

Blake Gopnik, "Lynn Hershman Leeson Makes Art From Life's Challenges" *Artnet News*, February 3, 2017 <https://news.artnet.com/opinion/lynn-hershman-leeson-bridget-donahue-845186>.

artnet® news

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, [delivered by ARTnews magazine](#) 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 [“Dreamlands: Immersive Cinema and Art, 1905-2016.”](#) 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 [1977 film re-creation of Oskar Schlemmer’s “Triadic Ballet” \(1922\)](#), 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.

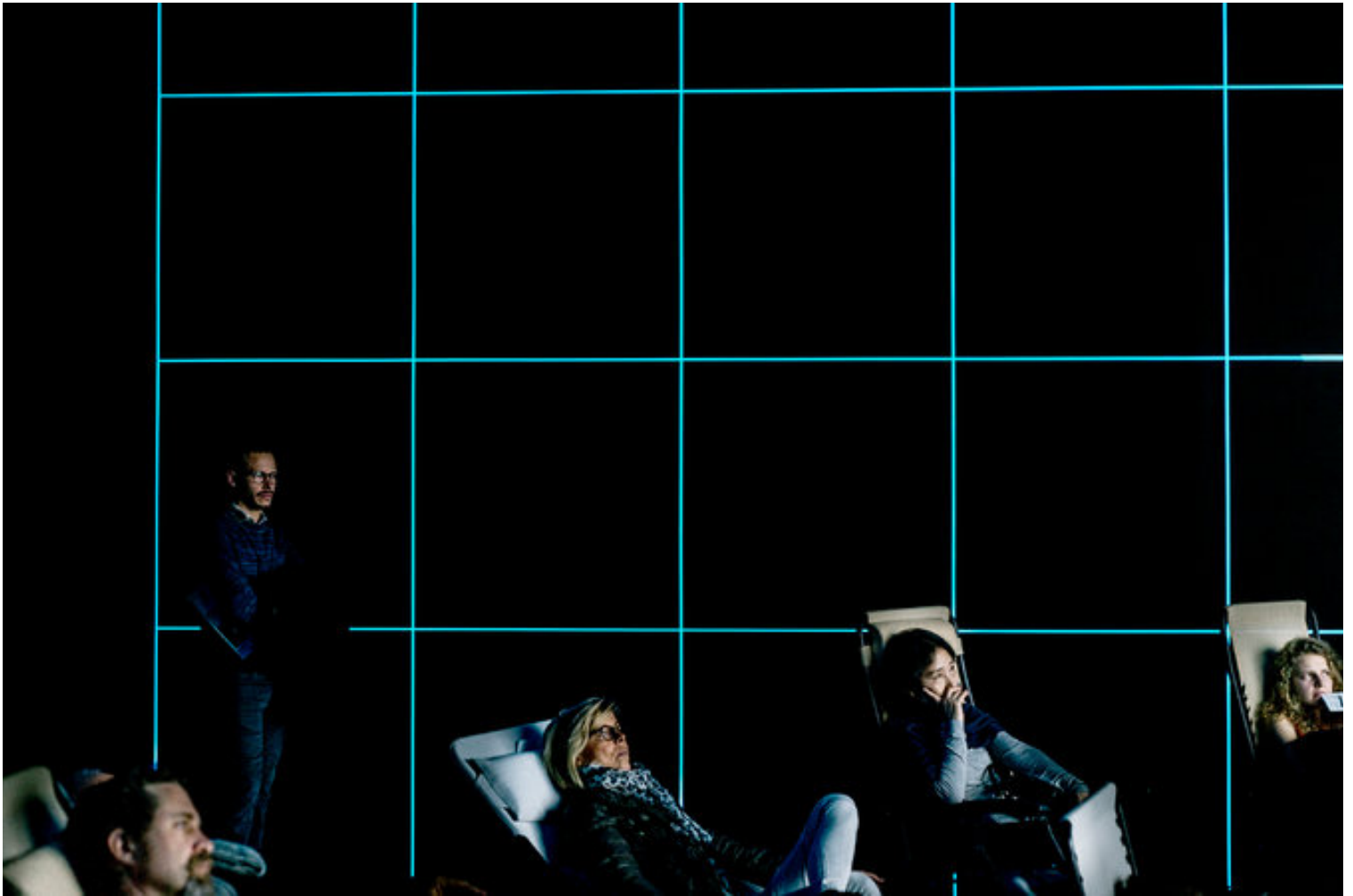
Nearby the short [“Coney Island at Night,”](#) from 1905 by Edwin S. Porter, presents the classic dyad of film: the play of light against dark. It is captured in the wedding-cake filigree of the fairground’s dark structures elaborately trimmed in lights. It still thrills and feels new, proving perhaps 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.

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 [Lynn Hershman Leeson's "Room of One's Own,"](#) 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.

“Lynn Hershman Leeson at Vilma Gold”, *Contemporary Art Writing Daily*, November 15, 2016, <http://www.artwritingdaily.com/2016/11/lynn-hershman-leeson-at-vilma-gold.html>

Contemporary Art Writing Daily

Tuesday, November 15, 2016

Lynn Hershman Leeson at Vilma Gold



CAD never explains why things are important but Hershmann should be paid attention to not for this exhibition but for her resurgence now showing in Dreamlands: her forecasting much of the renderstentialist video and robot art of today's youth. Skip these images and go watch a low quality online sample of her work *Seduction of a Cyborg* and then everything else and see all the foreshadowing of Moulton's mock techno-spiritual, Wolfson's sex robots, Atkins' authorial monologue and sound cuts, Rose's affective slippages, Steryl's anti-comedy, Cortright's digital Sherman-esque subject construction, James Richards affective collaging, etc. etc. *It's all there.*

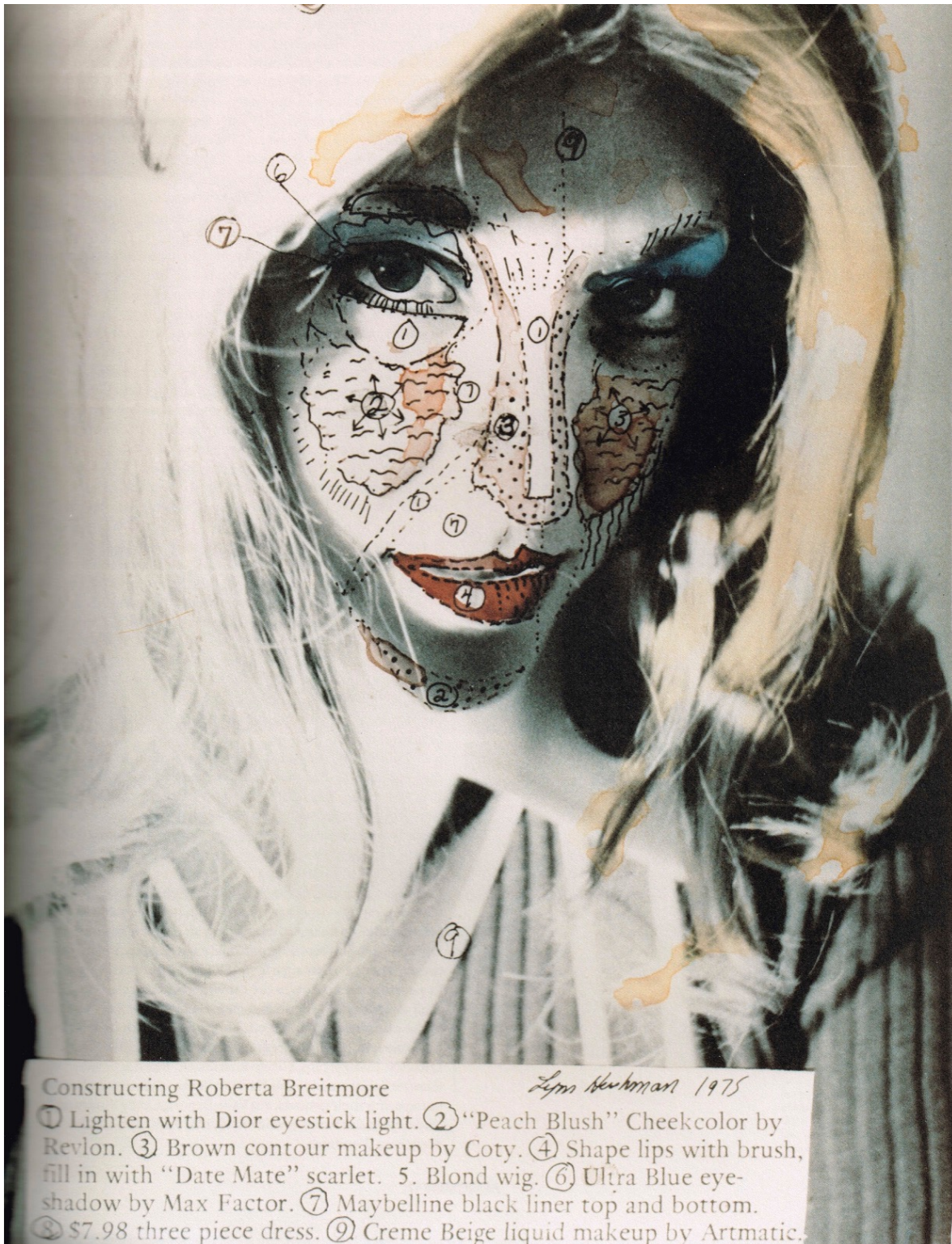
Nancy Princethal, "The Feminist Avant-Garde", *Aperture Magazine* #225, Winter 2016, 40-47.

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 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.



Constructing Roberta Breitmore

Lynn Hershman 1975

① Lighten with Dior eyestick light. ② "Peach Blush" Cheekcolor by Revlon. ③ Brown contour makeup by Coty. ④ Shape lips with brush, fill in with "Date Mate" scarlet. ⑤ Blond wig. ⑥ Ultra Blue eye-shadow by Max Factor. ⑦ Maybelline black liner top and bottom. ⑧ \$7.98 three piece dress. ⑨ Creme Beige liquid makeup by Artmatic.

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 personae 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 Narcissism,” 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.

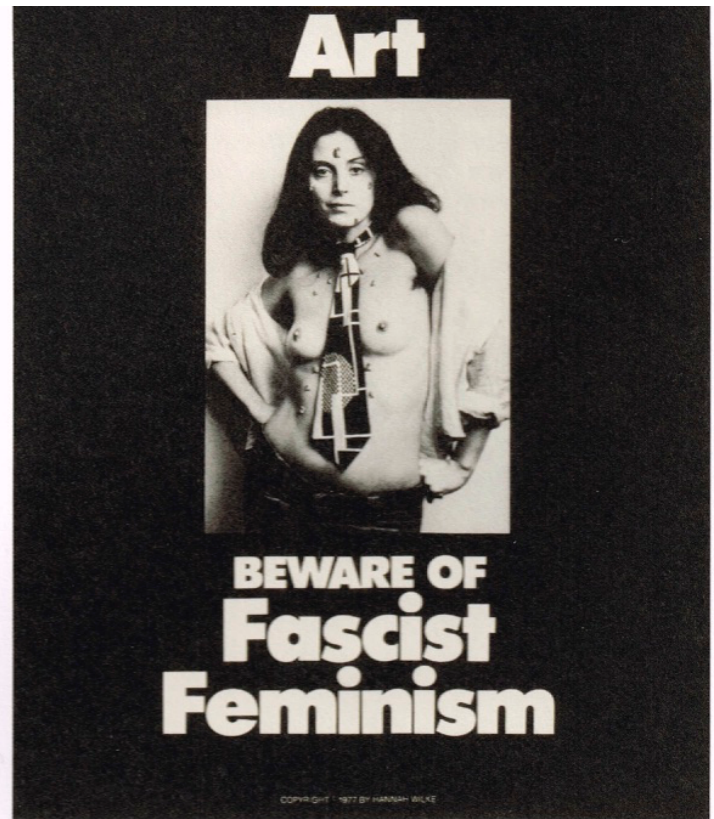
Both essays, it should be said, focus mainly on work by men - they include Vito Acconci (a focus in each case), Richard Serra, Bruce Nauman, Peter Campus, Robert Morris, and Bill Viola, along with Joan Jonas and Lynda Benglis (Wagner also discusses Laurie Anderson). And although the writers’ attention 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. Medieta 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 Medieta'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 were up against. Despite the reliance on Sigmund Freud 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



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.

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 thoroughly 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 on 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 be 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

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 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 vivid 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, <https://frieze.com/article/critics-guide-london-1>.

frieze.com

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.

Johanna Fateman, "Lynn Hershman Leeson: Civic Radar, Edited by Peter Weibel", *Bookforum*, September/October/November, 2016, 48.

BOOKFORUM

LYNN HERSHMAN LEESON: CIVIC RADAR EDITED BY PETER WEIBEL

BERLIN: HATJE CANTZ (DISTRIBUTED IN THE US BY ARTBOOK DAP). 352 PAGES. \$70.



Lynn Hershman Leeson, *Self-Portrait as Albino* (detail), 1968, wax face cast, bronze powder, makeup, wig, scarf, sensors, sound file, and recorder mounted on board, 36 x 24 x 8".

LYNN HERSHMAN LEESON'S "Breathing Machines," a sculpture series from the 1960s, are coolly macabre self-portraits- mask-like wax replicas of her face, styled with wigs and outfitted with electronics. In *Self-Portrait as Albino*, 1968 (above), the artist's expressionless face, eyes closed, is framed by hair like ratty white curtains, secured with a length of frayed silver fabric tied beneath the chin. As the viewer approaches, a motion detector triggers a cassette recording of her breathing. With this unsettling series, Hershman Leeson, who was traumatically confined to an oxygen tent for five weeks in 1966 with a potentially fatal heart condition, counters the traditional passivity of the art object, as well as that of the patient — and the woman. Inhaling and exhaling on cue, her low-tech "Machines" prefigure the feminist interventions and major themes — alternate selves, cloning, cyborgs, surveillance, and interactivity — that have defined her radical multimedia oeuvre for five prolific decades.

Civic Radar, the first major retrospective of Hershman Leeson's work, presented at ZKM Karlsruhe last year, was a rare opportunity to view these fascinating pieces. The substantial, handsome accompanying catalogue, replete with a reflective silver cover, charts her practice — from her early wax body parts to her recent 3-D bioprinted ones — with a comprehensive and illustrated timeline, interspersed with texts by diverse contributors. Art historians Pamela Lee and Peggy Phelan and film critic B. Ruby Rich provide deep context; Tilda Swinton, who has starred in three of Hershman Leeson's experimental science fiction films, contributes a love letter that illuminates the artist's ingenuity and humor; and documentary filmmaker Laura Poitras talks with Hershman Leeson about the hidden frontier of post-9/11 surveillance (the use of DNA mapping and genetic engineering), considering the possibilities for contemporary activist art that engages with these developments.

Hershman Leeson first emerged as an important figure in the women's-art movement of the 1970s. She documented its heady emergence with invaluable videotaped artist interviews (excerpts of which appear in 2010 film, *! Women Art Revolution*), and produced a germinal body of feminist work, the "Roberta Breitmore" series, between 1973 and 1978. Roberta was a persona who performed in real time, undercover, in the real world. She had her own wardrobe, body language, and makeup style. Importantly, she also saw a psychiatrist and had a driver's license and a bank account, leaving behind proof of her existence — an identity that became an entity, fictional but authenticated. Hershman Leeson's prescient art, as *Civic Radar* shows us, continually mines the overlaps of the real and the virtual, exposing the mediating and monitoring roles of culture, technology and the state. The book clearly maps out her career, circling back to landmarks such as the "Roberta" series, which functions, in the artist's words, as a "two-way mirror", embodying her subversive ideal of interactive art. Hershman Leeson's work demands that we look at it through our own reflection, making us aware of our biases and desires as we grapple with that double image. — JOHANNA FATEMAN

“Art is a Form of Encryption: Laura Poitras in Conversation with Lynn Hershman Leeson”, *Pen America: The Freedom to Write*, August 25, 2016, <https://pen.org/interview/laura-poitras-conversation-lynn-hershman-leeson>.



The Freedom
to Write

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.

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*, <http://www.vulture.com/2016/08/35-art-exhibits-opening-this-fall.html>, 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.

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

surveillance 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 relationship 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 procession 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 Beutin 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 writing 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.

Marc Garrett, "Lynn Hershman Leeson's - Civic Radar: Book Review", *Furtherfield*, <http://www.furtherfield.org/features/reviews/lynn-hershman-leesons-civic-radar-book-review>, May 18, 2016.

FURTHERFIELD

Lynn Hershman Leeson's - Civic Radar: Book Review

By Marc Garrett - 18/05/2016

Introduction

In the introduction of *Civic Radar*, editor Peter Weibel sets out the motivation, layout and journey of the book. This first comprehensive monograph of Lynn Hershman Leeson's artistic career, spanning across five decades. It must have been a dizzying publication to work on, when compiling her pioneering work in the fields of photography, video, film, performance, installation, and interactive and net-based media art. It is noteworthy that Hershman Leeson collaborated in its production. One feels her personal involvement in the book - its richness, care and detail, shows in its nearly 400 pages, and approximately 500 illustrations. It also features supporting texts by other writers, curators, theorists, and artists, such as: Andreas Beutin, Pamela Lee, Peggy Phelan, Ruby Rich, Jeffrey Schnapp, Kyle Stephan, Kristine Stiles, Tilda Swinton, Peter Weibel and interview by Hou Hanru and Laura Poitras with the artist.

Review.

"I try to live in the present, because most people live in the past. If you live in the present, most people think you live in the future, because they don't know what happens in their own time." Lynn Hershman Leeson.

Lynn Hershman Leeson has pioneered uses of new technologies, recognized as key to the workings of our society today. She tackles the big questions surrounding: identity in a time of mass, overpowering consumerism; privacy in an era of surveillance; the interfacing of humans and machines; the relationship between real and virtual worlds; and new bio-ethics surrounding practices such as growing parts of the human body from DNA samples. We can think of Hershman Leeson as a direct artistic descendant of Mary Shelley. Consider Shelley's celebrated publication, *Frankenstein: Prometheus Unbound*, published in 1818, and its challenges towards macho revolutionaries of 'reason', and her critique of the misuses of science and technology by the patriarch. We can see strong parallels between both women. They are feminists, who have managed to find ways around (and to work with) traditional forms of dominant, patriarchal frameworks, so to express personal, creative and cultural identities, on their own terms.

