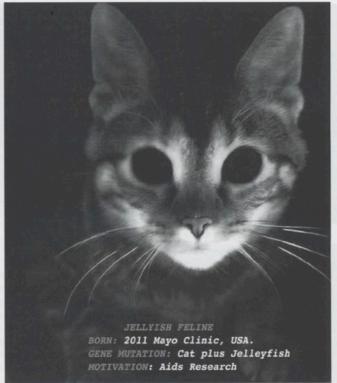
They were made up to be almost physically identical. They had the same dresses made for them, same wigs, same make-up...

In your conversation with Huxtable you spoke about your work engaging with multiple personae. I wonder how best to retroactively understand Roberta.

Roberta was a prism, and we all live in prisms or, in fact, prisons, of who we think we are. Nothing is stable because we live through time, and time and perception change how things appear and move and age, so nothing is fixed that is living.

Was Roberta set up explicitly or exclusively as an art project?





I look at these things as investigations. You could say they're art investigations, but I think it's broader than that. They are investigations into reality or its blurring, or what living is, or how people put frames on what they see and how that affects the perception of the thing inside the frame. I was just exploring these ideas through the process of her. That said, I did set up surveillance photographers around her – photographers of whom the public remained unaware – so I think I had to prove the project as I was doing it in different ways.

Before making *Roberta*, I was certainly affected by André Breton's book *Nadja* from 1928 where he took the city of Paris and turned it into this being. I also knew about Marcel Duchamp's very short-lived transition and why he made the choices he did, to create Rrose Sélavy instead of some other being, because he was thinking about being a Jewish person – he was thinking about all kinds of alternative personae. But it was *Nadja* that made me want to explore the situation of living within the context of a space and a time, how that affected how you were perceived as an individual.

So where is the complete archive now?

I was very lucky because I had one collector for many decades, Donald Hess, and in 1994 he bought the original archive of *Roberta*. Maria Balshaw, who was then at the Whitworth in Manchester, acquired the second set for that museum. The third archive is being split up. There are about 30 pieces at MoMA, several at Tate and the Jewish Museum in New York, with other pieces going elsewhere. I have kept one artist's proof.

Have you specified how material within those archives is shown in the future or are you open to multiple possible configurations or retellings?

There are over 200 elements in each, including notes, clothes and objects, but I think that when people look through and rearrange the material, it's like they are reperforming her and I am completely open to how they do that, and I like the fact that it is never the same.

How did your 2014 short film, The Ballad of JT LeRoy, come about?

I was always fascinated by Laura Albert's story and felt that when her literary persona was revealed to the media she was treated unfairly, and how in fact LeRoy's persona had been a brilliant ploy for her to do her work. Then she contacted me out of the blue and asked me to make a film about her. So I started to do it. I made the short at my own expense and as I was doing it I looked for funding. What I did not know at the time, however, was that she had also contacted many other people as well, asking them to do it. One of the other people she asked secured funding for a feature-length documentary. They even wanted to buy my footage for it, but I wouldn't sell it. I didn't see any point in doing two, so I left it as the short.

Throughout your work you have switched between media, but you have also created some of your own, within modest budgets and during a period when artists working with technology didn't necessarily have access to funding.

In terms of media, I developed many things with zero money, including two artificial intelligence or bot pieces. The first, in 1996, was *Agent Ruby*, and the second, Dina, was finished in 2004, 11 years before Apple's virtual assistant Siri – Dina is much better. To develop AI, MIT had millions of dollars, so did Carnegie Mellon, and they came up with something that falls far short of these things that I did from the mid 1990s on 25 cents.

You have spoken about Agent Ruby in the past as 'the expanded cinema element' of your film Teknolust from 2002.

I think of expanded cinema as something that extends the screen into real life. When I made *Teknolust*, I had the idea for the bot before I had the idea for the film. I almost



by André Breton's book Nadja from 1928 where he took the city of Paris and turned it into this being. I also knew about Marcel Duchamp's very short-lived transition and why he made the choices he did, to create Rrose Sélavy instead of some other being, because he was thinking about all kinds of alternative personae.

word files, video and jpegs from Infinity Engine and Electronic Diaries 1984-2018 converted into DNA

The Infinity Engine

Reach from the 'Phantom Limb series 1968

had to make the film, as weird as it was, to justify and secure the budget for making *Agent Ruby*, and when we first opened the film people were using PalmPilots and we developed a way that the code for *Agent Ruby* would leap off the screen and into the devices so that when people left the theatre they could go home and talk with her. *Agent Ruby* still refers to the earlier film through its central female character, and through the central narrative track of confessions within the film, so they're joined together, the two of them.

After making !Women Art Revolution in 2010, you spoke about all your work as being about 'loss and technology, about the erasure of identity and how technology adds to it and creates it. And how art can defeat that'. Do you still feel that art is capable of combating technology's erasure of identity?

I do, I think that's our major hope and the reason I tell people that this is why we need art more than ever, not only to neutralise the toxicity of our environment but also to create optimism and hope which art does better than anything.

Art also has the capacity to intervene in a visual field in a way that can be troubling. Artists can really challenge new modes of attention capture and I think that is something that your work has done for decades. When you are making work, are you conscious of the viewer's attention and how you want to channel that?

I want the viewer to be aware that they are viewing but also to be conscious that they're being watched. Many times I have brought surveillance into the piece so that the viewers are aware of the absorption of their presence into different media environments. I think that we have to be conscious about how our image is being stolen and what we can do to protect it.

You have been working with facial recognition technology for a while, anticipating an incredibly widespread usage of it, most recently by Facebook . . .

In one of the pieces I made, Venus and the Anthropocene from 2017, I used off-the-shelf software rather than software I had written myself or with my team. It is software

made in China and it is totally wrong, as in it logs incorrect data. It's the same software that major corporations are now using to strategise how to make commercial items for sale based on facial recognition, and this is software that essentially doesn't work. They have facial recognition for crowds, to scan for things, to judge what people like and what they don't like, so they base their conclusions on a product that is faulty. It is a new and highly unreliable form of surveillance data.

Are there artists whose works disarm you, in a similar vein to your own?

I am not sure that I have felt this way about a work recently. When my work was included in 'Art in Motion: 100 Masterpieces with and through Media', curated by Peter Weibel and Siegfried Zielinski, I was thrilled to see Étienne-Jules Marey's early work of a bullet going through glass, and how that affected William Eggleston's work, as well as an 8th-century automaton. So seeing things I didn't know about, and considering how early and how forgotten these pieces were, really resonated. In terms of contemporary artists, I have some concerns with how they use technology, because often it becomes problematic in its surface or shallow resonance. I would prefer not to mention names because sometimes a failed piece of work leads to a good piece and they are at least trying to make something relevant, I think. Other female artists that have inspired me include Leonora Carrington, Tina Modotti and Emma Goldman. All my mentors have been found through books. Paul Cézanne or JMW Turner have equally been of influence: people who were doing true explorations in their work and generally not accepted for their most important work during their lifetimes.

**Isobel Harbison** is an art critic based in London; her book *Performing Image* will be published by MIT Press this autumn.

**Lynn Hershman Leeson**'s exhibition 'First Person Plural' was at KW Berlin from 19 May to 15 July, and will be travelling to Museum Centro de Arte Dos de Mayo, Madrid in February 2019. 'Art in Motion: 100 Masterpieces with and through Media' continues at ZKM, Karlsruhe to 24 February.

Sonia Shechet Epstein, "Notes on Science and Fiction", The Brooklyn Rail, December 13, 2017.

## **| 国BROOKLYN RAIL**

### Notes on Science and Film

by Sonia Shechet Epstein



Still from Teknolust (directed by Lynn Hershman Leeson), courtesy Lynn Hershman Leeson.

1.

Once it was engineered by Thomas Edison at the turn of the 19th century, moving image technology was modified by research scientists to observe what the eye could not. In the French production company Pathé's studio, Dr. Jean Comandon affixed a camera to a microscope and filmed bacteria. The spirochete bacteria that causes syphilis squiggles while it moves; in 1909, examining this with his camera, the doctor was able to establish a means of verifiably diagnosing the disease even in an asymptomatic patient. "Dr. Comandon photographs and reproduces a scene in a blood vessel," Edfrid Bingham wrote in *The Technical World Magazine* in 1910, "just as the showman photographs and reproduces a dogfight, a comical domestic quarrel, a shipwreck or the flight of an aeroplane."

2.

Science is a means of uncovering facts about the world. Film is a practice of seeing the world. A good science film is one that advances both disciplines.

#### **BRIDGET DONAHUE**

After a male seahorse births its young, gaseous secretions cause contractions: the seahorse hops with every poof, and its tail twitches. "The seahorse was for me a splendid way of promoting the kindness and virtue of the father," Jean Painlevé, the French filmmaker and inventor of one of the first underwater cameras, wrote about his 1933 film *L'Hippocampe*. His film was one of the first to show the reproductive biology of seahorses.

Painlevé anthropomorphized his subjects (as Jane Goodall would do in the 1960s, giving chimpanzees human names instead of numbers, thereby ascribing character), allowing him to comment on society—in the case of the seahorse he challenged traditional gender roles. Isabella Rossellini, in her more recent "Green Porno" series, molts from a male shrimp to a female shrimp sporting a pink bodysuit and red silk bra.

4.

Together with scientists, filmmakers can create work that could not be realized otherwise. Isabella Rossellini collaborated with a conservation biologist on "Green Porno" to ensure scientific accuracy, as well as to capture footage from fisheries inaccessible to the public.

Making some of the first films using the computer as a tool to generate imagery, cinema pioneer Stan VanDerBeek collaborated with computer scientist Kenneth Knowlton on an eight-part series. To make the *Poemfield* films roughly between 1966 and 1971, Knowlton wrote a computer code that VanDerBeek programmed into an IBM desktop computer; the visual output, words radiating geometric shapes that stiltedly move about the frame, was recorded. The two practitioners were paired through the organization Experiments in Art and Technology (E.A.T.), which was founded in 1966 by Robert Rauschenberg and Robert Whitman along with engineers Fred Waldhauer and Billy Klüver.

A meaningful convergence of film and science needs to work both ways. "Engineers making themselves available to artists," Klüver wrote for a 2001 exhibit "The Story of E.A.T.," would allow artists to work within the relevant forces that shape society—i.e. the materials of technology—and engineers would come to see their work from the perspective of society and culture, which might influence its future development. This is a standard that early collaborators, such as Pathé and Dr. Comandon, meet.

5.

Films that engage scientists or scientific ideas enhance public understanding of subjects fundamental to human progress. Enhancing public understanding can advance science by informing what questions are asked, which can affect the direction of research. Lynn Hershman Leeson's film Teknolust (2002)—starring Tilda Swinton as three distinct replicants created by a biogeneticist named Rosetta Stone, who communicates with them through a microwave, was always amazing but is newly relevant now that the human genome has been sequenced and CRISPR-Cas9 gene editing can alter it. This technology is as capable of creating—without sexual reproduction—new organisms, as it is of curing illnesses. Public understanding can help to establish moral and ethical usage guidelines.

6.

Film, arguably the most widely accessible medium, can bring science to the public. Jean Painlevé produced three versions of many of his films: one for the scientific community for research purposes, one for education, and one for public entertainment. Mark Levinson's *Particle Fever* (2014), filmed over five years, features physicists working on a massive machine, the large Hadron Collider, designed to smash microscopic particles together for the sake of learning what would happen. When science filmmakers ask audiences to care about science as much as their characters do, cultural and political attitudes towards science can shift.

#### CONTRIBUTOR

Sonia Shechet Epstein

SONIA SHECHET EPSTEIN works at the intersection of science and film at the Museum of the Moving Image in New York.

Sarah Thornton, "The Tools of Her Time", Cultured Magazine, November 30, 2017.





"Lynn always engendered the feeling of being on the edge of new ground."

-Tilda Swinton

At San Francisco's Legion of Honor, in the room where Alfred Hitchcock shot *Vertigo*, you can sit on the bench on which Kim Novak sat and gaze at a portrait that has a GoPro camera hidden behind its eyes. The piece is part of a complex installation by pioneering artist and filmmaker Lynn Hershman Leeson, which is on display from December 16 to March 25. Titled *VertiGhost*, the work explores the shifting relations between fact, fiction, surveillance and identity—themes that Hershman Leeson has been investigating for more than 50 years. Asked to come up with a site-specific work that made reference to the collection, the artist thought it would be exciting to deal with the museum's Hollywood history. "In an era of fake news," she explains, "mistaking false information for truth is a topic whose time has come."

Another component of *VertiGhost* is a 15-minute film that explores two paintings—*Portrait of Carlotta*, a movie prop, and *Portrait of Pierre-Edouard Baranowski*, a Modigliani painting of an androgynous bohemian with empty eyes that was put in storage for 30 years because it was wrongly thought to be a forgery. In the documentary-style short, we see three Novak impersonators—a silent blonde, an engaging brunette and an articulate African woman with braids tied in a French knot. The latter is an actress who watched Hitchcock movies to gain insight into the "American mind" while growing up in Nigeria. "When you are on a steady diet of reality, you have way more discernment for what is not real," she says.

Hershman Leeson is enjoying a surge of mainstream museum attention, instigated by a comprehensive solo retrospective that toured three German cities, then travelled to San Francisco's Yerba Buena Center for the Arts. At the moment, the artist has work installed at the Fondation Louis Vuitton in Paris and the Bonner Kunstverein (in a show about "Art in the Age of Artificial Intelligence"). She also has a six-room installation, which replicates a genetics lab, in the current edition of Site Sante Fe. Called *The Infinity Engine*, the work includes images of experiments like the "Glow Cat," a tabby whose DNA includes a jellyfish gene. The piece has garnered the attention of the scientific establishment to the extent that Novartis, the pharmaceutical giant, has plans

to name an anti-body "Lynn Hershman."

Highly original and experimental, Hershman Leeson's oeuvre is hard to sum up. Her 1968 MA thesis consisted of reviews she wrote in the style of three fictional critics—Prudence Juris, Herbert Good and Gay Abandon. Then, in 1973, she created Roberta Breitmore, a mysterious creature whose existence was made real by her driver's license and dental records as much as her penchant for blonde wigs and seedy hotel rooms. Unlike Duchamp's Rose Sélavy or Cindy Sherman's various female characters (which came later), Roberta did not live in a photographic studio, but roamed the city, often stalked by a photographer. Eventually, Hershman Leeson hired three women to play Roberta and, in 1978, a handful of men volunteered for the part when the Roberta Breitmore lookalike contest invaded the De Young Museum in the form of a conga line. "A lookalike contest was perfect for a work about multiples," explains Hershman Leeson, who killed Roberta off in an exorcism the following year. "We are all more than one, whether we like it or not, and know it or not."

After that, Hershman Leeson took a deep dive, exploring how new technologies affect people's relationship to art and other human beings. She made Lorna (1979-82), an interactive laserdisc piece about an agoraphobic woman, which had three possible endings: Lorna would shoot the television. commit suicide or move to Los Angeles. In Deep Contact (1984), she used early touch-screen technology to enable her audience to access the body parts of a character called Marion. Then came CyberRoberta (1996), a telerobotic doll whose left eye hid a webcam, and Life Squared (2002), an online virtual hotel, haunted by an avatar version of Roberta. These works were followed by two ambitious science fiction feature films starring lanky British actress Tilda Swinton. Conceiving Ada (1997) was partly about Ada Lovelace, the 19th century inventor of the first computer algorithm, while Teknolust (2002) centered on a biogeneticist who made triplicate clones of herself. Swinton loved working with Hershman Leeson, who she describes as "the merriest of shipmates," because the artist-director always engendered the feeling "of being on the edge of new ground."







Hershman Leeson's *VertiGhost*, 2017, (left), is a complex installation opening at San Francisco's Legion of Honor on December 16; above, her 1976 *Masked Roberta*.

For many years, Hershman Leeson had only one collector—Donald Hess, the Swiss owner of many vineyards including Napa's Hess Collection. A friend to many artists including Francis Bacon, Hess visited Hershman in the 1980s when she was a single parent, living in a basement. "I felt intuitively that Lynn was an important artist," he explains. "She had a deep awareness of social issues such as privacy, gender, and surveillance. I may not immediately have understood her work but it intrigued me to the point that I wanted to spend time with it." Hess bought almost everything she had made—over three hundred pieces—and then continued to support her by acquiring the first edition of her photographs and interactive works for decades afterward.

"I admire outsiders," admits Hershman Leeson. "And people who have a political point of view." As such, her art historical inspirations are as varied as Jean Tinguely (with his kinetic mechanical sculptures), Lee Miller (a war photographer who started out as Man Ray's model) and Tina Modotti (an artist-activist who began her career as Edward Weston's assistant). Still the question remains: what made Hershman Leeson so ahead of the curve, so ambitious to merge art and technology? "It was about understanding that I couldn't compete with the past," she explains. "To have any impact, you have to use the tools of your time. I was able to breathe what was going on here in San Francisco and then reshape it."

Robert Slifkin, "Ladytron", Art Journal, Fall/Winter 2017, 133-136.

## art journal

#### Robert Slifkin Ladytron

#### Lynn Hershman Leeson: Civic Radar.

Exhibition curated by Peter Weibel and Andreas Beitin. ZKM / Center for Art and Media, Karlsruhe, Germany, December 13, 2014—April 6, 2015; Falckenberg Collection, Hamburg, Germany, June 14—November 15, 2015; Yerba Buena Center for the Arts, San Francisco, February 10—May 21, 2017. Organized for Yerba Buena Center by Lucía Sanromán

Peter Weibel, ed. Lynn Hershman Leeson: Civic Radar. Exh. cat. With texts by Andreas Beitin, Hou Hanru and Laura Poitras, Pamela Lee, Peggy Phelan, Ruby Rich, Jeffrey Schnapp, Kyle Stephan, Kristine Stiles, Tilda Swinton, and Weibel. Ostfildern: Hatje Cantz, 2016. 384 pp., 430 color ills., 62 b/w. \$70

In our current age of digital avatars, technological surveillance, and turbulent identity politics, few artists seem as relevant-and arguably as oracular—as Lynn Hershman Leeson. For more than fifty years, the artist has explored the ways in which a self is constructed, controlled, and exteriorized through various forms of mediation. The recent exhibition Civic Radar, organized by the Center for Art and Media, Karlsruhe (ZKM), and which traveled to Hamburg and the Yerba Buena Center for the Arts in San Francisco, along with its richly illustrated and comprehensive catalogue, provide a valuable and unprecedented opportunity to recognize and appreciate Hershman Leeson's sustained investigation of what of Marshall McLuhan described as "the pattern of sex, technology, and death" that has fueled the imagination, if not the material evolution, of modern humanity.1 Civic Radar effectively positions her works as a crucial and progenitive instance of a tradition of techno-feminism that reaches from McLuhan's Mechanical Bride (1951) to Donna Haraway's "Cyborg Manifesto" (1984) and has arguably flourished most effectively in more popular iterations such as films like Metropolis (1927), Blade Runner (1982), and Her (2013), not to mention Hershman Leeson's trilogy of sci-fi-inflected movies, Conceiving Ada (1997), Teknolust (2002), and Strange Culture (2007), which all, notably, feature the actor Tilda Swinton.



Lynn Hershman Leeson, *Synthia Stock Ticker*, 2000-2002, Custom software, LCD, glass and electronics, first use of stock date and behavior as net motivation,  $15 \times 11 \times 11$  in.  $(38.10 \times 27.94 \times 27.94 \text{ cm})$ 

The retrospective perspective of the exhibition brings into focus Hershman Leeson's restlessly heterogeneous practice, now spanning over five decades and encompassing assemblage, photography, performance, installation, video, and interactive new media as well as a growing body of feature-length movies (including the important documentary !Women Art Revolution-A Secret History from 2010). From her earliest sculptures and collages of the 1960s, which conjoined mechanic and organic forms into proto-cyborgian entities, to recent multimedia installations like The Infinity Engine (2014), which examines the brave new world of genetic bioengineering, Hershman Leeson has considered the ways in which gender and sexuality continue to inform the changing contours of humanity's-and pace McLuhan, not only man's-technological extensions, provocatively suggesting how the rise of the internet and digital culture more generally have crucially shaped contemporary considerations of sexual identity and desire and, in turn, altered the very basis of what constitutes the boundaries between nature and culture.

Like many other artists working in the 1960s, Hershman Leeson began to reconsider the work of art-and the sculptural object in particular-as a categorically environmental object in which the surrounding space of the gallery was activated, consequently making the viewer's body a constitutive element of the aesthetic experience. Along with Nam June Paik, Charlotte Moorman, Stan VanDerBeek, and a handful of other artists in the second half of the decade, Hershman Leeson examined the environmental impact of technology and the way in which it seemed to increasingly surround a subject, providing a media correlate to the phenomenological circumscription of Minimalism. Incorporating and manipulating ready-made technological objects such as televisions and radios, these artists recoded them as notably kinetic and sonic sculptural objects whose emanations encompassed the space of the gallery.

The exhibition and its accompanying catalogue make the case for Hershman Leeson's crucial role as an innovator in this increasingly influential strand of postwar art, claiming that she is "one of the world's very first media artists" (7). Such celebratory assertions arguably convey a certain degree of defensiveness that may come from the relative paucity of art historical consideration

of the artist's career. As Pamela Lee writes in her essay on Hershman Leeson's early series Breathing Machines, produced in the late 1960s, "any attention at all" to these strange and rarely exhibited works "is a long time in coming" (57). Lee compellingly aligns these works, which consist of Plexiglas boxes containing bewigged wax effigies of the artist's face coupled with tape cassette players projecting a woman's voice, with the tradition of anatomical sculptures dating back to the Renaissance; the assertion suggests a genealogical link between scientific and technological simulations of life, which find their ultimate conjunction in the recent mapping of the genome and the scientific artifice of genetic modification.

Like Paul Thek, who was also casting body fragments in wax in the 1960s, Hershman Leeson's sculptures from the period display a sense of technologically derived vitalism and not-so-latent anthropomorphism. She called these early assemblages, after all, Breathing Machines, and this uncanny nexus between human and technological varieties of animation and artifice would continue to inform the artist's work throughout her career. The works impart a somewhat primitive but nonetheless affective interactive mode of address. Viewers (or, as the artist repeatedly describes her intended audience, "viewers/participants") are invited to respond to a series of statements and



Lynn Hershman Leeson, Self Portrait as Another Person, 1965, installation view, Lynn Hershman Leeson: Civic Radar, Yerba Buena Center for the Arts, San Francisco, 2017 (artwork © Lynn Hershman Leeson; photograph by Charlie Villyard, provided by Yerba Buena Center for the Arts)

questions emanating from the sculpture. (The soundtrack, originally played back on the cassette machine inside the Plexiglas box, now is a digital loop.) A female voice, seemingly belonging to the wax effigy, asks questions like "what's your name?" and "tell me what you're afraid of," along with simple directives such as "talk to me" and startling observations like "I've never met anyone else like you." Asking viewers to engage-often intimately-with an electronic apparatus, the Breathing Machines can be seen as sculptural Turing tests, probing the boundaries between human consciousness and digital systems. Yet the litany of commands and questions, expressed in an entreating and anxious tone, also give the impression of existential poetry, so that these animated machines seem to interrogate the essential identity of their human audience.

Indeed, the exhibition effectively demonstrated the artist's consistent and cunning engagement with language, both written and spoken. If for various conceptualists the incorporation of linguistic "information" provided a means to dematerialize art and uncover latent aesthetic presuppositions that sustained a modernist faith in autonomy, Hershman Leeson typically drew on narrative and fictive realms of language, such as diaries and screenplays, as a means to, as she put it, "plan narratives for my sculptures." One might argue that for Hershman Leeson, such postmodern paradigms as dematerialization and the critique of autonomy were not purely philosophical or aesthetic issues but rather constitutive to her interest in an art that could tell stories. These narratives would sometimes take the form of sculptural tableaux and performances in which the audience was invited to hotel rooms and private residences where they encountered extensive mise-en-scènes featuring wax effigies and, in certain instances, live actors. Many of these performances, especially when staged in down-and-out venues like the YMCA and the Chelsea Hotel in New York or the Dante Hotel in San Francisco, conveyed a certain noir sensibility, investing the various objects within the installations with a forensic aspect and correspondingly placing the visitors in the position of detectives having to reconstruct the possible motives and meanings surrounding the depicted event.

Even more cinematic were the twentyfive window displays Hershman Leeson cre-

ated for the Bonwit Teller department store in New York in 1976. Expanding on the estimable legacy of artists such as Jasper Johns, Robert Rauschenberg, and Andy Warhol, who early in their careers, in the late 1950s, designed displays for the store, Hershman Leeson, sponsored by the Institute for Art and Urban Resources (which later became the alternative art space, PS1), avoided the promotion of commodities for sale. Instead she emphasized the shop window as interface between fantasy and reality. One window featured live actors who could communicate with passersby through two-way microphones and speakers installed in the glass, while another window contained a mannequin whose arm broke through the glass, suggesting the central theme of connection, often between animate and inanimate entities, in the artist's oeuvre. The works, on view for only six days, were transient, collaborative, and multimedia, attributes that in many ways define a great deal of Hershman Leeson's output and make it at once so radically unique, difficult to categorize, and challenging to display in museum settings.

As the Bonwit Teller works suggest, Hershman Leeson often showed her work in non-conventional venues. These were truly alternative art sites: besides department stores, the artist would exhibit her work in casinos, hotels, and private residences. This tendency to eschew traditional modes of artistic display would be extended in her Floating Museum (1974-78) in which the artist organized a temporary exhibition for various friends and collaborators, creating what Kyle Stephan describes in his catalogue essay as a "nomadic, process-based exhibition model" (223). During its four-year existence, the Floating Museum presented over three hundred projects on three continents, including ephemeral "space invasions" (the artist's notably sci-fi-inflected term) by artists such as Eleanor Antin, Michael Asher, Terry Fox, and Newton and Helen Mayer Harrison. As Stephan notes, these projects demonstrate Hershman Leeson's "investment in the democratic potential of interactivity" (224) and, moreover, reveal a fundamental modesty and collaborative ethos at the heart of her practice, which might be aligned with her position within both the feminist and new media movements.

In addition, by working with time-based and collective practices, Hershman Leeson's

works often exist primarily through various forms of documentation. This presents another challenge for her work's representation in museums. As in the recent and equally revelatory retrospective of Mierle Laderman Ukeles at the Queens Museum, ephemera serve an essential, rather than supplemental, role in the artist's practice, again proposing a possible feminist interpretation for this model of art making that is not grounded in patriarchal ideals of permanence and power.2 An obvious care and thoughtfulness can be detected in the presentation of Hershman Leeson's ephemeral materials in the exhibition's horizontal vitrines. They contained elegantly arranged items ranging from unassuming photographs of the self-destructive assemblages known as Suicide Machines (1963-68), to various exhibition announcements, invitations to the series of "Performance Dinners" Hershman Leeson hosted, and an array of personal artifacts related to performances, including traces of her most famous and protracted performance, Roberta Breitmore.

The artist created Breitmore in 1973 as what she called "a portrait of alienation and loneliness" and would continue to perform and literally inhabit this fictional persona for four years until the character was ritualistically "exorcised" in 1978. Unlike other instances of artists taking on fictive persona such as Marcel Duchamp's Rrose Sélavyand more like Eleanor Antin's King of Solana Beach-Hershman Leeson's Breitmore operated primarily beyond the art world, going so far as to register for a driver's license, open a bank account, visit a psychologist, and place classified ads in the local newspaper for a roommate. (These last interventions led to

meetings with prospective lodgers in public spaces which the artist had photographed by a private detective.) Along with the documents related to what Peggy Phelan calls the character's "institutional markers of identity" (103), the exhibition also featured a series of altered photographs that served as diagrammatic "construction charts" for Hershman Leeson's transformation into Breitmore, identifying the type of wig and clothing to wear and noting where the artist would apply makeup. The project suggests a much longer —and much less technological—genealogy of mediated identity that finds its origins in Charles Baudelaire's celebration of maquillage as the epitome of modern artifice in his 1863 essay "Painter of Modern Life."