"Lynn Hershman Leeson's mission statement seems to be that the body is a programmable software embedded in a changeable hardware. Therefore, she shows us so many hybrids and mutants, aliens and agents, actors and avatars, in real life and second life. From Dolls to clones, she demonstrates the paradox plurality of identities especially in the age of total observation." [1] (Weibel 2016)

Hershman Leeson's artistic process however does not keep its distance from the processes of science and technology. She leaps into the depths of our fears and unreservedly engulfs herself, and her imagination in their material influences and modifications. Like Donna Haraway, Hershman Leeson takes cyborgs, misfits, biology, mutation and transformation as her inspiration, contexts and materials. And also like Haraway, she playfully and critically owns concerns around science and technology, along with the ethical issues that may arise out of their continuously shifting, influences on society; and, thus not owned by or weighed down by them. Every work put forward by Hershman Leeson, is an experiment. Her interests and knowledge inspired by science and technology reflects her constant state of contemporariness. Her work directly correlates to breaking down systems of perceived values.

“Hershman Leeson confronted conventional gender roles and exposed the normative construction of gender identity. Some of her videos have included cross-dressers and transgender men and women, as in Double Cross Click Click (1995), and her assumed male pseudonyms at a time when the art world was dominated by men who mostly ignored women.” [2] (Beitin 2016)

Hershman Leeson's art moves fluidly between different formats, contexts and disciplines. This of course is not easy to brand. The art market survives by promoting art that fits into particular roles and products that are easy to promote, predict and consume. The irony here is that the art world promotes the idea of itself as a site of novelty and insights, but in reality represents a deeply conservative culture. Some artists, Hershman Leeson is one of them, transcend the contemporary artworld norm and build alternative universes, contexts and identities, where the art is so investigatory and esoteric, traditional conventions are challenged.

When I interviewed Hershman Leeson last year for Furtherfield she talked about how she'd like to “eradicate censorship, and make more transparent the capitalistic underpinnings that are polluting access, value and visibility”. In the 70's, she was the first artist working on a prison art project in San Quentin, and many of her early public art works “geared toward social change.” [3]

Civic Radar shows us that her work is not reduced to a singular, reflection of her own creative self. There is a wider story and it includes the voices of many others as part of the narrative of her life and her work, as well as reclaiming a history in a male dominated society.

We see reaffirmed a varied and dynamic history where she has been involved in strengthening the role of women in society, as part of an extension of her art process. One excellent example of this rich history is that over a period of 40 years she interviewed an extensive array of women artists, historians, activists, and critics who integrated personal and political content into their work. Then, some of that gathered material was made into a film project *!Women Art Revolution*, in 2010.

Lynn Hershman Leeson has not only achieved pioneering work as an artist, but also as filmmaker. She has collaborated with actor and Oscar winner Tilda Swinton in several feature films that have gone on to receive numerous awards at international film festivals on account of their outstanding quality and innovative themes. *Teknolust* is an absurd, amusing and scientifically highly topical science-fiction drama on the subjects of cyber-identities, biogenetics, gender constructions and sexual self-determination in the age of the Internet. The plot turns on the scientist Rosetta Stone (Tilda Swinton), who illegally produces three clones of herself. The artificial entities can only be distinguished by the color of their clothing and live in an enclosed cyberspace. Because they are dependent for survival on the male Y chromosome, Ruby, the femme fatale among the clones, goes in regular pursuit of men. Sexual contact with Ruby leads to impotence in her lovers as well as to an allergic reaction triggered by a computer virus which is transferable to human beings. The FBI becomes aware of the clone family's machinations following the increased incidents of infection among men, and begins to investigate. Note*

Her work has crossed into many different fields and formats. Which includes: installations, videos, films, sculptures, robots, avatars, contracts, computer programs, photography, paintings, drawings, collages, browser based art, artificial intelligence, bio-matter, network communication systems and devices. *Synthia Stock Ticker* and *Dollie Clones* are just two examples that demonstrate how ahead she has been with her ideas and her integration of digital technologies into art. *Synthia Stock Ticker* is a networked-based media artwork made in 2000. It refers to the stock ticker invented by Thomas Edison and is unusually prescient in its portrayal of the emotional life of global markets. Inside a glass casing sits a small monitor screen, showing a video of a woman character named Synthia. “When the market is up, the character dances and shops at Christian Dior: when the market is down, she chain smokes, has nightmares, and shops at Goodwill.” [4]

Again *The Dollie Clones* 1995-96 predate a contemporary artistic obsession with creeping surveillance. Two telerobotic dolls, *Tillie the Telerobotic Doll* and *CyberRoberta*, whose eyes have been replaced with cameras. Each doll has a website that allows users to view the images taken by the webcams and click on an “eyecon” to telerobotically turn the doll’s head 180 degrees to survey the gallery.

Hershman Leeson’s most prominent performance work was as another woman, Roberta Breitmore. This elaborate alter ego existed between 1973 and 1978. The Breitmore character was well developed, possessing different behaviors and attitudes to Hershman Leeson’s own personal identity. Roberta Breitmore had her own handwriting, clothing, wig, makeup, driver’s license, apartment, psychologist, bank account, credit cards, acquaintances, life story, and adventures. Hershman Leeson took the audacious leap and sporadically became Roberta Breitmore for 5 years. Other women also lived as Roberta Breitmore and sometimes simultaneously. [5]

“Hershman Leeson hired three additional performers, all women, to play Roberta. They wore costumes identical to the ones Hershman Leeson herself wore, and they treated Roberta essentially as a professional (albeit part-time) gig. They undertook some of Roberta Breitmore’s correspondence and went on some of her dates (which were documented in photos and audio recordings). Eventually, Hershman Leeson stopped enacting Breitmore, reducing the instantiations of Roberta Breitmore from 4 to 3.” [6] (LaFarge 2007)

The spirit of Hershman Leeson’s radical art persona can be seen in younger, contemporary artists today. For instance, Heath Bunting’s *Identity Kits*, part of his larger The Status Project consist of various items, personal business cards, library cards, a national railcard, T-Mobile top-up card, national lottery card and much more. “They take a few months to compile each of them because they are actual items that everybody uses in their everyday lives, involving evidence of identity. There is also a charge for the package of 500.00 GBP, which is cheap for a new identity.” [7] (Garrett 2014) Then we have Karen Blissett, an Internet artist who suddenly decided to go multiple by opening up all of her email, Twitter, Facebook and Google accounts to many different women around the world. “A torrent of provocative, poetic, and often contradictory voices issued proclamations, made auto portraits, and shared psalm-like meditations on her existential transformation; distributed across online platforms and social spaces, in text, image and video.” [8] (Catlow 2014)

Towards the end of *Civic Radar* a collection of pages show us various images of the exhibition by the same name at the ZKM Museum of Contemporary Art, in Germany 2014. When viewing the images of her work in the large gallery spaces you realize the scale of it all, and how substantial her work is.

Moving on after the images of the works in ZKM, there is a selection of Hershman Leeson’s texts written, from 1984 and 2014. These writings, take us through different stages of her career, revealing ideas and intentions behind much of her work and also some of the work included in the publication. In the last paragraph of the last text in a short essay, titled *The Terror of Immortality* she writes about the contexts that have given rise to her most recent work. “As organic printing and DNA manipulation reshapes the identities of newly manipulated organisms, so too the culture of absorbed surveillance has dynamically shifted. In the next 100 years, the materials used to create DNA will become increasingly distributed and hybridized. The implications of this research include not

only the creation of a sustainable planet of hybrid life forms that can survive a sixth extinction and incorporate into its existence a morally responsible future.” (Leeson 2016)

This book is a profound read, offering an insight to this generous and profound artists’ fantastical journey in an era marked by accelerating change. And what’s so amazing is that the content, the narratives, and the histories, are real. It is an Aladdin’s Cave of rich, exceptional artworks, flowing with brilliant ideas. Hershman Leeson has had her finger right on the pulse of what’s relevant in the world for a long time, and transmuted the knowledge she unearths in her examination of identity, feminism, science, technology and more into her own artistic language.

Her work is way ahead of most contemporary artists showing now. This book should be read everywhere. Not just because it features great art, but also because features a woman with a great mind. I am not a fan of the words *genius* or *masterpiece*; I find them tiresome terms reflecting a form of male domination over women and the non-privileged classes. Yet, after spending time with *Civic Radar*, I cannot help myself thinking that I have just witnessed something equivalent without the negative baggage attached.

Preferences:

[1] Weibel, Peter. A Panoply of Identities. Civic Radar. Hatje Cantz; 01 edition (15 Mar. 2016). P. 55.

[2] Beitin, Andreas. Face, Surface, Interface: The Motif of the Mask. Civic Radar. Hatje Cantz; 01 edition (15 Mar. 2016). P. 205.

[3] Garrett, Marc. Choose Your Muse Interview: Lynn Hershman Leeson. June 2015.<http://www.furtherfield.org/features/interviews/choose-your-muse-interview-lynn-hershman-leeson>

[4] Hershman leeson, Lynn. Civic Radar. Hatje Cantz; 01 edition (15 Mar. 2016).

[5] Beitin, Andreas. Face, Surface, Interface: The Motif of the Mask. Civic Radar. Hatje Cantz; 01 edition (15 Mar. 2016). P. 205.

[6] Breitmore, Roberta (Lynn Hershman Leeson). Antoinette LaFarge. 2007.http://fictive.arts.uci.edu/roberta_breitmore

[7] Garrett, Marc. Heath Bunting, The Status Project & The Netopticon. Furtherfield, May 2012.<http://www.furtherfield.org/features/articles/heath-bunting-status-project-netopticon>

[8] Catlow, Ruth. Karen Blissett is Revolting. Critical Personas. New Criticals. May 24, 2014.<http://www.newcriticals.com/karen-blissett-is-revolting>

[9] Leeson, Hershman Lynn. The Terror of Immortality. Civic Radar. Hatje Cantz; 01 edition (15 Mar. 2016). P. 365.

*Text from ZKM - Teknolust. With Lynn Hershman Leeson at the cinema.
<http://zkm.de/en/event/2015/03/teknolust-with-lynn-hershman-leeson-at-th...>

In 2015, ZKM in cooperation with the Deichtorhallen Hamburg / Sammlung Falckenberg exhibited the first comprehensive retrospective of Leeson’s work, including her most recent productions of art. Last year Modern Art Oxford hosted a major solo exhibition of her work *Origins of a Species, Part 2* and she also has work in The Electronic Superhighway, at Whitechapel Gallery, in London.

Calder Yates, "Flavr Savr at the Pit", *Daily Serving*, May 17, 2016.



May 17, 2016 Written by Calder Yates

Flavr Savr* at the Pit

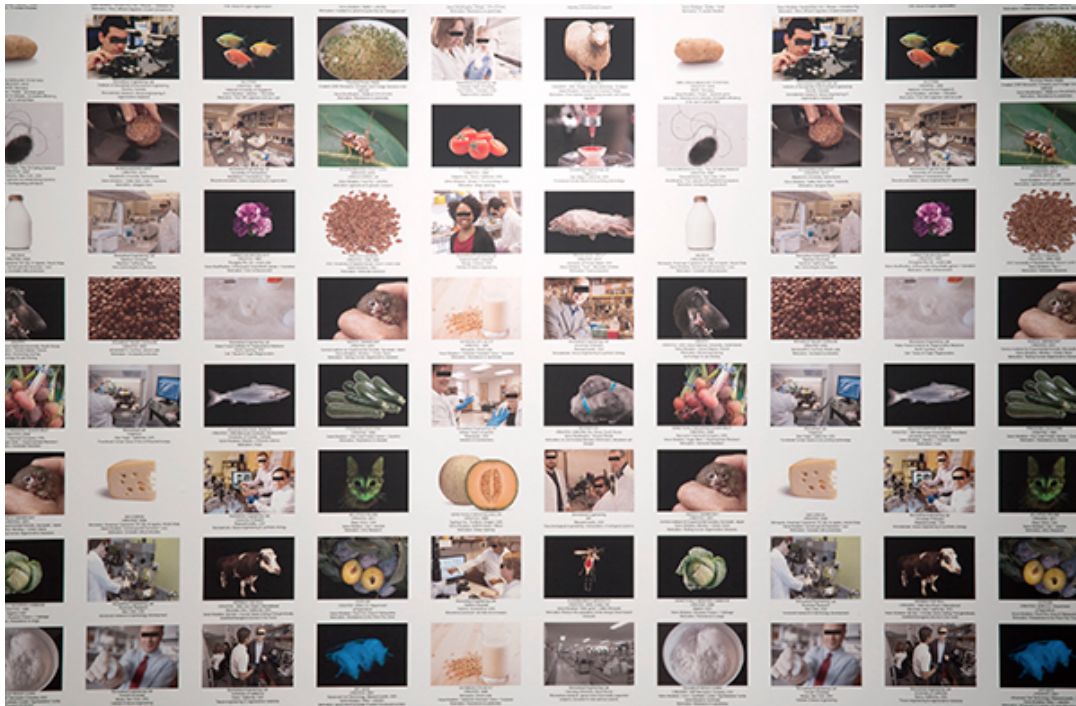
The Pit, a small artist-run gallery, sits semi-hidden in a commercial and industrial neighborhood north of Los Angeles. Artists Devon Oder and Adam Miller founded the gallery in 2014, exhibiting emerging artists in tightly curated group shows alongside at least one well-established artist. The Pit, located in a converted car mechanic's garage, has the same anonymously beige exterior as the neighboring businesses. But its out-of-the-way location and undistinguishable architecture belie the impact the space has had during its short lifetime. On clear days, when approaching the gallery's entrance, the combination of the Southern California sun mixed with the Pit's hard fluorescent lights will make your eyes water, as if you've been staring at a mirage for too long.



Lynn Hershman Leeson. *GMO Animals, Crops, Labs (The Infinity Engine)*, 2014; wallpaper; dimensions variable. Courtesy of the Artist and the Pit.

Visual deception and optical illusions permeate the Pit's current show, *Flavr Savr**, curated by Alexandra Gaty. The exhibition title refers to the first genetically modified food approved by the Food and Drug Administration (FDA). Engineered and developed in the early 1990s, Flavr Savr was a tomato of middling quality designed to ripen slower, thereby extending its shelf life. The FDA decided that the tomato needed no special labeling to delineate its genetic modification because its health risks and nutritional composition were no different from other tomatoes on the market.

*Flavr Savr** has, as its background noise, the fear of unforeseen consequences that result from explicit human interference with the invisible, microscopic interventions into the systems we take for granted, like the food or healthcare system. Lynn Hershman Leeson's wallpaper, *GMO Animals, Crops, Labs (The Infinity Engine)* (2014), most explicitly tackles the dilemma of genetic modification and acts as a backdrop for the other video and sculpture pieces throughout the space. The wallpaper bears images, locations, and brief descriptions of research in genetically modified organisms, including glow-in-the-dark cats, 3D-printed human limbs, and cloned pit bulls and Afghan hounds. Many of the descriptions refer to experiments that either had an eventual practical application (developing pesticide-resistant crops or furthering AIDS research with glow-in-the-dark cats) or an idiosyncratic one (cloning pit bulls in order "to memorialize Bernann McKinney's deceased pet Booger").



Lynn Hershman Leeson. *GMO Animals, Crops, Labs (The Infinity Engine)*, 2014 (detail);
wallpaper; dimensions variable. Courtesy of the Artist and the Pit.

Just as artists often make political, philosophical, and moral points through their work, Leeson's *GMO Animals* focuses on the political, philosophical, and moral points that scientists have made through their research on genetically modified organisms. Take for instance the "GLO FISH" entry on the wallpaper, which has as its motivation: "First GM organism sold as a pet." The desire for a glow-in-the-dark fish has implications beyond the lifespan of research. It creates demand and suggests that the scientists and their funders have certain assumptions about the good and proper role that animals play in society—namely, the same role that a painting above a couch might fill. As Jessica Pierce recently wrote in the *New York Times*, "Woe to the fish expected to live its entire life in six cups of water." Designer pets are nothing new, but Leeson shows how much more sophisticated our genetic modifications of animals have become. Her straightforward presentation of this research collapses the distinction between ethics and aesthetics with chilling efficiency.



Danielle Dean. *True Red*, 2015 (still); hand-drawn digital animation; 03:45.
Courtesy of the Artist and the Pit.

The show's inversion of expectations continues with Danielle Dean's hand-drawn animation, *True Red* (2015), which depicts the metamorphosis of a popular Nike skateboarding shoe into dozens of other forms. The iconic red shoe morphs into a figure in a fetal position, a flying bat (the animal), a bulging fist, a dark puddle that an iPhone falls into, and a standing figure whose hair flies off her head, which reveals a different figure wearing a surgical mask. The animation's eerie, machine-like drone in the background mutes the shoe's slapstick mutations, producing a hypnotic and haunting tone.



Kathleen Ryan. *Bacchante*, 2016; concrete, stainless steel, marble, steel;
53 x 36 x 45 in. Courtesy of the Artist, Josh Lilley, and François Ghebaly Gallery.

Elsewhere, in Kathleen Ryan's *Bacchante* (2016), a cluster of concrete and marble balloons dangles from a slick granite plinth reinforced with steel earthquake retrofitting. The cluster of stone balloons is made to look like a branch of grapes hanging off a platter. The whole piece weighs hundreds of pounds, making the paradoxical dangling action of the balloon–grapes that much more visually confusing and dangerous seeming. The piece's very presence implies a perilousness that, combined with Leeson's research into pesticide-resistant crops, suggests a bacchanal gone wrong.

At its heart, *Flavr Savr** appraises the moral calculus involved in controlling and losing control of one's environment. The verdict has been determined by Alexandra Gaty, who has curated a protest rather than an inquiry. Despite the nefariousness the curator ascribes to these scientific and political interventions, the artists' work shines a hard light on the complicated ethics of an unexamined aesthetics.

*Flavr Savr** is on view at the Pit in Los Angeles through May 22, 2016.

Alex Greenberger, “Lynn Hershman Leeson is Making a Documentary About Tania Bruguera”, *ARTnews*, March 24, 2016, <http://www.artnews.com/2016/03/24/lynn-hershman-leeson-is-making-a-documentary-about-tania-bruguera/>

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.

“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 pay-as-you-wish



Lynn Hershman Leeson, *Construction Chart Drawing*, 1973.
COURTESY BRIDGET DONAHUE, NEW YORK

“Lookout Highlights of 2015”, *Art in America*, January 7, 2016, <http://www.artinamericamagazine.com/news-features/news/lookout-highlights-of-2015/>

Art in America

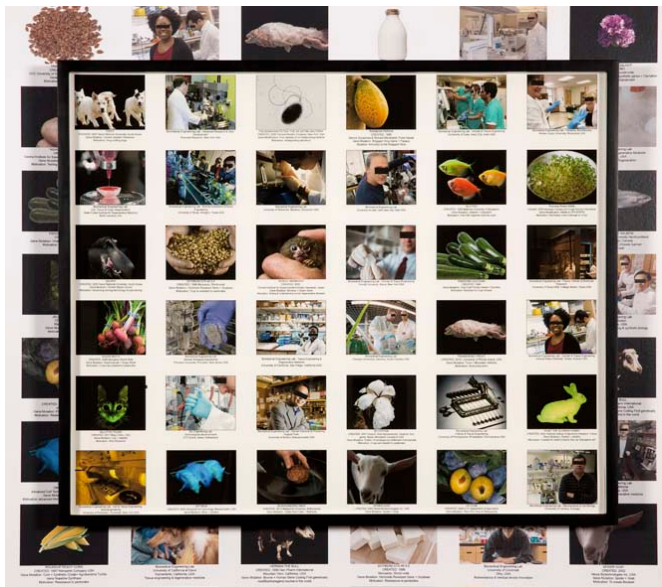
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NEWS JAN. 07, 2016

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)

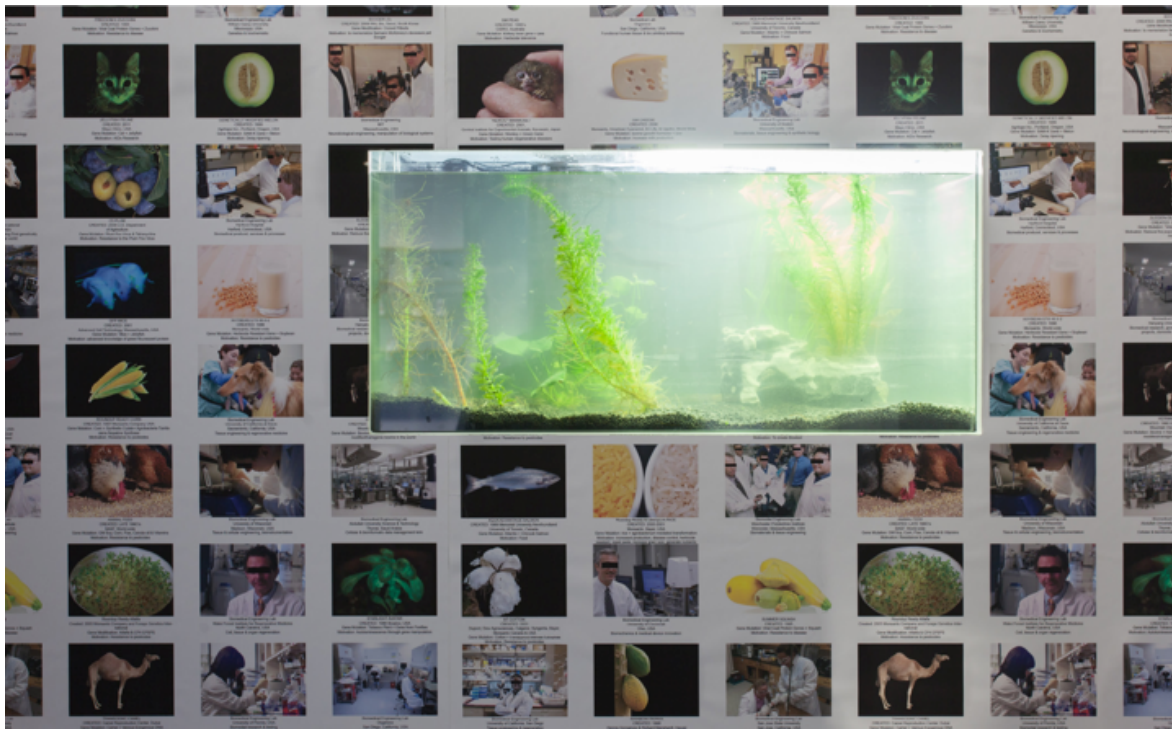
When a young dealer opens a gallery downtown you'd expect her to show artists from among her peers, but Bridget Donahue makes a big statement with her first show—a mini-retrospective of Lynn Hershman Leeson. In recent years, the New York and San Francisco-based artist has drawn increasing attention for 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.

Ingeborg Reichle, “The Infinity Engine”, *SciArt in America*, October 2015, 27 - 31.

SciArt in America

a bimonthly publication dedicated to science-based art

REVIEW



The Infinity Engine

By Ingeborg Reichle

Guest Contributor

The human species is fascinated by the possibility of immortality. If we follow the progress of cutting-edge research in fields like regenerative medicine or human aging, which seek to

understand the molecular mechanisms and genetic factors that underlie the aging process, then we are closer to making this idea a reality than ever before in our history.

In her latest exhibition “Civic Radar”—a comprehensive retrospective at the ZKM Museum of Contemporary Art in Karlsruhe, Germany, initiated and curated by Peter Weibel and Andreas F. Beitin—the influential San Francisco-based artist Lynn Hershman Leeson engages with these developments through her prophetic art project *The Infinity Engine*. Hershman Leeson placed a molecular biology laboratory at the center of the exhibition, making a strong statement about the pre-eminence of the sciences and the role of art in the 21st century, which some call the age of ‘technoscience’.

Starting her career in the late 1960s, Hershman Leeson became best known for her pioneering oeuvre in new media art and performance, as well her provocative and distinctive films such as *Conceiving Ada* (1997) or *Teknolust* (2002). From the very beginning, her art projects addressed the interplay between cutting-edge technology, new media, and gender—challenging concepts of identity and human uniqueness. In *Teknolust*, for example, Hershman Leeson raises questions about advanced techniques in biotechnology, but in terms of fantastic future scenarios like the cloning of humans.

With *The Infinity Engine* Hershman Leeson explores the current state of cutting-edge technologies, like the manipulation of DNA, the production of transgenic organisms, and regenerative medicine technologies, such as artificial fabrication of human organs with 3D bioprinting techniques. All these technologies profoundly affect our concepts of human identity and the relationship between past and present as well as life and death. *The Infinity Engine* asks questions about property rights and ownership of human body parts when human cells and tissue are turned into commodities.

Hershman Leeson also showcases contemporary developments in regenerative medicine by exhibiting an extracellular scaffold for growing a three-dimensional cell and tissue culture in the shape of a human nose in a glass display cabinet in the same manner as a priceless museum exhibit. All this is accompanied by a video projection of a collage of interviews with experts like the American scientist Anthony Atala, head of the Wake Forest Institute for Regenerative Medicine (WFIRM) at Winston-Salem, North Carolina. According to Atala, research is just one step away from implementing tissue engineering techniques and methods to grow sophisticated cell structures in vivo and create artificial organs.

Another video features Keith Murphy, CEO of the U.S.-based company Organovo, which specializes in designing artificial organs. Murphy reports on the state of the art to create biologically functioning organs by 3D bio-printing, and describes the unlimited potential of tissue engineering and the new techniques that enable us to manipulate cells in a systematic and fully controlled way, producing whatever shape and function is desired.

Capture Room is a unique project Hershman Leeson developed with NASA scientist Josiah Zayner. It is an innovative and highly speculative project that attempts to identify a person's genome through a non-invasive procedure; that is, without extracting and sequencing the DNA from a body cell, relying instead on information provided by an image or photograph of a person's face. To develop *Capture Room*, Zayner used current face recognition software and advanced statistics that are implemented in machine learning. His approach diverges significantly from the invasive procedures employed in DNA sequencing by U.S. companies like 23andMe, which around a decade ago introduced a service to provide personal ancestry-related genetic reports to a fee-paying public. Information about one's own genome is now accessible to many people for the price of a whole genome-sequencing run, which has dropped significantly since the advent of next-generation sequencing technology.

The idea that *Capture Room* presents is much more than a bizarre vision of the near future. It is a scientifically-informed and probable scenario of what is likely to be standard practice in just a decade or two. The main obstacle to the realization of this vision is not a lack of machinery or algorithms, but our still very imperfect understanding of genotype-phenotype correlations embodied in complex gene expression pathways. Disentangling the complex gene interaction patterns involved in phenotype generation has proven to be far more difficult to uncover than was originally thought after the successful completion of the HUGO project some fifteen years ago.

In *The Infinity Engine*, Hershman Leeson also explores the manipulation of DNA and the production of transgenic organisms, exemplified by living transgenic zebrafish that glow in the dark. A number of zebrafish are presented in a brilliantly illuminated aquarium, which is surrounded by wallpaper with images of all kinds of genetically modified plants and organisms. The zebrafish, an important model organism in a great number of research fields, were provided by the Institute of Toxicology and Genetics at Karlsruhe Institute of Technology (KIT), which houses more than 400,000 zebrafish. The vast number of examples of transgenic plants and animals depicted are palpable evidence that genetically modified organisms (GMOs) now belong to our daily life and have also become an integral part of the art world.

One of the rooms the spectator experiences when entering *The Infinity Engine* is covered with projected images and films produced in laboratories, which elicits the feeling of standing right in the middle of a laboratory. This part of the installation is a wonderful metaphor: on the one hand *The Infinity Engine* brings us as close to a wet bench in a laboratory as possible, and on the other this shift of 'location'—from the art museum to a science context—obliges us to get acquainted with new epistemologies and the logic of the techno-scientific regime in which many scientific fields are embedded today.

The manipulation of the human genome is still taboo in most countries. But with *The Infinity Engine*, Hershman Leeson drives the point home that with current and future developments in

fields like tissue engineering and regenerative medicine, there is far more at risk than just our identity. Our ontology as humans is called into question. Until recently, controversies about progress in fields like biotechnology or regenerative medicine focused on the future of our species and on some bizarre post-human visions about future bodies or getting closer to immortality. But since techniques and applications like DNA sequencing have become widely available and inexpensive, attention has shifted to the fact that they can be used by and on a great number of people outside the highly regulated scientific arena. This means that ethical considerations must be discussed not only within the controlled field of special medical applications, but also on a broader social level because mass use of these techniques is affecting large areas of our society.

In March 2015, some weeks after the opening of “Civic Radar” in Karlsruhe at ZKM, two commentaries by two groups of scientists—one published online in *Science* on March 19 and one in *Nature* on March 12—argued that the explosive proliferation of powerful new genome-editing technologies such as CRISPR-Cas9 and other techniques needed careful consideration and discussion. Developed by Emmanuelle Charpentier at the Helmholtz-Centre for Infection Research in Braunschweig, Germany and Jennifer Doudna at the University of California at Berkeley, CRISPR-Cas9 makes it easy for anyone with basic molecular biology training to edit genes in cells, including in eggs, sperm, and embryos, potentially curing genetic diseases or adding new traits.

In recent years, new media and social media have garnered much of our attention. Amazingly, powerful corporations like Google and Apple have emerged, and are giants in Silicon Valley and on Wall Street. American whistle-blower Edward Snowden revealed the extent to which our personal data is collected by governments and processed without our consent, and showed us that we lost control over our personal data quite some time ago. The next step will be the collecting of personal genomic data on a massive scale to scrutinize the genetic makeup of as many people as possible. What kind of potential misuse of DNA profiling, privacy, and genetic surveillance will there be? If the make-up of the genome is also a criteria for decisions made with respect to the labor market or insurance—for example, health insurance—we are facing a wholly novel constellation. The new options that come with mass application of DNA sequencing or tissue engineering in the private sector make it a compelling necessity to understand what consequences committing to these new options have. We have lost control over our personal data, and now the question is whether we will also lose control over our personal genomic data, which governments and powerful corporations started to collect some time ago.

At the exit of the exhibition we encounter a lab coat and gloves and a red sign which reads: “You are leaving a laboratory controlled area. Gloves, lab coats, and other protective equipment should not be worn past this point.” When we leave the exhibition we can leave the lab equipment behind, but not the imperative necessity to engage more with current developments

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 biomedicine, 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 ZKM | Zentrum für Kunst und Medientechnologie Karlsruhe. Photo: Fidelis Fuchs, © ZKM | Zentrum für Kunst und Medientechnologie Karlsruhe.



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 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 culture and which continues today. This is all explicated in *!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

Medienkunst in Karlsruhe, and in New York the artist was recently the subject of a daylong celebration and panel series at MOMA PS1, as well as a solo show at the new gallery Bridget Donahue on the Lower East Side. As

we all know, artworld taste and time work cyclically, and for the first time it seems as if the two have paired for Hershman Leeson. Her work appears to be a decades-preceding preamble to much of what is being produced in New York, Berlin, and London today. For example, if you were to take a look at the New Museum Triennial, curated by tech-savvy artist Ryan Trecartin and curator Lauren

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

puzzle easily fall into place - the artist was on the vanguard 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.



above *Self Portrait As Another Person, 1966*,
wax, wig, sound, makeup, sensor, tape recorder

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. 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 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 cisgendered, 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 seemingly uses the motif to suggest an escape from the self. 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 purpose in Hershman Leeson's life. "Nothing she 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 investigation into the often unstable boundaries of the self. Breitmore continued to be a motif in her practice, as she resurfaced in 1996 as *CybeRoberta*, a telerobotic made-to-order 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, mass-produced 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 eyebrows'. 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 glow-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 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 nineteenth-century 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 original footage spanning four decades.

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 | 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.

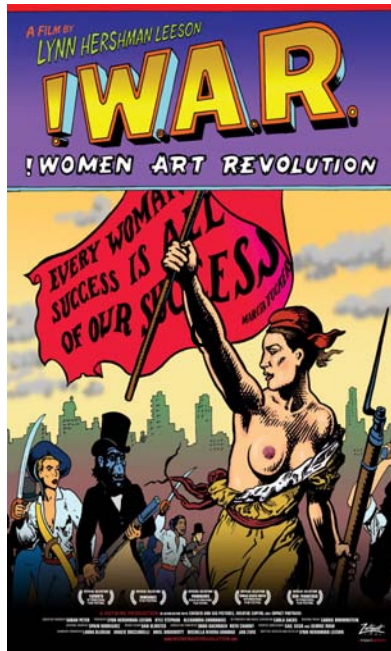
I'VE NEVER HAD works of art take so many photographs of me. Soon after entering Lynn Hershman Leeson's recent show at the ZKM, I was met by *Past Tense*, 2014, a projection displaying a frantic succession of pictures of animals on the brink of extinction; the image collection was sourced by searching "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 cheetahs—ostensibly to engage me, the (equally endangered?) viewer, more forcefully and perhaps to remind me that my own existence in 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

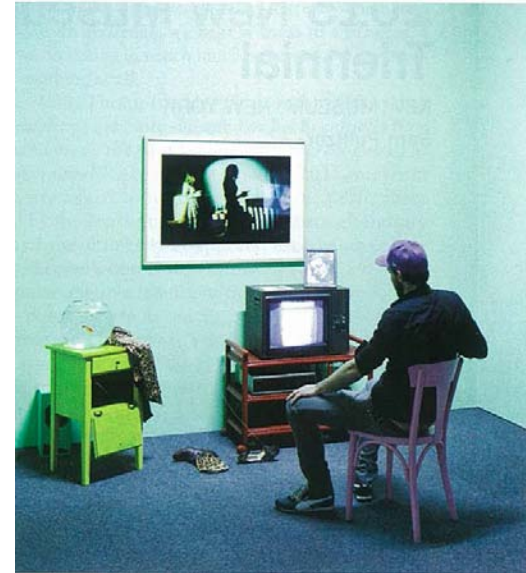
of generic engineering. Standing in front of another large screen, I saw my own face being analyzed in real time by facial-recognition software, which then broadcast data about my genetic makeup: In my case, a disembodied voice focused on the genes I must carry as a "white male," with "brown" (actually 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 *America's Finest*, 1994, a shooting stand 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 not-altogether 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 cliché 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-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, paintings, collages, photographs, digital prints, 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 excellent displays made clear that these pieces are closely linked to her recent media installations by their focus on spatial and social 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 between male and female mannequins, and *Dream Weekend: A Project for Australia*, 1977,

in which the audience was invited to watch, via surveillance cameras, the increasing 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 prostitutes—into submission, unmistakably echoing her earliest electronic projects.

While Hershman Leeson's early installation works are still known today, the multitude of pieces she created over 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 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 fictional person become more and more real; she even provided her with official documents and obligations of all kinds, including appointments with men and meetings with prospective roommates. This project was

followed by several resurrections of Breitmore in various new media, including one in the now 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

recent decades she has become known to European audiences, in particular, for her three films starring Tilda Swinton, which include *Conceiving Ada* (1997), about the computer pioneer Ada Lovelace, and *Teknolust* (2002), about the ill-fated genetics experiments of a scientist enlightened by then-recent 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 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, allowing the full nuances of this rich and dense history of feminist art in the US to emerge. The feature films could be viewed here as 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 activism and interventionism, as well as her 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

Kerry Doran, "Cyborg Origins: Lynn Hershman Leeson at Bridget Donahue", *Rhizome*, March 19, 2015, <http://rhizome.org/editorial/2015/mar/19/lynn-hershman-leeson-origins-species/>.