In all these ventures, Hershman Leeson brought her embodied narratives into the realm of the everyday, becoming, as she described Roberta, a "simulated person who interacts with real life in real time" (104). As Phelan notes, the Roberta Breitmore persona entailed a "performance of co-identity" in which Hershman and her fictional double (who was sometimes played by other actors) "forged a third identity" that was simultaneously real and fictive (101). As such, Hershman Leeson acted as both Pygmalion and Galatea, artist and uncanny ideal, suggesting what the literary theorist Wendy Steiner calls the "ontological paradox" of the "real model," who is "a real person who becomes artificial in posing and gives rise to a quasi self in the form of an artistic image." If, as Steiner notes, such figures "symbolize the growing permeation of the virtual into everyday reality," Hershman Leeson would make this virtual existence explicit in the work's ultimate manifestation as a character



Lynn Hershman Leeson, Roberta Breitmore series, 1973-78, installation view, Lynn Hershman Leeson: Civic Radar, Yerba Buena Center for the Arts, San Francisco, 2017 (artwork

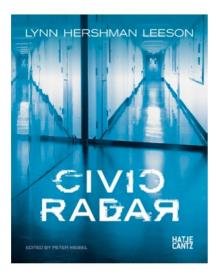
© Lynn Hershman Leeson; photograph by Charlie Villyard, provided by Yerba Buena Center for the

in the online platform Second Life and as an interactive doll, CyberRoberta (1996).<sup>3</sup>

Hershman Leeson went on to explore the possibilities of inhabiting fictive persona through a wide array of multimedia platforms. For instance, in her multimedia installation Lorna (1984), the artist invited viewers to imagine trading places with an agoraphobic single female character who was in many ways similar to Roberta. Described in the catalogue as the "world's first interactive video art disc," the work consists of a television placed within what appeared to be a somewhat grungy living room, containing unassuming furnishings, magazines scattered on the floor, and a fishbowl (with a real goldfish!). Viewers/participants are then invited to sit down in front of the television, grab the remote control, and select possible options for Lorna from an interactive menu. The relatively limited array of possible choices for the character's cloistered and desperate emotional life is fleshed out by the video's soundtrack, which features songs from Terry Allen's artcountry masterpiece, the album Lubbock (On Everything) (1979). As in so many of the artist's works on view (such as Home Front, A Room of One's Own, and America's Finest), video imagery in Lorna is incorporated into what could be described in somewhat formalist terms as a sculptural support, investing the moving image with a specificity rarely experienced in most aesthetic settings. The same objects depicted in Lorna's living room constitute the setting of the installation, allowing for what the artist describes in one of the short published writings included in the catalogue as a "point of identification between the viewer and the referent" (361). In a recent interview, the artist recognized how a similar empathetic relation based on a shared set of experiences is proposed in the Breitmore work. "Roberta was a fictional character, but in her DNA she carried the same characteristics as any woman who looked like Roberta and lived in the late 1980s, and so her experiences were common experiences."4

Many of Hershman Leeson's more recent projects have taken this genetic/technological connection as their primary subject. In Agent Ruby (2002) and DiNA (2004), the artist, working with programmers, has constructed interactive artificially intelligent characters that are able to "learn" and "evolve" through their interactions with users and the World Wide Web. This interest in the genetic con-

struction of identity, across species, provides the central theme of the artist's Infinity Engine, which greeted visitors to the exhibition at the Yerba Buena Center for the Arts. The installation appears to be a stylized natural history museum display with videotaped interviews with scientists, immersive wallpaper featur-



ing an encyclopedic array of bioengineered entities, an aquarium containing live GloFish (an early patented bioengineered species), and open browsable file folders that held legal documents related to bioengineering copyright infringement cases going as far back as the 1970s. By emphasizing the creativity and artifice motivating scientific practices, these works blur the boundaries between artist and scientist.

Due to its treatment of the artist's prolific and varied output, the accompanying catalogue provides a valuable synopsis of her entire oeuvre, and the accompanying essays usefully situate her practices within larger milieu. Like many recent catalogues, the book contains shorter texts by numerous authors (twelve, if one includes the artist) as well as interviews, and in this instance the array of different voices work in tandem to produce a comprehensive, cohesive, and remarkably multifaceted account of the artist's work. Of particular note is Kristine Stiles's essay, which considers the importance of the Bay Area in the artist's oeuvre. Hershman Leeson assembled around her an impressive coterie, including the countercultural guru Timothy Leary and the feminist sex worker activist group COYOTE, as well as the gonzo journalist Hunter S. Thompson

(with whom she communicated via telephone), and Christo and Jean-Claude, for whom she served as the associate project manager for Running Fence (1973). Many of the texts focus on the artist's investigation of the constructedness of identity. Peter Weibel's introductory essay capably situates Hershman Leeson's gender-bending practices in an avant-garde genealogy and considers her place within a tradition of recoding the "male mythology" (51) explored by the Surrealists and Dadaists like Francis Picabia, in which femininity is aligned with nature while masculinity is related to technology. Andreas Beitin's contribution considers the artist's sustained interest in the theme of the mask, both in literal manifestations and through virtual avatars, both digital and analogue (such as her reviews published under pseudonyms.) Most valuable of all, perhaps, are the collected writings by the artist herself at the end of the catalogue. It is in these texts that one can discern Hershman Leeson's wide-ranging intelligence and her vision of art as a viable means of discovery rivaling any scientific endeavor. "Fiction, at its best," she writes, "makes truth accessible" (200). One senses a moral integrity and modesty even in Hershman Leeson's darkest and most inhuman inventions. Her work eschews spectacle even when most technological. Whether such a vision offers a constructive means of recalibrating our relationship to technology or envisages the consequences of our refusal to do so remains provocatively unresolved.

Robert Slifkin is an associate professor of fine arts at the Institute of Fine Arts, New York University. He is the author of Out of Time: Philip Guston and the Refiguration of Postwar American Art (University of California Press, 2013). He is currently working on a book project entitled "The New Monuments and the End of Man: American Sculpture between War and Peace, 1945—1975," which will consider the intertwined histories of sculpture and nuclear war in postwar US culture.

- Marshall McLuhan, The Mechanical Bride: Folklore of Industrial Man (New York: Vanguard, 1951), 13.
   Mierle Laderman Ukeles: Maintenance Art, organized by Larissa Harris and Patricia C. Phillips.
- organized by Larissa Harris and Patricia C. Phillips, Queens Museum, New York, NY, September 18, 2016–February 19, 2017.
- 3. Wendy Steiner, The Real Real Thing: The Model in the Mirror of Art (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2010), 4, 12.
- 4. Evan Moffitt, "All Lynn," interview with Lynn Hershman Leeson, *Fri*eze, April 14, 2017, at https://frieze.com/article/all-lynn, as of August 28, 2017.

Vanessa Thrill, "The Trauma of Political Engagement: Lynn Hershman Leeson's *Tania Libre*", *Art in America* (May 23), <a href="http://www.artinamericamagazine.com/news-features/news/the-trauma-of-political-engagement-lynn-hershman-leesons-tania-libre/">http://www.artinamericamagazine.com/news-features/news/the-trauma-of-political-engagement-lynn-hershman-leesons-tania-libre/</a>.

## Art in America

NEWS MAY 23, 2017

# The Trauma of Political Engagement: Lynn Hershman Leeson's *Tania Libre*

by Vanessa Thill



What happens when a performance artist struggling against state censorship goes to therapy? In her new film *Tania Libre*, Lynn Hershman Leeson lets us eavesdrop on Tania Bruguera's session with Dr. Frank Ochberg, a leading psychiatrist and PTSD expert. Their conversation is slow in tempo as it unfolds over the hour-long film, but it raises provocative questions about abusive familial structures and the ways that traumatic experiences of betrayal can play out on a larger political scale. Static camera angles of Bruguera and Ochberg relaxing on easy chairs have a drowsy visual impact as their discussion rambles between anecdotes and responses. But Bruguera's stories are highly useful for interpreting her work, and although the mood of Tania Libre is sedate, its ideas are keen.

Since the 1980s, Bruguera has found creative ways to test the limits and contradictions of various power structures through performances and collaborative projects. Her practice is impossible to pin down; sometimes it involves horse-mounted police officers herding visitors around a museum, or Bruguera reading aloud the entirety of Hannah Arendt's Origins of Totalitarianism. In one of her most well-known pieces, Tatlin's Whisper #6 (Havana Version), presented at the 2009 Havana Biennial, members of the public were invited to speak freely for one minute each at a podium. Footage of the performance is included in *Tania Libre*. In the doctor's office, Bruguera fondly reminisces on the sentiment from one participant in Tatlin's Whisper, who expressed his hope that "one day freedom of expression in Cuba will not be a performance."

Two weeks after President Obama announced the end of the American embargo against Cuba in 2014, Bruguera attempted to restage the performance again in Havana with the title #YoTambienExijo, but was arrested and detained by the Cuban police before she could begin. Hershman Leeson heard Bruguera was in jail and decided to produce a film about her. "I simply wanted to help," Hershman Leeson explained to me. "As an artist I felt empathy for the censorship and repression of her confinement and imprisonment that generated from an attempt to do her work." Hershman Leeson's unusual film focuses less on the political impact of Bruguera's provocative performances than on the relationship between the manipulative tactics of the Cuban government and the fraught psychic underpinnings of the artist's decisions made throughout her practice.

As one of the art world's most celebrated—and daring—artists, it's moving to see Bruguera express doubt about the risks she has taken for her work. In her session with the doctor, she eloquently reflects on the emotional ramifications of constant struggles with authorities and even peers who seek to cast her as a criminal. Yet Bruguera's resentment toward those who disparage her is coupled with empathic remorse for the pain that she has caused others.

When Bruguera and Ochberg discuss her time in jail, she laughs bitterly about her complicated attraction to her prison guard. Ochberg describes Stockholm Syndrome, explaining how victims of violence can be attracted to their abusers. The possibility of such a powerful—but scarring—bond at work in society at large may shed light on why citizens seem to willingly give up their rights under repressive regimes.

The familial metaphor of the state as an abusive caretaker is particularly apt when considering the Castros and the

aftermath of their revolutionary idealism. As any good shrink would, Ochberg makes sure to ask about Bruguera's relationship with her father, a former diplomat and minister to Fidel Castro. The topic first comes up when he asks about an early moment when Bruguera's faith in justice was deeply shaken. She recalls working on a newspaper project in 1994, when her father "came to my house as a policeman, not as a father." He turned her in to secret police.

Ochberg reflects on this incident as a moral wound connected to a deeper realization of injustice that has had complicated effects on Bruguera. In the aftermath of this betrayal, her father lost his status as an ambassador and was no longer allowed to travel outside of Cuba. The secret police have continued to interrogate and detain his daughter on and off, using creative tactics to censor her work to this day. As she told Art in America in 2015, "my work is about loopholes." In the film she recalls, her countenance lighting up with mischievous joy, the attempt by government officials to drown out her reading of Hannah Arendt's *The Origins of Totalitarianism* with jackhammers. During their lunch break, the workers listened in.

Footage of the therapy session comprises an overwhelming majority of the film, but there are also several intentionally discontinuous moments. Archival shots of Bruguera's performance work are interspersed as short montages with upbeat music, and several mysterious voiceovers from Hershman Leeson ask brief yet cutting questions like "Do you see this whole event as a performance?" Bruguera grins.

The film is bookended by a voiceover cameo by Tilda Swinton, who declares that "art is a basic human right" while disembodied hands release doves against a black background. The text, which comes from Bruguera's *Manifesto on Artists' Rights*, must have resonated when Bruguera delivered it to the United Nations in 2012, but the speech's effect is dulled here by theatrical cliché. Toward the end of the film, Hershman Leeson turns the camera to Bruguera's current projects, like the Hannah Arendt Institute for Art and Activism in Havana, a space for international artists and activists to work on civic literacy projects. Unsurprisingly, the government subsequently launched a smear campaign against Bruguera, accusing her of working for the CIA. Yet Bruguera has refused to give

#### **BRIDGET DONAHUE**

99 BOWERY 2ND FLOOR, NEW YORK, NY 10002 USA BRIDGETDONAHUE.NYC up on Cuba despite the government's many offers of a oneway ticket out of the country.

The film draws to a close with Bruguera announcing her 2018 Cuban presidential bid via a webcam in her house, undercutting any hubris with her primary message: "you should run, too." Ultimately, Tania Libre is a portrait of an artist committed to seeking out her most honest and vulnerable self. Portraying Bruguera's own messy internal process of constant questioning, the film concludes with the artist stepping solidly into the future, guilt and regrets in hand.

CURRENTLY ON VIEW *Tania Libre* screens at the Museum of Modern Art, New York, through May 24. Additional screenings will take place at Laemmle's Royal Theater, Los Angeles, June 2–8; the SF DocFest at the Vogue Theater, San Francisco, June 9; and at the Art Gallery of Ontario, Toronto, June 14 and 16.

Evan Moffitt, "All Lynn", Frieze, April 14, 2017, https://frieze.com/article/all-lynn.

## frieze



INTERVIEW - 14 APR 2017

## All Lynn

Recently awarded a USA Artist Fellowship, Lynn Hershman Leeson speaks about cultural technologies, personal narratives and alter egos

#### BY EVAN MOFFITT

In 1984, Donna Harraway published A Cyborg Manifesto, a critique of feminist identity politics that dismantled the boundaries between human and machine, and imagined our bionic future. One year earlier, artist Lynn Hershman Leeson had already created a feminist cyborg called Lorna, the first interactive laser artdisk, that allowed players to simulate the life of an agoraphobic woman. For more than 30 years, Hershman Leeson has employed innovative technology to probe issues of identity, embodiment and expression in newly engaging ways, producing complex works of computer engineering as well as powerful documentaries and feature films. I spoke with her in Chicago, where she was being recognized as a 2016 USA Artists Fellow – one of 46 recipients, across disciplines and from around the country, of a USD\$50,000 no-strings-attached

artist grant. The award coincided with her current retrospective at Yerba Buena Center for the Arts, in her hometown of San Francisco, and closely follows her recent exhibition at Bridget Donahue Gallery in New York.



Lynn Hershman Leeson, *Self Portrait as Another Person*, 1965, installation view, 'Lynn Hershman Leeson: Civic Radar', Yerba Buena Center for the Arts, San Francisco, 2017. Courtesy: Yerba Buena Center for the Arts; photograph: Charlie Villyard

Evan Moffitt: I've always found one of the most moving elements of your practice to be your use of personal narrative, both your own stories and those of your alter ego, Roberta Breitmore. I'm thinking especially of 'The Electronic Diaries' (1986-1994), a series of confessional videos that were included in your recent show at Bridget Donahue in New York, in which you discuss experiences with men, including domestic violence. Do you see this as a specific strategy of engagement, or simply a fact of being an artist?

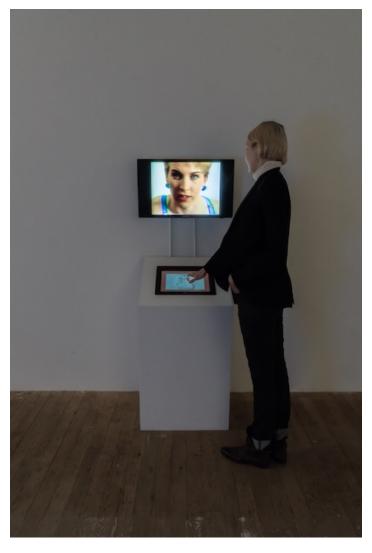
Lynn Hershman Leeson: I think that all art involves some kind of personal narrative, whether artists consciously include them or not. In my particular case, I began 'The Electronic Diaries' in order to teach myself how to use a video camera. I wasn't working with anyone else, so I was alone with the camera for hours on end, and just started talking. I've recently begun a new series of similar videos about aging, and what happens after you turn 30 – which reflects my own personal gestation. Narratives, if one is honest with themselves, are always personal – and the more personal you get, the further inward you go in search of yourself, the more people you'll resonate with. If you've been a victim of domestic violence, it's easy to think that you're alone, but after completing the 'Diaries' I've had so many people tell me they've had similar experiences, but never spoken about them.

EM: Were 'The Electronic Diaries' a form of art therapy for you?

LHL: I was seeing a therapist at the time, and my therapist saw the work and said, 'How come you never said those things to me?' (laughs) Working with a video camera, and especially editing, was a good process of self-analysis. But I also think that personal confessions make you into an archetype of your time: Roberta was a fictional character, but in her DNA she carried the same characteristics as any woman who looked like Roberta and lived in the late 1980s, and so her experiences were common experiences.

EM: If Roberta is characteristic of the 1980s, so was the equipment that you used to create your videos. The works have a patina that function as a kind of timestamp, given that technology has evolved rapidly since then. How has that technological change affected your relationship to the medium of film and video? What about technological change in a broader cultural sense?

LHL: Going from very heavy camera equipment that required a crew to complete any kind of shoot, to being able to film on your own, using just your iPhone – that's a profound change. My work has always followed technology as it has adapted to engage with people in new ways – creating artificially intelligent creatures like *Lorna* (1983) that will respond to you in a video game-like format. Just two days ago, I was up at Harvard meeting with the molecular engineer George Church, was telling me that they are working with Technicolor, Google and Microsoft to embed film on a strand of DNA, as a new form of archival storage. They've already done it with *A Voyage to the Moon* (1902), a very fragile film that will now be there for a million years, unless we get hit by an asteroid (laughs). So I thought, why not use my USA Artists grant to create a portrait of George Church, a documentary about this process, and embed it in DNA



Lynn Hershman Leeson, *Deep Contact*, 1984-89, interactive videodisk installation, including first touch screen created on hypercard and ported, video, colour, sound, with coding in collaboration with Sarah Roberts. Courtesy: the artist and Bridget Donahue, New York © Lynn Hershman Leeson; photograph: Jason Mandella

EM: Bodily absorption as archival preservation – incredible!

LHL: It's bionic, in a very strange way. The ingestion of film, as George put it.

I think that as technology develops, it really changes both the narrative and the form of art. Life itself changes along with the means to express its narratives. There's been an explosion of personal expression with social media.

EM: Not just with the speed of communication, but the fact that anyone with a mobile phone has the ability to record and disseminate confessional videos to a hypothetically endless number of people. From camcorder to YouTube.



Lynn Hershman Leeson, *DiNA*, 2004, installation view, 'Lynn Hershman Leeson: Civic Radar', Yerba Buena Center for the Arts, San Francisco, 2017. Courtesy: Yerba Buena Center for the Arts; photograph: Charlie Villyard

#### LHL: Or not share it, and have it surveilled ...

EM: If you do make a documentary about George Church, it will be one of many; you recently completed a documentary about Tania Bruguera, *Tania Libre* (2017). which premiered at the Berlin Berlinale this year, and will be screened at the Museum of Modern Art in New York this May. What was it like making a work about another artist?

LHL: I had done it with *Strange Culture* (2007) and *!Women Art Revolution* (2011) – both of those films are about artists dealing with the injustice of censorship. Tania experienced the same thing, so the film is really about the freedom of expression. I've been interested in the culture that provokes attitudes that perpetuate injustice, as seen through the eyes of an individual – much the way Roberta reflected the injustices of her time.

EM: Going back to technology, science fiction and speculative fiction seem to be enjoying a recent surge in popular interest – to say nothing of the dystopian films and books that have followed disasters like global warming or the rise of Trump. What has drawn you towards science fiction? What can it offer art – or, even further, a feminist art practice like yours?

LHL: I'd like to think that there's also a 'science truth', not just a fiction – and that if you live in the present, the things we think of as fictions are absolutely possible, even imminent. It's maybe easier to swallow the future when it's framed as science fiction; stories like *The Handmaiden's Tale* (1985) perhaps more productively frame the potential problems of repressive societies, so we can learn to spot warning signs when they appear. When I made *Teknolust* – a sci-fi film – in 2002, it reflected concerns about society that are very present today, regarding sexual repression and freedom of expression. If you make a film like that I think it can inform a public much better than accusations. I think many of my works can function as a kind of warning, a wake-up call.

EM: Many people might consider you a kind of prophet, for that reason – you worked with artificial intelligence, for instance, before many people outside of the computer engineering field imagined it was even possible. Do you feel at all vindicated that public discussion around the subjects of your earlier work – from surveillance to misogyny in the media – has increased in the age of Donald Trump?

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LHL: These issues have been prevalent for a long time, and many people have been concerned about them for decades. The fact that we have a President whose actions prompt us to discuss those issues more prominently just reveals how outdated our discourse really has been all these years. Our society has never been free of prejudice.

EM: Do you think the forms of media we deal with most regularly on a mass scale – from social platforms to cable news – exacerbate those prejudices? You've appropriated the forms of a wide range of such media in your own work. Can they be changed, or do we have to hit the reset button?

LHL: We really do have to start over again. But technology can never be the full solution to our problems; technology is cultural, and it's how we use it that matters. The ways the right wing has used media technology in recent years reveals a selfishness and myopia that younger people can actively work against, using those same systems, since they understand them so well.

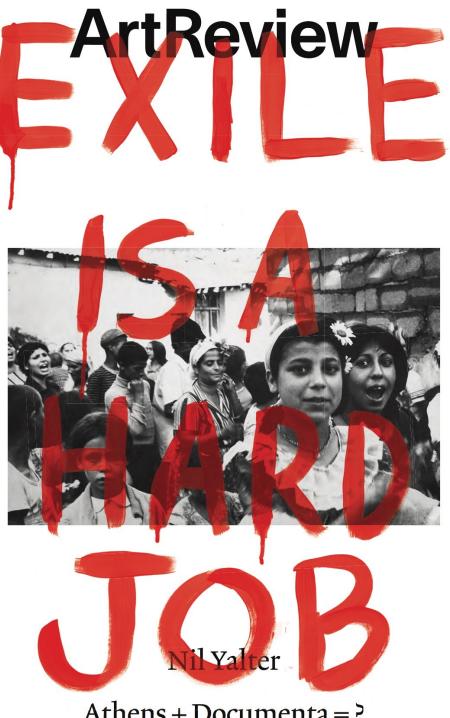
I think privacy ended in my lifetime: we now carry cyborgs in our pockets that permit government and corporate surveillance on a mass scale. At the same time, technology is a kind of mirror, in which we are reflected, and can better understand ourselves.

The retrospective Lynn Hershman Leeson: Civic Radar' runs at the Yerba Buena Center for the Arts, San Francisco, until 21 May 2017.

#### EVAN MOFFITT

Evan Moffitt is assistant editor of frieze, based in New York, USA.

Jeppe Ugelvig, "Lynn Hershman Leeson: Remote Controls", Art Review, April 2017, 124.



Athens + Documenta = ?

### Lynn Hershman Leeson Remote Controls Bridget Donahue, New York 27 January – 12 March

When it comes to new media, few artists can claim a vision as prophetic as that of Lynn Hershman Leeson. Since the 1970s, the American artist has investigated issues of identity in relation to digital and virtual existence, often going unacknowledged for her trailblazing deployment of emerging technologies. Remote Controls surveys her interrogation of technologies of control and surveillance over almost four decades, both as subject matter and as a structural premise of artistic form.

For example, in Deep Contact (1984), the sensuous voice of a female avatar addresses the viewer, drawing us towards the screen she inhabits, 'waiting' for the touch of a passerby to 'activate' her. The first artwork ever to use touch-activated-screen technology, Deep Contact leads users through a technicoloured garden of Eden, where interaction determines the outcome of the narrative. The work skilfully captures the psychosexual dimension of the encounter (using tactile technologies long before the age of smartphones) and accurately predicts the prevalent feminine gendering

of AI service assistants today, such as Siri (Apple), Cortana (Microsoft) and Alexa (Amazon).

The erasure of the boundary between feminine subject and digital object is indeed Hershman Leeson's main concern, which is turned on its head throughout the show: technology as that ambivalent extension of humanity producing at once deeply troubling systems of control and new utopian horizons of female subjectivity. The six-minute Seduction of a Cyborg (1994) tells, in a surreal language reminiscent of that used on TV home-shopping programmes, the story of a white female computer-user whose body is invaded by the pictures that appear on her screen, effectively blinding her to anything but the virtually disseminated images of the Web (which in the video consist mostly of digitally rendered maps and newslike visuals from around the world). Hershman Leeson points to the seductive but hollowing effect of representation in cyberspace, in which ethnic/cultural Others are reduced to nothing but fetishised images despite the promises

of global networked communicability. This problematic techno-gaze is inverted in *The Complete Electronic Diaries* (1986–94), a 76-minute video 'confessional' in which then-emerging video-editing techniques become a kind of therapeutic tool enabling Hershman Leeson to act out histories of personal trauma.

These anxious, ambiguous documents regarding technology's effects on the human condition feel all the more poignant alongside Hershman Leeson's newer works, which engage super-current discourses of technology without ever betraying the formalism that by now shines clearly from her oeuvre. Venus of the Anthropocene (2016) captures, via facial-recognition technology and without warning, the image of the viewer, and projects it above a vanity dresser (part of a small installation that includes a stool, mirror and dismembered mannequin), where it remains as evidence of the surveilled body even after one has left the gallery for the streets, where these technologies already pervade, albeit far less visibly. Jeppe Ugelvig



 $\label{thm:process} Venus \ of the \ Anthropocene, 2017, mixed \ media, dimensions \ variable.$  Photo: Jason Mandella. © the artist. Courtesy the artist and Bridget Donahue, New York

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Martha Schwendener, "Lynn Hershman Leeson", *The New York* Times, March 9, 2017, <a href="https://mobile.nytimes.com/2017/03/09/arts/design/what-to-see-in-new-vork-art-galleries-this-week.html">https://mobile.nytimes.com/2017/03/09/arts/design/what-to-see-in-new-vork-art-galleries-this-week.html</a>.

## The New Hork Times



A video still from "Lorna" (1979-84) in Lynn Hershman Leeson's show at Bridget Donahue. COURTESY OF THE ARTIST AND BRIDGET DONAHUE, NYC

#### LYNN HERSHMAN LEESON

Through Sunday. Bridget Donahue, 99 Bowery, second floor, Manhattan; 646-896-1368, bridgetdonahue.nyc.

In the 1970s, suffering the neglect endemic to most female artists during that period, Lynn Hershman Leeson assumed the identity of several fictional art critics, wrote about her own work and had the reviews published in art magazines. Ms. Leeson no longer has to resort to such tactics. A retrospective of her work was mounted at ZKM in Karlsruhe, Germany, in 2014, and a smaller version of that show is at the Yerba Buena Center for the Arts in San Francisco through May 21. "Remote Controls," her second show at Bridget Donahue, also functions as a mini career survey.

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Inventing fictional critics sounds extreme, but creating characters and identities is central to Ms. Leeson's work, as is considering the effects of technology on women's bodies and psyches. "Deep Contact" (1984-89) uses early touch-screen technology to enter one woman's life, while "Lorna" (1979-84) employs interactive LaserDisc technology (here, a DVD version). The video "Seduction of a Cyborg" (1994) conjures Donna Haraway's germinal feminist essay "A Cyborg Manifesto" (1984), which moved away from nature-based 1970s goddess feminism.

Exploring traumas like rape, battery and agoraphobia, Ms. Leeson suggests that technology both glorifies violence against women and serves as a refuge from it, as in her video diaries from the '80s and '90s on view here. A new work, "Venus of the Anthropocene," features a half-mannequin propped in front of a mirror and a webcam that takes the viewer's photograph and uploads it to the internet. On a vanity table are bottles with the labels of drugs used in genetic engineering, like T-2 mycotoxin, which point to new horizons in biotechnology and new identities for women and all post-gender, post-human creatures.

Alan Gilbert, "Lynn Hershman Leeson's 'Remote Controls", *Art Agenda*, March 9, 2017, <a href="http://www.art-agenda.com/?p=10038392&preview=true">http://www.art-agenda.com/?p=10038392&preview=true</a>.