RHIZOME

Cyborg Origins: Lynn Hershman Leeson at Bridget Donahue

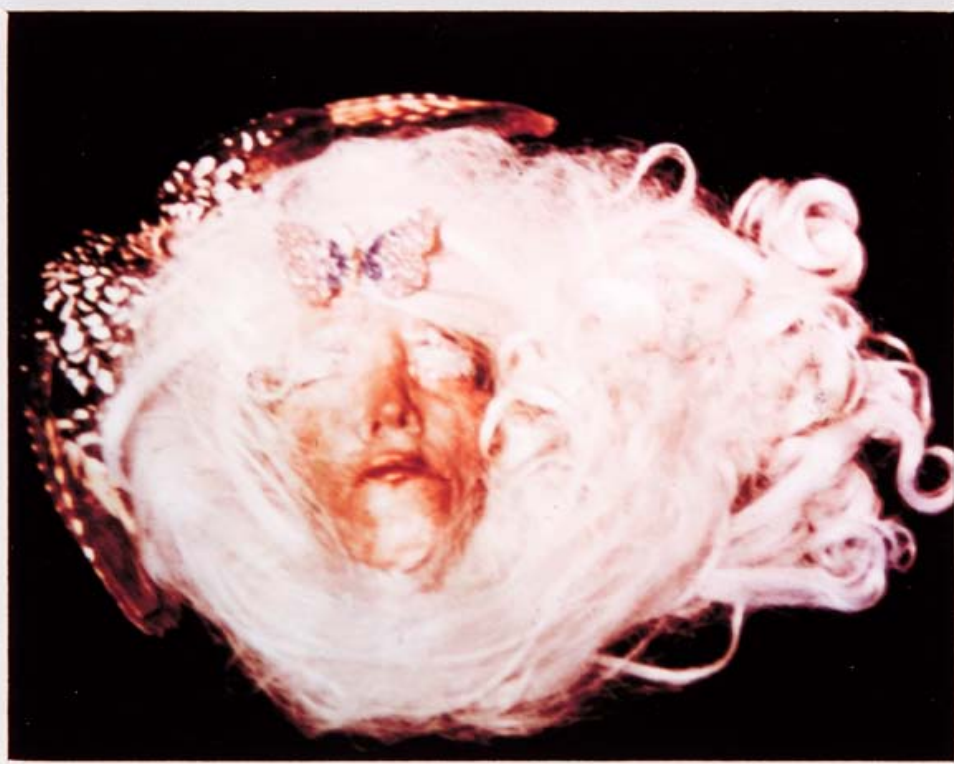
KERRY DORAN | Thu Mar 19th, 2015 11:15 a.m.



"Lynn Hershman Leeson: Origins of the Species," installation view, Bridget Donahue. Copyright Lynn Hershman Leeson. Photos by Marc Brems Tatti. Courtesy Bridget Donahue, New York.

Lynn Hershman Leeson has been probing the idea of what it means to be a cybernetic organism since the 1960s. This line of inquiry is laid bare in "Origins of the Species," a solo exhibition of Hershman Leeson's work that inaugurates Bridget Donahue's new gallery space in New York. Running concurrently with the artist's first museum retrospective, "Civic Radar," at ZKM in Karlsruhe, Germany, the exhibition nevertheless assembles an impressive cross-section of Hershman Leeson's work, including multimedia works on paper, sculpture, photographs, collages, videos, and interactive installations, spanning her five-decade career.

We find the hybrid of organism and machine, very conspicuously, in the sculpture *Breathing Machine II* (1968/2011), a woman's face cast in wax with a tangle of feathers, butterflies, and other fauna dispersed throughout her hair, actuated to "breathe" when the viewer draws close enough to peer down onto her. Or in Hershman Leeson's *Phantom Limb* series (1985-1987), in which the female body melds with sockets and wires, so that technology is as much a part of one's appearance as one's skin or physique.



Lynn Hershman Leeson, *Breathing Machine II* (detail), (Early Work "Suicide Pieces" wax sculpture burned, photos are documents of these works, 1965). Copyright Lynn Hershman Leeson. Photos by Marc Brems Tatti. Courtesy Bridget Donahue, New York.

Other instances are more subdued: *Dress Me 1, 2, 3* (1965) and photographic documentation of her *Roberta Breitmore* performance (1974-1978) are suggestive of avatars, multiple identities, and multiple personas, in distant anticipation of MUDs, chat rooms, and social networks. The former depicts a woman with three options of clothes to wear, her body a mere outline devoid of sexual organs, the words "DRESS ME" emblazoned across her breastless chest. She longingly looks toward her two garment options: an average looking coral frock or a diagram of parts, words, and pieces, appearing simultaneously deconstructed and reassembled, as though taking in the outside forces that seek to define a woman wearing a dress in the world: "shadow," "reflection," "body," "&," "... "!!" What will I wear today? How will I be perceived, measured, valued, judged? Who am I: right now, today, or tomorrow?

As if to bring this dilemma to life, Hershman Leeson conceptualized Roberta Breitmore, a persona that she performed from 1974 to 1978. During this time, Breitmore came to be recognized as a person in her own right, interacting with people and systems, obtaining a driver's license, opening a bank account, and applying for credit cards. Included in "Origins", we find two photographs documenting some of Breitmore's real encounters with people, traces that of exchanges that actually took place. Yet these people will most likely never think of this woman as anything other than a woman, if they remember her at all. Thus, there was no "performance" for the people who experienced Breitmore's presence in the world: only those who are looking back on this as a performance can distinguish it from everyday reality. This differentiates her work from that of Cindy Sherman, Laurie Simmons, Eleanor Antin, and Suzanne Lacy; each of those artists embodied an

identity and life other than their own, but Hershman Leeson's performance is a fugitive one, barely discernible as such apart from its tangible affect. Anticipatory of filling in the negative space of platforms like Facebook, Instagram, and Tumblr, Hershman Leeson's Breitmore inhabits the negative spaces of the physical world and its systems, her identity constructed through encounters and paper trails, or what could now be equated to digital footprints.

During "Do you Follow?: Art in Circulation 3" at the ICA London in October 2014, Hannah Black posited that the issues Amalia Ulman addresses in her Instagram performance *Excellences and Perfections* (2014) were not specific to internet culture: "you could have probably talked about [this] in the seventies or whatever, it's just the methods of distribution have changed." In Hershman Leeson there is proof. Ulman's statement, "Being watched means coming to life and being someone," is just as much true for the character of Roberta Breitmore as her performance on social media. This comes full circle in Hershman Leeson's *Room of One's Own* (1990-1993), an interactive sculpture with a surveillance camera and motion detector that is activated as the viewer peers into the opening of a pedestal-mounted box. One eye stares back, and a small projection of a woman sitting in a room incisively asks, "Excuse me, what are you doing here? ... Would you please look away? ... How did you get here? ... Who are you?" The sculpture comes to life through the viewer's gaze, by being gazed upon.

The arc of the cybernetic organism in "Origins of the Species" reaches its climax with *The Infinity Engine*, an ongoing research undertaking including a series of works that replicate some of the paraphernalia found in genetics labs. Wallpaper with a visual index of GMO animals, crops, and labs decorates the wall (Eduardo Kac's Alba makes an appearance), overlaid with propaganda-like posters advocating for bioengineering. Here, the cyborg manifests itself at a cellular level: the very makeup of our cells is entwined with technology. By focusing on the smallest level of human life, this inward-looking approach reaches far beyond our bodies, suggesting that the "origins" of the exhibition's title may not lie in the past, and that the "species" it refers to may not be recognizable life forms as we now know them.

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 für 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 für 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 doppelgänger 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) 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.



Lynn Hershman Leeson, *Construction Chart Drawing*, 1973, ink on gelatin silver print, 9 1/4 x 6 1/2".

— 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, <http://www.newyorker.com/goings-on-about-town/art/lynn-hershman-leeson>.

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, <http://www.artinamericamagazine.com/exhibitions/lynn-hershman-leeson>.

Art in America

NEWS & FEATURES

EXHIBITIONS

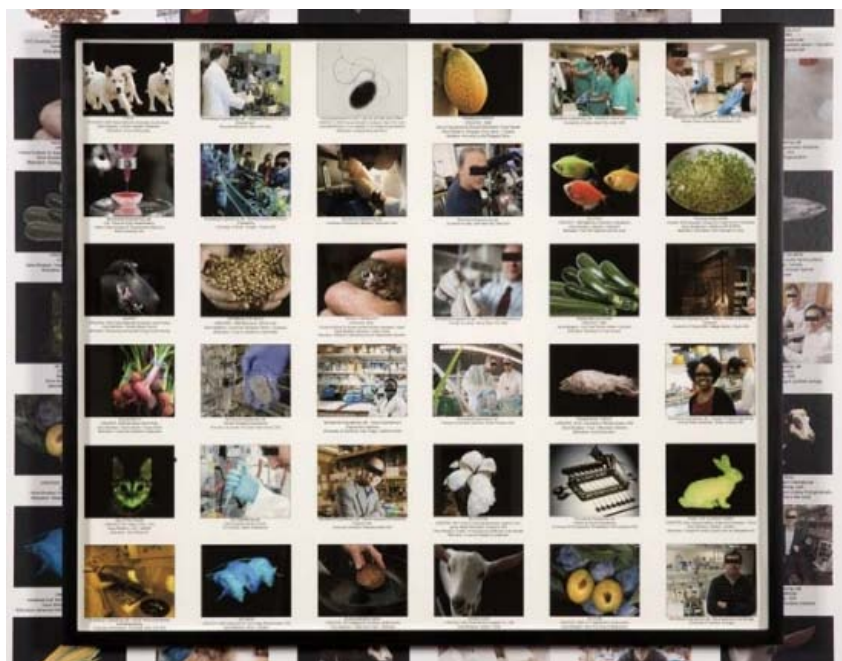
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EXHIBITIONS THE LOOKOUT



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.

Noelle Bodick, "Lynn Hershman Leeson and the Art of Genetic Experimentation", *Blouin Artinfo*, March 3, 2015, <http://www.blouinartinfo.com/news/story/1110302/lynn-hershman-leeson-and-the-art-of-genetic-experimentation>.

BLOUIN ARTINFO

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Lynn Hershman Leeson and the Art of Genetic Experimentation

BY NOELLE BODICK | MARCH 03, 2015



Lynn Hershman Leeson's "Glo Cat (The Infinity Engine)," 2013, currently on view at Bridget Donue.
(©Lynn Hershman Leeson/Courtesy Bridget Donahue, NYC/ Photo by Marc Brems Tatti)

To exhibit genetically modified fish that glow like tiny electric bulbs, Germany's ZKM Center of Art had to register as an operational genetics laboratory. State regulators come daily to take stock of the fish tank, just one of the hundreds of artworks fusing nature and technology in Lynn Hershman Leeson's current retrospective.

While this strict regulation reflects the wariness with which Germany approaches genetic experimentation — in New York City, by contrast, the jellyfish-gene fish are sold in pet shops — a laboratory does in fact feel like an appropriate venue in which to consider the work of Hershman Leeson, 73, who started making unlikely alliances between art and science well before the trendy millennial artists today.

In the 1960s, she invented wax-faced breathing machines and female cyborg drawings. Most famously, in the 1970s, she performed as Roberta Breitmeyer, a blonde avatar in possession of a credit card, apartment, and even a shrink. She continued her transformative experiments in identity in the '80s, mashing-up celebrity pictures (David Bowie and Audrey Hepburn, for instance), resulting in Frankensteinian progeny. Most recently, she has been producing a sci-fi film trilogy starring Tilda Swinton, while also interviewing experts on genetic biology for her “Infinity Engine,” an art installation that will reenact some of the current-day experiments in genetics.

Given her work's relevance today and her prolific output, it's surprising to learn that two-thirds of the work at the ZKM retrospective, titled “Civic Radar” (through April 6), and at her new show at Bridget Donahue in New York, “Origin of the Species” (through April 5), is being shown to the public for the first time.

“[The art world] couldn't hear me — that's why I have an ear in there,” she said in an interview, laughing, referring to a bio-printed human ear scaffold in the show at Bridget Donahue (more on that later). Today, it seems that we are finally ready to listen to her prescient voice, which is neither alarmist nor optimistic about technology's encroachment into our daily lives — and our bodies.

“I think technology can go either way, and it is up to us to determine as artists how we shift that to something positive,” she told ARTINFO before speaking last week at a Sunday Session Panel at PS1, which touched on these themes.

At the talk, Hershman Leeson considered the dilemmas we face in our sci-fi-like present — a present, she described, as ethically unresolved. While the US experiments with regenerative tissue for wounded soldiers, for instance, Israel is developing microchips to erase traumatic memories. And while scientists strive to discover better medical treatment, corporations are looking to patent genes, threatening to reinforce current economic inequalities in healthcare.

But Hershman Leeson trains a neutral gaze, not unlike a scientist. (The artist herself studied biology in college. She sided with art, she said, because she “just always made things.”) Her current inquiries into genetics began a few years ago, when she visited the Wake Forest Institute for Regenerative Medicine in Northern California. There, she witnessed synthetic organisms coming out of a printer, beating and alive. “What is this thing?” she remembered thinking. But then, she realized, “This is a photographic process,” one that she could appropriate in her art.

In a corner of Bridget Donahue, one such printed body part, an acrylic ear, hovers inside a translucent cube. Nearby, bright wallpaper expands across the gallery wall, showing dozens of images of genetically modified organisms — from a spider-goat crossing made in 2002 to a cat modified with a jelly-fish gene to glow green, like the fish at ZKM. It looks like a massive Google image search for “GMOs.” She called these genetic manipulations the ultimate form of surveillance — but quickly added that it, of course, saves lives, too.

“You can swallow cameras, you can take pills that will track parts of your body. And they can track where you are and what is happening to your bloodline without you being aware of it,” she said.

It is not the first time the artist has considered this tension between technology and privacy. In “Room of One's Own,” 1990-93, on view at Bridget Donahue, a voice confronts the viewer as she approaches the boxy contraption: “Why are you here? Who are you? What are you doing?” it asks as you press your face to the peephole. Inside sits miniature dollhouse furniture and a screen showing a woman's eyes staring back. Meanwhile, a video screen captures your own eyes looking onto another screen, turning you into a double voyeur.

“Stop looking at me. Go look at your own eyes,” the disembodied voice continues, sounding a warning.

But just as she instructs you to avert your gaze, the more you may wish to look. Do you stare into the glowing light, or turn away?

Karen Archey, "Exhibition Tour: Lynn Hershman Leeson's 'Civic Radar' at ZKM", *e-flux*, February 25, 2015, <http://conversations.e-flux.com/t/exhibition-tour-lynn-hershman-leesons-civic-radar-at-zkm/1027>.

e-flux conversations

Exhibition Tour: Lynn Hershman Leeson's "Civic Radar" at ZKM

Karen Archey



Lynn Hershman Leeson, "Shower," Film Still from Teknolust, 2002

While the list of under-recognized female artists is a very, very long one, it seems particularly urgent to cast light on the work of American artist Lynn Hershman Leeson. Hershman Leeson's oeuvre spans just about every medium-performance, collage, drawing, painting, filmmaking, video, installation, and most importantly, new media, for which she has made invaluable contributions to the field. Active since the 1960s, she and has

long been thought as an artist making work before her time. Hershman Leeson's work has touched on topics such as the politics of biotechnology, the cyborg, surrogate and fractured identity, feminism, government surveillance, and more. The artist even unexpectedly touts a long-running collaboration with actress Tilda Swinton, who is featured in many of her films. For you New Yorkers, there's an all-day series of events and panels at MoMA PS1 this Sunday 2/22 (where yours truly will also be speaking).

I recently toured "Civic Radar," Hershman Leeson's massive retrospective curated by Peter Weibel and Andreas Beutin at ZKM in Karlsruhe, and happily got to see much of the artist's work. Check out some of my favorite works below.



Installation View from "Lorna" 1979–1982

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 an exhaustive 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 site-specific 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 Bag 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*, Routledge, 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-leeson/>

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 yet 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 Automaton" 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, <http://frieze.com/issue/review/lynn-hershman-leeson/>.

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 Beutin, 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

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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

Zentrum für Kunst und Medientechnologie Karlsruhe, with its forthcoming comprehensive monograph, and, opening tonight, a solo presentation:

Long before the digital revolution and the virtualization of everyday life, Lynn Hershman Leeson created surrogate personas to investigate relationships between humans and technology, and the media's potential as a tool to counter censorship and political repression. *Origins of the Species* traces these prophetic concerns in works that span from 1968 to 2014, including photography, collage, sculpture, and interactive installations. The exhibition maps Hershman Leeson's early gestures toward the split self, her notion of "Self Portrait as Another Person" exercises, and her parsing of the double bind of voyeurism and surveillance that has, in recent decades, become increasingly fraught.

Alongside this solo, Hershman Leeson will convene this Sunday at MoMA PS1 in a panel called "The Future of Humanity":

In an era of programmable DNA when human organs can be printed and banked, limbs regenerated and new life forms created daily, who will have the power to make decisions that affect us all? Will wealth alone determine who benefits from biological engineering? What will it mean to be human?

Participants include Karen Archey, Aimee Mullins, Oron Catts, Melissa Logan, Patricia Maloney, Luke Massella, Aimee Mullins, Keith Murphy, Anicka Yi, and Dr. Josiah P. Zayner.

You'll see us out at both—this kind of focused, thematic presentation with temporal breadth, as represented by the solo exhibition and its concurrent public program, seems particularly urgent at a moment when Silicon Valley, and its adherents worldwide, seem committed to a confused "posthuman."

Wendy Vogel, "Portfolio: Lynn Hershman Leeson", *Modern Painters Magazine*, December 12, 2014,
<http://www.blouinartinfo.com/news/story/1067137/embodied-performance-lynn-hershman-leeson-gets-a>.



LYNN HERSHMAN LEESON

DECEMBER 2014

MODERN PAINTERS

NEW MEDIA AND EMBODIED

Performance are trendy today, but Hershman Leeson has been mining these veins for more than 40 years. The artist's cutting-edge work has run the gamut from the long-term performance "Roberta Breitmore," for which she lived a double life as herself and an alter ego for most of the 1970s, to a series of feminist science-fiction films starring Tilda Swinton as, among other roles, a Victorian mathematician and a group of replicants. A committed feminist, Hershman Leeson chronicled the movement in the 2011 documentary *Women*

Art Revolution. Yet her contributions to technologically sophisticated art have long been under recognized. Her retrospective "Civic Radar," opening December 12 at the ZKM Center for Art and Media in Karlsruhe, Germany, with additional stops next year at the Falckenberg Collection Deichtorhallen in Hamburg and Modern Art Oxford, aims to change that perception. In February 2015 the artist will open a new show at New York's Postmasters Gallery. Hershman Leeson spoke with *Modern Painters* senior editor Wendy Vogel in New York about technology,

genetic mutations, and why feminism still matters.

WENDY VOGEL: From 1968 to 1972 you wrote about your own work under the guise of three fictional art critics. How might those critics start a conversation with you today?

LYNN HERSHMAN LEESON: Each critic thought about things very differently; one was a Greenbergian. I have recently thought about reviving the project because of some elements that haven't changed much in the last four decades. I think if those critics were

looking at what I'm doing now, they would be totally surprised at the effect that they had.

WV: I first came to know your work through the "Roberta Breitmore" project when it was exhibited in the show "WACK! Art and the Feminist Revolution." How have your concerns with doubling and embodied performance evolved over the years?

LHL: It's a matter of looking at the underbelly of society, and of being invisible for so many years. A lot of these personae tend to be a shadow or a witness of things that people don't normally see. That always fascinated me: the perspective we rely on, what you can see, and what's left out. It's really the blur of the edge that's most interesting.

WV: You've said that the Roberta Breitmore character arose from negative space.

LHL: It's true. I started out as a painter, and I looked at that negative space and created the rooms Roberta inhabited first at the Dante Benedetti Hotel in San Francisco. I was trying to actualize and embody that negative space that would go out into the world. And that's what she became: a floating negative space, which I hadn't intended. That's what the reflection of her was in the culture of that time.

WV: Were there people who did not realize Roberta Breitmore was a fiction?

LHL: Nobody knew that she was an artwork until she was over, except for the photographer and some of the multiples who portrayed her. She was totally anonymous, and I wanted it that way. It wasn't a work that would go out and seek an audience. It was one that would seek a reflection, and if I were to let people know that's what I was doing, it would skew how people reacted.

WV: You not only documented Roberta Breitmore with a photographer and through a comic book, you made her legally valid.



checking account. How did your approach shift as you moved from analog materials of administration to digital traces?

LHL: It was important to validate Roberta as much as I could so that people looking back would think that she existed. She really has more validity in that era than I do, because I couldn't get a credit card. Later on, for the project *Myth America*, 1979–81, I became a corporation, and the stock certificates became the identity piece for that. I think the timing was right. If I had done that project 10 years later, I would probably have been arrested for identity fraud. Laura Albert did a project where she created the fictional writer JT LeRoy and got into a lot of trouble for assuming another identity.

WV: You made a film about Albert and LeRoy.

LHL: I interviewed each of them and then made a short film from it. They're on different sides of the wall—or in a corner, the piece is shown in a corner—and they react to the same questions completely differently.

WV: There was a lot of anger when it was discovered that JT LeRoy was a hoax in the early 2000s. The character of JT was a young, gay, male writer during the era of the AIDS crisis who was played by a woman.

an overweight Jewish woman from Brooklyn and nobody would pay attention to her, so she wanted to embody the cultural politics of that time by deciding consciously who JT LeRoy was so that people would take him seriously. She didn't think people would take *her* seriously, and she was probably right.

WV: The way you've used technology, including LORNA, the interactive video art laser disc of the early 1980s depicting an agoraphobic woman, has anticipated the anxieties that we experience culturally today in the age of digital avatars.

LHL: I think a lot of it early on was about surveillance. Even in the early '70s, I was really aware of how much we were being watched, and most people were completely

unaware until very recently, although the NSA started in 1952. This kind of copying and replicating and loss of privacy is something that I've been keenly mindful of, so much so that I felt that people, as time went on, wouldn't know what privacy was. I think that's true today.

WV: How did you get into making feature length feminist sci-fi films? What obstacles did you encounter as a female director?

LHL: I didn't know of any other women who were doing sci-fi. A lot of the dialogue was based on things that scientists have said, but it was easier to accept if you thought about it in terms of sci-fi. As for their production, I was fortunate that I won a prize in Europe for my videos and I got an opportunity to work with German television, which funded those two films and a few others. I immediately had funding to make the film, and an audience.

WV: Can you talk about the final work in the trilogy with Tilda Swinton?

LHL: I hope to make that film next year. Tilda is going to play a cat named Matilda, who is a genetic cross between a jellyfish and a feline that was created in order to better track viruses for AIDS research. After I made the feminist art documentary

Women Art Revolution and the film *Strange Culture*, I wondered, What can I do to make a difference? Because I think those two films did. So I

started doing research on the Human Genome Project and its implications—how things are being crossbred, how many bioprinted organs are being implanted, how much can be regenerated, how species themselves are completely shifting and mutating.

The film is about a 19-year-old girl who was the first person to have a

Lynn Hershman Leeson

LEFT:
Digital Venus-Titian, 1988.
Archival digital print,
30 x 40 in.

She had a psychologist, a Weight Watchers membership, a driver's license, and a

LHL: Laura said that she was very careful in constructing this figure. She said she was

bioprinted implant, which I see as an extension of photography. Cyborgs now are bioprintable elements extended into living beings.

WV: Your retrospective at the ZKM will also include a piece with DNA sequencing.

LHL: I'm going to make a genetics lab. I've been doing these interviews with scientists and ethicists for the past three years. There will be a room for bioprinting and regeneration, a room for some of the ethical cases with all the files that you can look through, a mutation room, and we're going to try to reverse-engineer people's DNA based on facial recognition.

WV: Has your new media work been considered not only difficult to canonize but also difficult to conserve?

LHL: I think it would be too simple to say that it was a matter of technical capacity. It's just that nobody understood this work as art. In a way, it gave me a lot of freedom; when you're not successful, it allows you to do whatever

you want. I feel fortunate that it's being shown now and that it's going to be historicized.

WV: Are there other works in the ZKM show that have rarely, if ever, been seen?

LHL: Yes, like my "Suicide" pieces from the '60s, where I made wax casts of myself, or people I knew, and set them on fire. My work has always dealt with transience, transformation, and regeneration. Also, I have storyboards for a piece I made with John Cage and Calvin Tomkins about Duchamp. The show will have most of my films in it, even the short films.

WV: Your work is inspiring in the way that it continues to link the project of feminism to your ethical concerns.

LHL: Feminism was always about issues. It was about censorship, a quest for equality and transparency. With this new work, I'm finding out that genetics issues are very central to the world's moral stances, and they need to be addressed now. It's like when they passed the law allowing the government to tap

anyone's computer for information. Nobody except the Electronic Frontier Foundation protested that. I think the same thing is happening now with some of the new manufacturing linked to genetics, like brain chips that will erase trauma.

WV: How has the Bay Area influenced you?

LHL: Going to Berkeley in the 1960s and being in that environment is what allowed me to think about being an autonomous agent, the way Tilda Swinton's replicant character Ruby is in *Teknolust*, not being part of any organization or presumed dominant force. And with the explosion of the tech industry over the last 30 years, I could make things there that I couldn't make anywhere else, particularly with out-of-work programmers or people who wanted to do something with technology that wasn't linked to product. **MP**

Lilly Wei, "Lynn Hershman Leeson: Civic Radar", *Studio International: Visual Arts, Design, Architecture*, January 22, 2015, <http://www.studiointernational.com/index.php/lynn-hershman-leeson-civic-radar-review>



Lynn Hershman Leeson: Civic Radar

A dedicated feminist who came of age in the tumult of the 1960s, Lynn Hershman Leeson was born in 1941 in Cleveland, Ohio, and is now based in New York and San Francisco. She is an influential new media and performance artist and film-maker, even if her provocative, pioneering oeuvre has not always received the degree of recognition it merits

ZKM/Museum of Contemporary Art, Karlsruhe, Germany
13 December 2014 – 6 April 2015

by LILLY WEI

Civic Radar, a comprehensive, long-overdue retrospective of her work, presents the remarkable breadth of her thinking about art, technology, politics and the increasingly elastic and complex definitions of what constitutes identity and being, thinking that has always been timely. Perceptively curated by Peter Weibel, himself a pioneering advocate for new media, and Andreas Beutin of the ZKM (Center for Art and Media), Karlsruhe, in collaboration with the Deichtorhallen/Sammlung Falckenberg, a version of it will travel to Hamburg in May 2015, as well as to Modern Art Oxford, UK. Shamefully, Hershman Leeson has yet to receive a similarly in depth assessment in the US, although her work will be the inaugural show at Bridget Donahue, a new gallery opening this February on Manhattan's Lower East Side.

Civic Radar, the title luminously projected as a band circling the space near the entrance like a searchlight, emphasizing the omnipresent theme of voyeurism and surveillance, begins with Hershman Leeson's early 60s drawings, paintings and sculptures, then explores her shift to performance, installation, conceptual work and her enthusiastic embrace of evolving media that is a subject in itself, from photography to film, video and digital, including sound, interactive and social media. It continues to the present with her newest projects, among which is the *Infinity Engine*, a functioning genetics laboratory that proposes possible scenarios for the future of life on Earth, not "sci-fi," as

Hershman Leeson puts it, but “sci-tru,” based on biogenetic research, artificial intelligence, cloning, mutations, transgenic experiments and regenerative medicine.

Among the other high points of the show is the documentation for *The Dante Hotel* (1973), one of the first installations that used a setting outside a gallery. Hershman Leeson created it with Eleanor Coppola, an artist and documentary filmmaker: each of them rented a room in the hotel and filled it with objects to evoke a narrative. Hershman Leeson’s room, the key given to anyone who asked for it, was arranged to suggest the imagined lives of its previous occupants in a study of fiction on fiction, of masks, impersonations and the conjured identities that lead to both truth and lies. Soon afterward, she conceived *Roberta Breitmore*, one of her most acclaimed works, a thoroughly documented, extended performance that lasted from 1973-79, in which she alternately lived as both herself and Roberta, the character she created. Others include *Lorna* (1983), a character who is the opposite of Roberta, existing only on videodisc and seen on a monitor. She also never leaves her apartment, imprisoned by agoraphobia. It is the first artwork to use an interactive videodisc, programmed to be remotely accessed (now transferred to DVD). Here, played on an old television set, it is part of an installation that corresponds to Lorna’s home. The viewer, choosing from among 36 chapters, determines the progress of the story and its denouement, in essence creating *Lorna*’s life.

Another striking heroine is Lord Byron’s daughter, Ada Lovelace, a 19th-century English mathematician, now credited as the writer of the first computer program, played by Tilda Swinton in Hershman Leeson’s 1997 film *Conceiving Ada*. Swinton also stars in the smart, engrossing feature film *Teknolust* (2002), in which she assumes the triple role of three replicants as well as the scientist who created them, in a world where men might become redundant, necessary only for their DNA, an earlier treatment of a theme more chillingly reprised in Jonathan Glazer’s recent film, *Under the Skin*. Also shown, again with Swinton as one of the protagonists, was *Strange Culture*, Hershman Leeson’s 2007 documentary on bio-artist Steve Kurtz, who was arrested as a “bioterrorist” and indicted for mail fraud because some specimens used for his projects were deemed pathogens. In *!WAR (Women Art Revolution)*, 2010, her documentary on how feminism changed art, the well-selected archival footage and interviews with the women who fueled it was especially absorbing, capturing the period’s climate of excitement, iconoclasm and urgency. In addition to feminist issues, freedom of expression and individual rights, Hershman Leeson these days is deeply concerned with bio-politics. Her simulated laboratories, her black comedies – or not so comedic – address the ethical and pragmatic quandaries and potential disasters, as well as the enormous possibilities, that scientific breakthroughs have raised, with an even clearer, more vigilant eye. One reason why her work continues to matter is that it has always reflected its present, looking towards the future, with criticality and apprehension, but not despair, believing that we can do better, that awareness will ultimately be our salvation, however uncertain that future is.

Lilly Wei, "Lynn Hershman Leeson: Civic Radar", *Studio International: Visual Arts, Design, Architecture*, January 22, 2015, <http://www.studiointernational.com/index.php/lynn-hershman-leeson-civic-radar-review>.



Lynn Hershman Leeson: 'I've always been interested in the exchange between reality and virtual reality'

The US artist Lynn Hershman Leeson, known for her performance art and film-making, talks about her latest show, Civic Radar, making films with Tilda Swinton, and her fears about bio-engineering.

by LILLY WEI

Published January 22, 2015

Lilly Wei: Although the show is presented thematically rather than chronologically, let's start with the earliest works. Would you talk about Breathing Machines a little? You seem to have an interest in masks and the construction of a multiplicity of identities from the beginning, exploring the social and political roles of women and minorities.

Lynn Hershman Leeson: I was in Berkeley during the Free Speech Movement in 1964 and the Civil Rights Act was signed that same year; these were issues that very much concerned us. For Breathing Machines, I made wax casts of my face, and partially painted them black as a sign of equality and to counter racism.

LW: It was for a show at the Berkeley University Art Museum in 1966, wasn't it? And the self portraits had wigs and sound.

LHL: The museum was afraid it would have its funding cut if it didn't start to show women, so it offered me and two other female artists token exhibitions. I was asked to show drawings, but the Breathing Machines had sound that was an extension of the sculpture. It seemed to me that the sound was like a drawing, but the show was taken down. Berkeley said that sound was not art and not appropriate for a museum.

LW: In The Dante Hotel, you had two life-sized female dolls in bed together, one head painted black, the other white, their faces again a cast of yours, with breathing sounds from an audiotape to make them seem alive. Was it a continuation of the Breathing Machines?

LHL: Yes, after my show was taken down, I finally understood what the free speech movement was about. Who needs a museum, I thought. So [the documentary film-maker and artist] Eleanor

[Coppola], and I decided to rent rooms in a hotel. People could get the keys and come up whenever they wanted. She set up a room where someone lived for a week, and mine was supposed to be there forever, where everything in it was from the neighbourhood. People came and went, and they were very careful: they weren't destructive; they didn't take things.

LW: Were the figures supposed to be you?

LHL: They were based on what I interpreted as the fleshing out of the ephemera of who one is.

LW: It has been called the first site-specific artwork.

LHL: I think it was the first time that an alternative space was used; the term "site-specific" didn't even exist then. But it was successful and a lot of people came. It was a natural evolution for women to find places that they could call their own. And everyone was reading Virginia Woolf's *A Room of One's Own* then.

LW: You then did a version of it in New York, in three very different kinds of hotels: the Chelsea Hotel, the YWCA and the Plaza.

LHL: It expanded into a sociological situation that became almost a portrait of the rooms.

LW: And this led to Roberta Breitmore, whom you said was made from "negative space"?

LHL: Roberta evolved directly from *The Dante Hotel*. In fact, in her background narrative, when she arrived in town on a Greyhound bus, she went to the Dante Hotel and stayed there until she found a room. The Dante Hotel was an environment, but what if you had the trappings, the discards that defined a person, the negative space, and, from that, you actually made a person who went out to live in real space and time, who was part of reality, but also separate from it, and track what it was like to live as her at that time?

LW: How did that work exactly?

LHL: Originally, I wanted someone else to do it, but no one wanted to so I had to. I created *Construction Charts* that detailed the transformation – what she should do, how she should wear her hair, makeup and clothes, how she should walk – and I became that. She had to work, so she got a job, and I went to work as Roberta, and I met people socially as her, did things that she arranged.

LW: You were quite thorough. You gave Roberta her own apartment, credit cards, a bank account, a driver's license, a therapist, and placed ads in her name in a newspaper seeking male companionship. And you didn't tell anyone about it all that time?

LHL: No, I didn't. I thought I would do it for a week or so, but the longer I was Roberta, the more I needed to prove she existed. If I had tried it 10 years later, it would have been fraud. But it was preinternet, no one tracked those things then. Other people were doing identity works and role reversals, but they were doing it more for a camera. They didn't live it; they never put themselves at risk.

LW: When you created this persona, how much was her, how much was you?

LHL: I actually did coursework in psychology in order to make her different from me, so my personality wouldn't seep into hers. I wanted her to be her own person: her reactions were not mine. She wasn't the opposite of me, but she also wasn't me.

LW: Lorna was next in your series of women, conceived in reaction to Roberta.

LHL: Roberta was in the world so I decided to invent a protagonist who never went out of the house. I wrote to the people who were making the first videodiscs and they helped. It was a perfect way to do this project since it combined videotape with viewer intervention. Roberta was compressed into her opposite through this technology.

LW: If the author cedes authorial responsibility to the audience, is the narrative compromised, is it less satisfying?

LHL: In the case of Lorna, there were multiple endings, but there was a structure, so the choices were limited. The audience could choose its own ending, but it couldn't write its own ending. I wanted the viewer to choose the sequence, the remote becoming a tool of empowerment; with it, you could make decisions for another person, one you were living through.

LW: Do you believe performances can be, or should be reproduced?

LHL: No, to me performance comes out of a context, the political issues and attitudes of the time, so if you re-enact something that wasn't designed to do that, it becomes subverted, and lacks the energy of the original.

LW: Would you talk about how you began to make films?

LHL: I taught myself how to make films in the 80s. When I showed videos, the museum always put me in a back room. I thought the films that Eleanor and others were making didn't look too hard to do, so I decided to make films. What did I know? I had learned about Ada Lovelace and thought the only person to play her was Tilda Swinton. I called her agent who asked for my budget, and when I told her, she said no. But, by chance, I met a friend of Tilda's, who told me she was looking for interesting projects. The friend told her about my film, she called her agent, who called me and said, all right but only for five days. So we made *Conceiving Ada* [1997] in five days, inventing a way to make virtual sets using a blue box, which is in the show and you can see how it's done; it was a little miracle.

LW: You also cast her in *Teknolust* (2002) as Rosetta Stone. I thought the film was incredibly funny, although most men might not be amused to find themselves reduced to genetic material. But it was also about searching for love – even replicants need love – and curiously touching. Swinton was wonderful as the bio-geneticist who surreptitiously created three clones of herself, all three also played by her.

LHL: In science, they generally require three positive results to prove the validity of an experiment, so thinking of that, I had Rosetta make three copies of herself. The themes are the themes that I've always been interested in: identity, gender construction, sexual self-determination, the exchange between reality and virtual reality, mutations, surveillance, the lack of privacy, and how technology impacts individuals and culture.

LW: And when do you start Matilda, the third film in this trilogy with Swinton?

LHL: I'd like to begin this summer. Tilda will be playing a talking cat, a mutant with a human gene that lives in a biotech lab.

LW: And then?

LHL: I can't tell you that – but she glows.

LW: Your newest project in the exhibition is the Infinity Engine, would you talk about that?