## art agenda



View of Lynn Hershman Leeson's "Remote Controls," Bridget Donahue, New York, 2017.

by ALAN GILBERT March 9, 2017

### Lynn Hershman Leeson's "Remote Controls"

BRIDGET DONAHUE, New York

January 27-March 12, 2017

One day the interface between humans and computers will be seamless. For now, it involves necks bent over smartphones, hours sitting hunched in front of a monitor, fingers and arms that still need to extend toward their devices. Despite all the talk about disembodied experiences and virtual worlds, computer technology hasn't superseded the physical body; instead, it's subtly reshaping it, including neurochemistry. Nevertheless, some new media and digital art treats computers as if they're mostly tools for creating shiny images and scrolling animations, especially when abstraction is added to the mix. Many of these works can feel like painting and video simply updated for the electronic age.

The first audio track encountered upon entering Lynn Hershman Leeson's exhibition "Remote Controls" at Bridget Donahue is the phrase "touch me." It emanates from *Deep Contact* (1984–89), described on the exhibition checklist as the "earliest touchscreen"—i.e., the first artwork to utilize an operational touchscreen. Hershman Leeson has always been at the forefront of incorporating new technologies into her work (checklist descriptions also mention "earliest digital editing software" [*Seduction of a Cyborg*, 1994], "earliest emotional engine to reflect stock market data" [*Synthia Stock Ticker*, 2000–2], and "earliest interactive LaserDisc" [*Lorna*, 1979–84]), but accompanying this exploration is Hershman Leeson's ongoing commitment to tactility. For more than four decades, she has examined how bodies and screens interrelate, how bodies (usually female) appear on screen, and how female bodies move through various forms of constraint.

Along with showcasing an acclaimed artist whose reputation and significance have sharply increased in recent years, *Remote Controls* parallels on a reduced scale Hershman Leeson's current retrospective at the Yerba Buena Center for the Arts in San Francisco, which originated at the ZKM in Karlsruhe last year. (Hershman Leeson is also an independent filmmaker whose *!Women Art Revolution* [2010] is among the most important documentaries of the feminist art movement in the United States.) At Bridget Donahue, *Deep Contact* includes the aforementioned audio accompanying video footage of a blonde woman in a low-cut blue dress who beckons viewers to "try to reach through the screen and touch me." This obvious impossibility instigates other modes of interaction selected on the touchscreen directly beneath the monitor: for instance, following the woman along a path through the trees or encountering a demon that in turn gives the viewer a sense of what it's like to be pursued.

In this way, the gaze in Hershman Leeson's work frequently aims to alternate between object and viewer, even if her primary subject is representations of the female body via technology and performance. *Lorna* features both of these with its choose-your-own-adventure format that tracks a woman who suffers from agoraphobia. A video installation in which the objects in the gallery directly mirror the ones on screen (right down to the goldfish in a small bowl) establishes a feedback loop—as many of Hershman Leeson's works seek to do—between reality and its representation. Sitting in front of a television, viewers select with a remote control the chapters originally stored on a LaserDisc (now on DVD). While *Lorna*, *Deep Contact*, and other works (including many not in the exhibition) are structured around open-ended narratives, what they presciently anticipated is perception and experience skipping along the internet's seemingly infinite set of links—seemingly, because what Hershman Leeson's work also shows is how circumscribed choice (even on the web) can be. We remain trapped in our narratives.

What the internet promised—and perhaps initially achieved—was the means to range far from one's own personal experience and location, although at this stage in its evolution, the web seems more likely to confirm prejudice and predisposition than eradicate it. It's a bit like the theme of agoraphobia running through Hershman Leeson's oeuvre. The woman in Lorna waits for her lover, talks on the telephone, smokes cigarettes, and combs her hair. The viewer gets to choose one of three end results for her life, but the protagonist eludes through her loneliness any ultimate control, of her own or by anyone else. But this comes with a price—an existence that never coheres. Elsewhere, as with the installation *Venus of the Anthropocene* (2017), which features a nude plastic torso with exposed guts and a couple of internal organs displayed on the vanity dresser in front of it (above which a surveillance camera hangs), it's the female body that's presented in fragments.

Seduction of a Cyborg is the only example in the exhibition of a human and computer truly melding, and it also happens to be the most conventional work in the show (despite its "first" quality), as well as the only one explicitly imagining the future. A six-minute digital video depicts a woman receiving computer transmissions as a means to regain her sight. Its titular companion, Cyborg Lightbox (2003–6), hung directly across from it is a blurry photograph mounted on a lightbox—the human fully absorbed into pixels. But the work's bulky frame gives it a physicality—a phenomenological exchange with both image and viewer—that the virtual world remains a long way from eclipsing.

Lara Atallah, "Lynn Hershman Leeson: Remote Controls", The Brooklyn Rail, March 1, 2017.

### **国BROOKLYN RAIL**

## LYNN HERSHMAN LEESON Remote Controls

by Lara Atallah

#### BRIDGET DONAHUE | JANUARY 27 – MARCH 12, 2017

"The patriarchy has no gender," writes A.L. Steiner in the latest issue of Aperture. Linking that system of society to neoliberal values, stressing ideas put forth by critical theorist Nancy Fraser, she describes mainstream Eurocentric feminism as an inherent adage to capitalism—an economic system that is in and of itself founded on, and sustained through, the oppression of women and minority groups. To be a woman in 2017 is to be constantly affronted by the bellicosity of a world where life-changing decisions are still made by men. It means to be scrutinized, judged, and silenced when choosing to fight back and speak. But the intricate wickedness of capitalism runs even deeper than these basic levels of oppression, for it has expanded its assault through surveillance technology, legitimizing the voyeur as a lurking pervert reigning over the codes of aesthetics and the commodification of beauty.

Operating at the confluence of technology and visual arts, Lynn Hershman Leeson's practice has been heralded as pioneering. Much of her work is a product of second-wave feminism that came about in the 1960s, at a time where the artist herself was a twenty-year-old in San Francisco. In this small retrospective at Bridget Donahue, Hershman Leeson's installations strike a depressing chord: forty years later, we're still fighting against the same shit. The medium's obsolescence further underscores that message.

Here, and throughout her trajectory, the viewer is both a witness and an enabler. Take *Lorna* (1979 – 84)—one of the first interactive artworks on video disc—in which we are invited to watch, and control, the world of a "typical" (i.e. white) American woman of the 1980s. *Lorna* represents all that we'd been told is feminine at the time, taken to tacky extremes. Her living room walls are red and teal, her armchairs leopard print. Inside a drawer of her small IKEA-esque yellow side table is a gun. As viewers sit inside a recreation of Lorna's living room, they watch, on the small TV set, *Lorna* in that exact same room, enacting different scenarios all controlled by the viewer via a remote. Throughout the video, several statements are made in defiance of these societal rules: "Mirrors like TV reflect our fears"; "Life's not what it seems. Be Brave"; "Take the chance. Learn to fight." Ultimately, despite her best efforts to resist manipulation within that small box, Lorna remains a prey to the viewers' whims.

The installation *Home Front* (1993 – 2011) suggests a war, and rightfully so. Within a tiny room of a constructed dollhouse, painted in dull, almost morbid colors, is a screen. On it, we see a (white) heterosexual couple, "playing house," oso to speak, in the kitchen. The venomous dispute that soon erupts is punctuated by belittling arguments made by a husband who dismisses his wife as an overly emotional person controlled by her "over-analytical graduate school head." When the fight turns to physical assault, all the man has to say is "look what you made me do," absolving himself from any responsibility, and verbally forcing his battered wife into submission. Using a dollhouse as a subverted gender-normative prop, Hershman

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Leeson's piece registers as a reflection on traditional marriage and the nuclear family. Beyond that, it exposes the viewer as a witness to the scene, who by virtue of not being able to directly interfere, becomes an unwilling participant in the violence.

The artist's latest work, *Venus of the Anthropocene* (2017), presents an evolution of a practice driven by the advancements of technology, and its connivance with surveillance. The installation consists of a cyborg-mannequin seated at a vanity station, its mirror equipped with facial recognition software, analyzing the micro-expressions of each viewer's face as they peer in. The piece is a twist on numerous ideations, from a narcissistic obsession with one's appearance—further emboldened by selfie culture—to the use of technology to read and categorize a person's emotions.

Scholars and activists such as Angela Davis, Nancy Fraser, and bell hooks have criticized second-wave feminism, calling it a movement that has been whitewashed and hijacked by women driven by the desire to acquire status and material gain within a capitalist economy, rather than achieve reproductive rights across gender, class, and race categories. While much of this is true given the pay gap between white women and women of color, the poignant relevance of Hershman Leeson's work at this moment signals that we are at a crossroads that, if not handled carefully, could lead to an impasse. As the war on women continues to seethe, let it be understood that until that war is rightfully won, a woman's place is in the resistance.

Alex Greenberger, "A New Future from the Passed", ArtNews, Spring 2017, 66-71.

## **ARTNEWS**



# from the Passed LYNN HERSHMAN LEESON comes into her own after 50 years of prophetic work By Alex Greenberger Portrait by Katherine McMahon

n 1965, while pregnant with her daughter, Lynn Hershman Leeson discovered she had cardiomyopathy, a disease that makes it difficult for the heart to pump blood to the rest of the body. A valve in her heart collapsed, and she was confined to an oxygen tent for five weeks. "I wasn't able to do anything—I couldn't lift a teaspoon," she said. "You either die within six months, or you slowly survive." Unable to make art the way she had since graduating from art school two years before, she slowly regained the strength to work with a ball of wax by her bed, molding it until it resembled two human heads—one male, one female. The process took two weeks, and she was proud of the result. Then she got an idea.

Having gone through X-ray machines and isolating medical procedures as a consequence of her health, Hershman Leeson learned to pay close attention to the sound of her breathing. When no longer confined to bed, she made what she called "Breathing Machines"—wax casts of her face accompanied by cassette decks that played sounds of heaving breaths, giggles, and recorded dialogue. Even though these sculptures looked dead—their eyes blank, like a corpse's—they evinced a sense of life in line with her self-diagnosis at the time. As an older Hershman Leeson said, looking back: "I always knew I'd survive."

Five decades on, Hershman Leeson continues to produce art in many different modes, though it wasn't until the past couple of years that the art world took proper note. When a retrospective opened in Germany in 2014, under the title "Civic Radar," her work was thrust into public view. Some 700 pieces—many of which had spent decades in boxes, under beds, and in closets in Hershman Leeson's San Francisco home—were exhibited at the ZKM Center for

Art and Media. Reactions were ecstatic. Reviewing a smaller survey of her work at Bridget Donahue gallery in New York around the same time, *New York Times* critic Holland Cotter wrote of the exhibit far away in southwest Germany, "someone here should grab that prophetic show now."

For the artist herself, the attention had been a long time coming. "People say I've gotten rediscovered," Hershman Leeson told me, "but there's no re-. I was never discovered before two and a half years ago." Since then, she has been retrofitted back into history as a pioneer of feminist art and an essential figure in the evolution of art and technology.

Art from a different era can appear new if shown at the right moment, and that has been the case with Hershman Leeson's 50 years of drawings, sculptures, performances, installations, videos, internet-based works, and feature films, some made with studio backing and released to theaters nationwide. At a time when young artists are exploring how we construct identity through technology, Hershman Leeson's work in all her different

media has proven remarkably ahead of its time. Her art proposes that identities are, in essence, aggregations of data—we are all masses of information gathered over time—and that who we become is shaped by computers, television, electronics. We make technology, but technology makes us, too.

At age 75, Hershman Leeson is pleased and also a bit disarmed by how suddenly she has been embraced. For the first time, she is out of debt, and she finally has a studio in San Francisco (as well as an apartment that she keeps in New York). When I met her for lunch this past fall, she was in Manhattan to oversee the installation of several works in the Whitney Museum's "Dreamlands" show, which surveyed an enterprising notion of "immersive cinema" since 1905. And she had more work ahead of her: a solo show at Bridget Donahue running from January to March 2017 and, on view until late May, a version of her ZKM retrospective at the Yerba Buena Center for the Arts in San Francisco. The year was shaping up to be one of the biggest of her career. She smiled through most of our lunch, her shoulder-length brown hair bouncing as she laughed. Though known to wear stylish Armani suits, that day she was dressed down, in a tweed jacket and cozy wool scarf.

In "Dreamlands," Hershman Leeson's work was shown alongside pieces by younger artists like Ian Cheng, Dora Budor,

and Ivana Bašić, all of whom are under 40. Their art involved human bodies altered by the internet, 3-D computer imaging, and algorithms. Hershman Leeson's video installations—delving into surveillance, avatars, and cyborgs—shared a certain kinship, even though they were made years before. Chrissie Iles, the show's curator, said of Hershman Leeson's art, "I think her influence is strong, but I think it's going to be stronger now that her work is more visible."

Iles added, "Paradoxically, you run a great danger of disappearing when you're young. Lynn never disappeared. She was hiding in plain sight, and now she's appeared."

ynn Hershman Leeson was born in 1941, in Cleveland, Ohio. Her father was a pharmacist, her mother, a biologist. Science appealed to her, she said, because "you put things together and form something completely hybrid and new." From a young age, she combined that interest with art, going to the Cleveland Museum of Art almost every day. Although her childhood led to her life of art, it would also haunt her work. She was abused, both physically and sexually—"broken noses, bones," she said. "I feel I withdrew from my own body during some of those episodes and watched things happen." Those experiences informed her early work from the '60s and '70s, which confronts the difficulties of being a woman

Above Lorna (still), 1983. opposite CybeRoberta, 1996.



in a patriarchal world. "I think the use of surveillance and not being present, of living virtually and the continual fear of brutal confrontation," she said, "came out of those episodes."

After college at Ohio's Case Western Reserve University, Hershman Leeson moved to California in 1963, to study painting at the University of California, Berkeley. She had been lured by the student activism there, but she gave up her studies before the semester even started. "I quit because I couldn't figure out how to register," she said, with a laugh signaling her disinterest in—or indifference to—the kind of abstract painting coming out of the Bay Area at the time.

In between protests, she found time to make paintings and drawings about living in a world being changed by technology. Her early works from the mid-'60s, some of which were on view in "Dreamlands," show mysterious women in forms reminiscent of anatomical drawings. Hershman Leeson depicts them without skin so that we see their innards, which are mostly cogs. "I thought of [the drawings] as a symbiosis between humans and machines—feminine machines," she said.

When she began making her "Breathing Machines" shortly after, not everyone was receptive to art that so aggressively disregarded traditional painting and sculpture. In 1966, when a black wax version of the artist's face with a recording of her asking the viewer questions was shown at the University Art Museum in Berkeley, the curators removed it because the sculpture included sound. "There was no language for it," Hershman Leeson said of the reaction to works like Self-Portrait As Another Person, "and nobody thought it was art."

Fed up with the kinds of conversations her work was generating in museums and galleries, in 1968 Hershman Leeson invented three art-critic personas who reviewed her work for Artweek and Studio International. With her editors unaware of the ruse, she gave herself good reviews but also wrote that her "Breathing Machines" were riddled with "clichéd social amenities and contact games to those who will listen." She brought these published reviews to galleries as proof-both positive and negative—that her art was worthy of attention.

In early actions like these, Hershman Leeson was "blurring the space between art and life," said Lucía Sanromán, who organized the San Francisco iteration of "Civic Radar." No doubt this was the case with *The Dante Hotel* (1973–74), a covert piece staged in a sitespecific fashion at a seedy hotel in San Francisco's red light district. When museums would not show

art by women, Hershman Leeson and her collaborator on the piece, artist Eleanor Coppola, took matters into their own hands. "We liked the democracy of exhibition opportunities" outside institutions, Coppola said. In a room they rented for \$46 a week, they installed two life-size wax dolls in a bed. Anyone in the know could walk into the hotel, sign in, and head upstairs to see the work. The installation concluded when one visitor called the police, having mistaken the sculptures for dead bodies.

That was merely a warm-up for *Roberta Breitmore*, a piece for which Hershman Leeson invented a fictional persona by that name and performed as her for five years, from 1973 to 1978. The name came from a character in the Joyce Carol Oates short story "Passions and Meditations," in which a woman attempts to contact celebrities through print ads and letters. The inspiration for *Roberta Breitmore*, Hershman Leeson said, was the result of thinking to herself: "What if someone were liberated—if they were able to go out in real time, in real space—and blur the edge of reality?"

Under her new persona, Hershman Leeson was able to get a driver's license and a credit card for Breitmore, and she enrolled Breitmore in Ph.D. classes about how people create their identities, as well as sessions for Weight Watchers and the then popular personal transformation training known as EST. Breitmore had her own psychology—she contemplated jumping off the Golden Gate Bridge at one point, only to end up choosing life instead.

The piece became dangerous in other ways. Performing as Breitmore, Hershman Leeson put out an ad for a roommate, unaware that was how sex workers at the time recruited women in need of money. "Roberta was asked to join a prostitute ring at





the San Diego Zoo," Hershman Leeson recalled. "They were chasing her! When you're dealing with real life, it has a different trajectory of risk than just changing costumes for a photograph."

Hershman Leeson ended the Breitmore piece when people started phoning her house looking for her alter ego—it had simply gone too far. Her friends and family thought so too. When the artist's daughter went on a field trip to the de Young Museum in San Francisco, where documentation of the performance was shown, she pretended not to know her mother's work. In 1978, after Breitmore cloned herself into four other women, Hershman Leeson held an exorcism for her by burning a photograph of Breitmore. For the artist, this was a way of liberating the character. Having become her own complete person, Breitmore was able to "convert that victimized single woman in the '70s into someone who was less victimized," Hershman Leeson said. "You could be a witness to her and also be her."

fter her actions and performances in the '60s and '70s, Hershman Leeson turned her attention to technology. Her interest in new media, she said, goes back to an experience she had when she was 16. She was Xeroxing a life drawing she'd made when the paper got crumpled in the machine. The woman's figure in the picture came out warped and distorted in a way she could never reproduce by hand. This, Hershman Leeson said, was when she first understood technology's impact on the human body.

She went on to work with LaserDiscs, touch screens, and webcams. "The idea of using technology as it's being invented in your own time—people think it's the future, but it's not the

future," she said. "You're living in it."

LaserDiscs, which for the first time allowed users to skip through films with precision and ease, were new when Hershman Leeson used them to create *Lorna* (1979–82), a work in her latest show at Bridget Donahue. By clicking on various objects using a remote control, viewers command the life of Lorna, an agoraphobic woman whose only connection to the world is by phone and television. "It's not that radical now," she said. "At the time, it was."

She built on Lorna's effect with *Deep Contact* (1984), which explores the life of Marion, a seductive blonde who invites viewers to caress her. Thanks to Hershman Leeson's pioneering use of a touch screen, *Deep Contact* makes visceral the ways men might control women and turn them into objects. To spring the piece into action, viewers have to touch Marion against her will.

But Marion is not as innocent as

she seems. Depending on how viewers navigate the work, she can become a devil or a Zen master. Maybe she is in control after all—maybe she plays the viewer rather than the other way around. Perhaps she is like the protagonist of *A Room of One's Own*, a later work from 1993 in which viewers peer into a periscope to see a video of a woman staring back at them and saying, "Go look at your own life—don't look at me."

"The voyeur becomes the victim," Hershman Leeson said of such works. "When you begin an aggressive act, you're victimized by it also. You're not separate from the result."

Some of Hershman Leeson's art has more directly addressed violence. For *America's Finest* (1990–94), she reconfigured an AK-47 machine gun with a viewfinder that projects images of explosions. If the trigger is pulled, the work captures the image of the viewer and then puts it in the crosshairs. Donald B. Hess, Hershman Leeson's first collector, acquired the piece and holds it now as part of the Hess Collection in Napa, California. Hess told me he admired the work's "visual presence and impact" in service of a statement about gun violence. Other works of hers in his collection seem to evolve with advances in technology—"a little like a cyborg," he said.

Hershman Leeson has enlisted artificial intelligence and the internet to update old pieces in such works as *Life Squared* (2005), which reconstructs *The Dante Hotel* installation in the form of a Second Life virtual world. Viewers could go online and explore a digital version of the hotel, and, if they were lucky, they

Above Teknolust(still), 2010; opposite Glo Cat (The Infinity Engine), 2013

"Lynn Hershman Leeson", The New Yorker, February 27, 2017, 8.



ART GALLERIES—DOWNTOWN

#### **Lynn Hershman Leeson**

This selection of absorbing interactive and video works spans four decades in the career of the American artist, a feminist trailblazer who exploits new technologies in provocative ways. The interactive videodisk "Lorna," from 1979-1982, displayed in a living-room-like set with leopard-print armchairs and teal walls, invites you to snoop through the apartment of an agoraphobe. The navigation is clunky by today's standards, but the work endures as a seductive, discomfitting exploration of voyeuristic complicity. In "Venus of the Anthropocene," completed this year, a white-wigged cyborg-mannequin with gold organs sits at a vanity, in a familiar scene of feminine self-inspection. Stand behind her, though, and you'll find your own face frozen in the mirror, as stats display your gender, age, and mood, as determined by facial-analysis software.

Chloe Wyma, "Lynn Hershman Leeson", *Artforum: Critics' Pick*, February 17, 2017, <a href="https://www.artforum.com/?pn=picks&section=nyc#picks66579">https://www.artforum.com/?pn=picks&section=nyc#picks66579</a>.

## ARTFORUM

#### **New York**

#### Lynn Hershman Leeson

BRIDGET DONAHUE 99 Bowery, 2nd Floor January 27-March 12

Seated in overstuffed leopard-print armchairs, visitors to Lynn Hershman Leeson's second solo exhibition at the gallery navigate, via remote control, the dumpy virtual living room of Lorna, a middle-aged agoraphobe whose experience of the world is entirely mediated through her television. Clicking on various objects unlocks bits and pieces of a schmaltzy vernacular media culture, such as boozy cowboy ballads, daytime talk shows, televangelical sermons, and amateur music videos. In one of the game's three possible endings, its lonely heroine commits suicide.

The first interactive videodisk, *Lorna*, 1979–84, can claim importance in a broader media history beyond twentieth-century art, though Hershman Leeson has likened the piece's random, nonhierarchical sequencing to "electronic cubism." Even more fragmented and multiperspectival is *Deep Contact*,



1984–89, the first artwork to employ interactive touch screens. Viewers are invited to touch the virtual leather-clad physique of a Teutonic hardbody named Marion, whose various parts open onto a labyrinthine sexual fantasy with fifty-seven forking paths. In her 1985 essay "Interactive Technology and Art," Hershman Leeson espoused optimism about the enfranchising potential of interactive technology. "The art world," she wrote, "has long functioned on the presumption that viewing art is passive, while only making art is active. Technological change in the form of laser and video art, however, is changing this traditional way of viewing art."

But Hershman Leeson's avant-garde technologism is cut with camp, horror, and feminized abjection, undergirding an eerie feeling that interactivity is as much about capture and control as it is about activation and agency. Between the Snowden leaks and a Twitter presidency, the narrative around technology has acquired a dystopian charge, and Hershman Leeson's work is increasingly recognized for its Cassandra-like premonitions of technological panopticism. Such anxieties explicitly structure her new installation, *Venus of the Anthropocene*, 2017. A grotesque mannequin torso faces a vanity mirror rigged with a camera and crude facial-recognition software that attempts—with modest success—to identify the viewer's age, gender, and mood.

Haley Weiss, "Lynn Hershman Leeson", *Interview Magazine*, February 7, 2017, <a href="http://www.interviewmagazine.com/art/lynn-hershman-leeson/#">http://www.interviewmagazine.com/art/lynn-hershman-leeson/#</a>



#### **ART**

#### LYNN HERSHMAN LEESON

By HALEY WEISS
Photography VICTORIA STEVENS

Published 02/07/17



Lynn Hershman Leeson's career involves a lot of firsts. To name but a few, there's *Lorna* (1979–1984), the first interactive LaserDisc, in which the viewer manipulates the fate of an agoraphobic woman through a remote control; *Deep Contact* (1984), the first hypercard touch screen, which beckons you to stroke its display and set a narrative in motion; and *Synthia Stock Ticker* (2000–2002), an "emotional engine" that syncs with current stocks and alters its female protagonist's behavior according to market fluctuations. Hershman Leeson is also often framed as a "predictor," an artist who sees our forthcoming faults, but beyond her role as a technical pioneer in digital art, it's perhaps more accurate to describe her as an astute reflector. She looks to science, technology, and how it's affecting us now. She's also keen to emphasize that it's not all *1984* and *Blade Runner*—that is to say, a downhill dystopia—from here.

"The technology itself, it's neutral, there's no utopian or dystopian—it's really up to what we, as a public, do with it," says Hershman Leeson. "It's about having faith in the next generation being able to use the media that was created during their lifetime, to speak it—because they speak it better than anybody—to alter the systems that their parents or grandparents caused them to inherit, and reshape them into one of sustenance."

Interview recently spoke to Hershman Leeson, who splits her time between New York and San Francisco, at Bridget Donahue gallery in New York, where a collection of her works from the '70s through today is on display in "Lynn Hershman Leeson: Remote Controls." This Friday, a second career-spanning exhibition on Hershman Leeson will open at Yerba Buena Center for the Arts in San Francisco.

HALEY WEISS: I'd like to talk about your most recent work, *Venus of the Anthropocene*, and how genetics is playing into your practice now. What are you most interested in in terms of genetics?

LYNN HERSHMAN LEESON: Well, I did this film called *Strange Culture* [2007] that helped to get the charges dropped against an artist, [Steve Kurtz, who was detained by the FBI on suspicion of bioterrorism,] and then I did *Woman Art Revolution* [2010], which inserted a history [of women in art] that had been denied our culture, and I thought those were really important things to add. And I thought, "What's going on now that are the issues to deal with?" And I realized that the genome had been programmed for the first time in 1995, and the things that people were doing with genetics were changing our species, changing the whole identity of who we are, of all living things, and to me it seemed like the most crucial thing—that and planetary pollution were the most critical things that we have to deal with, even though neither one was in the presidential issues that were discussed.

So that's how I started looking, and I went to these various labs since that time, in 2011, documenting what they're doing, doing interviews, and finding out about it. It will result in the entire *Infinity Engine* lab of eight rooms being opened in Santa Fe in October, which will deal with ethics, with bioprinting, with the CRISPR, which I'm going to shoot in late March at Harvard—the CRISPR lab.

WEISS: Gene editing is what the CRISPR is used for, right?

HERSHMAN LEESON: Gene editing, exactly, that anybody could do on a flash drive.

WEISS: That's surreal. A lot of your work is seen as predicting the future, but it feels like you're just looking at the present.

HERSHMAN LEESON: That's absolutely true. I think most people live in the past, because current information is discarded or not made available easily. Whatever I make are things that have been current to that time, so it's really not looking at the future, it's looking at what's happening in your lifetime around you. I think it's more comforting to look in the past because you can understand it better, and there are labels for it often.

WEISS: In terms of looking at the past, a lot of your older works are on display here. Is there anything within your body of work that looking back, you are surprised by the way you formulated it or by something that you made?

HERSHMAN LEESON: I'm surprised by all of it. [laughs] I'm surprised it exists. I look at it and say, "How did we ever do that?" But they all take a long time, between three and five years to do generally. I find people in the Bay Area who are programmers mainly, people I've worked with before, and just figure things out. We use the technology not in a commercial-based way, to see how you can make a profit from it, but rather what it can be, which the programmers like because it's really creative to do that, and not just gearing it towards a product.

WEISS: When you're working with a programmer, what do you look for in a collaborator? Is it just the technical acumen?

HERSHMAN LEESON: It depends on what I need—whether I need an AI person, whether I need a sound person—but people who are willing to look at the creative potential of what a technology can do. And a sense of humor.

WEISS: You've talked about the potential for biological censorship in gene editing, which made me think of this story from 2014, when a Danish zoo put down a giraffe because it didn't add any more to their gene pool, even though it was perfectly healthy. That seemed emblematic of shifting attitudes toward genetics and what's of worth. And "biological censorship" implies a danger.