LHL: We just designed it a few months ago, with the help of biophysicist Josiah Zayner, a research fellow at NASA. The museum had to be declared a genetics laboratory in order for us to have transgenic material on display. Now that I've seen it, I will be able to make the final version for Oxford, where it goes in May. I've started to interview prize-winning scientists about the ethical and moral consequences of what we're doing with bio-printing, extending limbs, stimulating our DNA from other life forms. One issue that concerns me is when a mutated life form is created, it is patented and that life form and its progeny are owned. What are the implications of that? How bio-engineering will affect human evolution in a planet that is increasingly uninhabitable is the most serious question of our times. We are completely shifting the structure of life and we have no idea what that will mean two or three generations later.

Guy Parker, "Tracing the Invisible on the Cutting Edge", *ArtSlant*, July 30, 2014, <http://www.artslant.com/ber/articles/show/40261>.

ARTslant



How to Disappear

Lynn Hershman Leeson

Aanant & Zoo

Bülowsstrasse 90, 10783 Berlin, Germany

July 19, 2014 - September 6, 2014

Tracing the Invisible on the Cutting Edge

by Guy Parker

At Aanant & Zoo you can currently visit *How to Disappear*, a selection of works by Lynn Hershman Leeson created over the past forty years. It's a compact little exhibition featuring some twenty-seven works of various media including video and photography. It cuts out a great overview of an amazing career on the cutting edge while offering a taster of the planned retrospective at the ZKM, Karlsruhe, this coming December.

Some of the earliest works are the *Suicide Pieces* (1963-1968), photographic prints of death mask-like wax casts of the artist's face. Heavily made up and wigged, the masks were set alight as ritualistic inquiry into the erosion and erasure of identity, disappearance, and invisibility—themes that echo throughout the artist's career and are central to the show.

In the late 60s, a variant of such a mask that included motion sensor triggered playback of a recorded voice was rejected by a museum in Berkeley—she was informed at the time that art should not make sound—so the artist looked beyond the gallery and the limitations of the established art space. She instead created a site-specific work in a low-budget hotel room, thus marking the birth of Roberta Breitmore.

Roberta became an artist's alternative identity, a simulacrum, a virtual individual. With a blonde wig, too much make-up, and body language casting shapes of introversion and low self-esteem, she bussed into town with \$1800, some luggage, and hopes of finding happiness and security. Visitors could pick up the keys at the hotel's front desk and visit Roberta's room twenty-four hours a day where they could observe the cultural clutter and artefacts that marked the world around her.



Lynn Hershman Leeson, *Roberta at Psychiatrist Office Contact*, 1977, Digital archival print, 40.6 x 50.8 cm; Courtesy of the artist and Aanant & Zoo, Berlin

Hershman Leeson describes Roberta's existence as being outlined by negative space: a silhouette defined only in the fabric of surrounding material. As she extended her domain she created evidence, paper trails, and lipstick traces in the networks, systems, and databases of the day. Her activities included blind dating through the small ads and applying for bank accounts and a driver's license. At Aanant & Zoo you can see evidence of these encounters including a psychiatrist's evaluation and a transcript of a lonely heart meet up with a local dude who offers tips on the surrounding environment and culture.

These experiments in artificial identity pre-empted the virtual self or avatar, social network user accounts, and personalities replaced and defined by spending habits. They would continue into the following decades when further pursuit of a more open, dynamic, expanded art through new media led to the creation of the first artist's interactive video disc. In another breakthrough piece Roberta was succeeded by *Lorna* (1979-84), a virtual agoraphobic who lives her life through the television screen. Disc users experienced the work as an interactive game (the Art Video Game was another LHL first) with a narrative offering a choice of endings navigated via a virtual remote control, Lorna's singular means of affecting change in her isolated environment.

The paradox of screen technology's promise to liberate the individual through open access, to place all users on an egalitarian level playing field—countered by its penchant for domination and erosion of the individual—is a recurrent theme, and explored in the video *Seduction of a Cyborg* (1994). The work follows the fictionalized experience of a blind woman who is given the power of sight through direct interface with a computer network. The result is a cautionary tale that demonstrates Hershman Leeson's desire to utilize and test the capability of technology without unconditionally trusting it.

The rich, video-toasted graphics used in *Seduction of a Cyborg* to represent the fusion of human being and information superhighway are very much of their day. Swirling graphic sprites and lines of data pour out of the beer crate sized VDU into the wide, amazed eyes of the operator, who in turn, absorbs imagery of the ubiquitous computer-generated spinning globe, plus other cultural artefacts and motifs.

The moment signifies the genesis of the blind protagonist's downfall; her corruption and contamination by media and the destruction of her privacy and persona are soon to follow. However, the exact type of imagery used in this sequence was, at the time, being used everywhere to promote the sheer exhilaration of futurist magic carpet rides through cyberspace and the limitless potential of the World Wide Web. Hershman Leeson not only saw the potential of this new media ahead of the curve, she was foreshadowing some of its future anxieties long before most other users and commentators could see anything other than utopian ecstasy via the net.

Also on view is the new work *The Ballad of L.T. Leroy* (2014), a new video documenting the true story of Jeremiah "Terminator" LeRoy, an author's nom-de-plume and alter ego whose warm acceptance by the literati and Hollywood was matched with fury and spite when the truth was discovered and they felt the joke was on them. Leroy's work was, in fact, that of Laura Albert but far from a joke;; the author had been using an alter ego as a kind of creative therapy in a strange series of events that could easily have been imagined as a Hershman Leeson fiction.

Hershman Leeson has employed new processes and pushed boundaries within the accepted norms of the art world time and time again. But unlike so many other avant gardists she has rejected the status of media guru and the invitation to mystify her ability to predict and shape emerging genres, themes, and environments. On the contrary, she has and continues to use her vantage point to strive for open access and create a space where all are seen, all voices heard. At the same time, she often critiques the new media with which she has, through pioneering diligence, achieved expert status and could so easily use to further her own interests and art career. Here, the broader picture is kept always in focus.

— Guy Parker

Johanna Fateman, "Critics' Picks: 'Post-Speculation'", *Artforum*, October 2014, <http://artforum.com/picks/id=48751>.

ARTFORUM

New York

“Post-Speculation”

P!

334 Broome Street

September 1, 2014–November 1, 2014

I missed “Act I” of this exciting group show curated by Prem Krishnamurthy and Carin Kuoni, but traces of the eleven-day installation by HOWDOYOU SAY YAMINAFRICAN? remain in the gallery for “Act II,” on view now. The walls are still painted black, and an edit of the art collective’s timely, twenty-four-channel video piece *The Wayblack Machine*, 2014, plays on a single monitor. It’s a moving montage of material culled from news sources and social media about the police killing of unarmed black teenager Mike Brown in Ferguson, Missouri, on August 9. Art’s turnaround time doesn’t often allow for immediate responses to world events, so it’s satisfying to see something made with such apparent urgency on the fly. Slideshows of newly iconic photos—protestors’ hands up in defiant poses of surrender, teargassed faces, tanks—are interspersed with digitally animated tweets that swirl into hashtagged gibberish.



View of “Post-Speculation,” 2014.

The YAMS installation was billed as the launch for a new Internet archive, thewayblackmachine.net, but that URL takes you to a low-res splash page, a dead end. Maybe the radical project of building a digital repository for the documentation of “activism around black embodiment,” as the press release reads, is a kind of joke, purely conceptual—or speculative, at least for now. The show’s funniest work is Lynn Hershman Leeson’s *Synthia*, 2000–2002, which literalizes the hysterical market fluctuations on which financial speculation relies. A tiny monitor hangs from a chain in a bell jar, showing real-time market data and video clips of a woman in corresponding states of mind. I visited the gallery on a bad day for Wall Street, I guess: Mostly, Hershman’s character slumped on a couch drinking alone. There’s a surprising thread of humor to “Post-Speculation.” While the black walls remind us this is Ferguson October, they don’t dampen the prankish synergy between the works assembled.

— Johanna Fateman

Arthur and Marilouise Parker, "Top Ten: Lynn Hershman Leeson", *Artforum*, January 2013, <http://www.lynnhershman.com/wp-content/uploads/2013/02/artforum-critics-choice.pdf>.

ARTFORUM

JANUARY 2013

TOP TEN

Arthur and Marilouise Kroker

Arthur and Marilouise Kroker are writers and lecturers in the areas of technology and culture and together edit the influential electronic journal *CTheory*. Arthur's most recent book, *Body Drift: Butler, Hayles, Haraway*, was published last year by the University of Minnesota Press.

LYNN HERSHMAN LEESON

is the ultimate code breaker. The San Francisco-based filmmaker and video artist argues that we are witnessing the "birth of the anti-body"—our Net identities as fictional personae. The *Paradise Lost* of cinematic stories she has created traces the bodies, anti-bodies, and nonbodies we thought we had finally left behind via electronic operations moving at escape velocity. Reflecting on the Faustian bargain involved in the question of technology, she asks: "If humans have become the interface to the larger communicative body, can soulful automatons be far behind?" Hershman Leeson's most recent filmic project—*Women Art Revolution*, 2010—is that most inspiring of all the great counternarratives, namely a retelling of the story of the unsettled present by rehearsing the still unfulfilled struggles of the feminist art movement(s) of the late twentieth century.



Lynn Hershman Leeson, *Shutter*, 1986, gelatin silver print, 20 x 24". From the series "Phantom Limb".

Linda Yablonsky, "The Women of 'W.A.R.'", *T Magazine Blog - The New York Times*, March 3, 2011,
<http://tmagazine.blogs.nytimes.com/2011/03/03/artifacts-the-women-of-w-a-r/>.

The New York Times



ONLINE

THE WOMEN OF 'W.A.R.'

March 3, 2011

By Linda Yablonsky

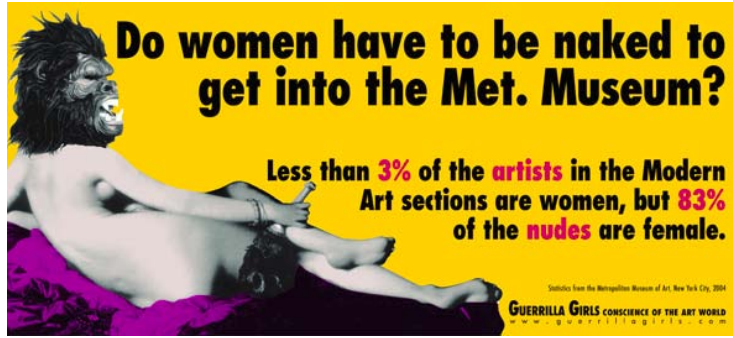
<http://tmagazine.blogs.nytimes.com/2011/03/03/artifacts-the-women-of-w-a-r/>



Cindy Sherman, Marina Abramovic and Tracey Emin are among the most successful women in art today. Their work regularly appears in international museum shows, is prized by top collectors and has no trouble getting attention in the press. If their market share still does not approach that of male peers like Richard Prince, Damien Hirst and Jeff Koons, at least they didn't have to wait for fame as long as Louise Bourgeois, who emerged as a force when she was over 60.

A feminist studio workshop at the house of Sheila Levrant de Bretteville in September 1973.

Until the first wave of feminism, most women artists were known only to themselves. That was certainly the case for the dozens of groundbreakers who appear in [“!Women Art Revolution” \(!W.A.R.\)](#), a new documentary by the San Francisco-based artist Lynn Hershman Leeson that will have its first New York screening tonight at the Museum of Modern Art.



In interviews conducted over the last 40 years, contemporaries like Yoko Ono, Hannah Wilke, Nancy Spero, Carolee Schneeman, Yvonne Rainer, the Guerrilla Girls and Judy Chicago attest to the almost total exclusion of women artists from museum collections and art history itself. The situation was worse for African-American artists like Howardena Pindell, Betye Saar and Adrian Piper, who were even more invisible to the mainstream.

What they were up against in their youth comes clear early in the film, in scenes in which Leeson asked people on the street in front of MoMA to name three women artists. With the occasional exception of Frieda Kahlo, most drew a complete blank.

Things are different now, of course, when young artists like Elizabeth Peyton, Kara Walker and Cecily Brown can zoom into public consciousness right out of the gate. But that is due partly to the pioneering feminists featured in the film, which has a soundtrack by Carrie Brownstein, the former front-woman for the all-girl band Sleater-Kinney, and includes the only known footage of the late Marcia Tucker, the visionary curator who founded the New Museum.

Leeson, 69, began videotaping her friends in 1968, when she was still a student at the University of California, Berkeley, but forgot about most of it until 2004, when she sold her archives to Stanford University and rediscovered the footage.

“A lot of people came through my living room in those days,” she says of her Berkeley experience. “Bob Dylan, Phil Ochs — all kinds of people. But I only captured the women who were making art because that’s what I wanted to do. It just seemed the best way to document what they were doing.”



Berkeley was then the heart of the free speech movement, which generated such radical groups as the Black Panthers and politicized a generation that found its voice in protests against the war in Vietnam. All of it serves as the context for the women artists who banded together to make their presence felt, chiefly through performances that called attention to the blind eye the art establishment turned on them at the time.

As one example, Leeson cites the moment Robert Rauschenberg and Robert Morris withdrew from the 1970 Venice Biennale to protest American involvement in Vietnam. They put together another show in New York that included many of their own contemporaries. There wasn’t a single woman among them.

Ana Mendieta’s “Documentation of an untitled work,” 1972.

“We all felt that something transformative was occurring, and that we were part of it,” Leeson recalls in the film, which has been popular with audiences on the festival circuit over the last year and will open for a commercial run in June.

To go with it, she collaborated with Spain Rodriguez, one of the original Zap Comix artists, on a graphic novel that highlights significant moments in this “secret” revolutionary history and includes a thoroughly researched index of every exhibition and performance by the women in the film. It goes on for 57 pages.

“Women are the outtakes of history,” says Leeson, who teaches at the San Francisco Institute and is working on the last in a trilogy of films that stars Tilda Swinton and Marilyn Manson. “And younger people know nothing about it. What I had was just a fragment, but I wanted to get it out.”

Lynn Hershman Leeson’s “!Women Art Revolution” (!W.A.R.) screens tonight at the Museum of Modern Art, 11 West 53rd Street, and opens June 1 at the IFC Theater. She is also included in “Touched: A Space of Relations,” a group show on view through April 16 at the Bitforms Gallery, 529 West 20th Street.

Kristin M. Jones, "!W.A.R.", *Frieze Blog*, March 25, 2011, <http://blog.frieze.com/w.a.r/>.



!W.A.R.

MARCH 25, 2011 *by Kristin M. Jones*



Lynn Hershman Leeson's *!Women Art Revolution*

'If you poured water on each frame, it would become a novel,' Gloria Steinem said with wonder during her introduction to a recent screening of Lynn Hershman Leeson's *!Women Art Revolution* (2010), at the Museum of Modern Art, New York. It seemed an apt description of a film that distills hundreds of hours of interviews with artists, art historians, critics and curators about feminist art into excerpts interspersed with stills and snippets of archival footage documenting performances, anti-war and civil rights protests and other epochal events. An at times breathlessly paced collage, *!W.A.R.* aims to fill in historical gaps while stirring viewers to look beyond what appears on screen.

A pioneering new-media artist, Hershman Leeson has also directed feature films whose prismatic narratives address the intersection between reality and technology, including *Conceiving Ada* (1997), about the 19th-century inventor of computer programming, Ada Lovelace, and *Teknolust* (2002), which envisions a dreamlike world filled with cyborgs and shifting identities. The product of 42 years' of work, *!W.A.R.* is a more personal project. Hershman Leeson began interviewing artists and activists in her living room with a borrowed camera while living in Berkeley during the 1960s, after she abandoned a stifling past (before-and-after snapshots capture a comical transformation from a stiff

Midwesterner wearing pearls to a radicalized Berkeleyite). After she rediscovered the older footage in 2004, she began assembling *!W.A.R.*

That personal engagement is the unobtrusive glue that holds *!W.A.R.* together. In one of the strongest sequences Hershman Leeson briefly discusses her own early work, having ‘decided not to continue the legacy of omission.’ Anticipating avatars and work by artists like Cindy Sherman, for a number of years during the 1970s she lived as the fractured virtual character Roberta Breitman, shooting self-portraits, applying for official documents and placing classified ads in her name. Hershman Leeson was able to get her work exhibited in galleries and museums through subversive strategies such as publishing reviews under the names of fictional male critics. One buyer returned a work after he discovered she was a woman; when she sold some of her early work years later, the funds allowed her to complete *!W.A.R.*

It’s a story echoed by others, such as the late Nancy Spero, who describes visiting Leo Castelli gallery ‘like a fool’ and being made to place her drawings on the floor so she felt like she was ‘genuflecting’ to a male staffer. The late Marcia Tucker’s reminiscences of how she was initially paid US\$2,000 a year less than her male counterpart at the Whitney are as discouragingly relevant today as her account of founding the New Museum after being fired from the Whitney is inspiring.

No doubt every viewer will think of an important artist, art historian or critic whose voice is absent, but in her voice-over Hershman Leeson acknowledges, ‘I know how much is left out of this film.’ The film stresses the importance of making space for a wide range of types of artmaking. Whatever one thinks of Judy Chicago’s polarizing installation *The Dinner Party* (1974–9), for example, TV footage of male congressmen squeamishly debating its possible censorship packs a gut punch. Of course, just as the art was heterogeneous, the interpersonal relationships weren’t all about sisterhood and sunshine – some interviews touch on acrimonious disagreements that erupted between artists such as Chicago and Miriam Schapiro – but overall the emphasis is on the movement’s many heady achievements, from picketing museums to founding galleries, publications and women’s studies departments.

Although most of this dense, decades-spanning history is dedicated to interviews with older women, the film also incorporates commentary by younger artists such as Janine Antoni and Miranda July (though perhaps a bigger jolt of intergenerational cool comes in the form of the score by Carrie Brownstein, formerly of Sleater-Kinney). Hershman also interviewed men, including Mike Kelley, who makes some fascinating comments on the influence of women artists on his work while he was studying at CalArts in the 1970s.

!W.A.R. has been making the festival rounds and will be premiere theatrically in New York and Los Angeles in June, followed by a national US release. It’s also slated to screen in London at the Human Rights Watch Film Festival in late March and at Whitechapel Gallery in October. But given Hershman Leeson’s emphasis on the scope of the material (‘There are no outtakes,’ she said at MoMA), it isn’t surprising that she doesn’t end the story there. All of the interview footage is being archived at Stanford University’s Special Collections (many of the videos and transcripts can already be accessed at <http://lib.stanford.edu/women-art-revolution>).

As another facet of the project, Hershman Leeson and several collaborators have set up RAW/WAR, a project that includes an interactive website (<http://www.rawwar.org>), where viewers can explore the history of feminist art and upload new art works. A graphic novel commissioned from comic artist Spain Rodriguez – which includes a curriculum guide and other resources – also supplements the film. Hershman Leeson’s energy and humor are as infectious as that of so many of her interviewees. As she writes in her introduction to the graphic novel: ‘That many of these incidents now appear ludicrous is testament to how far we have come and, poignantly, how far we still need to go.’

Hilton Als, "Critic's Notebook: Girl Talk", *The New Yorker*, May 30, 2011.

THE NEW YORKER

CRITIC'S NOTEBOOK GIRL TALK

In 1968, the artist and filmmaker Lynn Hershman Leeson—Ohio born, University of California at Berkeley bred—began videotaping women artists. Sitting on the sofa in her living room, in bathrooms, and their studies, or at exhibitions, such



post-modernist greats as Adrian Piper, Guerrilla Girls, and the late Hannah Wilke and Nancy Spero talked to her about their experiences in a

post-civil-rights-era, decidedly white-male-dominated art world, where women artists were generally characterized as shrewish propagandists or quaint folklorists. Decade after decade, Leeson—who has made three striking films that feature her muse, Tilda Swinton—took her camera where it was needed; she didn't entirely know what kind of film she had on her hands—until now. "Women Art Revolution" (which opens June 1 at IFC Center) depicts Leeson's forty-year journey raising the consciousness of women, and thus of the world, about America's feminist legacy. Whether performing in the streets or showing in their art how inequality works and feels, Leeson's women are our own; their voices are essential.

—Hilton Als

Cherie Turner, "The Secret War: Q + A With Lynn Hershman Leeson", *Art in America*, April 13, 2011, <http://www.artinamericamagazine.com/news-features/previews/lynn-hershman-leeson-raw-war/>.

Art in America

PREVIEWS APRIL 2011

The Secret War: Q+A With Lynn Hershman Leeson by Chérie Turner



For over 40 years, pioneering artist and filmmaker Lynn Hershman Leeson has videotaped interviews of the influential people around her. These form the basis of her recently produced, soon-to-see-release *!Women Art Revolution! A (Formerly) Secret History (!W.A.R.)*. The film premiered last year at the Toronto International Film Festival and recently played a packed run at the Berlin International Film Festival.

According to Hershman Leeson, *W.A.R.* is the first movie to tell the history of the American feminist art movement, dating from the mid-'60s to the present. Hershman Leeson also recently released a companion project RAW/WAR (rawwar.org), which premiered at the 2011 Sundance Film Festival as part of its New Frontiers program. The interactive website allows users to access and contribute to the history of the feminist art movement.

A.i.A. recently sat down with Hershman Leeson in her San Francisco studio to discuss *!W.A.R.*, *RAW/WAR* and untold histories.

CHERIE L TURNER: In the film, you say that you started filming the interviews as a way of remembering, so that what you were experiencing wouldn't be lost. Did you have a sense that there was something important happening?

LYNN HERSHMAN LEESON: Yes, I did. That was the mid-'60s in Berkeley [California]. There was a lot going on. People were coming over to my house, people like Allen Ginsberg, Jerry Rubin, Timothy Leary, Phil Ochs. I wasn't a filmmaker then, but I wanted, in a sense, to keep a scrapbook of what was going on. I concentrated on women artists because those were the people I knew.

TURNER: When did you realize this was a documentary in the making?

HERSHMAN LEESON: I put something together in 1993. It wasn't very good. So I just put everything away again. In 2004, when Stanford University got my archives, and I was cleaning my studio, I found all this footage and showed it to my students. All of us were amazed. They were hungry for this information that didn't otherwise exist. It was at that point I decided to make this film, and to try to get a grant to digitize everything, because it was in so many different formats.

TURNER: Salient details and events in the American feminist art movement, and the people behind them, could have been a part of art history that was lost, because you're the only one with this documentation.

HERSHMAN LEESON: It wasn't in any books because at the time most powerful people in the art structure thought that women artists weren't important enough to write about, or to collect their work or to discuss. I think that this film really creates a history that didn't exist and wouldn't have existed without it. It establishes that *this happened*. It credits the people who did it and the struggle to do that work, which liberated several generations beyond it, male and female. The feminist movement itself essentially and radically changed the direction of art making, and it hasn't been credited for having done that. It absolutely revised the way that people look at content in art, social content and issues of justice, cultural issues. It's the first art that really dealt with those culturally relevant issues, such as violence against women and empowering people. It questions a different set of principles than art that just deals with the image itself.

TURNER: You were a part of the movement documented in the movie. How did the feminist movement impact your work?

HERSHMAN LEESON: I was making art up here in San Francisco alone. I didn't have a community. But by nature, the work was feminist. So I can't say feminist art influenced me because it was contemporaneous. But my work was really all about empowerment, and, probably because I was metaphorically imprisoned, severely limited because of my gender, not being able to show or not being able to sell just because I am a woman.

TURNER: I wanted to ask you about the *RAW/WAR* project. Can you talk about what your intentions are with it?

HERSHMAN LEESON: It took three months to look at all the film. And I was making 83 minutes out of 12,000 minutes [200 hours], and so I wanted to make that work accessible, which is how I got Stanford to put it online, so they could see the entire interviews. Instead of seeing two minutes of Carolee Schneemann, I have 17 hours that you can look at that's all transcribed and cross-linked. The other part is, what about the future generations of feminist artists or people from the past I didn't include? I get e-mails all the time saying, "You didn't put this in, you didn't put that in." So now, people can put their own information into *RAW/WAR*; they can upload images or video or text; you can create a living archive, a community-based information system on this work.

TURNER: A lot your work has involved new technology to explore ideas of identity and place. What is it about cutting-edge technology that so interests you? Does the fact that technology is a male-dominated realm have any influence on your gravitating toward it? There's something poetic in using a male-dominated field to further feminist art.

HERSHMAN LEESON: First, technology is not a male-dominated field. It was invented by women. The first computer language was created by Ada Lovelace. I did the film *Conceiving Ada* [1997] about her. Artificial intelligence was envisioned by Mary Shelly, and wireless computing was invented by Hedy Lamarr. All of the major advances in technology have been made by women. But I think the thing that drew me to technology was the fact that it doesn't have a history either. Its history is particularly ignored by the arts. So I wasn't competing with 2,000 years of painting if I was trying to do something that dealt with a completely new medium.

TURNER: What do you hope that people take away from this film?

HERSHMAN LEESON: The main issue is that the women who are featured were extremely courageous and resilient and didn't give up and reinvented themselves in order to fight the repression of culture.

Thessaly La Force, "Making Art", *The Paris Review*, June 2, 2011, <http://www.theparisreview.org/blog/tag/lynn-hershman-leeson/>.

the PARIS REVIEW

ARTS & CULTURE

Making Art

June 2, 2011 | by Thessaly La Force

Toward the end of *!Women Art Revolution*, the performance artist Janine Antoni, who was born in 1964, recalls a moment when her professor, Mira Schor, asks if she's heard of the work of Ana Mendieta, Hannah Wilke, and Carolee Schneeman. Antoni hadn't, and she went to the library to learn more. She found nothing, so Schor brought Antoni clippings and catalogues she had saved at home. The moment was profound. "I looked at this work," Antoni said, "And I thought, 'I'm making the work of the seventies.'"

!Woman Art Revolution, which plays for just this week at IFC, is a documentary by Lynn Hershman Leeson. The film weaves together decades of interviews with female artists, which Hershman Leeson began recording in 1966 in her Berkeley living room, and she continued recording through the next four decades.

There are over four hundred hours of tape, and it took Hershman Leeson three and a half months to watch it all—once. It is incredible. Nancy Spero, who died in 2009, shares a humiliating appointment with Leo Castelli: "Ivan Karp saw me. I was wearing high heel boots at the time. I was really kind of tall. Ivan is small.... He had me put [my tablet] on the floor so every time I turned the page, it felt I was genuflecting to him. And then he said, 'What'd you bring these to me for?'" Here's the late art historian Arlene Raven: "I stopped doing the dishes, making the three meals a day, the laundry, and the house cleaning and so on. The process of personal liberation for me resulted in the breakup of my marriage." The Guerrilla Girls appear: "Do women have to be naked to get into the Met. Museum?" Marcia Tucker, the founding director of the New Museum, talks about how she was hired as the first female curator at the Whitney, but at \$2,000 less than her colleague James Monte: "So I went into see my director and I said, 'Listen this is what's happening and you've got to change it.' And he said, 'Oh well, the budget, the budget, the budget.' And I said, 'The New York Times, The New York Post, The Daily News.' So it got changed!"

Born in Cleveland, Ohio, Hershman Leeson was raised Orthodox Jewish. A photograph of her from high school makes an appearance in the film. I mistook her black gown for formal wear, but when I met her, she corrected me. "No, I used to go out like that," she said. What triggered the transformation? "Well," she said simply, "Nobody dressed like that in Berkeley." She was a graduate student there, studying art, when she decided to pick up a camera. "I thought filmmaking was silly," she said. "And nobody thought it was going to be a film, either. They trusted me. I think if I was a real filmmaker, or if they thought I was, they would have been be more reserved." I nod, recalling an interview with Judy Chicago in a public bathroom.

With grant money, Hershman Leeson hired three film editors to turn footage into a narrative. "One guy," she said, "Had done a twelve hour thing on Martin Luther King and I thought, 'Well, he'll know.' But he couldn't do it either. He was there for six months and I got two-and-a-half minutes." When the money ran out, she sat down and edited it herself. It took four years to find something that made sense. She says she hopes the film reaches a younger audience, and that people who aren't in the art world will watch it. She hired Carrie Brownstein of *Sleater-Kinney* to write the soundtrack, explaining, "I wanted it to be entertaining and not just a bunch of women complaining." Hershman Leeson is also an artist, and after much deliberation, she decided to include her own work in the film. Was hard to keep making art in the seventies with no money, no fame, no institutional support? As I waited for her to answer, I wondered: Would any of us today have done the same? "Well most of the artists I know can't do anything else," she said. "They don't have the skills to function in society."

Jarrett Earnest, "Don't You Understand What We Are Trying To Do Here?", *The Brooklyn Rail*, <http://www.brooklynrail.org/2011/06/film/dont-you-understand-what-we-are-trying-to-do-here>.



DON'T YOU UNDERSTAND WHAT WE ARE TRYING TO DO HERE?

Lynn Hershman Leeson's Meta-Project

by Jarrett Earnest

"We were mad as hell and we weren't going to take it anymore," laughs Faith Ringgold, about the lack of women or artists of color in Robert Morris and Carl Andre's Biennale-in-Exile in 1970. That anger led her to form Women Students and Artists for Black Art Liberation (WSABAL). She continues, "That group was really just me and my daughter Michele Wallace...those were the days when two people could raise a lot of hell!" This spirit permeates Lynn Hershman Leeson's new documentary, *!Women Art Revolution*, which opens this month at IFC after a standing-room-only premiere at the Museum of Modern Art last March. In the joyous DIY aesthetic of its subjects, the film intercuts footage from over 40 years of interviews by the artist, with archival footage, self-referential digital effects, and illustrative drawings by legendary cartoonist Spain Rodriguez. *!W.A.R.* is a major contribution toward an expansive, pluralistic feminist history of women in the late 20th century art world, and the necessary brutal battles that continue to be waged within art history and society at large.

Lynn Hershman Leeson is best known in the film community for works like *Strange Culture* (2007) and *Teknolust* (2002), oddball features starring Tilda Swinton that explore politics, cyber-sexuality, and the perverse tangles of "identity in the Internet age." She is, however, equally well known in the art world as a West Coast conceptual artist who lived as a fictional person named Roberta Breitmore for much of the 1970s, and as a pioneer of that precarious, ever shifting field of "new media." Her work depends on a strategic intertextuality to subvert the idea of an artwork as a discrete object (even a contained film) or the "individual" as a stable fixed totality. *!W.A.R.* is a consolidation of Hershman Leeson's artistic practice, and should be viewed with her larger oeuvre in mind – the culmination of a formal and conceptual project spanning the past 50 years.



!Women Art Revolution, a graphic novel by Lynn Hershman Leeson. Alexandra Chowanec, Spain Rodriguez; Drawing by Spain Rodriguez; Published by Women Art Revolution, LLC 2010.

Through performance and video, Hershman Leeson has always explored how the self is constructed through images and fantasies, working through an understanding of "identity" as encrypted and enacted in complicated and unstable ways. Her video diaries from the 1980s, *First Person Plural*, remain some of the most complex explorations of confession, performance, and persona creation in the video era. The key to this interrogation was an almost psychoanalytic procedure of self-examination, which moves outward from the individual, dissecting ever broader social systems. *!W.A.R.* is the zenith of

this investigation, reaching a Dantesque mode where the artist confronts the fabrication of history, using herself as the fulcrum. This history is precarious, something constantly under the threat of disappearing, as when she explains in voiceover before one interview: “I shot this in a bathroom at Hayward State, where I was able to get good sound.” That sense of contingency further extends to *!W.A.R.*’s visual aesthetics in the multiplicity of media formats: from 8- and 16-milimeter to shifting degrees of grainy video, all heightened by their high-definition projection on a theatrical screen. An excerpt from Howardena Pindell’s *Free, White and 21* (1980) looks more luminous than ever against an electric blue background, the artist’s painted white face beneath a stocking reaches the televisual sublime. The entire film is richly overlaid with images, dialogue, and music that it forges a fractured but unified “video piece.” A particularly striking example is a sequence of Yvonne Rainer’s famous *Trio A* (1966) that repeats a second of her rolling over and over into the position of a dead body in a photograph of the Kent State shooting.

Now-canonical artists like Rainer, Ana Mendieta, Adrian Piper, and the Gorilla Girls orient the major framework of the film.

In one interview, the late Nancy Spero describes looking for a gallery to show her work. “A friend said, ‘If anyone could tell you where to show it would be Leo Castelli.’ So, like a fool, I went.” She goes on to explain how Ivan Karp had her lay work at his feet. “Every time I turned the page, it was like I was genuflecting to this guy—I was humiliated.” There is strength and tenderness in her recount—conveying the debasement that these artists endured, but also the power they demanded and attained. The film also introduces many lesser known but equally amazing artists like Shelia de Brettville, Suzanne Lacy, Leslie Labowitz, and Rachel Rosenthal, who enrich and expand the more familiar names.

Hershman Leeson’s strange humor, the unacknowledged underpinning of her work, is in full swing here, framing some of the operatic seriousness of the 1970s Women’s Movement in a fresh way. She even accomplishes what to me seems miraculous, making notorious curmudgeon Judy Chicago likeable—even more, funny. With the editing’s zippy rhythm, by the time we reach footage of Chicago screaming, “The women of America are embedded in staying ignorant, and it pisses me off!” one appreciates her as never before. By highlighting these conflicts Hershman Leeson signals the heterogeneity of feminist practice itself from the beginning, when for instance the remarkable Martha Wilson remembers Judy Chicago yelling at her as a student for calling her peer’s work prescriptive: “DON’T YOU UNDERSTAND WHAT WE ARE TRYING TO DO HERE? WE ARE TRYING TO SUPPORT THESE YOUNG WOMEN!”

Peppered with art historians’ commentary, from Arlene Raven to Amelia Jones, *!W.A.R.* forms a fast historiography of the production and reception of women artists, butting up to the recent watershed of the *WACK!* Exhibition organized by Connie Butler, which traveled from LA MOCA to MoMA PS1 in 2008, with rave reviews. The wonderful Janine Antoni speaks for the generation that came of age in the 1990s. She recalls trying to find information on Carolee Schneemann and Hannah Wilke at the suggestion of her teacher, Mira Schor: “I went to the library and I couldn’t find a single thing.” If anything, this illustrates how much has been attained since even Antoni’s school days and the vital importance of working from within history. Artists of the present and future cannot continue the formal and aesthetic dialogue of “art” without access to those that have come before—a living language. After Schor brought her copies of these artists’ catalogs, Antoni laughs, “I



Lynn Hershman, "Roberta Breitmore," 1974-78. "ExternalTransformations: Roberta's Construction Chart, No. 1," Dye Transfer print, 40" x 30", 1975. Courtesy of Lynn Hershman Leeson.

realized I was making the art of the 1970s.”

The cumulative feeling of the film is celebratory but tempered, as Amelia Jones makes clear: “For complex and perhaps obvious reasons I don’t think feminism managed to substantially change the way art is produced, exhibited, and written about.” In absence of any ultimate conclusion, one of the last shots of the film is a Final-Cut editing screen. This sequence directs the audience to a section of Stanford University’s special collections website (<http://lib.stanford.edu/women-art-revolution>) where the unedited footage for all the interviews are available, along with a new website rawwar.org where the present and future generation can post their own work and continue to proactively construct this narrative. The film takes up feminism’s pedagogical project, coming equipped with a graphic novel version of the film drawn by Rodriguez, and a curriculum guide ready to be implemented in high school and college classrooms. The project of making art and writing history is an intergenerational pact that cannot be taken for granted or left unquestioned any more than it can be done away with. In a shared world it is our obligation as artists, thinkers, and beings to understand and protect this, as Hershman Leeson laments while surveying the collaged blocks of the final editing screen: “I know how much is left out.”

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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Alexandra Chowanec, Spain Rodriguez; Drawing by Spain Rodriguez; Published by Women Art.Revolution, LLC 2010.

Katerina Gregos, "The Importance of Being Roberta", October 2011.

The Importance of Being Roberta

written by Katerina Gregos

Pioneering artist Lynn Hershman Leeson (b. 1941, USA) holds a special place in art history. With a practice spanning more than forty years, Hershman Leeson has worked in performance, moving image, drawing, collage, text-based work, site-specific interventions, and later new media / digital technologies, and interactive net-based works, making her one of the first truly multi-disciplinary artists. In the pantheon of feminist artists, she also holds a special place, having investigated the question of gender, identity politics, and selfhood – a key field of interest in her practice – in-depth, over time and with a complexity that far surpasses many of her peers.