HERSHMAN LEESON: Yes, because generally, at this point, it's people who can afford to choose, like people who can alter babies they don't have, so that they have blue eyes and blonde hair—it seems to be more popular than to create black babies, so you shift the natural balance of [racism], or you have different kinds of prejudices that show up through what people want. So yes, I do think it's really dangerous as to who has access, and what people want and why they want it, and what the aesthetics of choice.

WEISS: You've talked about how interactive art allows you to operate differently than other more traditional modes of media. Is that part of your artistic goal, to implicate the participant through interaction?

HERSHMAN LEESON: Yes, and I think they are implicated, but the difference is what [Marcel] Duchamp called "retinal art," where you just looked at it as opposed to really having a dialogue. So the early interactive works, you thought you were having a dialogue and making a choice, but you didn't because they were all pre-programmed. But with what's happening now, with AI and machine learning, and you add social media, is that the viewer can really participate and change the direction of content and context in a way that they never were before. That's really what interested me in the '80s, to see what kind of political shift individuals, and particularly individuals who previously had no voices, could manifest in the world. I have great faith in the millennials and in what they understand about social media, and how they're going to be able to counter fascist forces as they come.

WEISS: It's great to hear that you're positive about how people are able to use social media and these technologies. I think it's easy to view everything as dystopian, because things are changing so fast and the capabilities do seem a little terrifying when it comes to matters like gene editing.

HERSHMAN LEESON: But, you know, there's no limit as to who can do it, and the ethics haven't [caught up]—and there's no FDA, anybody can get a CRISPR and can start editing life forms in their kitchen. That's what's really dangerous, is people doing it without knowing what's going to happen, or not having a structure that oversees what gets done.

WEISS: Do you think there's a greater capacity for empathy in the kind of works you create, when one perceives that they have control, for example on Lorna where you can go through these different interactions with the piece?

HERSHMAN LEESON: I think that there is, that there will be, for sure, an empathic voice that's broader than ourselves.

WEISS: Back in the '80s, were you influenced by science fiction writing? I think of *Neuromancer* by William Gibson—I wonder if that was something that interested you.

HERSHMAN LEESON: Yeah, the writing did, but science always interested me, and science, real science, was more science fiction than science fiction. My family are all scientists except for me—my mother was a biologist, my daughter is a doctor—so they're all embedded in the sciences; that became my point of magic.

WEISS: Did you ever consider going into science yourself?

HERSHMAN LEESON: My undergraduate degree is in biology.

WEISS: So when did you incorporate that into your art? I saw an interview where you said that you basically hadn't done anything other than art-making.

HERSHMAN LEESON: Yes, that's all I ever did, but I was always interested in the sciences, so then it affected the art, but a lot of people couldn't understand that I would do that or why I would do that. But it just seems that they were interrelated.

WEISS: What's something you learned recently from a scientist or programmer that you think people would be surprised to know?

HERSHMAN LEESON: There's something called epigenetics, which are the patterns above genetics, and it's a year ago now that I interviewed somebody at Oxford and he was telling me about trauma and how trauma transfers through generations, and how they're able to correct trauma in unborn babies and embryos prior to their birth. They can see it and correct it before they're born so they don't have a lifetime of chemicals to shift it. I thought that was really interesting.

WEISS: Trauma—especially in your dollhouse and video installation *Home Front*, in the form of domestic violence—reappears throughout your work. So is that capability, of editing out or correcting trauma, appealing?

HERSHMAN LEESON: I think we have to learn how to do it, and not accept trauma that has been given to us for some reason, that we either inherited or is in our genes or is in an accident that happened in our lifetime, and use that in a way that it can be reconverted through creative restructuring—to not accept trauma as the end. We all experience trauma, and that's only halfway to what we can do with it before prevailing in a creative way.

WEISS: And that relates to the film you worked on most recently, *Tania Bruguera: A State of Vulnerability*, and psychotraumatology. She's someone who was detained by a doctor?

HERSHMAN LEESON: She was imprisoned for eight months, and she thought she had PTSD. So we found the man who identified PTSD, [Dr. Frank Ochberg,] who named it, and he was in his eighties living in Michigan and still practicing. That's how we found him and went to him.

WEISS: So is this a documentary? Is it fictionalized?

HERSHMAN LEESON: It's not fictionalized at all. The switch is, is a documentary or is it a performance? And where does performance begin and where does anything else begin? And is all of life a performance?

WEISS: I suppose it is; everything is situational. That relates back to when you created the *Roberta Breitmore* series, where you had an alter ego. When is it fiction and when is it reality?

HERSHMAN LEESON: And the diaries—things that are real—people think I fictionalized.

WEISS: One of the potential end points for Lorna is that she might commit suicide, right?

HERSHMAN LEESON: There are three choices: she could stay where she was, she could move to Los Angeles, or she could commit suicide. You can switch [the result] at any time, you can listen to different soundtracks—you could look at a screen with one soundtrack and [it would] make you think one thing is happening as opposed to the other soundtrack, or you see that it's misinterpreted based on what you heard. ... I think you just get lost in it, and then all of a sudden these things happen.

WEISS: What's the process like to create a work like that? Do you have to flowchart everything out?

HERSHMAN LEESON: We had a flowchart of where we were going to put everything, and what we were going to shoot, and we shot these 30-second to one minute clips that were put together. And, you know, in the beginning when we did it, there hadn't been any precedent, so the term "user," that little arrow at the bottom of how you instruct people to use it—nobody understood what interactivity was or how you navigate this.

WEISS: People are so tech savvy now. How they react must be different.

HERSHMAN LEESON: Yes, it's like an antique. [laughs]

WEISS: Has writing been a part of your practice? Obviously it is in your films, but what about writing narratives in relation to these works?

HERSHMAN LEESON: I have to write, I had to, because nobody understood anything I was doing. I had to put these little pamphlets together to explain what [the works] were, and why I did them, and what the references were, and how they related for instance to cubism. I saw these [interactive works] as extensions of cubism, because you're looking at something from all sides.

"LYNN HERSHMAN LEESON: REMOTE CONTROLS" IS ON VIEW AT BRIDGET DONAHUE IN NEW YORK THROUGH MARCH 12, 2017. "LYNN HERSHMAN LEESON: CIVIC RADAR" OPENS AT YERBA BUENA CENTER FOR THE ARTS IN SAN FRANCISCO, CALIFORNIA ON FRIDAY, FEBRUARY 10, 2017. FOR MORE ON LYNN HERSHMAN LEESON, VISIT HER WEBSITE.

Olivia B. Murphy, "Digital Pioneer Lynn Hershman Leeson Walks Us Through Her Groundbreaking 'Firsts'", *ArtSlant*, February 10, 2017, <a href="https://www.artslant.com/ny/articles/show/47301">https://www.artslant.com/ny/articles/show/47301</a>.



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**GALLERIES** 

ART

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#### DIGITAL PIONEER LYNN HERSHMAN LEESON WALKS US THROUGH HER GROUNDBREAKING "FIRSTS"

BY OLIVIA B. MURPHY

#### **FEBRUARY 3, 2017**

I recently met with septuagenarian artist Lynn Hershman Leeson just after the opening of her latest solo show, *Remote Controls*, at Bridget Donahue Gallery. Her first solo with the gallery in 2015 sparked something of a rediscovery of her groundbreaking work, even though she has spent her decades-long career pioneering in the realm of technology in visual art. In 2016, a comprehensive retrospective entitled *Civic Radar* at ZKM in Karlsruhe, Germany, charted her career from its early performative days in the 70s to her latest work addressing complex genetics research and technology.

With a portion of the ZKM retrospective coming to the U.S. this month, at the Yerba Buena Center for the Arts in San Francisco, Donahue and Hershman Leeson got the idea to put together a show of firsts—works that had mostly not been shown in New York, yet were the first of their kind to utilize different emerging technologies like the interactive laser disc, the touchscreen, and even video that reacts in real time to stock market data. The work in *Remote Controls* ranges from pencil drawings on paper to complex facial recognition technology, a testament to how vast and curiosity-driven Hershman Leeson's career has been.

During a gallery walk-through, Hershman Leeson carefully explains how she came upon the diverse technological modes she has worked with. More often than not she was ahead of the curve, and yet her name is not synonymous with the innovations she helped to forge. This never stopped her from continuing to try new things, however, and she always embedded an unapologetically feminist agenda within them: from using male pseudonyms to write about her work when no one else would to her investigation of the abuse of women's images through new media.

As we come to the newest work in the show, *Venus of the Anthropocene* (2017), we pause and examine a doll-like creature with exposed, golden organs, sitting at a vanity with a small teched-out mirror:



Lynn Hershman Leeson, Venus of the Anthropocene, 2017, Vanity dresser with drawers, stool, mirror with facial recognition system, plastic body parts, plastic labeled DNA composite jars, mannequin, custom electronics programmed to read viewer's DNA. Copyright Lynn Hershman Leeson. Courtesy Bridget Donahue, NYC. Photo: Jason Mandella

**Lynn Hershman Leeson:** See, she has all these disposable body parts. On the vanity, instead of make-up there are body parts and the chemicals you use for DNA modification. If you stand in front of it, it takes your picture and analyzes you. Try it!

#### Olivia Murphy: Sure.

[I carefully step onto the plush carpet below the vanity, and look up to find that the mirror has already begun capturing different stills of my face, holding them for a moment on the screen just above it.]

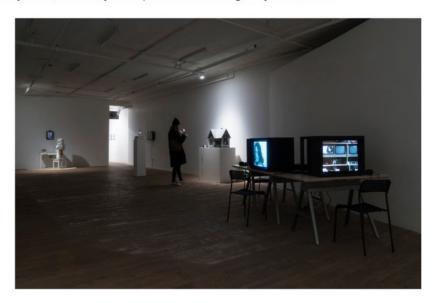
LHL: How old does it say you are? 34.

OM: Overshot by a few years, but that's okay. Let's see what else it says. Gender: Female; Mood: Surprised; Lips: Parted; Eyes: Open—the rest is true, I guess.

under my own name, but then I invented these other names so that I could have more freedom, and so people wouldn't get mad at me.

OM: That's a very invested project, to be keeping up with three different careers on top of your own! How did you end up capping that off as a project—did you present the writings all together?

**LHL:** No. One [critic] wrote for *Studio International*, one wrote for *Flash Art*, and one wrote for a throwaway newspaper that you got on your doorstep. I used the reviews about myself (because they would fight about me—somebody liked my work, somebody didn't) and that's how I got my first shows.



Lynn Hershman Leeson, Installation view of *Remote Controls* at Bridget Donahue, NYC, January 27–March 12, 2017. Copyright Lynn Hershman Leeson. Courtesy Bridget Donahue, NYC. Photo: Jason Mandella

OM: At a time when there wasn't a lot of opportunity for women artists, you created the dialogue you wanted to exist around your work.

**LHL:** Yes. In those days women didn't show their work, much less get reviewed, so by taking the reviews to galleries, they became interested in me.

OM: Was there any backlash after it came out that you had been behind these three different invented critics?

LHL: Nobody knew! It was a thesis that went into the library, and that was it! It's all collected, and I think it will go into the [Yerba Buena] retrospective, but no one knew at the time.

OM: From there, you began working with technology, using sound and mixed media in sculptural, body-like forms. Tell me about the show that was taken down at the Berkley Art Museum.

LHL: That show went up in 1970, but they took it down because they didn't expect it. When I was in high school I did a drawing that I Xeroxed, and it got caught in the machine, and I really liked the effect! That's what interested

me in what technology could do: I could mash it up and rip it, and I thought that was better than just drawing. So at Berkeley, they were threatening to close the museums because they wouldn't show women—

OM: They actually wouldn't? That was a rule, not just a tradition?

LHL: Yes! So they had to do some shows with women, and I got invited to do a drawing show. And to me, sound was like a drawing because it extended into space. I had this piece that used sensors and sound; you would

"Women really had a natural inclination to do these non-linear things that had technology."

walk up to it and it would talk to you. They had not seen anything like that. Ever. And they said it was "media" and the curator closed it down in one day. She didn't tell me she was closing it down, she just did it!

#### OM: And that is what spawned the Dante Hotel series?

**LHL:** Yes. We did some Xeroxed flyers and put them around. I also did hotel rooms in New York and Las Vegas, and for those I did these 30-second commercial spots. I bought time on television. And then it was just word of mouth.

OM: It's interesting to use the television spots to promote the hotel series, because much like your own work, it was still a "new media" that was far from being considered high art.

But before you really dug into new media you were focused more on performance—like the critic personas, but also *Roberta Breitmore* [1973–79], where you were spending time acting in a performance while also in your "real life." What was the leap from using yourself as the virtual or performed reality, towards moving into video as virtual reality, like we see here with *Lorna*?

LHL: Roberta would go out into the world and have "real" interactions and adventures, but then somebody gave me access to the local TV station, and I loved working with [video], because it used time and space and color manipulation and narrative. That was at the end of the '70s, and then I read about the National Gallery of Art putting their collection on a disc, where you could walk through and view the gallery on the disc. I thought that was really interesting, so I contacted the company that did it, and got the idea for *Lorna* [1983], who instead of going out into the world, was agoraphobic and was stuck in the room. I went into cable access TV all night to finish it.

When you're doing something that's new, nobody knows the language, so you can't explain what you're doing because they don't understand it. I just had to not let it go. I felt like, this is a really important and interesting thing I want to do, so why not? How can we get it done? Then it's just hotwiring and hijacking things to get them finished—mainly because I wanted to see what it would look like!

Deep Contact [1984] was the first touchscreen. You have to actually touch the screen on the woman's body.

Depending where on her body you touch, it goes into different options of where you can go with her—you can have her follow a Buddhist Zen master, or a demon.



Lynn Hershman Leeson, Deep Contact, 1984, Interactive videodisk installation, including first touch screen created on hypercard and ported, video, color, sound, with coding in collaboration with Sarah Roberts, Infinite duration. Courtesy of the artist and Bridget Donahue

OM: The way you've scripted the character, there's a sort of sexualized element to it.

**LHL:** Exactly. A lot of these works are really about abuse of women's images, so you physically have to touch her body, and where you touch her body creates a different kind of response.

OM: And you were crafting all of the different narratives?

LHL: Yes, I wrote the narratives, but we also invented the technology of the touchscreen!

OM: And for that you were actually developing the coding? Or the physical technology?

LHL: Me along with a few people, yes. There's a piece in *Dreamlands* [at the Whitney] called *Dina*, and we did Dina twelve years before [Apple's] Siri. Dina, I think is better—she's smarter [chuckles]. And we had people talking to us about her technology who went on to develop Siri. Eventually my programmer stopped talking to them because we were giving away too much information! And we never patented these "I needed the millennials to be horn."

OM: Both Lorna and Deep Contact deal with women's lack of agency in culture and society, as well as in their virtual forms—the "abuse of women's images," as you said. How did you insert this

"I needed the millennials to be born because they really get this work—it's their language."

feminist platform into the technological space, which wasn't exactly free and open to women to begin with?

LHL: It wasn't free and open, but I wasn't used to anything being free and open! You know, you just do it. And women really were the basis of all our technology: Ada Lovelace invented the computer language; Mary Shelley invented artificial intelligence; Hedy Lamarr invented the spectrum technology used in cell phones. Women really had a natural inclination to do these non-linear things that had technology.

Lorna became mildly successful because the people who could understand it were really into it. So I wanted to do something else, not with a remote where you were distanced from the work, but with a touchscreen itself. It's trial and error. I've worked with the same team since then. And I live in the Bay Area, where technology is in the air, so you can always find people who can lead you to new ways of figuring something out.

OM: We have become so immersed in our virtual identities—how do you feel about looking back on the work now, knowing that it's become so pertinent to the way we live our everyday lives? Did you have any inclination that we'd all be living via smartphone versions of ourselves?

LHL: No, no... I keep saying that I needed the millennials to be born because they really get this work—it's their language.

I can't anticipate the future, but as an artist, you sort of have to do the things that come to you, and culture will slowly catch up. Culture has now caught up in a way that, to me, seems obvious. Because the ideas were present in the days that I created the works, but they weren't disseminated as widely as they are now. It's like an amoeba: it puts a foot out and the rest has to follow. Although it's never as fast as you think.



Lynn Hershman Leeson, *Home Front*, 1993-2011, Video installation, dollhouse, paint, custom electronics. Copyright Lynn Hershman Leeson. Courtesy Bridget Donahue, NYC. Photo: Jason Mandella

OM: In *Civic Radar*, the monograph that coincides with your 2016 retrospective at ZKM, you say that interactive technology "is the antithesis of communication as we have known it." What exactly do you mean by that?

LHL: Communication had historically been one omnipresent voice—television or some other authoritarian voice—whereas now anyone can publish and get their message out. I think social media has a great ability to change reality. Look at the Arab Spring. We just have to learn as a global culture how to mobilize it in order to overcome oppression and freely communicate. I saw interactive media as a vital force for politics, in particular for third world countries. Using it to avert oppression is a really potent form.

OM: I'm also curious about how you've moved from this idea of technological surveillance and voyeurism, into more recent work that deals with DNA, facial recognition, and the ethics around that technology.

**LHL:** I had finished the films !Women Art Revolution [2010] and Strange Culture [2007], and I thought those were really important films that had set clear a history that had not been

"I think social media has a great ability to change reality—we have to learn as a global culture how to mobilize it in order to overcome oppression and freely communicate."

noticed, and corrected the censorship and eradication of ideas and artists. I thought what can I do now that could be as important?, and that's when I started to learn about what's happening with genetics. It seemed amazing to me that this never came up in the presidential election. Between genetic manipulation, loss of species identity, and climate pollution—these are the key issues for the globe.



Lynn Hershman Leeson. Photo: Lisa K. Blatt

OM: What I find interesting is your optimism for technology. It seems that it's a very scary line to walk, between the good and the harm that can come from things like AI, social media, and genetics. How do you envision that technology being used for good?

**LHL:** Technology is always neutral. It's what we as human beings bring to it that determines whether it's going to be a weapon or whether it's going to mobilize unity and sustainability, so I really have hope for the future. I believe that young people are interested in sustainability and existence, and will find ways to use the technology that's been invented to create a planet that we can live in. I can only hope.

OM: Any weapon is a tool until it's weaponized, and we are definitely coming upon that moment where we have so much access that it's going to come down to not just how the powers that be use technology, but how we as individuals utilize it.

**LHL:** The most vital technology is being invented by young people all over the world—not old white men. They should have the force to use it in a way to defeat the old racist attitudes.

Remote Controls is on view at Bridget Donahue Gallery through March 12th, 2017. Civic Radar—originally curated by ZKM, Karlsruhe, Germany—will open at Yerba Buena Center for the Arts on February 10, 2017.

-Olivia B. Murphy

Olivia Murphy is a writer and editor based in New York, covering arts and culture. Her work has appeared in various publications both in print and online, including L'Officiel Magazine, Freunde Von Freunden, Whitehot, Riot of Perfume, doingbird, and Whitewall Magazine.

(Image at top: Lynn Hershman Leeson, Still from *Lorna*, 1979–1984, Earliest interactive laser disc, created with original software. Copyright Lynn Hershman Leeson. Courtesy Bridget Donahue, NYC.)

https://www.artslant.com/sf/articles/show/47301-digital-pioneer-lynn-hershman-leeson-walks-us-through-hergroundbreaking-firsts

Charles Desmarais, "Lynn Hershman Leeson: Myths and machines at YBCA", San Francisco Chronicle, February 10, 2017.

## San Francisco Chronicle

#### Lynn Hershman Leeson: Myths and machines at YBCA

By Charles Desmarais, San Francisco Chronicle February 10, 2017



Photo: Lynn Hershman Leeson, Anglim Gilbert Gallery Lynn Hershman Leeson, "Reach," from the series "Phantom Limb" (1986)

The exhibition "Civic Radar," a retrospective of the work of San Francisco artist Lynn Hershman Leeson, opened this week at Yerba Buena Center for the Arts. It is required viewing for anyone attentive to pioneers of feminism, the development of digital and performance art, or the cultural history of the Bay Area. It is, as well, a reminder that legends are part historical, part mythic — distilled narratives, best told free of muddling detail.

Any good exhibition is an argument for a point of view with regard to quality, timeliness or significance. "Civic Radar" was organized by the German museum ZKM/Center for Art and Media and adapted here by YBCA Director of Visual Arts Lucía Sanromán. It makes a thorough case for Hershman Leeson's political and media prescience.

The theme of identity and the search for self-awareness spans the artist's entire career, beginning with drawings like a Mylar-headed figure ("Mirror Face Woman," 1966) who exists as a reflection of others, who is alive only on the viewer's terms. Objects such as "Self Portrait as Another Person" (1965), "Thinking Woman Dreaming of Escape" (1965) and "Giggling Machine, Self Portrait as a Blonde" (1968) — sculptural masks of wax, sometimes with recorded sound, boxed into Plexiglas containers — develop the idea of woman as invented persona.

It is carried forward in time with works that revolve around the idea of the cyborg — the digital descendant of the automaton doll, spookily human and mechanical in equal proportion, invariably female in Hershman Leeson's work. She has pursued these avatars in a variety of media, including film, interactive video and Web-based projects.

There are intriguing side roads that might have become central artistic courses for other artists. A series of photo-collages called "Phantom Limb" (1984 and later) envisioned machine-human mutations. "Room of One's Own" (1993) is a nonlinear narrative controlled by choices the viewer makes about where to look.

"America's Finest" (1990-94) is among the most chilling works of art I know: An AK-47 assault rifle is fitted with a modified gun scope, rigged so that squeezing the trigger inserts into what is seen in the viewfinder (including anyone in the gallery at whom the gun is pointed) a momentary recorded video image of violence.

But Hershman Leeson returns again and again to the topic of self as observed from without — self seen as other. A yearslong, intermittent "private performance" as a blond and glamorous alternative to the brunet intellectual artist (the "Roberta Breitmore Series," 1973-78) is one of her best known actions. Those of us who came late to the piece know it from a few manipulated photographs and the story of the artist leaving home in another's makeup, wig and clothing. She eventually added further elements: a Breitmore driver's license and checking account, an apartment, potential roommates — a parallel life.

Performance grew into obsession. The only way out, ultimately, was a formal exorcism, held at the crypt of the 15th century sex symbol Lucrezia Borgia.

Truth be told, I had been satisfied with the myth, and I don't know that we need to see the whole Breitmore wardrobe, laid out in vitrines and hung on a mannequin — much less a transcribed conversation with a creepy guy, a psychiatrist's notes or vials of (simulated) urine and blood samples — to get the point.

Likewise, while the artist's undoubtedly early embrace of new technologies of presentation is remarkable, including in the show what seems to be every outdated, now-clunky experiment gives it something of the air of a prep school science fair in places. One gallery is a sea of library cases full of texts one feels one should read.

I spent nearly three hours in two visits to the exhibition, and two more hours with the exhaustively complete catalog (384 pages, 12 essays and interviews), yet I feel I have only scratched the surface. On one hand, it should surprise no one that a lifetime of thought and creative energy is not easily condensed into a few hours of consideration.

But the role of the curator and the editor is both interpretation and distillation — to be the intermediary between the artist or specialist, who is all information, and the curious audience with ordinary limits of time and patience. (We are told, good Lord, that the San Francisco presentation is an abbreviation of the show in Germany.)

Never mind. The exhibition opens and closes with a dazzling contemplation on bioengineering and its social implications that, on its own, will convince and excite the most skeptical among us. "The Infinity Engine" (2014-17) feels very today and, with all the problems this implies, tomorrow.

A disorienting mirrored corridor, widened and extended by life-scale films re-creating a modern laboratory, leads us to a high, large room. It is spacious to the point of nearly empty, clean in the sterile sense. A black-and-white mural confronts us, depicting two syringes, set en garde in opposition. Two walls are papered, floor to ceiling, with colorful images of life

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science experiments and their results; scientific papers in file folders, tablet computers and a video monitor serve as records of still more research.

Centered on the longest wall is a standard home aquarium holding half a dozen fish, each genetically modified to glow with a different luminescent hue.

A wall label claims that "the artist poses the question as to how far human intervention in DNA is ethically acceptable and what social and political impact it has." Not so. The pretty, lively strokes of color moving before our eyes do not frame a question about our future, but an answer.

Blake Gopnik, "Lynn Hershman Leeson Makes Art From Life's Challenges" *Artnet News*, February 3, 2017 <a href="https://news.artnet.com/opinion/lynn-hershman-leeson-bridget-donahue-845186">https://news.artnet.com/opinion/lynn-hershman-leeson-bridget-donahue-845186</a>.

## artnetenews

#### **Opinion**

#### Lynn Hershman Leeson Makes Art From Life's Challenges

THE DAILY PIC: At Bridget Donahue, videos by Hershman Leeson show a couple as their rancor builds, and the artist as she admits to prostitution.

#### Blake Gopnik, February 3, 2017



THE DAILY PIC (#1726): The videos and installations of Lynn Hershman Leeson, which went on view last weekend at Bridget Donahue gallery in New York, are painful things. A piece called Home Front asks viewers to look at a video through the window of a dollhouse, and to listen as the couple on view inside goes from an affectionate moment to a full-blown hissy-fit fight. Almost all of us have been there, and done that.

An earlier series of videos, now assembled into an ensemble called The Complete Electronic Diaries (today's Pic is taken from it) consists of pretty straight footage of Hershman as she tells various harrowing stories from her life—all of which could quite possibly be true. But did she really do a stint as a call girl, and think of it as half-decent employment?

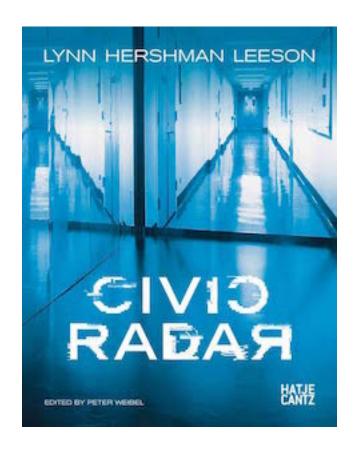
Hershman's work isn't always easy to take, but it certainly makes most of the other art on view in New York seem so light that it's barely there. (©Lynn Hershman Leeson, courtesy Hershman Leeson and Bridget Donahue, NYC)

Holland Cotter and Roberta Smith, "The Best Art of 2016", The New York Times, December 7, 2016.

## The New York Times

## The Best Art of 2016

By HOLLAND COTTER and ROBERTA SMITH DEC. 7, 2016



The art critics of The New York Times — Holland Cotter and Roberta Smith — share their picks for the best art of the year.

#### **Holland Cotter**

"Despite Fear and Uncertainty, Parts of Art Market May Benefit From a Trump Presidency, Insiders Say." This bit of speculative reassurance, <u>delivered by ARTnews magazine</u> on Nov. 9, gave a good sense of where the soul of the mainstream art world — and there are many other art worlds — lies: in business as usual. Sell. Buy. Art Basel Miami Beach.

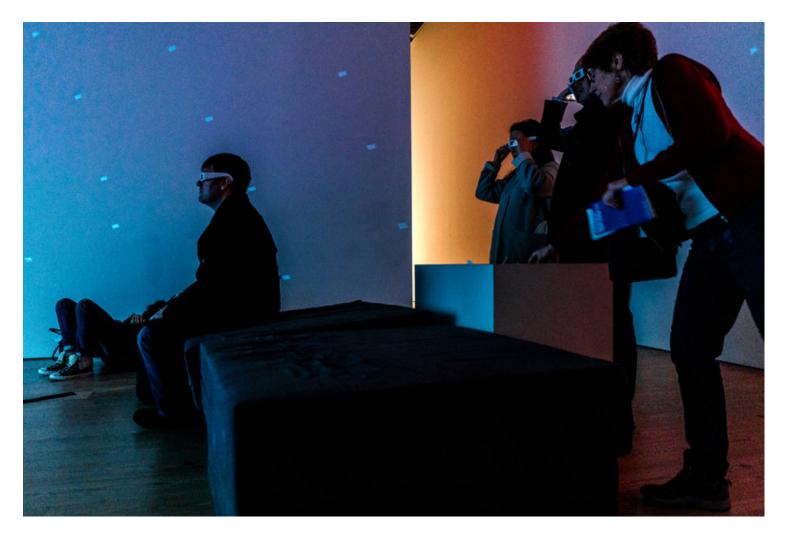
Can there be business as usual in the climate of racism, misogyny, homophobia and xenophobia that the election exposed and fostered? Has an economic and ethical line been drawn in the sand between the art market, with its appetite for eye-candy, and alternative factions and modes of production, in whatever forms they may take? Time will tell.

Most of the 2016 art season predated the election but can't help but be viewed, retrospectively, in its light. Meretricious events now look doubly so. Some of the stronger ones look more timely than ever. Here are some that struck me as strong:

**13. INDISPENSABLE BOOKS** arrived, among them "Working Conditions: The Writings of Hans Haacke" (M.I.T. Press); "Civic Radar," by Lynn Hershman Leeson, accompanying her retrospective at ZKM/Center for Art and Media in Karlsruhe, Germany; and "Postwar: Art Between the Pacific and the Atlantic, 1945-1965," the catalog for a world-embracing global show at the Haus der Kunst, Munich.

Roberta Smith, "Diving Into Movie Palaces of the Mind at the Whitney", The New York Times, December 2, 2016, C21.

## The New York Times



Visitors experiencing "Flatlands" by Trisha Baga in "Dreamlands" at the Whitney Museum of American Art. The exhibition explores the immersive nature of film.

Credit Jake Naughton for The New York Times

When the movie camera emerged around the turn of the 20th century, it quickly became the miracle that never stopped giving. It attracted scientists, the news industry and entertainers. It generated its own forms of commerce, wealth and celebrity and, for a while, inspired its own architecture, the luxurious movie palace. It was itself the focus of constant innovation, from the advent of sound, color and 3-D, to digitalization, which let smartphones and other devices incorporate both filmless cameras and small screens — hand-held movie palaces. And from the very beginning, creative people of all types grasped the cinema as an artistic outlet that would transform traditional storytelling and popular culture while giving a new focus to the international avant-garde. That group soon set about taking liberties with all aspects of the miracle: the

camera, film and projector and the ways they could be manipulated to alter experiences of time, light, space and self.

The interaction of art and cinema throughout the 20th and 21st centuries progresses fitfully across "<u>Dreamlands: Immersive Cinema and Art, 1905-2016,"</u> an ambitious sprawl of an exhibition that has taken over the Whitney Museum of American Art's vast fifth floor — a space whose flexibility is once more impressively demonstrated.

Beautifully designed, with generous corridors, the show avoids being a daunting succession of black boxes, although the sound is not well balanced, and quieter works, many displayed on wall monitors in the halls, can be drowned out. It is informative, filled with diverse pleasures, rewards hours of viewing time and reflects a commitment to film in all of its forms maintained by no other New York museum. But making it all cohere is another thing.

"Dreamlands" presents the work of more than 30 artists born between 1870 and 1993, starting off strong and then unraveling. It includes a handful of avant-garde films made before 1930; a slightly larger group from 1940-80, especially the 1960s and '70s. But a majority of works date from 2000 and are often arcane, ineffective or not especially innovative.

In the catalog, the Whitney curator Chrissie Iles, who organized the show, sees her inclusions as dismantling the cinematic givens of "projection, apparatus, film, the frontal rectangular screen, darkness, immobility, cinematography, linear narrative" to give priority to "the senses, the eye, immersive space, the body and the all-surrounding image."

How often the work achieves this may depend on your definition of immersive. As mine is probably somewhat literal, stressing the disorienting, body-enveloping, all-surrounding kind, I was often disappointed. There simply weren't enough strong examples. There was almost no reference to video games or virtual reality, arguably the most immersive of recent developments. It took me a while to see that Ms. Iles defines immersive with more nuance to include concentration and psychic absorption, some of it achieved in old-fashioned frontal rectangular formats, or in very intimate terms. That's signaled by Joseph Cornell's "Rose Hobart" (1936), a mesmerizing, 20-minute blue-tinted version — no larger than a small painting — of only those parts of the Hollywood movie "East of Borneo" that feature its female lead.

"Dreamlands" starts with a bang: a <u>1977 film re-creation of Oskar Schlemmer's "Triadic Ballet" (1922)</u>, all blaring music, marionette choreography and bright bulbous costumes that turn the dancers into toys. Initially presented in a theater on a monochrome boxlike stage, it has the projecting intensity of a modernist, almost abstract film.

Nearby the short "Coney Island at Night," from 1905 by Edwin S. Porter, presents the classic dyad of film: the play of light against dark. It is captured in the wedding-cake filigree of the fairground's dark structures elaborately trimmed in lights. It still thrills and feels new, proving perhaps that beauty — and celluloid? — is always alive. After that comes "SpaceLightArt," a triptych from 1926 by the great Oskar Fischinger, an artisanal wizard who made abstract color films. He used strips of clay and swirled liquids that alternately evoke computers and the cosmos, and they were combined with music in environments he staged in interwar Berlin, pursuing, he said, "a happening of the soul, of the eyes." In 1936, he relocated to Hollywood and worked for Disney, drawing designs for "Fantasia" that were never used. Some are included here and equally reflect his visionary instincts.

Film's light-dark pairing recurs throughout the show, including in Anthony McCall's "Line Describing a Cone" (1973), an installation that progressively outlines a circle on the wall that, when complete, gives the projector's white cone of light a startling tangibility (with the help of some atmospheric haze). Next door is Bruce Conner's "Crossroads," from 1976, a symphonic ode, in grisaille, to the beauty and horror of the 1946

underwater nuclear test at Bikini Atoll in the Pacific; its overwhelming scale is by definition immersive. Farther along, Frances Bodomo's enchanting "Afronauts" of 2014, a D.I.Y. 13-minute film based on the true story of some citizens of the newly independent Zambia who decided in 1969 to try to beat the United States to the moon. Here, black and white merge into lunar silver.

Among other immersive high points is Stan VanDerBeek's "Movie Mural" (1968), a floor-to-ceiling massing of slide and film projections with the scale of a walk-by drive-in movie. The result is a jumping, roiling collage that's both crazed and encyclopedic.

Although it is something of a period piece, Jud Yalkut's "Destruct Film," from 1967, deserves mention as the show's most physical environment: Its floor is strewn with pieces of film (walk on them, handle them, hold them to the light), while its walls blink with projected movies that include the Fluxus deities Charlotte Moorman and Nam June Paik in performance.



Viewers focusing on Hito Steyerl's "Factory of the Sun." Credit Jake Naughton for The New York Times

Two recent pieces meet the show's immersive billing with fairly total environments. Hito Steyerl's brilliant, Tron-like "Factory of the Sun" was a hit at the 2015 Venice Biennale. It weaves together corporate malfeasance, international intrigue and an astounding hip-hop stylist, and was partly shot at a ruined American listening station in Berlin, a satire edged in ominousness in the era of fake news.

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Alex Da Corte's three-hour "Easternsports," an elaborate surround of four videos, adds robotic performers to his over-the-top arrangements of banal products. Meanwhile, a series of brilliant monologues and dialogues, by the artist Jayson Musson and rendered mostly as subtitles, rove sardonically through art, life, spirituality and the lack of it.

Among the pieces descending from Cornell's intimism, I recommend <u>Lynn Hershman Leeson's "Room of One's Own,"</u> a miniature installation whose tiny screens feature a woman confronting either a male intruder or the male gaze in general. And Terence Broad's "Blade Runner — Autoencoded," which immerses Ridley Scott's film in its own cloudy, prismatic atmosphere, leaves the dialogue as the primary tracking device.

Some works don't seem developed; others are just impenetrable mind games. Mathias Poledna's "Imitation of Life," a meticulous creation from scratch of a Disney-style animation with a singing donkey, is both homage and conceptual joke, but mainly virtually indistinguishable from the real thing.

Ms. Iles is one of the most skillful, erudite and ambitious curators in her field, but "Dreamlands" seems confused by her desire to accommodate both a large viewing audience and also to reach a smaller, more informed in crowd. On the side of such specialization, she has included all of the AnnLee videos. Those started in 2000, when the French artists Pierre Huyghe and Philippe Parreno bought rights to a Japanese manga character, named her AnnLee, made short videos about her, then invited other artists to do likewise.

The nine resulting videos are united here, appearing throughout the show, usually compromised by ambient noise. Seeing them together reveals their sameness: Most artists didn't move beyond AnnLee's minimally depicted, passive-waif persona and endless self-reference. (Is it by chance that one of AnnLee's homonyms is ennui?) She is filled in only by Melik Ohanian, who gives her physical solidity and dance moves, and especially by Liam Gillick, who turns her into a gleaming 3-D goth vixen who sets off electrical storms wherever she goes. She promises less to immerse than to bury us.

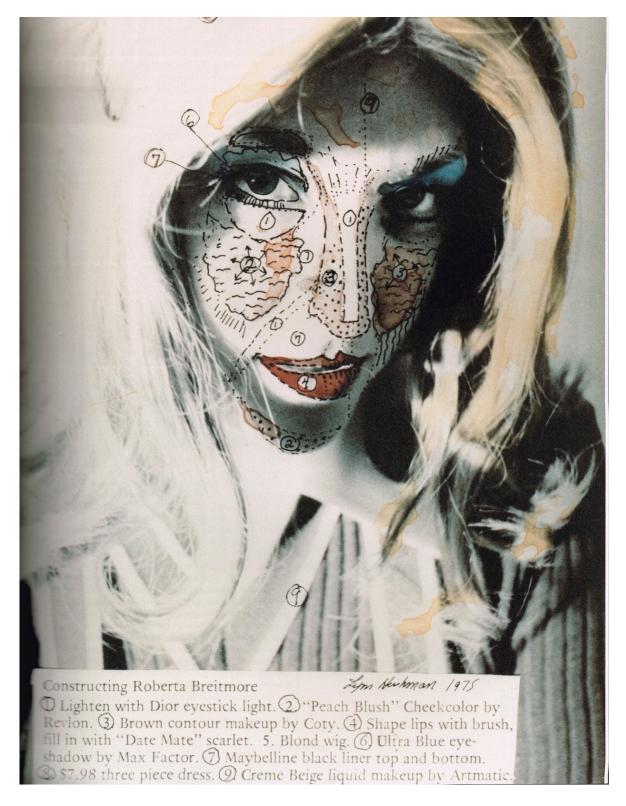
Nancy Princenthal, "The Feminist Avant-Garde", Aperture Magazine #225, Winter 2016, 40-47.

# aperture

# THE FEMINIST AVANT-GARDE

#### **Nancy Princethal**

It seems that it's time, once again, to consider the naked truths revealed by second-wave feminist art. In 2007, a year of women in the arts was spearheaded by *WACK!Art and the Feminist Revolution*, a traveling exhibition of women's art from the 1970s organized by Connie Butler for the Museum of Contemporary Art's two-day symposium "The Feminist Future." Traveling since 2010, the exhibition *Feminist Avant-Garde of the 1970s: Works from the Sammlung Verbund, Vienna* returns to the achievements of that formative decade. An assembly of photo-based work by thirty-four artists, the exhibition was organized by Gabriele Schor, who is also editor of the accompanying publication discussed here (its other primary authors are are Mechtild Widrich and Merle Radtke; there are numerous additional contributors of shorter texts). Schor's aim, she writes is to "draw the connection between the concepts of "feminism" and "avant-garde" - that is, to challenge the idea that at the leading edge of culture there is always a battalion of men.



Lynn Hershman Leeson, Roberta Construction Chart #1, 1975, copyright the artist

In her catalogue essay, Schor divides the artists into a Borgesian list of incommensurate, sometimes overlapping, and yet productive categories, including "Bride/Marriage/Sexuality," "Homemaker/Wife/Mother," "Role-Play," "The Dictate of Beauty," and "Violence Against Women." There is also "Measurement," both as an artistic strategy and a social constraint, and, more obscurely, "Critique of Reification," which sets "the female body in opposition to institutions and architecture." Some of these linkages comprise curatorial tours de force: Donna Henes, Franciose Janicot, Renate Eisenegger, and Annegret Soltau are all shown to have wrapped their heads in various binding

Seen forty years later, these many exercises in self-exposure have grown increasingly complicated—often raw and innocent, sometimes angry.



Renate Bertlmann, Tender Touches, 1976 © the artist and courtesy Richard Saltoun Gallery

materials; Elaine Shemilt did the same to her body. Birgit Jürgenssen and Helen Chadwick both devised full-body costumes that took the form of kitchen appliances, while Ulrike Rosenbach posed at a kitchen stove wearing a series of marital "bonnets," and Martha Rosler produced hilariously deadpan Semiotics of the Kitchen (1975). Lynn Hershman Leeson's commitment to her alter ego, Roberta Breitmore, was extraordinary - for several years, Roberta had an independent and fully credentialed personal and professional life, and even her own psychotherapist - but Hershman Leeson was only one among a host of artists who undertook role-play to explore the dramatis pesonae of womanhood. Other themes likewise substantiated.

Schor, however, declines to situate them in a lineage that includes precedents and successors. A compendium, then, rather than a polemic, this book nonetheless offers strongly provocative gatherings, primary among them the abundance of women turning the camera on themselves. As noted in Widrich's catalogue essay, art historian Rosalind Krauss's "The Aesthetics of Narcissism," an article that appeared in the first issue of the influential journal October, in 1976, identified a prevailing "narcissism" in the nascent medium of video art. Widrich claims that Krauss "disparages...a preoccupation with

the artist's own self." But rather than actually exploring such preoccupations, malign or otherwise, Krauss applies the term *narcissism* to structures of perceptual relation. Similarly, fellow art historian Anne Wagner's "Performance, Video, and the Rhetoric of Presence," written nearly twenty-five years later for *October* and also cited by Widrich, is, like "The Aesthetics of Narcism," concerned with the nature of photographic address, although Widrich, is, like "The Aesthetics of Narcissism," concerned with the nature of photographic address, although Wagner explicitly counters Krauss by noting the preponderance of early video work that directs the camera, often rather aggressively, at its audience as well as, or instead of, at its creator.

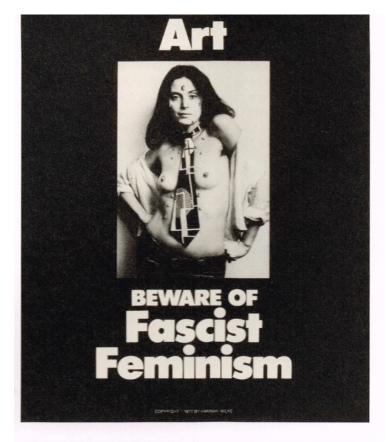
Both essays, it should be said, focus mainly on work by men - they include Vito Acconci (a focus in each case), Richard Serra, Bruce Nauman, Peter Campus, Robert Morris, and Bill Viola, along with Joan Jonas and Lynda Benglis (Wagner also discusses Laurie Anderson). And although the writers' attention to the question of narcissism sheds

valuable light on women's use of video and photography in the 1970s, it is an oblique kind of illumination. In the artworks *Feminist Avant-Garde* celebrates, the medium of photography - whether video or still, documentation of a live performance or freestanding - is less an object of interest in itself than a device for recording personal experiences, and in particular the experience of having a female body. More specifically still, in a great number of cases the camera found these artists with their clothes off. Those shown nude include fully half the artists in the exhibition, among them

Eleanor Antin, Lynda Benglis, Lili Dujourie, Birgit Jürgenssen, Ana Medieta, Rita Myers, ORLAN, Ewa Partum, Ulrike Rosenbach, Martha Rosler, Carolee Schneeman, and Hannah Wilke; shown mostly nude, or exposing their genitals, are Valie Export, Cindy Sherman (in an early, uncharacteristic work), Martha Wilson, and Francesca Woodman.

In her conclusion, Schor claims "self-depreciation and humor were important strategies" for the women she brought together, and that is certainly true of some - for instance, Antin's rueful exercise in "carving" her body (through scrupulously documented dieting) and Beglis's arch sendups of Hollywood cheesecake. Straightforward expressions of spirit and pleasure are important too; Wilke is probably the poster girl for defiantly flaunting physical beauty. But, seen forty years later, these many exercises in self-exposure have grown, it seems to me, increasingly complicated - often raw and innocent, sometimes angry, occasionally abashed. Mendieta and Woodman both caused their breasts to be seen painfully distorted by panes of glass, and their bodies to be placed in various positions of acute vulnerability - most dramatically in Mendieta's searing photographic work *Untitled (Rape Scene)* from 1973. Myer's presentations of her "better" and "worse" halves show her standing stone-faced and stiff, as if for a full-body mugshot. In the well-known documentation of her performance Action Pants: Genital Panic (1969), for which a gun-toting Export spread her legs to reveal a hole cut into her pants at the crotch, the artist presents us with a scowl as wary and fearful as it is aggressive.

Even the generally irrepressible Wilke allowed herself to be seen as vulnerable, not only in the late photographs in which her body is ravaged by cancer, but also, for instance in the guarded crouch she assumes in *So Help Me Hannah: Snatch Shots with Ray Guns* (1978). At the time they were made, these admittedly complicated and heterogenous images of self-disclosure were all understood to be, primarily, acts of proud defiance. In this respect, it *is* helpful to go back to Krauss, because the poststructuralist criticism of the kind she so forcefully propounded, with its scathing disdain for lived experience (men's as well as women's), and its "bracketing out" (to use a term favored by Krauss) of emotional and physical life, is what women



Hannah Wilke, Marxism and Art: Beware of Fascist Feminism, 1977 © Hannah Wilke Collection & Archive, Los Angeles/ Marsie, Emanuelle, Damon, and Andrew Scharlatt and courtesy Bildrecht, Vienna

The notion that "male" and "female" are fixed categories, and that the landscape of gender is divided between them, has been thoroughly discredited.

were up against. Despite the reliance on Sigmund Feud and Jacques Lacan, such criticism rendered women's full psychological lives invisible even to female critics.

Perhaps not surprisingly, the headlong rush to disrobe was brief. Most of the women who were leaders of the deconstructivism that arose in the following decade turned the camera away from themselves, using the codes of

commercial photography to subvert the media's framing of gender. Even when the women who were at the forefront of the Pictures Generation - including Sarah Charlesworth, Barbara Kruger, Louise Lawler, Cindy Sherman, Laurie Simmons, Lorna Simpson, and Carrie Mae Weems - featured themselves in their photoworks, they chose not to portray themselves nude. And as the art world opened, in the 1990s, to an awareness of non-Western cultural traditions and values, it was recognized that being covered up - indeed being clothed nearly head to toe, as are some Muslim women can be a positive choice, and its violation a form of oppression. But perhaps, too, the discomfort that is still, or newly, caused by the variously naked artworks of the 1970s reveals an alarming return of repression, a squeamishness styling itself as sophistication. In any case, seeing this work again is deeply instructive, and powerful in many ways perhaps not originally intended.

If this wholesale baring of the self still seems provocative, some of the battle lines drawn by female artists in the 1970s appear less revolutionary now. The ways conventional heterosexual couples struggle to manage domestic chores is hardly different from arrangements made by same-sex couples, male or female, and although more women than men still stay at home to care for infants, and disparity across the board remains a pressing concern, work/life issues are now understood to involve class as much as sex - a triumph, perhaps, of feminism. Similarly, the commodification of women's bodies and the pressure to be alluring remain important issues, but again, they are mitigated by both greater pushback and the recognition that such pressures are not restricted to women.

By the same token, the notion that "male" and "female" are fixed categories, and that the landscape of gender is divided between them, has been pretty throughly discredited in recent years. There is little evidence of that change in this book. Admittedly, it covers a period in which the dismantling of the gender binary was yet to come, but it is still very odd that LGBT identities and rights do not come up at all. Nor do those of race, in a volume that represents only white women, almost all from Europe and the United States. Where, in Sammlung's collection, or in this publication, is Lorraine O'Grad? Adrian Piper? Camille Billops? Theresa Hak Kyung Cha? This disregard is most glaring in a section os Schor's essay called "Whiteface," which features the (white) artists Martha Wilson, Cindy Sherman, and Suzy Lake, of work by women who "made up their faces with white foundation for the process of transformation," Schor writes that "the basic effect of whiteface is to neutralize the artist's own identity." Not a word is said about actual skin color and its ramifications.

For American readers and viewers, another bias of note, this one positive and instructive, is toward European artists and Continental points of reference. A touchstone for Schor's essay, Simone de Beauvoir's *The Second Sex* (published in 1949 in France and in 1953 in the United States), differs from the founding texts of the 1960s and 1970s feminism in America - Betty Friedan's *The Feminine Mystique* (1963), Kate Millet's *Sexual Politics* (1970) - by its mandarin tone, its political and philosophical commitments (to socialism and existentialism), and its historical scope, which spans the globe and reaches to antiquity. While it is profoundly rousing, it is not a call to action. It also stakes out a chronology of feminism that differs from the one generally followed in the United States. Beauvoir's books supports Schor's statement that the artists gathered in this publication, who ere born between 1933 and 1958, spent "their childhood and teenage years [in] what we might call the long 1950s." In this view, the culture in which feminism emerged was shaped by the left's challenge to a rising capitalism, and by the lingering shadow of World War II. Figures who negotiated those forces - preeminently, for German speakers, Joseph Beuys - were lodestars. "Joseph Beuys's actions in Germany...were important experiences for many women artists," Schor writes, noting, for instance, that Ulrike Rosenbach had studied with Beuys, who "explicitly conceived of his appearance as a form of mythmaking." While insisting that everyone is an artist, and that the boundary-crossing practice of social sculpture" is a kind of activism-as-art available to all, Beuys put his highly dramatized personal story to work in consolidating his authority as a performance artist, sculptor, and teacher, and ultimately as a founder of the leftist Green Party in Germany.

But looked at, instead from the perspective of the many artists included in this publication who came of age in what was perhaps an even longer 1960s, the prevailing influences are different - and they shift to the United States. While Schor sees the 1960s as dominated by "Critique of the capitalist-imperialist economic system," in America the most pressing issues were surely the civil rights movement and the Vietnam War. Mobilization for the first and against the second clearly set the stage here for the feminism of the 1970s.

If Beuys is key to socially oriented performance work in Europe during this period, a comparable figure in the United States might by Vito Acconci, as is suggested by Schor (who credits him, along with Chris Burden, as having influence comparable to that of Beuys) and Krauss alike. For women taking on the mantle of the avant-garde, as Schor defines the feminist art movement, usurping Beuys would have meant engaging with an enormously charismatic politician-cum-shaman who proudly wielded considerable real-world power. Acconci, on the other hand, was

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determined, especially in his years as a performance artist, to dodge such power, using his own considerably (if decidedly unconventional) charm to explore body and soul at their most naked. Stripping off his clothes, burning his his hair, biting his flesh, and rubbing his skin until it bled, alternately taunting viewers and prostrating himself before them, he exhibited a brave (and still very disturbing) willingness to recognize the less amiable aspects of being embodied. It is by illustrating the vivd legacy of women who propelled this impulse, using their own physical and emotional lives to examine the full range of personal experience rather than - as is sometimes thought - generalizing expressions of collective strength, that Schor's publication makes its most valuable contribution.

Orit Gat, "Critic's Guide: London: Lynn Hershman Leeson, Mike Kelley, Laura Owens, and more: the best exhibitions on view during Frieze Week" *Frieze*, October 3, 2016, <a href="https://frieze.com/article/critics-guide-london-1">https://frieze.com/article/critics-guide-london-1</a>.

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CRITIC'S GUIDE - 03 OCT 2016

## Critic's Guide: London

**BY ORIT GAT** 

Lynn Hershman Leeson, Mike Kelley, Laura Owens, and more: the best exhibitions on view during Frieze Week



Lynn Hershman Leeson, 'Trans Genesis: Evaporations and Mutations', 2016, exhibition view, Vilma Gold, London. Courtesy: Vilma Gold, London

#### Lynn Hershman Leeson

#### Vilma Gold

#### 4 - 29 October

*Lorna*, which was included in 'Electronic Superhighway (2016 – 1966)' at the Whitechapel Gallery earlier this year, is proof of how ahead of her time Lynn Hershman Leeson has always been, and how current she still is. Made in 1983, the piece is an interactive video installation that sees viewers make decisions for *Lorna*, an agoraphobic woman who hasn't left her small apartment in years.

Leeson is showing a lot at the moment – she recently had a highly praised exhibition at Bridget Donahue Gallery in New York, and her video installation *Lynn Turning into Roberta* (2016) was shown at Vilma Gold earlier this year, another in a longstanding series of works focusing on Roberta Breitmore, who Hershman Leeson first created in 1974. The work of this artist, who has been thinking about the relationship between human being and technology since the late 1960s, seems more pressing, current, and urgent the more technology enters into our everyday lives. It's as if, finally, time has vindicated her.

"Art is a Form of Encryption: Laura Poitras in Conversation with Lynn Hershman Leeson", *Pen America: The Freedom to Write,* August 25, 2016, <a href="https://pen.org/interview/laura-poitras-conversation-lynn-hershman-leeson">https://pen.org/interview/laura-poitras-conversation-lynn-hershman-leeson</a>.



## ART IS A FORM OF ENCRYPTION: LAURA POITRAS IN CONVERSATION WITH LYNN HERSHMAN LEESON

By: PEN America

Long before the digital revolution and virtualization of identities became part of our everyday lives, American artist and filmmaker Lynn Hershman Leeson created surrogate personas and investigated issues of surveillance, interfacing of humans and technology, and media as a tool to counter censorship and repression. Spanning five decades, her groundbreaking work has ranged from Roberta Breitmore (1973-78), the fictional character that she enacted in real time and space, to !Women Art Revolution (2010), a documentary charting the history of the feminist art movement in America, to works dealing with robots and the latest developments in genetic engineering. Hatje Cantz Verlag has recently published Civic Radar (2016)—the first comprehensive monograph devoted to this pioneer. In the following edited interview, released in Civic Radar, Hershman Leeson and Laura Poitras discuss their experiences with electronic and DNA surveillance and more.



Lynn Hershman Leeson: Laura, do you think that people are aware of the deep level of surveillance we are experiencing?

Laura Poitras: If you are an activist, an artist, or someone perceived as critical of the establishment and you are living in a repressive environment—for instance, Saudi Arabia or China—then, yes, of course. State surveillance is something that you must circumvent and navigate on a daily basis. Activists in Saudi Arabia know how to use VPNs (virtual private networks) and encryption, because they know that if they don't their lives are on the line. The perception of [state surveillance] as a threat has everything to do with what one's relationship is to the state. If you perceive the state as benign—which a lot of people do in Western democracies—you don't necessarily feel that it is harmful to you. Some specific communities in the West—say, African communities in the United States and Muslim-American communities—have a very different relationship to the state. The state has always been threatening to them or at least has been active in their repression. What

we are seeing right now in terms of surveillance is that we have both perspectives in societies that include a spectrum of cultures. And it also depends on where you are globally.

LHL: Is there any place in this world that surveillance doesn't exist?

LP: I think probably you have a better answer to that question, because you have been working on the theme of surveillance, alongside issues of emerging technologies, for much longer than I have, for at least as long as I have known your work. You've been looking at how surveillance and technology intersect with people on a personal and psychological level and also on cultured and gendered levels. Do you see a shift, and where can you mark it?

LHL: I do see a shift. I think that the ultimate surveillance now is in DNA, which is in itself a form of encrypted archiving. In Istanbul, for instance, you have to submit to biometric readers on door locks to gain access to some private rooms. These readers can register your blood type and trace what sect you're from—what your bloodline is—and that will determine whether or not you can enter. Also now there are what are called brain chips, which can be inserted into your body to alleviate post-traumatic stress disorder. But they also can add new memories into your brain.

LP: I have never heard that.

LHL: Since the genome has been sequenced, in about 2001, scientists have been making completely new life forms. Mutants. Hybrids. For instance, they'll cross, say, a goat and a spider to get more resilient milk, or a deadly mosquito and tetracycline to deliver an antidote simultaneously with the insect's poison. I've been asking scientists from around the world about the implications of all this research. The reason human genes can't be used in any experiments in the US is because it would violate the Thirteenth Amendment, which abolished slavery. The Supreme Court decided that owning or patenting a gene of a human equals owning that person. Laws concerning humans are more relaxed in other parts of the world. In England, experiments were conducted last April on women who couldn't conceive; they were given an extra female chromosome. These women gave birth to fifty babies who were born with two female markers and one male. Eventually all of these mutated babies will give birth to progeny that are also mutated in this way. There are labs that are banking the DNA of original life forms, so that we don't forget—that is, so we know where we came from and can access and use that DNA in cloning if necessary.

LP So you must think we are naive when we worry only about electronic surveillance. DNA surveillance goes to a much deeper level of social engineering.

LHL: And racism. People could engineer designer babies who have blonde hair and blue eyes, repressing other ethnic physical attributes.

LP: And how is it that you define what you just described as surveillance?

LHL: Because micro-robots armed with a new force-sensing system can probe cells and track your interior corporeal being and also track your history. So the camera is not on the outside anymore. It's scanning you from the inside out!

LP: I'm used to seeing a dark world, but that certainly is even more terrifying.

LHL: When they passed those laws in Congress about allowing the government to tap all of our phone lines, there was no protest that I know of other than one from the Electronic Frontier Foundation, who unsuccessfully tried to stop it. The level of ignorance or denial is profound.

LP: The fact that people don't know is not surprising, because the government is not telling; even elected officials in many cases don't know what intelligence communities are doing. If you have this awareness, you are considered paranoid and crazy. If you worry about chips tracking people, you might be called crazy until the culture at large sees it actually happening and then catches up with you. It's hard to know what the ultimate impact will be from Edward Snowden's disclosures—if it will actually lead to change or not. But what you're describing in terms of manipulating biology, that's profoundly scary, and people should be scared. Technologies should not engage in this without a robust debate about the ultimate consequences, because it impacts humanity. Why isn't it part of the public conversation? How much of what you know in terms of biological manipulation and engineering is being done in a private sphere or a governmental sphere?

LHL: The military is funding a lot of this research. The labs say that they have ethicists on board. But, of course, the ethicists are being paid, too. Bear in mind, it took me a year to get the interviews, and I had to send the scientists the questions before I was allowed to ask them. Even so, they told me a lot off the record. I'm working with Lisa Cortés, who produced the films The Woodsman (2004; directed by Nicole Kassell) and Precious (2009; directed by Lee Daniels), among others, and was an early voice in Def Jam Records. We find articles in the papers every day about this, but people are not paying attention.

LP: How are you translating the research into art?

LHL: It's a three-part project. It will be a documentary and a feature film—part three of my trilogy on technology and women—and then it's also going to be an installation called "The Infinity Engine," which will include all of this research material and will play sequentially, on its own, in a program modeled after DNA. We will have in it a bio-printed nose and ear, and we'll have projected interviews with a person who's had the first bio-printed body part— a man whose finger grew back by putting protein powder on it. Among the people I interviewed was Myles Jackson, who testified in the US Supreme Court on the gene-patenting case. I intend to have many of the patent files available.

LP: So with something like skin grafts—that's a positive use of the technology, right?

LHL: Of course, like most technology, it can go either way. For example, scientists have discovered that the telomere, or the "aging gene," can also be used to deepen the understanding of cancer. I've consistently worked on projects where the roles of the observer and the observed are interchanged, and the user becomes both the victim or aggressor. The viewed or voyeur. They can see both sides, the dark and the light. There's always a choice—one can use technology to alter biology in either dystopian or utopian ways. Our decisions now are crucial in that they affect whether or not our polluted planet and the life forms on it can survive. We are not going to start the film until next spring. Tilda Swinton is going to play a phosphorous cat that has jellyfish genes of the kind they used for some early experiments in the search for a cure for AIDS.

LP: Nice.

LHL: Art is a form of encryption.

LP: People have always used encryption. That is one of the goals of encryption, how to communicate privately. I think art is in a kind of different category, because it is communication with the desire to express something more openly. Or perhaps it is communicating some kind of different emotion. It is a translation, or a type of communication that is not based on a set language. Encryption is pretty basic; it has a more practical use. I want to say something to you, and I don't want anyone else to hear it. I want you to know what I'm trying to say. Art making is not about anything practical.

LHL: What if you're doing art that's activist? You want people to react, but at the same time you need to be protective...

LP: Sure. Again, if you go to a country with a regime that you can't criticize, you have to figure out a way to do it and people do find ways. You find metaphors, for example, to stand in for the government. In China, there are certain words that can't be used on the Internet or they'll be censored, so people use other words as replacements. That happens with art all the time. And does your art-making feel like a type of encryption?

LHL: Yes, because it's a metaphor. If I make a film about [artist] Steve Kurtz, it becomes a metaphor for the kind of culture we live in. I use stand-ins. I used a stand-in for Steve because he couldn't talk about his case.

LP: I understand. I use codes all the time. I pretend to be talking about something else. There are certain people who don't encrypt their e-mail, so we just create a coding system. Perhaps we are talking about having lunch at a certain restaurant, when in fact we are talking about meeting to do NSA research. It is a way to use codes to communicate, whereas with art making it is maybe about more universal issues. I don't particularly use encryption to talk about broader issues.

LHL: After I made the film about Steve, I started to get audited—which is what happened to all his friends. It hasn't happened this year yet, but the last three times I got audited they had to give me money back because I never report everything since it looks ridiculous that I spend so much. I think that may have done the trick. That was a relatively harmless thing to go through. People asked me when I made that film if I was afraid of what the consequences would be

for me. For me there was no choice though. If you know about these things, you feel you have to go forward and deal with the consequences. Have you ever thought about those things for yourself?

LP: Yes, of course. I agree with you. For sure, there are dangers in doing this kind of work. But the dangers to us with US passports, with communities behind us—we have a lot of leverage, a power that we can deploy to do our work. And we're public figures. Those things give us more protection than someone else. In general, I feel that the work I do is my choice. It is a privilege to do it. But, working on NSA stuff...there is nothing that has put more fear into me. It is really scary. And there have been times at which I've felt that if I weren't careful about how I was communicating there would be repercussions. There are people who would do anything to make sure some information doesn't get out and that includes harming somebody...harming me. There are risks working in Germany. The Central Intelligence Agency just had their station chief kicked out. I assume my house is monitored; I assume I get followed. Those things are all par for the course. If you stick your hand in the hornet's nest, it is going to come at you. But there was no choice but to make the film because you realize that next it might be you who is victimized. If you back out and don't call on your courage to take that risk then you become part of the system you are criticizing. In terms of your work, what have been the moments that have been scary or that you felt yourself at risk?

LHL: I never have been really scared by making art, but maybe that's because I always felt like an outsider, so I haven't felt that I have had much to lose. It is a privilege to be able to give voice or give some presence to issues that have cultural resonance and can absolutely cause change.

LP: I absolutely agree. We are incredibly fortunate that people are opening up.

LHL: When did you become acutely aware of surveillance systems in your life and how they affected you?

LP: When I started working on this series of films about America post-9/11. I didn't conceive the first one, *My Country, My Country* (2006), as part of a trilogy; I just wanted to document what was happening in the Iraq wars, so I went to Iraq. While I was filming it, I knew that my next film had to deal with Guantanamo because the fact of that prison still being open was such a national shame. I also felt that my films were not all about the Middle East, that they are about how the war and terror is brought home to the US. At the same time as the government was planning the invasion of Afghanistan and later Iraq, it was also planning to surveil the US population. In fact, the turning of the powers of the NSA inward, into the US, happened before any bombs were dropped on those countries. It was an important part of the story to tell, and I became interested in doing research on wiretapping after seeing a New York Times story about it in 2005. After I finished the film about Iraq, I was put on a watch list and started to be detained and interrogated every time I traveled. I became acutely aware of it on a personal level, not just on the level of a person informed about the issue. I have never been tortured—and we do know that the US legalized torture—but my notebooks were photocopied and my computers confiscated. They contained my source material, real things I had an obligation to protect. The government started to infringe on this obligation, so I became aware of the risks that it posed to my work as a documentary filmmaker. I guess the short answer is that I became aware of surveillance post-9/11. Before 9/11, I had a more naive relationship to it.

LHL: What happened when you most recently came into the US? Did you get stopped?

LP: No. For six years, I was stopped every time. There was a particular incident at Newark when they threatened to handcuff me for taking notes. I was taking notes because my lawyer said take notes about what time of day it is, the names of the agents, and the questions they ask you. So, I was taking out my notebook, and they threatened to handcuff me. They yelled at me. There were several agents telling me to put the pen down, and I asked why. They said that I could use the pen against them as a weapon—and they were not being ironic. They thought that I would stab them with it. It was so absurd, because they all had guns! And they told me that my pen was a potential weapon.

LHL: It is! (...)So those are the stakes that you go through in making your decisions. You set a path but have no idea what's going to come from that, except that you kind of have to be ready for anything.

LP: Yes. You have been working on the themes of surveillance for a longer time than I have.

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LHL: Not as publicly as you. Always as more of a voyeur of surveillance within a culture. I always felt like an outsider, therefore, like a witness. In your work, you have always tried to think ahead of technology, to ask what the next technological thing will be, and how it will be used because technology has the ability to subvert individuals and to repress freedom. That's what the work is about to a great extent—exposing censorship and repression. Often people are victimized without realizing it. Sometimes, I hope, my work provides a tiny glimpse of what freedom could look like.

Laura Poitras is an award-winning director, producer, and journalist. Her film CITIZENFOUR, concerning Edward Snowden, received the Oscar for Best Documentary in 2015. One of three founding editors of The Intercept, Poitras is also a 2012 MacArthur Fellow and winner of the 2013 George Polk Award for her reporting on the NSA.

Lynn Hershman Leeson is an acclaimed artist and filmmaker whose work has explored technology and its effects on the human experience for over fifty years. Her use of innovative techniques such as digital media and interactivity has resulted in accolades from The National Endowment for the Arts, The Alfred P. Sloan Foundation, and the John Simon Guggenheim Memorial Foundation, among others.

Ian Epstein, "35 Can't-Miss Art Exhibits Opening This Fall: Dreamlands: Immersive Cinema and Art, 1905 - 2016", *Vulture*, <a href="http://www.vulture.com/2016/08/35-art-exhibits-opening-this-fall.html">http://www.vulture.com/2016/08/35-art-exhibits-opening-this-fall.html</a>, August 24, 2016.

## VULTURE

#### **FALL PREVIEW 2016**

35 Can't-Miss Art Exhibits Opening This Fall By Ian Epstein



10/28 "Dreamlands: Immersive Cinema and Art, 1905–2016"

Through 2/5, the Whitney Museum of American Art

From hand-painted films to a 3-D video projected inside a dome, the Whitney delivers a multisite high-tech exhibition, including work by Lynn Hershman Leeson, that begins with the dawn of moving images and goes reeling into the present day. Films will also be screened at Bushwick's Microscope Gallery.

Juliana Huxtable and Lynn Hershman Leeson, "Personae of Interest: Lynn Hershman Leeson and Juliana Huxtable in Conversation", *Artforum*, Summer 2016, 312-319.



## **PERSONAE OF INTEREST**

LYNN HERSHMAN LEESON AND JULIANA HUXTABLE IN CONVERSATION

FOR THE PAST fifty years, LYNN HERSHMAN LEESON has explored identity's fluid mutations, creating a pioneering body of work that has presciently engaged questions of subjectivity in an era of artificial intelligence, surveillance, the cyborg, and genetic engineering. Hershman Leeson sat down with fellow artist JULIANA HUXTABLE, whose own shape-shifting work investigates similar issues in the millennial generation, to discuss the ways in which technology both abets essentialism and creates possibilities for its evasion and subversion.



## Leeson/Huxtable

LYNN HERSHMAN LEESON: When I was starting out as an artist, people were just beginning to unwrap their identities, just beginning to reclaim their histories. Since then, it seems to have gone from an unwrapping to an unraveling. I think there's a different urgency now, as well as new possibilities for incorporating mutations and transgressions that weren't technologically possible earlier. And your generation was born in the midst of this flux.

**JULIANA HUXTABLE:** Yes—I was in college right at the moment when the celebration of the posthuman was at its height. At the time, I felt we were naively unaware of the conditions of the technology. There was a moment when it became so obvious that we had given up a lot in exchange for these new online spaces—that there were serious privacy questions, for example, and a real danger of oligarchic control of the Internet. Today we're still grappling with those issues, and with a perceived failure of participatory politics, at least in America, while identities, or ideas about identity, are unraveling in this radical way. So many notions are just crumbling. Technology can provide ways to engage with these shifts—a potential that I don't think is fully recognized in the art world, which hasn't yet acknowledged the importance of technology in art history, either.

**LHL:** You mentioned oligarchy and the failure of democracy. One of the things I think about is the impact that genetic technology will have on government

surveil- lance programs. What will happen in the future, when it will be possible to track anything forensically through genetic bar coding? We're constantly revealing our identities through our DNA. Hundreds of thousands of cells are right on this table. They could be tracked forever.

**JH:** I feel a bit of paranoia sometimes. Technology has gotten to a point where every single trace of yourself is marketable.

**LHL:** They market genetic information to insurance companies, for instance. Or DNA testing, which becomes a kind of biological censorship of identity.

**JH:** Yes, or pharmaceutical companies get patents for bizarre medicines that are marketed to consumers based on their race.

**LHL:** It was after the full sequence of the human genome was published that big pharma started, for the very first time, to market drugs to particular races that they believed—wrongly, as it turned out—were predisposed to certain illnesses. It scared people into buying those drugs.

JH: It was high-blood-pressure medicine, I think. They were saying that African Americans are more genetically prone to dying from heart failure. Sometimes drugs that just aren't doing so well on the market will be rebranded —the companies say, "OK, well, if we can link this with

some sort of genetic patent, then we can remarket it."
But to suggest that high rates of heart disease among
African Americans are attributable to their genes—and
not to years and years of food deserts—is a way of
dodging the ethical questions.

**LHL:** Right—or, for example, the Pima Indians of Arizona have the highest rate of type 2 diabetes ever recorded. Well, if you're looking at the molecular genetics, you may conclude that these patterns that you see in the Pima and their DNA would explain their diabetes rates. But when the Pima had a healthy traditional diet, which they did until the late nineteenth or early twentieth century, they had almost no recorded diabetes. Now, again, if you're working in molecular genetics and you get a grant to study diabetes among the Pima, you're going to look at their DNA, not their history. And you can use the results of your study to sell them drugs for diabetes. Today, research shows that if your ancestors went through a trauma, like a famine, that translates as a kind of genetic scar. And that scar from the trauma is passed down to all your progeny. I understand that they can correct this trauma scar in the embryo stage. In a sense, they could erase the trauma before the birth of the baby, so the child does not have to go through life taking corrective drugs to neutralize the damage.

**JH:** That's really intense.

**LHL:** It's now legal in the UK.

JH: There's this impulse to reduce everything to a set of genes—to say that these genes produce these phenotypes, which collectively represent an identity.

There's this push toward a biological, hormonal,

physical idea of what identity is. In some ways, I think that constitutes a certain liberation from older forms of racial or gender essentialism, because it makes things a bit more flexible. But it's also scary. If you're dealing with questions of transracial or transgender identity, you're in murky territory. I think we're still in the midst of a difficult conversation about how the physical matrix points that represent certain identities intersect with conditioning, experience, culture—all these other factors.

**LHL:** Do you think we need to find that out, or that we'll need to know that in the future?

**JH:** I don't think we will. It seems more like a matter of trying to find the gray zone. This is the liminal space in which these claims can be staked. But even though I don't think that there is necessarily an answer, I do think it's necessary to have that conversation, to consider questions of representation, and to explore their ethical implications. You've been doing that throughout your career, asking questions that no one else was asking about identity and the ethics and politics of its construction. The series "Roberta Breitmore" [1972–79], for example, was such an incredibly prescient project: this fictional character or avatar who leaves trails of documentation and ephemera, this character who accumulates a file of photos, tapes, psychiatric reports.... What were your thought processes when you were creating that work?

**LHL:** At the time, I collected data about how you identify something as reality. The information was nonhierarchical. I rented a place to live for Roberta, got her a job, a driver's license, a bank account, and collected the ephemera that accrued, from checks to

surveillance photos. As she went about her daily life, Roberta was "played" either by me or, later, by one of several actors who were multiples of the fiction. The accumulated materials were meant to be seen as yet another layer of witnessing, as what would remain after the "reality" of the fictional character no longer existed, after her corporeal body, or bodies, disappeared. It was a different era from yours, but if you're aware of the traces that you leave, the essence of the traces can still be subverted. You play with ideas of a false trail in your work, too.

**JH:** For me, there hasn't ever really been a separation between IRL and URL. I was an Internet baby. Both of my parents worked in tech, so I had access to a computer before I had anything else. I think the idea of an online profile, with all of the possibilities for fiction that come with that, was an inherent part of how I saw myself. I used technology as a way to seek out a counterculture, a music culture, a mail-order culture where I could gain these markers and this identity. I felt I'd found an alternate community. Maybe at one point I was thinking, "I'm stuck in my hometown at this terrible high school that I really don't like. Everyone hates me, and I hate them." That's the IRL. Then there's the other space, which to me was more real. I spent more time there, and all of my energy, all of my labor, went into that world. So while my work deals with my self as a fictional character, that fictional character is inseparable from my "real" self.

**LHL:** Is fiction even possible under these circumstances? There's a parallel to the genetic traces we leave everywhere we go: You always leave a data footprint, a digital fingerprint that with today's

technologies can be traced and interpreted in unexpected ways.

JH: The trail of documentation is mutable. I have such a long history of feeling like, "OK, this is what I have on my birth certificate," and then having a crisis where my body was not matching up with what my doctors presumed. Then there was this moment where they said, "Oh, aha, you have extra chromosomes. That's why this is happening." From that point, I chose to intervene via hormones. So even the trail of documentation is already so back and forth. I don't know what I would point to as the ground for what's real. Is it the chromosomes? Is it the psychologists' reports?

LHL: It's never one thing. It's all these different influences that create the mutation and the blurring. Any two people have at least three to six million points of difference in their DNA, so how can we expect absolutes? The spaces in between difference are what is fascinating. Did you start out with a fictional identity on the Net?

JH: I started off using an abbreviation of my first name —J. It was tied to who I was, almost like branding—it loosely implied a relationship to this real entity, but it existed on its own. Then it just moved on from there. At one point, blogs were free territory, and that's where you could create different personae. Like you could have whatever name you wanted for your Blogspot. You could have multiple profiles, and you didn't have to prove your identity. And at the same time, the Internet represented, for me, the ultimate library. I found this world online of queer history and precolonial black history— Encyclopedia Africana, for instance. You mentioned the connections between identity and history

—these sites illuminated those connections for me. I felt like I had found my library. This was before Wikipedia became a monolith, a reference monopoly. When that happened, a lot of alternative reference works and information sources disappeared. What I didn't realize was that this archive was totally ephemeral.

LHL: It isn't, because you can access it.

**JH:** I mean in the sense that I can't find a lot of the sites now. Maybe they're in a Google archive somewhere.

**LHL:** Somebody could find them. It's a different form of archaeological digging. It's cumbersome, but I think they can be excavated. Nothing disappears. That's what I've learned. You can't really erase anything. Disappearance is a fiction.

JH: Maybe the question of access, then, is: Who has the resources to actually get the erased histories? If the infrastructure for accessing that data doesn't enable the necessary type of search, it's almost as if it's not there. When I couldn't find the sites that I remembered, I felt like I had been wronged.

**LHL:** Your performances at MOMA [*There Are Certain Facts That Cannot Be Disputed*, 2015] were engaging this lost archive directly.

JH: That project started, in a lot of ways, with mourning these sites. The performance traced this longing to participate in history or to have a personal relation-ship with history, and I was also looking at how technology might facilitate that. When you go to the Met and you see a painting, there's a feeling you get—a moment of being in that pictorial space, like, "This is history." I'm engaging with that desire to experience a moment of

identification, even if it's just visual, just a moment of connection with an image. In one section of the piece, I was trying to create this romantic, dramatic processional for a lost era of technology and these lost sites. I wanted to evoke the idea that there were these great cities that disappeared, like the virtual cities that were lost when GeoCities shut down—like Atlantis. I was also looking at new hybrids of fantasy and history—video games where you can play a character in the Revolutionary War, fan fiction, cosplay. The work was celebrating those avatars, and the ways in which technology opens up these possibilities of inhabiting other personae and other histories. When I saw your show at Bridget Donahue [New York, 2015], I was in the middle of working on this project. I thought, "Oh, God, this is great. There's so much here to process and think through"—for example, CybeRoberta [1995–96], the doll with webcams for eyes. There's so much to consider in terms of how technology affects vision, perception, proprioception.

**LHL:** You become it—you become a virtual cyborg, just by looking through her eyes and tracking what she sees on the website. Even if they are in a room with her, viewers are captured by her eye cam and lodged in her gut, so to speak—they are cannibalized by this telerobotic doll, pulled into a symbiotic human-machine networked interaction that is live yet archived. The symbiosis is completed through absorption.

**JH:** I was with a friend when we saw your show, and we pulled the feed up on our phones. The site was living and it was active, but it had a certain texture, so that you knew it had been created in the 1990s. Looking at it was like looking at a page from an old book. That was really

interesting, and it was one of the things I really liked about the piece—this interplay between two different eras, two aesthetics. It made me think about GeoCities and all of that.

LHL: I really like to preserve the glitches of a time, the underbelly of an era. That is more revealing than a cosmetic surface. The mistakes in coding are like scars that you learn from. Even when I migrate a piece to a different technology, I keep the scars intact. The site you saw reflects and replicates the state of the technology at the time it was made—I'm not going to upgrade it to make it faster or more beautiful and then say, "It was done in 1995." That would make it counterfeit, which is what I am trying to avoid.

**JH:** That's great. I love that approach.

**LHL:** One of the things I also realized is that Internet breeding machines are live and refuse to die. For instance, the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art acquired Agent Ruby—she's now one of the most visited works in their collection. Ruby is a Web bot that began in 1998, as the expanded-cinema part of my film *Teknolust*, and surfaced live with the film in 2002. The media curator at the museum, Rudolf Frieling, and some of his staff found a gargantuan archive on the project's server— which was Ruby responding to users who chatted with her for over twelve years, from all parts of the globe, about everything from politics to their dreams. In some years the conversation was about 9/11, or Bush or Obama or surveillance. But it was also about love and relationships, which I find is at the heart of all these AI bots. When SFMOMA exhibited it, Rudolf compiled eight books of conversations derived from the chats on subjects ranging from "what it means to be

human" to "the economy" and "feminism." Ruby's interactions are a mirror of the times in which she was accessed, a living history of dreams and fears.

**JH:** That's so insane—to discover that the archive had been growing all that time.

**LHL:** It never occurred to me in 2002 that these pieces don't die, that they're out there somewhere breathing through the pulse of the Net.

JH: If you can find them. Now that Google has become almost synonymous with searching, I feel they have a responsibility to do something with the archive to make it more accessible. I don't think Google caches images —I think they only save the HTML and the text of the websites. I found one of the sites that I was looking for, for my performance, but all of the images had disappeared.

**LHL:** I love what you did in the performance with the images and scanning—projecting the laser across your body as if it were the scanner bed, and using the sounds of scanning as well.

JH: That was a way of performing the idea that I wasn't actually there. This was in the wake of the New Museum Triennial [2015], where I'd shown self-portraits and Frank Benson's sculpture of me had been on view [Juliana, 2015]. There was a lot of media attention, and there seemed to be this desire to access my body, as if my body and the sculpture were a one-to-one representation. I was grossed out by that, and by a certain understanding of my performance, especially in the case of people who maybe weren't familiar with my work. They might have expected an aggressive presence of the body, so I liked the idea of using the performance

and technology as a way to create these screens, or distractions from the idea that it's a real, raw person in front of you.

**LHL:** When you mentioned that the role of technology wasn't really acknowledged in art history, what were you thinking about specifically?

**JH:** There's a gap between art history and how art actually deals with questions of technology, and with the progression of technology itself. There are just large moments that are unaccounted for. I find a lot of the writing about the potential of the Net really frustrating, partly because there doesn't seem to be that sense of historical knowledge. The whole post-Internet discourse skipped over a lot of the issues that you and I were talking about initially. Instead, everyone focused on formal and technical aspects of the work. The conversation felt really limited, and it accelerated very quickly, to the point where technology became almost passé. When I would tell people, "Oh, I'm dealing with. . ." the second I would say, "the Internet," it was like, "Oh." I was like, "What do you mean? What are you rolling your eyes at?"

**LHL:** That's why what you're doing is so important. I think it takes your generation, with your early access to the Internet, to be able to see the ongoing relevance and importance of these technologies that are emerging with you, and to know the language of the Internet in a different way. For most people I know, it's a second language, but your generation has grown up on it.

**JH:** Right, it's the very first language. But a lot of artists around my age have been distancing themselves from questions of technology, even though it's so important. I

know you've actually developed many of your own technologies.

**LHL:** Oh, yes. I had to, because they didn't exist, so I had to make them. I didn't want to. It's a lot of trouble and it was hard and always took years and a lot of frustration, but it was the only way to create what I was seeing in my head. In most cases, it took five years, and in some it took eight years to produce the work. My collaborators and I had the great joy of being able to figure it out ourselves— though of course, by the time we'd finish, we would invariably be able to buy whatever it was we were making off a shelf. We hunted the codes and programs and hardware down by instinct and faith and belief that it would be possible to accomplish a touch screen, or other kinds of interaction. In the field of artificial intelligence, for example: *DiNA*, which I finished in 2004. Siri was released in 2011, but still has not caught up to DiNA's wit and comprehension, in my opinion.

**JH:** Have you ever been approached by companies about commercial applications?

**LHL:** Well, when we did *DiNA*, there was a company that gave us a free software package worth \$40,000. We would show them all the things *DiNA* was capable of, things they were not thinking about, because they were only thinking of commercial applications, and we were thinking about stretching the metaphors. When I think back on it, it is possible that the research we were doing and feeding to the software company was actually used to create Siri, but there's no way to prove that. And thanks to the software, we were able to make *DiNA* and *Agent Ruby*, which is what we wanted to do, so it's an even trade. Other than that instance, no, no companies

have approached me, because what I do is relatively useless in the real world. I don't see these projects as a commercial application for anything that people might need, except maybe for joyful interactions, which are important but have not been monetized yet.

**JH:** You were interested in genetic engineering before a lot of people were aware of it.

**LHL:** It's something I've been dealing with in my work since the mid-1980s. My current project, *The Infinity* Engine [2011–], involves a scanning booth that accesses viewers via DNA readings, which I think is going to be the standard way of determining individual genealogy and histories in about ten years. The project was developed as a way of using facial recognition to reverse engineer a person's genetic origins. I worked on it with a (then) nasa scientist, Josiah Zayner, and several other programmers, and we premiered it in my retrospective, "Civic Radar," at ZKM [Museum of Contemporary Art, Karlsruhe, Germany, 2014–15]. Peter Weibel and Andreas Beitin and the entire ZKM staff valiantly committed to fully actualizing this piece. I hope to install it somewhere in New York. There were also rooms at ZKM devoted to bioprinting, mutation, genetic transplants, ethical conundrums. . . . We even had a bioprinted nose and mutant GMO fish. ZKM declared itself a science lab to accommodate all this.

**JH:** That's so ahead of the curve, to be dealing with these things in your work.

**LHL:** I think that if you're dealing with the present, and I've said this before, people think that you're in the future, because they don't know what's going on in their own time. I try to understand what is happening in the

time I live in. The full human genome was sequenced in 2005. That was a huge leap in discovering the possibilities for the inevitable genetically migrated and hybrid planet that we will inhabit in the future.

**JH:** In terms of the critical reception of your work, how have people responded to seeing their present reflected back at them? How did they respond to *CybeRoberta*, for instance?

**LHL:** They didn't, because nobody would show it. In fact, about 65 percent of the work in my retrospective was seen for the first time last year. Much of my work wasn't shown for fifty years, and most of it took at least twenty years to be acknowledged, because people had no reference or language for it.

**JH:** So almost all of the writing has been in retrospect, much later?

**LHL:** Yes. It's the opposite of your situation in a way.

JH: I have no clue what the perception of my work will be later on. I'm just thankful that it has been written about. I was really honored that people were writing about the performance versus the triennial work. In the case of the triennial, I felt like a lot of the writing was really just an accessory to the image. It was mostly anecdotal, biographical information about me, supplanting a discussion of the work itself. I was nervous that would happen with the performance—that it would become about the circulation of an image—and I was happy that there seemed to be more engagement with the actual work itself.

**LHL:** So what you're saying is that your work is aimed at combating any calcification of your identity into

merely an autobiographical cipher? It's almost as if you're actively trying to disrupt the process of stability of your identity, as if it is constantly shifting.

JH: I think I felt a sense of freedom for a while, because I found my visibility through multiple avenues. I was working in nightlife, but I also had a blog where I had built a following, and I would share other people's work and my own writ- ing and criticism. I felt I had these microcommunities and multiple identities online, and they didn't ever really have to come together. In the past two or three years, that all condensed into a singular body. Especially given the moment we're in—it was too easy for people to say: "trans." And that just became a reductive signifier—clickbait. I was so shocked by how crude people could be. I felt like I had to be aware of that and counter it in my own work.

**LHL:** When you say counter it, are there platforms that are especially useful for that?

**JH:** Maybe Twitter, because right now Twitter feels like it's a little bit more open to experimentation. If I don't read it for two days, I've missed so much. There's no algorithm to push something back up. And that appeals to me. It has become a space where I can say, even just for a day, "OK, this is my character right now, my alter ego of the moment."

**LHL:** That's interesting. For me, Roberta was a way of testing the blur that exists in spaces where people perceive reality, and to show and exhibit flawed belief systems. At first, I didn't really think that I was going to actually perform the role of Roberta myself. I certainly didn't want to do it. But I initially couldn't find anybody else to do it, so I had to. Then it took all that time to

flesh it out. These projects are like vampires. They enter your bloodstream surreptitiously, and then they inhabit you. Don't you feel that?

**JH:** Yes, that's how I feel.

Alex Greenberger, "Lynn Hershman Leeson is Making a Documentary About Tania Bruguera", *ARTnews*, March 24, 2016, <a href="http://www.artnews.com/2016/03/24/lynn-hershman-leeson-is-making-a-documentary-about-tania-bruguera/">http://www.artnews.com/2016/03/24/lynn-hershman-leeson-is-making-a-documentary-about-tania-bruguera/</a>

# ARTNEWS

# LYNN HERSHMAN LEESON IS MAKING A DOCUMENTARY ABOUT TANIA BRUGUERA

BY Alex Greenberger POSTED 03/24/16 12:24 PM

Lynn Hershman Leeson has recently enjoyed a late-career comeback. Over the past two years, the feminist video artist has had critically acclaimed solo shows at Modern Art Oxford, Bridget Donahue in New York, and the ZKM Center for Art in Karlsruhe, Germany, and now her work can be seen at the Whitechapel Gallery's much-hyped show "Electronic Superhighway 2016–1966," which surveys the Internet's impact on art. During a recent talk at Brooklyn's Light Industry held in honor of a new monograph of her work, Leeson unveiled a preview of her latest project: a full-length film about the Cuban artist Tania Bruguera.



Still from Lynn Hershman Leeson's Tania Bruguera: A State of Vulnerability COURTESY THE ARTIST

Leeson's documentary is tentatively titled Tania Bruguera: A State of Vulnerability and will focus on the aftermath of Bruguera's experience in Cuba. Bruguera's political performances have been censored in her home country, where her passport had at one point been confiscated after she joined 40 activists in a protest against Cuba's suppression of civil rights. (Bruguera has since gotten her passport back from the authorities.)

Leeson has made two other documentaries: !Women Art Revolution (2011), which is about feminist artists, and Strange Culture (2007), which follows an artist on trial for bioterrorism charges. Both films deal with artists and civil rights, and Leeson explained that Bruguera interested her because her work had been so radically censored.

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"Artists, and in particular women artists, suffer so much censorship in culture," Leeson said in an interview. "It just seemed like this was something that I could easily help with."

The artist Rafael Lozano-Hemmer put Leeson in touch with Bruguera's sister, who then helped Leeson contact Bruguera. Because they felt as though their emails were being surveilled, they met in New York, where Bruguera came up with the idea to see Frank Ochberg, the psychiatrist who was on the committee that formalized the term "post-traumatic stress disorder." Bruguera and Ochberg spoke for 12 hours, and Leeson plans to edit their conversation down to 75 minutes.

"Tania feels that all of Cuba suffers from post-traumatic stress," Leeson said. "They don't know their rights. They don't know how free they could be." Leeson added that her film will also include other issues related to private and cultural forms of censorship.

"She said so much in the film about the situation in Cuba that it'll only make it worse for her," Leeson continued. "But on the same note, if it gets seen a lot, it will protect her as well, in a way."

Leeson has the first public preview of the work planned for June 8, at Tate Modern—British audience members may be able to give good feedback since some may have seen Bruguera's performances at that museum, she explained. The version shown won't be the theatrical cut, and Leeson said she hopes it will be rough around the edges. "I think now it's really timely, and I don't want some sort of perfect film that takes you 20 years, or even two years, to do," she said. "It should come out right now, and I think the rawness is part of it."

Alex Greenberger, "9 Art Events To Attend In New York City This Week", ARTnews, March 7, 2016.

# ARTNEWS

### 9 ART EVENTS TO ATTEND IN NEW YORK CITY THIS WEEK

BY The Editors of ARTnews POSTED 03/07/16 10:00 AM

#### WEDNESDAY, MARCH 9

#### Talk: Lynn Hershman Leeson at Light Industry

Lynn Hershman Leeson, long an underappreciated figure in the art world, has finally come into the limelight. In the past year, the feminist video artist has secured New York gallery representation, thanks to Bridget Donahue, and was the subject of a retrospective at the ZKM in Karlsruhe, Germany. (We still haven't gotten a Hershman retrospective stateside, but it doesn't feel too far off—curators are quickly beginning to realize just how much she's influenced a generation of artists whose work deals with the Internet.) Now, Hershman's work, which deals with the male gaze and technology's effects on organic matter, will be surveyed in a new book called Civic Radar. Not only will Hershman be discussing her work with Artforum editor-in-chief Michelle Kuo, she'll also be previewing a new piece at this talk, making this a can't-miss event. —Alex Greenberger

Light Industry, 155 Freeman Street, Brooklyn, 7:30 p.m. Tickets are payas-you-wish



Lynn Hershman Leeson, Construction Chart Drawing, 1973. COURTESY BRIDGET DONAHUE, NEW YORK

"Lookout Highlights of 2015", Art in America, January 7, 2016, <a href="http://www.artinamericamagazine.com/news-features/news/lookout-highlights-of-2015/">http://www.artinamericamagazine.com/news-features/news/lookout-highlights-of-2015/</a>

# Art in America

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NEWS JAN. 07, 2016

# Lookout Highlights of 2015

by A.I.A. Editors



Every Thursday, A.i.A. editors compile The Lookout, a series of microreviews of compelling exhibitions on view in New York. Selections range from museum blockbusters to gallery shows to presentations in small nonprofits, from the Upper East Side to the outer boroughs. As a complement to our popular Best of 2015 series, contributed by art luminaries in New York, Los Angeles, Chicago, Houston, London and Japan, we're presenting ten Lookout highlights of the past year in chronological order. Here's to an art-filled 2016!

#### Lynn Hershman Leeson, at Bridget Donahue (Feb. 19-Apr. 5, 2015)

When a young dealer opens a gallery downtown you'd expect her to show artists from among her peers, but Bridget Donahue makes a big statement with her first show—a mini-retrospective of Lynn Hershman Leeson. In recent years, the New York and San Francisco-based artist has drawn increasing attention for her decades of perennially fresh encounters between technologies and bodies. Her last New York show was in 2008 at bitforms, which specializes in new media. Yet Donahue's current presentation is grandly quiet in its focus on the old. It includes a scratched painting from the '60s, along with photographs and performance documents reflecting the artist's interest in the female body as an object of surveillance and voyeurism. New wallpaper bearing images of genetically modified organisms suggests the internalization of tech, while a projection that one must peer inside a black-box installation to see bends the viewer's body to the artist's will.

in fields like DNA sequencing or regenerative medicine; this is what Lynn Hershman Leeson is saying with *The Infinity Engine*. The ubiquitous application and spread of digital media that we have experienced is now being followed by a similar development in the field of biomedia, and this will change our lives and habits as much as the digital media did and still do.

### SciArt in America October 2015

The Infinity Engine (2014) installation. All images are courtesy of Lynn Hershman Leeson, produced by ZK M | Zentrum für K unst und M edientechnologie K arlsruhe. Photo: Fidelis Fuchs, © ZK M | Z entrum für K unst und M edientechnologie K arlsruhe.



Karen Archey, "Lynn Hershman Leeson", Art Review, May 1, 2015, 126 – 129.

# **ArtReview**

## Lynn Hershman Leeson

by Karen Archey

One of the most successful tools deployed by second-wave we all know, artworld taste and time work cyclically, and feminist artists was mathematical calculation. By calculating female representation in gallery and museum exhibitions - which often amounted to none - second-wave feminist artists were able clearly, factually to express the egregious gender imbalance that plagued twentieth-century were to take a look at the New Museum Triennial, curated culture and which continues today. This is all explicated in by tech-savvy artist Ryan Trecartin and curator Lauren

!Women Art Revolution (2010), a 40 years-in-the-making documentary film by artist Lynn Hershman Leeson, who has seen her own fair share of elision from the art historical record

Hershman Leeson has been active as an artist since the 1960s. focusing on issues related to technology (specifically biotechnology) and the body, and although the influence of her works can be seen in that of artists of younger generations - such as Cory Arcangel, Cécile B. Evans or Ann Hirsch - and has won innumerable honours, including a Guggenheim Fellowship and a National Endowment for the Arts grant, she is just now seeing widespread recognition. Her first major institutional solo show was mounted this past winter at Zentrum für

above Self Portrait As Another Person, 1966, wax, wig, sound, makeup, sensor, tape recorder

panel series at MOMA PS1, as well as a solo show at the new gallery Bridget Donahue on the Lower East Side. As

for the first time it seems as if the two have paired for Hershman Leeson. Her work appears to be a decadespreceding preamble to much of what is being produced in New York, Berlin, and London today. For example, if you

> Cornell, you'd see a concerted interest in reimagining the body in light of advances in biotechnology and mass communication. So, too, is this interest expressed in contemporary art discourse in Europe, as, for example, in the group exhibition Inhuman at the Fridericianum in Kassel, which offers "visions of the human being as a socially trained yet resistant body, transcending biologically or socially determined gender classifications, as a digitally immortal entity, or as a constantly evolving self". In other words, we're thinking about the cyborg again. In a recent phone interview, Hershman Leeson told me she has been hiding her work under her bed for all of these years waiting - hoping - for the artworld to catch up. Looking back at Hershman Leeson's career now, the pieces to the

Medienkunst in Karlsruhe, and in New York the puzzle easily fall into place - the artist was on the vanguard artist was recently the subject of a daylong celebration and of both burgeoning feminist and new-media art movements during the 1960s and 70s, with a concerted interest in the cyborg that unites these fronts.

Hershman Leeson, originally from Cleveland, moved to Berkeley in 1963, longing to take part in the activist scene there. From her early days as an artist during the 1960s, her work was political in tone. Her first major drawings, shown at ZKM, were giant renditions of cyborgs, purpose in Hershmans Leeson's life. "Nothing she At Bridget Donahue, Hershman Leeson's early work includes hand-painted female bodies on canvas from 1965 that are deceptively haptic in contrast to the rest of her oeuvre. Her *Breathing Machines* of the late 1960s are an early example of work that employs sensor technology. Breathing Machine II (1968) comprises a wax face covered with a wig, paint, butterflies and feathers entombed in a wood-and-Plexi vitrine that, when you come near it, begins audibly breathing. These materially revelational works tap into an aesthetic depicting the hybrid investigation into the often unstable boundaries of the self. state of subjectivities; one both stereotypically feminine (the fragile butterfly), and the morbid (the disembodied, rotting face). This depiction of a woman as alive but entombed, rather than ebullient and brimming with vim, represents the female body in a realistic way that 's still severely underrepresented in both art and popular culture. The female bodies most visible in contemporary art today are so often eigendered, conventionally attractive and at least partially nude, and able to cater to, and perhaps overpower the male gaze in a battle of erotic forces. Hershman Leeson acknowledged as early as the 1960s that one cannot fight false idealization of women by creating another false idealization of herself, but rather focused on revealing abject femininity to collapse those ideals. A woman in 1968 could be many things, but not simultaneously feminine and funny, or simultaneously sexy and intelligent - and certainly not feminine and morbid.

While leading feminist thinker Donna Haraway saw the cyborg as a utopian vision of freedom from our gendered bodies, Hershman Leeson goes further and In her landmark 1975 essay 'A Cyborg Manifesto', Haraway writes that 'a Cyborg is a cybernetic organism, a hybrid of machine and organism, a creature of social reality as well as a creature of fiction. Liberation rests on the construction of the consciousness, the imaginative apprehension, of oppression and so of possibility. The cyborg is a matter of fiction and lived experience that changes what counts as women's experience in the late twentieth century.' Hershman Leeson's performance Roberta Breitmore (1973-9) saw the artist living a double life as a self-loathing blonde with a personality disorder.

She had an apartment across the street from the artist's own. as well as a part-time job, a shrink and a driver's license. Breitmore cruised around the city, meeting people through classifieds, but she served no grand, dramatic did was really remarkable," said the artist to me in a recent phone interview. "Roberta was activated by me putting on the outfit, getting into character and really becoming her. She had her own handwriting, her own gestures, her own manner of speaking and voice." Perhaps the most interesting aspect of Roberta is that she is not terribly dissimilar to Hershman Leeson herself. Roberta isn't the (supremely misguided) social-justice fantasy experiment that Donelle Woolford is for Joe Scanlan, but an Breitmore continued to be a motif in her practice, as she resurfaced in 1996 as CybeRoberta, a telerobotic made-toorder doll with webcam eyes. Even though desktop computers weren't popularized until the mid-1990s and the iPhone didn't debut until 2007, Hershman Leeson was already thinking about digital surveillance.

Especially in her work of the 1980s and beyond, Hershman Leeson tends to deal in the machine-made, massproduced and mediated image. Past the 1960s, her work has few moments of haptic touch or aesthetic delight, as in the case of her *Breathing Machines* or painterly collages, but rather focuses on the brutality of the image, specifically of the female body and the scientific infographic. Take for example her Construction Chart Drawing (1973), a photograph scribbled upon in pen with markings appearing similar to plastic surgery directions, such as 'lighten evebrows'. Or, at ZKM, her installation The Infinity Engine featured wallpaper, titled GMO Animals, Crops, Labs (The Infinity Engine) (2014), comprising images and brief descriptions of endless genetically manipulated organisms. The Infinity Engine also features genetically modified glowseemingly uses the motif to suggest an escape from the self. in-the-dark fish that one can easily buy in a New York City pet shop, but are considered illegal in Germany due to their genetically modified status.

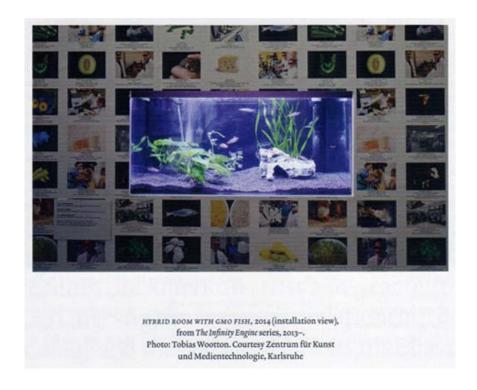
> Since the late 1980s, Hershman Leeson has also worked as a successful filmmaker and documentarian, her films exploiting the popular fascination with sci-fi to address polemical topics such as gender inequity and the precariousness of bioengineering. Actress Tilda Swinton has starred in nearly all of Hershman Leeson's movies (which have had modest budgets), seemingly in political solidarity with the artist, who knows that Swinton's presence will help popularize her filmwork and disseminate her message.

"When I was making video or new-media art, it was so often shown in the corner of a gallery and never seen," says Hershman Leeson. "So I decided I wanted to expand the format, to make feature-length films, in an attempt to expand my audience. I also needed the expanded amount of time to really develop a story." She has been working on original footage spanning four decades. a sci-fi trilogy for decades. Conceiving Ada (1997), her first in the series, features a young female computer programmer obsessed with Ada Lovelace (the nineteenthcentury mathematician and computer-programming pioneer) and a knack for manipulating the time-space continuum. Teknolust (2002), her next, features Swinton as Rosetta Stone, a scientist specializing in biogenetics who creates a part-human, part-machine organism. The last in the series will come out in the near future, and will further

deal with genetic manipulation. Hershman Leeson has also directed the documentaries Strange Culture (2007), on biogenetic artist Steve Kurtz's run-in with the FBI, and ! Women Art Revolution, which historicized the second-wave feminist art movement, with much of Hershman Leeson's

Having been making both films and artwork for nearly 40 years, Hershman Leeson's work now vacillates between long editing periods, and then building up the desire to make something. "A lot of the work is hybrid, because the ideas are always intertwined, but I do alternate," she says to me. Whatever her next wave brings, we should all be along for the ride. ar

> LYNN HERSHMAN LEESON: Origins of the Species (Part 2) is on view at Modern Art Oxford from 30 May through 9 August



Deidrich Diederichsen, "Lynn Hershman Leeson: ZKM Museum of Contemporary Art, Karlsruhe, Germany", Artforum, May 1, 2015, 364-365.

# **ARTFORUM**

## Lynn Hershman Leeson

ZKM I MUSEUM OF CONTEMPORARY ART, KARLSRUHE, GERMANY Diedrich Diederichsen

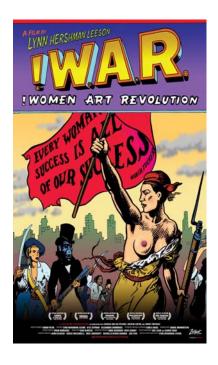
Hershman Leeson's works present an acutely palpable contrast between the rapid obsolescence of each novel technology she has enthusiastically embraced and the persistent currency of the underlying social and conceptual problems she addresses.

I'VE NEVER HAD works of art take so many photographs of me. Soon after entering Lynn Hershman Leeson's recent show at the ZKM, I was met by Past Tense, 2014, a projection displaying a frantic succession of pictures of animals on the brink of extinction; the image collection was sourced by searching "endangered" on Flickr and was updated on a regular basis throughout the course of the exhibition. But these creatures were not the only things on display. My own picture, apparently taken moments ago by a smartphone on a pedestal as I was peering at the installation, was smuggled in at regular intervals between the cougars and cheetahsostensibly to engage me, the (equally endangered?) viewer, more forcefully and perhaps to remind me that my own existence in America's Finest, 1994, a shooting stand the fragile ecology of our planet is not unrelated to the plight of this threatened fauna.

Shortly after, I encountered a sprawling work, The Infinity Engine, 2014, which addresses the dangers and possibilities of generic engineering. Standing in front of another large screen, I saw my own face being analyzed in real time by facial-recognition software, which then broadcast data about my genetic makeup: In my case, a disembodied voice focused on the genes I must carry as a "white male," with " brown" (actually greenish-brown) eyes. Finally, I saw my image appear to enter a kind of digital catalogue, dancing on an adjacent screen with the portraits of others who have submitted to this analysis (including Peter Weibel, the director of the ZKM and curator of the show), which seemed to offer an ominous warning that surveillance today reaches well beyond external appearances to the very core of identity. Soon after, I wound up in front of equipped with an M16, a staple of the postwar US military. The rifle sports a large scope, designed by Hershman Leeson, which incorporates a small digital display. Cradling the rifle and peering into the scope, I saw

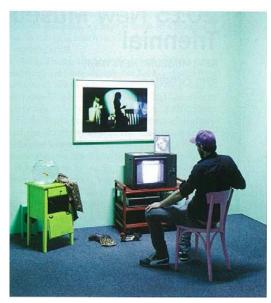
sequences of moving images of war scenes on which I could train the crosshairs; meanwhile, via a live video feed, my own body appeared in the line of fire as a potential victim: Here reflexivity became particularly menacing. Food for thought, presumably.

Interactive media art gunning for notaltogether unexpected didactic effects is hardly a novelty at the ZKM: Work that relies on a rate deployment of technology to produce not just interaction but the cliche of the eye-opening experience has long been the museum's bread and butter. In the waning years of the past century, the institution proclaimed with futurist ardor the rise of an electronic avant-garde. Now that the genre has aged considerably, and has repeatedly drawn criticism for its rather simplistic conception of the "activity" in "interactivity," the ZKM seems dedicated to a slightly truculent defense of standard-issue media art. Indeed, through works such as *Past* Tense, The Infinity Engine, and America's Finest, this show introduced Hershman



From left: Lynn Hershman Leeson in collaboration with Spain Rodriguez, film poster for !Women Art Revolution, 2010. Lynn Hershman Leeson, Teknolust, 2002, HD digital video transferred to video. color. sound, 73 minutes. Lynn Hershman Leeson, Lorna, 1979-84, interactive videodisc, remote control. furniture. Installation view. Photo: Tobias Wootton.





Leeson's work as fully in line with its usual fare. Such works, however, are only one type amid a great number of different artistic techniques, practices, and employments of technology that the artist has explored over more than five decades. And, ironically, through the very thoroughness of its comprehensive retrospective, the museum effectively contradicted or at least qualified its own emphasis: What's at stake in the artist's oeuvre is not a particular relationship between artist and media or technology but a set of well- excellent displays made clear that these piece defined political and philosophical questions that have remained remarkably constant over the decades.

Put simply, Hershman Leeson's work undertakes a feminist critique of the naturalization of gender through an exploration of the denaturalizing potentials implicit in novel technologies. It was not until the 1990s, when the writings of Donna Haraway were widely read, that the art world finally caught up with the investigations that Hershman Leeson had launched in the late '60s. Haraway may be credited with inventing so-called cyborg feminism, but this hybrid figure appears early on in Hershman Leeson's output as the model of a new subjectivity-one not merely to be envisioned by society but to be constructed in actual fact. This techno-realist perspective led the artist, in the early '60s, to initiate the ongoing

"Cyborg Series," a vast array of drawings, ceramic plates, and other works that visualize the cyborg as both a promising feminist project and the manifestation of an oppressive scientific-industrial regime, an ambiguity she has explored in far-ranging reflections.

Though most of the work Hershman Leeson created as an avant-garde feminist in the '70s appeared in the show primarily in the form of historical documentation, the ZKM's are closely linked to her recent media installations by their focus on spatial and social multitude of pieces she created over interaction. She repeatedly used public settings-shop windows, developments of model homes, hotels- as sites for installations. Many of these pieces scrutinize the interplay between gender and social architecture, the behavior expected from women in interior spaces, or the individual gendered roles assigned within families, while also hinting at utopian and transgressive forms of community life. Such works include, for example, 25 Windows: A Portrait/Project for Bonwit Teller, 1976, in which twenty- five windows of the Bonwit Teller department store in New York were converted into installations that constructed social and physical interactions fictional person become more and more real; between male and female mannequins, and

in which the audience was invited to watch, via surveillance cameras, the increasing paintings, collages, photographs, digital prints, disenchantment of a family in a suburban town house. The Dante Hotel, 1973-74, offered round-the-clock access to derelict rooms in the titular building, where two women (represented by wax faces and mannequins) appeared to be sleeping. These projects explicitly explored oppressive architectures designed to force women – whether housewives or prostitutesinto submission, unmistakably echoing her earliest electronic projects.

While Hershman Leeson's early installation works are still known today, the the course of several decades using the fictional character Roberta Breitmore occupy an even more prominent place in the annals of the feminist avant-garde. Although they have much in common with some of Eleanor Antin's experiments, they are now primarily read as precursors to Cindy Sherman's early self-portraits its or Sophie Calle's social experimentation. The artist undertook a protracted first phase of this work from 1973 to 1979, when she lived in the character of her alter ego, recognizable by her unchanging dress and makeup. She inhabited Breitmore to the edge of exhaustion, since she let the she even provided her with official documents Dream Weekend: A Project for Australia, 1977, and obligations of all kinds, including appointments with men and meetings with prospective roommates. This project was

largely forgotten virtual-world experiment Second Life, undertaken at the height of the platform's

popularity in 2005. Lorna, 1979-1984, perhaps the artist's best-known piece, is another foray into emerging media and a rare example of the use of interactive videodisc in visual art. The project relates the story of an agoraphobic

woman holed up in her home through an interface reminiscent of the period's early computer games, in which the player often explored a sequence of rooms to discover hidden clues and complete the game's objectives. Displayed in the ZKM's galleries, these works presented an acutely palpable contrast between the rapid obsolescence of each novel technology Hershman Leeson has enthusiastically embraced and the persistent currency of the underlying social and conceptual problems she addresses.

At the same time, the show reminded us that Hershman Leeson does not use experimental media exclusively; in

followed by several resurrections of Breitmore recent decades she has become known to in various new media, including one in the now European audiences, in particular, for her three allowing the full nuances of this rich and dense films starring Tilda Swinton, which include Conceiving Ada (1997), about the (2002), about the ill -fated genetics experiments of a scientist enlightened by thenrecent gender theory and feminism. Unfortunately, the exhibition presented both films in suggestive and, again, slightly overdetermined settings: Visitors watching Conceiving Ada sat on replicas of the historic furniture that appears in the film. Such "immersive" techniques, obviously designed to activism and interventionism, as well as her encourage engagement with the art and lend the viewing experience a faint air of popular spectacle, are no less distracting than the didactic quality of the later interactive works. One wishes the exhibition designer had lavished similar attention to detail on more basic issues: The sound in both screening installations was so low that it was impossible to follow the dialogue. By contrast, the presentation of the brilliant historical documentary !Women Art Revolution (2010), which Hershman Leeson shot over forty-two years beginning in 1968, was exemplary: It was screened in a movie

auditorium that was built into the ZKM, history of feminist art in the US to emerge. The feature films could be viewed here as computer pioneer Ada Lovelace, and *Teknolust* well, but were presumably encountered by most viewers in their more rigid installations.

> In a sense, !WAR encapsulated many of the best qualities of the ZKM show; this extensive retrospective provided a long-overdue opportunity to rediscover the conceptual politics of Hershman Leeson's art. It offered, too, a reminder of the richness and complexity of her oeuvre, her involvement in early forms of strategic appropriations of formats such as the computer game and the feature film. In this context, her latest forays into media art seem less significant for any resonance they may have with contemporary artistic engagement with technology than for their continuation of a long, varied, and relentless confrontation of art's patriarchal hegemony.

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Translated from German by Gerrit Jackson.

Holland Cotter, "Lynn Hershman Leeson: 'Origins of the Species', The New York Times, March 27, 2015, C23.

# The New York Times

#### **ART & DESIGN**

## Lynn Hershman Leeson: 'Origins of the Species'

MARCH 27, 2015

#### **Art in Review**

By HOLLAND COTTER

The micro-survey of Lynn Hershman Leeson's art at the new Bridget Donahue Gallery is a tip-of-the-iceberg event with the potential force of a stealth explosive. Ms. Hershman Leeson began her career in the San Francisco Bay Area in the culturally roiling early 1960s. Like many young artists then, she identified as a painter, but one with multimedia extensions and futuristic ambitions. Almost from the start she was also working in sculpture that had a cyborglike dimension. The small assemblage in the show called "Breathing Machine II" (1968/2011), consisting of a wax face obscured by a wig, butterflies and feathers, sighs and coughs when you draw near.

Before Cindy Sherman was creating fictional histories for the camera, Ms. Hershman Leeson was living one, that of an alter ego named Roberta Breitmore, a 30-something divorced woman with an apartment of her own, a therapist and a troubled past. For several years in the mid-1970s, Ms. Hershman Leeson, wearing a wig and dark glasses, actually was Breitmore, at least part-time, and hired a private detective to tail her and photograph her daily movements. Several of those pictures are in the show, analog forecasters of the digital surveillance



Lynn Hershman Leeson's "Breathing Machine II" (1968/2011). Credit Courtesy of the artist and Bridget Donahue, NYC.

and identity theft that have since become ubiquitous.

Ms. Hershman Leeson continues to use art as an advance warning system in new work, developed with scientists, that focuses on, and participates in, the phenomenon of genetic manipulation. The show's most recent piece is an installation of wallpaper made from images of hybrid animals, plants, and human limbs created through DNA manipulation, regenerative medicine and 3-D bio-printing. It looks great in the gallery, and like much of this artist's work, it takes both ethics and aesthetics in ungraspable directions.

Ms. Hershman Leeson's multitasking ambition includes filmmaking: Her 2010 "!Women Art Revolution," the best documentary on the early feminist art movement, will be screened at the gallery on Friday night. The big question is why we haven't seen more of her in New York. A major Hershman Leeson retrospective is on view at ZKM/Center for Art and Media in Karlsruhe, Germany, and will travel in Europe, but no American dates have been set. Aren't our museums supposed to tell us where we've been and where we're going? Someone here should grab that prophetic show now.

Bridget Donahue Gallery

99 Bowery, second floor,

Lower East Side

Through April 5

Hannah Black, "Lynn Hershman Leeson: Karlsruhe, Germany - Zentrum für Kunst und Medientechnologie", Art in America, April 1, 2015, 121-122.

# Art in America



Video from Lynn Hershman Leeson's miniature installation Room of Ones Own, 1990-93, mixed mediums, 15 by 14 by 35 inches overall; at the Zentrum fur Kunst und Medientechnologie.

# LYNN HERSHMAN LEESON

KARLSRUHE, GERMANY- Zentrum für Kunst und Medientechnologie

In a scene in Lynn Hershman Leeson's *Re-Covered Diary* (1994), from the video series "The Electronic Diaries" (1983-98), a child claws at the wall next to her bed. "When I was small and after a particularly bad experience I would make holes in the plaster next to my bed trying to dig my way out," explains a voiceover. "My memory is

a powdered past pouring out into the camera." A few feet away from the TV on which the video plays, a painting, *Ripped/Mutilated Self-Portrait-Homage to Fontana* (1966), depicts a woman with a red claw-like hand, bionic or atavistic, in her lap; the canvas is scratched through. From the beginning of Hershman Leeson's career - as this

ON VIEW THROUGH APR. 6 dazzling retrospective at the Zentrum fur Kunst und Medientechnologie (ZKM) makes clear - the body appears as radically open to modifications by self and others, to violence and transformation. In a catalogue interview otherwise mainly concerned with technology, Hershman Leeson explicitly states: "One often survives trauma by making oneself a witness to it as it is happening, as a survival tactic.... It is something I had learned to do early in my life." In her practice, the development of new technology is implicated in the disassociations and repetitions of trauma, but also associated with the possibility of a reparative break with the past. The video *Seduction of a Cyborg* (1994) features a blind woman who undergoes a medical treatment that gives her the ability to see online images, and who becomes addicted to the stream of fragments. Lost in hyper-mediation, she is both imprisoned and released by her new access to the visual. Forgetting your body might not mean the same thing to everyone, depending on how that body has been treated in the world.

The show is thoughtfully installed, though a little overwhelming, as sounds from one work drift over to mix with the atmosphere of another. Hershman Leeson's preoccupation with technological novelty also means that some of the works' interfaces now seem less than intuitive. or even dated. All the works have been carefully installed as closely as possible to their original presentation, taking advantage of ZKM's expertise in tech-driven work. But it doesn't always go so well. In *DiNA* (2004), a chatbot played by Tilda Swinton asks polite questions that the viewer is supposed to answer into a microphone, but the bot is unresponsive. It's not clear whether the clumsiness of the conversation is a bug or a feature. Hershman Leeson succumbs to the lure of Second Life - the online community rendered in fanciful 3-D graphics - in Life Squared (2007), which consists of a virtual museum she created there to house her video works. But Second Life now looks like a misunderstanding or a lapsed possibility. The Internet is still a space for the performance of self, but on Facebook and Twitter, avatars and personae typically resemble their users, albeit in flattering or exaggerated versions, more closely than those on Second Life. In a practice that usually stuns with its prescience - Hershman

Leeson's "Cyborg" drawings from the 1960s look as if they could have been forged in Photoshop - it's a dissonant moment.

But obsolescence rather than novelty is the point of the works. Hershman Leeson's creations at the vanguard speak to technology's particular combination of failure and promise. The absence of vitality in the mechanical doppelganger reveals the living original's hitherto secret deathliness. Technology cannot be counterposed to a fully expressed humanity, because this humanity is unevenly distributed and fissured by trauma and drudgery, as in the installation *Cycles of Contention* (1993-2011). A video playing on a small monitor installed in a dollhouse shows a couple arguing in a kitchen: the woman begs the man not to go to work, not to be physically aggressive, to talk to her, to calm down. The video is a trap, the phrases are a trap, and even the dollhouse - requiring you to peer in - seems trap-like.

Infinity Engine (2014), commissioned for the retrospective, seemed to put extra pressure on Hershman Leeson's commitment to working at the bleeding edge of tech. Here, an array of research and objects related to biotechnology added up to less than the sum of its parts. In the catalogue, Hershman Leeson recalls using the first Xerox machines as a teenager to create distorted images of bodies. Now, science has allowed her to give those distortions fleshy form (Infinity Engine includes a bioengineered nose), but the sheer logistics of the task prevent her from imbuing the material with her own voice.

Hershman Leeson's engagement with biotechnology is yet another iteration of a message often found in her work: your body is already not you. In *Room of One's Own* (1990-93), a woman sneers at the camera: "Who are you? Go look at your own life, don't look at me." She makes the viewer a voyeur and the avatar of Hershman Leeson's problem: what does it mean to make high-tech artworks with the tools of patriarchal violence? Technologies of representation can disrupt the machinations of trauma, and vice versa, but relations of domination remain. Amid the claustrophobia of some of Hershman Leeson's arrangements, technology's inevitable tending toward obsolescence can seem like a gleeful bid for escape.

-Hannah Black

Courtney Fiske, "Critics' Pick: Lynn Hershman Leeson", Artforum, February 27, 2015, http://artforum.com/picks/id=50426.

# **ARTFORUM**

#### New York

#### Lynn Hershman Leeson

BRIDGET DONAHUE 99 Bowery, 2nd Floor February 19–April 5 2015

From 1974 to 1978, Lynn Hershman Leeson doubled as Roberta Breitmore. She rode the bus, signed a lease, and solicited encounters with strangers, whom she met by placing personal ads in San Francisco city newspapers. The performance was ongoing and, for the most part, unwitnessed, sporadically documented in photographs taken by private investigators under the artist's employ. "To me, she was my own flipped effigy: my physical reverse," Hershman Leeson has described. "Her life infected mine."

Concerns with duplication and bodily impurity organize Hershman Leeson's oeuvre, which here receives a retrospective gloss. The iteration at stake is almost always of the artist's self, rehearsed through the genre of self-portraiture and technological media (photography, video, Second Life, and so forth) that are themselves duplicative. Again and again, Hershman Leeson calls us to the precarity of our status as subjects. Selfhood emerges as a sebaceous thing, slippery and secreted like so much glandular waste. It's work that feels proleptic, loosely 1990s even in its '70s moment.

A pair of C-prints, titled *Roberta and Blaine in Union Square*, 1975, frame Breitmore on a bench beside a middle-aged man, his face puffy and his hair pomade-slicked. The scene seems a filched view of some vague impropriety, the whole thing seedy and synthetic. Breitmore's outfit (platinum wig, prefab cardigan)



**Lynn Hershman Leeson,** *Construction Chart Drawing*, **1973**, ink on gelatin silver print, 9 1/4 × 6 1/2".

heightens the effect, lending her the air of a department-store mannequin. Innervated by plastics, life, like the self, becomes alien, as indexed in Breitmore's incarnation as a telerobotic doll in *CybeRoberta*, 1996, which viewers can manipulate remotely. A nearby photograph, *Construction Chart Drawing*, 1973, finds Breitmore's face dissected, as if it were a cadaver. Tenuously organic, the artist's alter ego figures as a vacant (because partially mortified) site. Mediated and surveilled, Hershman Leeson is perpetually elsewhere.

- Courtney Fiske

Randy Kennedy, "Art: Technology and the Split Self", The New York Times, February 15, 2015, AR4.

The New York Times

#### THE WEEK AHEAD

A SURVEY OF THE CULTURAL LANDSCAPE



# ART TECHNOLOGY AND THE SPLIT SELF

RANDY KENNEDY

The philosopher Isaiah Berlin once described David Hume's idea of the self as a pure fiction, "a name for the concatenation of experiences out of which human personality and human history were formed, simply a kind of string which held together the onions, except that there was no string." For decades, the artist and filmmaker Lynn Hershman Leeson has been playing with this un-string, which technology has rendered all the more evanescent. Starting Thursday, a broad sweep of her unsettling work will inaugurate Bridget Donahue, a new gallery on the Lower East Side being opened by a longtime director at Gavin Brown's Enterprise, the West Village gallery. Ms. Donahue said she had been drawn to Ms. Hershman Leeson as a kind of prophet of "our cybernetic condition," through early interactive works that delved into artificial intelligence and surveillance and yearslong performances that blurred the line between acting and life. The show, "Origins of the Species," through April 5, will span from the late 1960s to recent work exploring the implications of genetic manipulation. (99 Bowery, 2nd floor; bridgetdonahue.nyc.)

From the "Phantom Limb" Series by Lynn Hershman Leeson Hilton Als, "Goings On About Town: Lynn Hershman Leeson", *The New Yorker*, March 10, 2015, <a href="http://www.newyorker.com/goings-on-about-town/art/lynn-hershman-leeson">http://www.newyorker.com/goings-on-about-town/art/lynn-hershman-leeson</a>.

# THE NEW YORKER

Art

#### LYNN HERSHMAN LEESON

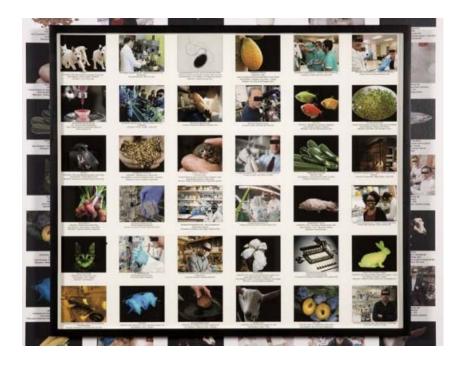
Since the nineties, the San Francisco-based artist has been best known as the director of some very distinctive films starring Tilda Swinton. But before Leeson trained her lens on the indomitable star she turned it on herself. In 1974, she created an alter ego named Roberta Breitmore, who had her own bank account, drivers license, and credit cards. It was a private performance without an audience, which was one of Leeson's points: Was a woman ever really known to anyone but herself? Now that the artist is getting the attention she deserves (a major museum survey just opened in Germany), we are treated to this loose retrospective, which delights with its idiosyncrasies and philosophical strengths. In addition to Leeson's looking-glass feminism, there's an abiding interest in science and the environment, real-world concerns that she renders both otherworldly and strangely familiar in five decades' worth of paintings, collages, and sculptural tableaux that reject signature style in favor of a wide-ranging and fantastic realism. Through April 5.

February 18 - April 5, 2015

"Exhibitions: Lynn Hershman Leeson", Art in America, February 27, 2015, <a href="http://www.artinamericamagazine.com/exhibitions/lynn-hershman-leeson">http://www.artinamericamagazine.com/exhibitions/lynn-hershman-leeson</a>.



**EXHIBITIONS** THE LOOKOUT



## Lynn Hershman Leeson

at Bridget Donahue, through April 5, 2015 99 Bowery, 2nd floor

When a young dealer opens a gallery downtown you'd expect her to show artists from among her peers, but Bridget Donahue makes a big statement with her first show-a mini-retrospective of Lynn Hershman Leeson. In recent years, the New York and San Francisco-based artist has drawn increasing attention for her decades of perennially fresh encounters between technologies and bodies. Her last New York show was in 2008 at bitforms, which specializes in new media. Yet Donahue's current presentation is grandly quiet in its focus on the old. It includes a scratched painting from the '60s, along with photographs and performance documents reflecting the artist's interest in the female body as an object of surveillance and voyeurism. New wallpaper bearing images of genetically modified organisms suggests the internalization of tech, while a projection that one must peer inside a black-box installation to see bends the viewer's body to the artist's will.

Kathy Noble, "The Alternating Realities of Lynn Hershman Leeson", Mousse Magazine, February 13, 2015, 152-165

## THE ALTERNATING REALITIES

MOUSSE 47 FEBRUARY 2015



Roberta going off with preacher, 1975. Courtesy: Bridget Donahue, New York

LOST AND FOUND

BY KATHY NOBLE

## OF LYNN HERSHMAN LEESON

Lynn Hershman Leeson's work is an incessant exploration of the nature of consciousness and its extension via technology. The way we communicate and form relationships inside a network of social and institutional ties are two of the themes of the artist's research approached by Kathy Noble in anhaustive overview of her versatile output, from the early pieces to the production of feature-length films featuring Tilda Swinton, starting in the 1900s, on themes like identity, cloning and feminist politics.

"Tell me your first memory... I'm anxious to get to know you..."
[1] she said in a breathy lilt, as I stood

1. Text from the audio component of *Self Portrait As A Blonde*, 1967, Lynn Hershman Leeson.

directly in front of her. "What was your first sexual experience, can you remember? I would like you to tell me about it in detail..." she asked: I am instantly transported back to my fourteen year old self. "I feel really close to you... I am so glad I have got to know you... I want to know you better... What are you afraid of? What do you hear in your head at night?" I hear the call of death every night, I think to myself. "Have you ever been in love? With whom? Did they love you back?" Yes. With multiple people. They said they did, but how can I ever truly know? "Talk to me. Tell me everything about yourself. Don't hold back..."

Lynn Hershman Leeson's Self-Portrait As A *Blonde* (1967)—from which these questions emanate, as heard by the viewer standing in front of the work activating a sensor—takes the form of a wax cast of her face, topped with a blonde wig, displayed in a vitrine with a tape recorder underneath. It is part of a series of sculptures that Hershman Leeson made in the mid-1960s whilst living in Los Angeles; there she took evening classes and learned to cast—using her own face because it was the most easily accessible. She created a series of casts in different colours—which wore a variety of wigs, while some talked or breathed when their sensor was activated—to show in an exhibition at University of California's Berkeley Art Museum entitled "Completed Fragments". This was a response to protests regarding the less than half of one percent representation of women in the museum's programme. Prior to installation, the museum's director Peter Selz asked Hershman Leeson not to include these sculptures, but only to show her drawings: the artist stood her ground and installed the works as she had originally planned. However, she returned to the exhibition days later to find that the works had been removed, and was told by the curator Brenda Richardson that "sound does not belong in the museum".

2. Pamela Lee, *Genealogy in Wax*, catalogue for "Civic Radar" exhibition, to be published by ZKM in Spring 2015

In 1967 it was not unheard of for sound and video works to be shown in institutions and galleries—for example, Jean Tinguely's Homage to New York was shown at MoMA, New York, in 1960, a self-destructing sculpture-cum-performance involving various elements of sound. As such, what was considered to be so offensive, disturbing, or unwanted, in these audio-sculptures that they needed to be removed? The wax casts of the artist's face are eerily disturbing—recalling both mummies and death masks—but that is also part of their power. However, the act of communication that occurs creates an extremely intimate relationship between object and viewer: the inanimate object comes alive, as if it has its own consciousness, and thus in that moment, I did feel as if I were having an active relationship with her. Regardless of their "failure", they are an extremely important moment in Hershman Leeson's life as an artist, and arguably sowed the seeds for much that followed. How we communicate and form relationships with others, with society, or for that matter, with ourselves, alongside how our being and consciousness exists, in different forms, within the network of institutional and social relations, via bodies and technology, underpins much of what Hershman Leeson has made over the last six decades.

This act of dismissal or refusal by the institution influenced Hershman Leeson to conceive her first sitespecific work, The Dante Hotel (1973-74), which proved to be the first of many activities that took place in the "real" world. She rented a hotel room at the Dante Hotel in San Francisco and installed two replicas of bodies in the bed, their faces made of casts, one white and one black, the room scattered with a fictional woman's possessions, as "artefacts" of her existence there, including glasses, tampons and nail polish, alongside a wall drawing and a series of 24 images of the wax woman on the bed, accompanied by a soundtrack comprised of Molly Bloom's soliloquy from James Joyce's Ulysses whispered from the closet, and the chorus of Elton John's Rocket Man from a radio. [3] Visitors could visit the room at any time of day, and the news of

### 3. Jeffrey T. Schnapp, (No) Vacancy, catalogue for "Civic Radar" exhibition, to be published by ZKM in Spring 2015.

the existence of the works spread by word of mouth—until the exhibition was shut down when a frightened visitor believed the body was a corpse and called the police.

Hershman Leeson began to imagine a life for the fictional person who had inhabited the Dante Hotel room. So Roberta Breitmore was born—or perhaps more accurately emerged slowly into the world, as Hershman Leeson did not purposefully plan her "life" in advance. Breitmore's psychology and physical persona were slowly developed as Hershman Leeson literally "lived" through different situations and interactions dressed and performing as Breitmore, such as going to charity shops, traveling around the city, visiting bars. Breitmore was inserted into the institutional network of our existence by obtaining a

driver's license, a checking account, and a credit card, seeing a psychiatrist, and placing personal ads in newspapers seeking friendship, to which she received genuine replies, displayed as part of the artwork *Roberta Breitmore* (1973-79). The work now consists of the paraphernalia of Roberta's life, a video of the artist becoming her alter-ego, a series of photographs of Roberta with drawings, lines and notes on them, alongside correspondence and ephemera—the psychiatrist's records which describe her as fitting the criteria for borderline personality disorder and schizophrenia. After several worrying experiences in her interactions via the personal ads—which advertised for friendship—Hershman Leeson decided to clone Breitmore and sent three different women out into the world dressed and behaving as her.

Roberta Breitmore has been readily compared to the later work of Cindy Sherman and Laurie Simmons, and also considered in the context of Hershman Leeson's peers Eleanor Antin and Suzanne Lacy, who both performed as fictional characters: Antin as the ballet dancer *Eleanor Antinova* and Lacy as *The Baq Lady*. However, in contrast to these staged personae, Hershman Leeson quite literally became Breitmore, inserting her new persona into the structures of lived reality, leaving a footprint via her records, and having "real" relationships with those she chose to encounter, thus creating a sentient being with a history. The network of physical and psychological evidence of Breitmore's existence is extremely prescient in relationship to Hershman Leeson's later works that use technology in different forms to create multiple versions of a character, such as Lorna (1979-84) and Deep Contact (1989), not unlike a younger generation of artists working today, such as Ed Atkins, Cécile B. Evans and Jordan Wolfson, who fuse "real" and "virtual" worlds to play with the disjuncture between lived experience and fiction.

"A Cyborg is a cybernetic organism, a hybrid of machine and organism, a creature of social reality as well as a creature of fiction. Social reality is lived social relations, our most important political construction, a world-changing fiction. The international women's movements have constructed 'women's experience', as well as uncovered or discovered this crucial collective object. This experience is a fiction and fact of the most crucial, political kind. Liberation rests on the construction of the consciousness, the imaginative apprehension, of oppression and so of possibility. The cyborg is a matter of fiction and lived experience that changes what counts as women's experience in the late twentieth century. This is a struggle over life and death, but the boundary between science fiction and social reality is an optical illusion." [4]

4. Donna Haraway, "A Cyborg Manifesto", Simians and Cyborgs and Women: The Reinvention of Nature, Routeledge, 1990, p. 298.

Donna Haraway first published "A Cyborg Manifesto: Science, Technology and Socialist Feminism in the Late Twentieth Century" thirty years ago in the *Socialist* 

*Review*, in 1985. Haraway was working contemporaneously to Hershman Leeson, and presents several ideas that relate to aspects of the artist's output (Hershman Leeson has stated she first used the term "cyborg" in the 1960s, alongside making works that include "cyborg" in their titles) **[5]**. First, Haraway argues that rather than being controlled by technological

#### 5. Interview online http://kubaparis.com/interview-lynn-hershman-lee-son/

advances, we—in particular women—must harness scientific and technological breakthroughs for political advancement of a form of socialist feminism. Second, Haraway's idea of fiction and lived experience existing simultaneously, and one affecting the other—in a blurring of science fiction and social reality—is one that Hershman Leeson has repeatedly considered. However, Haraway also imagines a somewhat utopian vision of a genderless world enabled by technology, something Hershman Leeson does not necessarily subscribe to, as her protagonists remain "female" in their characteristics, no matter how they are constructed to exist. Since The Cyborg Manifesto was written we have, of course, lived through the revolution of the Internet and its related technologies—a revolution whose reaches are still unknown.



Teknolust (still), 2002. Courtesy: the artist and Gallery Paule Anglim, San Francisco

At this point in the mid-1980s, Hershman Leeson was making several different series of works; first *The Electronic Diaries* (1983-88), and then the "Phantom Limb" series of images. She began making *The Electronic Diaries* as an exercise with which to learn how to make and edit video; and again, as when casting her face, she has stated that the easiest thing to do was to use herself as the subject. "I would sit in a room alone—again, I could not afford a cameraman, or an editor, or actors—so I just sat in a room and talked. And then watched how I witnessed myself talking, and I almost became another person, so fiction did blend

with reality. And I liked that, as things that were fictional often ended up seeming more real than the things that actually occurred. Although, to be honest, they are about 95 percent real." [6] In some ways, the camera

#### 6. Unpublished interview by Kathy Noble with Lynn Hershman Leeson, 2014.

thus became an extension of her psyche, a kind of mirror of aspects of herself—and the ensuing performance of her history and of a construction of her consciousness became a blur of lived experience and fiction. This relates to the concurrently made "Phantom Limb" series, in that the latter works are comprised of images of women with cameras, and other technologies attached to their bodies, often replacing their heads. As such, the technology becomes a kind of metaphor for another form of consciousness and a form of surveillance of both the self and the exterior world. As such, Haraway's emphasis on the need to harness technology as a tool for political empowerment, versus its use as a form of controlling mechanism by the capitalist military industrial complex, seems implicit in both these series.

In the 1990s, Hershman Leeson embarked on a vet to be completed series of feature films starring Tilda Swinton as the lead character(s), the first of which was Conceiving Ada (1997), which tells the tale of Ada Lovelace, a mathematician who conceived the first computer algorithm, mixed with a dose of sci-fi fantasy. The second was *Teknolust* (2002), a beautifully magical creation in which Swinton plays multiple roles as clones of the main protagonist, bio-geneticist Rosetta Stone. Stone clones herself to create three "Self Replicating Automatons" named Ruby, Marine and Olive, after the digital rainbow. They need male sperm to survive, as they only have Stone's DNA, so Ruby is sent out into the world on dates, programmed to perform emotional interactions via the clichés of movies projected into her brain whilst she sleeps. Teknolust draws on many of Hershman Leeson's earlier explorations of identity, personhood, cloning, cyborgs, feminist politics and the communication we use to form relationships, in particular on how this is all intrinsically shaped via society and culture. To be conscious is to forever be in the present: yet what Hershman Leeson's work suggests is that we, in fact, live simultaneously in the past, present and future, and thus we embody multiple experiences and identities: all the selves we could be, all the selves we have been, all the selves we have failed to be and all the selves we will never be. Her work could be seen as an on-going exercise in addressing the nature of this consciousness and, in particular, its extension via technologies, which in turn proposes that this consciousness, in part, is defined by our communications and relationships to ourselves and one another. However, not even Hershman Leeson can predict what will happen to our digital selves—are they forever to be stuck in limbo, like zombies floating around in a black hole of data?

William J. Simmons, "Lynn Hershman Leeson", Frieze Magazine 169 (2015), February 16, 2015, <a href="http://frieze.com/issue/review/lynn-hershman-leeson/">http://frieze.com/issue/review/lynn-hershman-leeson/</a>.

# frieze

## Lynn Hershman Leeson

#### Zentrum für Kunst und Medientechnologie

An important precursor of the Pictures Generation, Lynn Hershman Leeson has been left out of traditional accounts of conceptual photography. Her retrospective at Zentrum für Kunst und Medientechnologie (ZKM) has finally injected much-needed momentum into this staid discourse. Entitled 'Lynn Hershman Leeson: Civic Radar', and curated by Peter Weibel and Andreas Beitin, the exhibition spans the length of Hershman Leeson's career, from the early 1960s to the present. This massive but meticulous and intelligently organized show brings hundreds of objects into a single space – presenting a beautifully vibrant archive that never feels dated. Hershman Leeson's career has encompassed performance, photography, film and painting – work that has often prefigured the projects of other artists.

Discussions of Photo-Conceptualism have changed little since curator Douglas Crimp's initial manifesto for the movement-defining 'Pictures' exhibition at Artists Space, New York, in 1977, in which he concluded that 'underneath each picture is always another picture'. After viewing Hershman Leeson's retrospective, we cannot repeat the same truisms about the construction of identity and the constant citation of the image. Something different is happening here: for Hershman Leeson, behind each body is always another body, in a strange dance of presence and absence.

For example, in the 1973–79 'Roberta Breitmore' series, Hershman Leeson lived as an imagined woman named Roberta, starting some years before Cindy Sherman created her *Untitled Film Stills* (1977–80). During the six-year span of the project, Hershman-Leeson-as-Roberta got a driver's

#### About this review

**Published on 16/02/15** By William J. Simmons



Shower, still from the film *Teknolust*, 2002

license, was psychoanalyzed, opened a bank account and interviewed potential roommates for an apartment share. Hershman Leeson meticulously documented the scenes, clothes, objects and paperwork involved in this performance and, in doing so, summoned a human being into existence from photographic evidence. Inviting other women to act as surrogates, Hershman Leeson produced a number of iterations of Roberta, until the character was ritually exorcized on Lucrezia Borgia's grave at the Palazzo dei Diamanti in Ferrara in 1978.

In the photograph Roberta's Replacement At Her Temp Job After She Was Fired (1978), a nameless woman has replaced Roberta, herself a fiction, producing the effect of a double absence. Hershman Leeson's signature crosses slightly onto the edge of the silver gelatin print, as if to ground the imagined situation in the real via the corporeality of the artist's hand. The piece marks an oscillation between embodiment (the body of the woman who replaces Roberta) and disembodiment (the absent Roberta who, in turn, has already replaced Hershman Leeson). Similarly, another photograph, Roberta Contemplating Suicide on the Golden Gate Bridge (1978) reminds us of the importance of the (specifically female) body to the discourse of Postmodernism. We see Roberta from behind, standing near the edge of San Francisco's iconic bridge. The moment is charged with the potential for a body to hurl towards the water, but whose body – Hershman Leeson's or Roberta's?

Such explorations of photography and performance reach a pinnacle in Hershman Leeson's most recent project, The *Infinity Engine* (2013–ongoing): a functional replica genetics lab that explores the limits of Postmodern insights into identity in light of developments in regenerative medicine. bio-printing and DNA programming. Created in collaboration with a team of scientists working in the fields of synthetic biology and bioelectronics, the lab has created a flesh-like human nose using biological print technology and interactive facial-recognition software that attempts to predict the viewer's DNA profile. This work suggests ways in which we can copy bodies through images, as well as the potential realization of the Postmodern vision of endless citation – a future free of bodies and populated instead with discursive chimera. But Hershman Leeson also uses The *Infinity Engine* to ask whether this is a world we want: in which we become a series of bodies-cum-photographs and photographs-cum-bodies. This may be the limit of the Pictures Generation – the final coalescence of art and life – but to what end?

#### William J. Simmons