This complexity is best manifested in Hershman Leeson's seminal project *The Roberta Breitmore Series* (1974-1978). From 1974 until 1978, the artist conceived of, constructed and 'developed' a fictional persona and alter ego: that of Roberta Breitmore. The creation of Roberta Breitmore consisted not only of a physical self-transformation through make-up, clothing, and wigs which enabled the occasional role-playing, but a fully-fledged, 'complete' personality who existed over an extended period of time and whose existence could be proven in the world through physical evidence: from a driver's license and credit card to letters from her psychiatrist. According to the artist, Roberta's character was born one day in 1974 when she arrived on a bus in San Francisco and checked into the low-budget Dante Hotel, with \$1800 in her pocket. The fabrication and corroboration of her existence began at that moment, through a series of carefully orchestrated actions such as placing an advertisement in a newspaper seeking a roommate through to blind dating via the same means. The latter resulted in a series of physical encounters that Roberta had, with real people, in the real world, the repercussions of which played a key role in the formation of her psyche. Thus Roberta's existence came to be manifested into the world, through such encounters and accumulating material traces, which at the end of the project numbered hundreds of documents from which one could attempt to piece together a portrait of this young woman in mid-seventies, West Coast America.

This fracturing or splitting of personality and fragmentation of identity was later taken to further lengths when Hershman Leeson introduced another three 'Robertas', by hiring three additional performers to enact her character. These 'clones' of Roberta adopted the same look and attire, engaged in some of Roberta's correspondence and also went on some of Roberta (Lynn's) dates. Towards the end, Hershman Leeson, the 'original' Roberta, withdrew from her character leaving the three 'clones' to continue her work, until the character(s) were finally terminated in a performance at the Palazzo dei Diamanti in Ferrara, Italy in 1978, during an exorcism at the grave of Lucrezia Borgia. What remains are the standardised physical artefacts of any life: documentation and, of course, personal effects: from legal and medical documents to a personal diary. Though these 'prove' the existence of Roberta, what was of fundamental importance to Hershman Leeson, were the real experiences of Roberta, which perhaps more importantly 'determined' her character.

But who exactly was Roberta Breitmore and how can we come to know her? To what extent? Indeed how do we come to know anyone (including ourselves) and to what extent? How far was Roberta Breitmore fashioned out of Lynn Hershman Leeson? And how much of Roberta permeated into and shaped Lynn Hershman Leeson, given that Lynn spent considerable time *being* Roberta? If Roberta Breitmore is a figment of the imagination, then how much 'reality' resides within her? These are but some of the questions raised by Hershman Leeson in this work. Clearly the existence of Roberta was dependent on Lynn, but at same time she also became completely independent of her, the two identities being conjoined like Siamese twins but also separated.

The Roberta Breitmore Series thus constitutes one of the most profound meditations on existence and the impossibility to neatly circumscribe the human psyche and identity. It highlights the fact that identity is both nature *and* culture, both self-consciously constructed, as intrinsically experienced, and that it is often hard to pinpoint which of the two elements dominates. Finally, in a way that is both phantomic and very real, *The Roberta Breitmore Series* captures in an unequivocal way the complexity of identity, the fact that we all have many 'selves', some of which we may not recognize, who appear as estranged from our person as Roberta often does from her own. These different 'existences' cannot be easily be separated, much in the same way that Lynn Hershman Leeson cannot be separated from 'her' Roberta Breitmore. But who exactly was Roberta? We know that she

was married, divorced, at some point unemployed, battling weight gain, and getting psychotherapy. There is evidence of all of this. But to what extent can she become knowable?

Nearly forty years on, the importance of *The Roberta Breitmore Series* cannot be over-estimated. The questions it raised about the ungraspable, fluid state of identity, about 'truth' and 'authenticity', the difficulty to often draw the line between fact and fiction, biography and autobiography, the impossibility – perhaps - of entirely achieving that ancient Greek dictum of 'knowing thyself', the question of how appearances deceive, and the fundamental constructedness of identity remain; perhaps now stronger than ever given the advent of the internet and the emergence of virtual identities; and of course the increased importance attached to image and self-styling in our 'lifestyle' conscious culture of appearances.

Roberta Breitmore was the flesh-and-blood *real* equivalent of an existence that would now be found in something like Second Life (where she also had a stint), or disguised behind an adopted digital persona, while hiding behind the safety of internet anonymity, in the comfort of one's home. The risk that the artist Lynn and the character Roberta were exposed to, by stark contrast, was very real. To give an example, Roberta placed personal ads in newspapers, which were answered by men who agreed to meet her for a date. On one of the subsequent dates, a man arrived with five others and asked Roberta to join a prostitution ring (Roberta fled and, naturally, became depressed and suicidal).

At the same time, *The Roberta Breitmore Series* stretched the limits of female empowerment (and the issue of deciding upon and asserting ones chosen female identity) to an extent that few artists have done: by almost completely blurring the boundaries between art and life over a time-space continuum that transcended most other similar investigations by women artists of that time which were mostly confined to the gallery, the studio or the street and were, in essence, short-lived experiments of an often symbolic nature. The extents to which Hershman Leeson went to render her fictional character as *real* as possible far surpass the momentary, theatricalised mimicry that can be seen in the work of artists such as Cindy Sherman, for example, or the voyeuristic, self-consciously self-indulgent explorations of the self in the work of Sophie Calle.

In a sense, *The Roberta Breitmore Series* can be considered the definitive feminist *gesamtkunstwerk*: incorporating as it does private and public performative elements (*in real life*); static, object-based, mixed media 'artworks' (which were at the same time documentation); and interventions made by others (such as, for example, the instance when Hershman Leeson commissioned cartoonist Spain Rodriguez to create a comic-strip of Roberta's adventures). Thus, the live, the time-based, the sculptural, the real and the fictional, the material and the conceptual all come together in one artistic universe where the boundaries between all of these are collapsed but also deployed to give birth to a new artwork and a new life.

Evidence of the events that gave life to Roberta's character and physical documentation of her existence constitute one part of this project, which I would call the horizontal part, metaphorically speaking. This consists of the 'bureaucratic' evidence of one's existence in the real world such as driving license, credit card, bank account. The other – equally, if not more important – concerns the mining of and providing insight into the depth of Roberta's *existence*, the 'vertical' element. Roberta's psychological state is revealed both through standardised material evidence as well as by perspectives provided by herself (through her diary) and others: her therapist, a journalist, the cartoonist. *The Roberta Breitmore Series* thus remains singular in its breadth, scope and complexity in relation to the construction and mutability of identity, stereotypical notions of the female, the mediated expression of self, the self-conscious adoption of role-play, the desire to disguise, to move away from the innate self, to be other than what one is. At the same time it is a poignant statement on voyeurism and the gaze: the gaze upon the other as well as deep into ourselves.

Katerina Gregos, October 2011

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Amelia Jones, "This Life", *Frieze* 117 (2008), September 9, 2008, http://www.frieze.com/issue/article/this_life/.

frieze

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MONOGRAPH

Since the late 1960s **Lynn Hershman Leeson** has employed multiple personalities in photography, performance and digital media to explore ideas surrounding identity.



DEEP CONTACT (1984-9), interactive video still

In 1969 Lynn Hershman Leeson sculpted a mask of her face entitled *Self Portrait as Another Person*. Since then she has consistently performed herself through physical, legal, institutional and digital means as other, most particularly in the guise of 'Roberta Breitmore'. This character has assumed many forms: from the early to mid-1970s by the artist performing live and documented photographically as a neurotic young woman, and from the 1980s onwards in the guise of various robotic and digital avatars, the most recent of which guides the visitor through Hershman Leeson's online archive.

Hershman Leeson has recently noted: 'According to a national [US] database, there are several people in the United States named Lynn Hershman. For example, Lynn Hershman was born November 14, 1949, in Connecticut and died February 19, 1976. Lynn Hershman also lives in Rancho Palos Verdes, California; Manteca, California; and Phoenix, Arizona. I am none of the above.'¹ It might be said that the artist's project has been in part aimed at unhinging our tendency (in the art world and beyond) to think we know who an artist/individual is and what kind of expression is properly connected to her through the shorthand of her name.

Enacting a perpetual process of virtual becoming, Hershman stages the self as both simulacral and embodied. LH←→RB: they exist as the interrelated sides of one Möbius strip of selfhood.

Here's how it works.

Walking into the first room of the Whitworth Art Gallery exhibition 'Autonomous Agents: The Art and Films of Lynn Hershman Leeson' in Manchester late last year, I am struck by a seemingly anachronistic jumble of what I can only think of as anaesthetic visuals and objects – anaesthetic because they seem completely disconnected from the formal or theoretical conceits of dominant art-world systems of value.² The strange array of images, objects, documents and screens doesn't cohere in any formal or aesthetic way – we attempt to make sense of it all through a set of conceptual frameworks, all leading back to LH←→RB.

And yet, crucially, we find that we cannot achieve some final version of 'LH'. Precisely because LH's practice calls on the body/mind complex without making use of the sensual lures of aesthetic forms (which can be radical but also often work in the services of the market), we find ourselves thinking the work (the LH \leftrightarrow RB matrix) through our bodies (perhaps we are the arrows in the liminal gap between the LH and the RB).

In this way it is jarring (beautifully so) to encounter in the opening room of the exhibition a large Victorian vitrine filled with letters, a diary and photographs, and walls chock-a-block with photographs, drawings and diagrams, and, at the other end of the adjacent gallery, what appears to be a small robotic doll with large glasses and blonde hair sitting in a vitrine (*CybeRoberta*, 1995–). The uncanny big-eyed doll head swivels my way, making my skin crawl.

Even more unsettling, I discover a few days later that I was not only being observed but also simultaneously webcast live on LH's website via the gaze of CybeRoberta (the footage from her camera eyes is available archivally and as live feed via webcam). I have been in more than one place at a time, and the past telescopes into the present as I watch myself being watched. Uncannily, both LH \leftrightarrow RB and I are scattered across psychological and material spaces – but this makes me more, not less, aware of myself here in front of the computer engaging with my own past bodily image, which haunts me in the present.

These two apparent extremes – the webcast of CybeRoberta's spying vision on LH's website and the display of RB's musty material artefacts in the securely off-line and still vaguely Victorian spaces of the Whitworth – frame the range of LH's accomplishment and define the importance of her work as it has metamorphosed since the early 1970s. The exhibition 'Autonomous Agents' highlights the way in which the artist has incessantly explored the construction of the subject of the 'artist', itself a microcosm of the way in which all subjects are enacted in relation to institutions and other subjects via networks of exchange.

We now identify these networks as linked to Internet cultures and virtual worlds such as Second Life, but in the 1970s, when LH initiated the RB project, they were largely understood in relation to systems of the circulation of capital and information such as the bank account, postal service and telephone. The first gallery of the exhibition thus includes a wide array of objects and images from the 1970s collectively narrating RB in relation to these systems, including a wall-mounted case with RB's rather worn and threadbare clothing; a video monitor showing a grainy film of LH grooming and transforming herself into RB; numerous 'construction charts' documenting the changes from one to the other; a psychoanalyst's notes on RB's neurotic behaviour; RB's dental X-Rays; an advertisement RB placed in a San Francisco newspaper in 1975 ('WOMAN, Cauc. seeks bright companion to share rent & interests'); correspondence from the various men who answered her advertisement and surveillance-style photographs of her meeting one of them on a public bench; RB's diary; photographs of RB 'surrogates'; and a vast array of documentation substantiating RB's legal 'existence', from a driver's license to a chequebook in her name.

The other galleries at the Whitworth are filled with LH's subsequent range of works: the 'cyborg series' of digital photographs, video works, films and more of LH's interactive robotic/Internet works. These loops are activated in diverse works from her highly influential *Electronic Diaries* (1986–8), in which she uses the intimacy of video to narrate her life story, simultaneously drawing us in and repelling us through the intense emotional charge of the televisual confession, and *DEEP CONTACT* (1984–9), which invites participants to press parts of the body of a female 'guide' via a Microtouch monitor, to *Room of One's Own* (1990–93), forcing the viewer to engage physically and psychologically in a photographic web of surveillance, and *Synthia Stock Ticker* (2000–3), an interactive work linked to the live vicissitudes of stock market trading.

LH's life work reiterates a range of media and modes of embodiment to open LH \leftrightarrow RB to the possibility of being enacted by others. 'Autonomous Agents' includes photographs of a number of RB surrogates, with the same wig and outfit LH donned, navigating social spaces including those attending the 'Roberta Breitmore Lookalike Contest' at the De Young Museum in San Francisco in 1978. And in films such as *Teknolust* (2002) LH abandons herself to the various characters played brilliantly by Tilda Swinton – including the homely scientist 'Dr Rosetta Stone' and her three gorgeous multicoloured clones or 'self-replicating automata', Ruby, Olive and Marine.³ Across bodies, themselves ranging from flesh to pure virtuality, LH's practice is open to an exchange that increasingly takes place across digital flows of information. The artist has never stood still in relation to technological and philosophical developments: sponsored by the international (and one hopes ironically named) 'Presence Project', she is currently involved in archiving the entire RB project on Second Life.⁴ This project, entitled *Life to the Second Power: Animating the Archive* (2006–ongoing), extends into cyberspace LH's 1970s' expression of herself as RB – pointing to the links but also the differences between pre-cybernetic (legal, sartorial, photographic etc.) and digital structures of defining, performing and constructing the self.

The avatars on Second Life can fly, but they are otherwise profoundly bounded by all-too-human constraints. Stereotyped in Second Life according to racial and gender clichés such as the clearly white-skinned and 'middle-class boy and girl next door' available to non-paying participants on the website, avatars are constrained by old-fashioned and dangerous beliefs. Second Life reifies, albeit in apparently new form, the tendency to fix those we engage with as, for example, either male or female, as black or

white or brown, working still from the assumption that we know what all these labels mean.

Life to the Second Power (LSP) enacts a more sophisticated set of possibilities for Second Life, however. This is not surprising, given the ways in which LH has consistently and joyously perverted conventions attached to particular media, discourses and institutions, including the art market and identity politics. In order to access the LH archive, avatars visiting *LSP* navigate the hallway from the artist's mid-1970s' *Dante Hotel* project, in which LH rented out a room in a San Francisco hotel and staged it as an ongoing site for visitors, including, supposedly, RB herself. The disposition of the Dante Hotel corridor in *LSP* – a pastiche of photographs of the hotel – allows me (as my own stock avatar, Az Kirax, based on a vaguely 'Goth' female figure) to feel like 'I' am moving weightlessly down the hallway, with 'my' synaesthetic sense of embodiment reduced to a blurry field of vision that unrolls as a tunnel before 'my' moving form. Traversing the virtual version of the Dante Hotel (a weird amalgamation of analogue photographic imagery and crude digital 3-D modelling graphics), I am forced to acknowledge that my relationship to the history of LH's practice is both highly mediated and embodied: the hotel/archive is accessed via the corporeal form of the avatar, as guided by fingers on computer keys. In skimming through the hallway as Az Kirax, I feel disoriented, my body tugging at me in virtual form – even as my relationship to the past (to art's histories, and to the history of LH's work in particular) is both anchored to material bodies and things and fundamentally ephemeral.

Life to the Second Power is a portal tethered to a non-linear but still historical past, through the otherwise banal and commodified spaces of Second Life. Unlike most of Second Life, however, *LSP* encourages us to engage with the website as a critical space of cultural production and reception, where specific pasts can be evoked (albeit always incompletely) via present and embodied, if virtual, engagements. Whether or not *LSP* functions as an archive to amplify our sense of understanding of the extraordinarily complex range of this artist's ground-breaking work across performance, photographic, cinematic, digital and web-based media is another question.

LH's brilliant perversity is at work in *LSP* in this forcing together of embodiment and virtuality. Hershman Leeson has long laboured to show us that the two are not mutually exclusive: robotic, digital and networked engagements are not by any means only cognitive and inherently disembodied but, on the contrary, inevitably involve bodily processes. At the same time, the work itself has body. This is its politics.

We live in an age of virtuality, a time in which, as Guy Debord ominously foresaw in the late 1960s, 'life is presented as an immense accumulation of spectacles. Everything that was directly lived has receded into a representation.'⁵ And yet this is also an age haunted by the stubborn refusal of the body to disappear – an age haunted by bodies bleeding and bruised through the effects of physical violence, an age obsessed with removing the signs of aging, avoiding bad health or otherwise defeating the body's incontrovertible mortality (a mortality based on our heavy materiality, which we can never, no matter how hard we try, dominate or erase).

In such an age nothing could be more important than a practice like that of LH←→RB, an ongoing range of works that acknowledge and enact the spectacularized virtuality of our 'real' in and through the body.

1 Cited in Meredith Tromble (ed.), *The Art and Films of Lynn Hershman Leeson*, University of California Press, Berkeley, 2005, p.13

2 The exhibition at the Whitworth, curated by Mary Griffiths in consultation with LH, was a revised and expanded version of a retrospective originally mounted at the Henry Art Gallery in Seattle.

3 See Jackie Stacey's inspired article on Teknolust, 'Transductive Cinema: Leading Across the In-Between', to be published in her forthcoming book *The Cinematic Life of the Gene*, Duke University Press, Durham, NC.

4 On the 'Presence Project' see <http://presence.stanford.edu:3455/Collaboratory/Home>

5 See Guy Debord, 'The Culmination of Separation', section 1, *The Society of the Spectacle*, 1967, trans. Ken Knabb

Lynn Hershman Leeson's new film *Strange Culture* (2007) is released on DVD by Docurama New Video.

Amelia Jones

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HERSHMANLANDIA: PLEASE TOUCH

PIERRE RESTANY

Since I decided to write about Lynn, a strange phenomenon surreptitiously erupted inside me. It was like identifying with a missing persona but also included the singular, plural, psychological, and simulacral structure of Hershmanlandia.

I will attempt to define what Hershmanlandia represents. It is not easy because the concept itself is simultaneously physical and imaginary, mental and sentimental. In Lynn Hershman's world, sites, materials, appearances, illusions, and images are not only profiles or her sense of reality but represent a strategy of perpetual and infinite personality simulations and fragmentations.

Hershmanlandia is an alternative space in which the fractured theme of Life/Art-Simulation/Reality thrives. For example, it is the time – ten years – in which Roberta Breitmeyer evolved, exorcised her youth, and transferred identity from an extroverted Roberta to the mature, introverted, agoraphobic Lorna. Through a wide variety of installations, site-specific interventions, performances, audiovisual productions, and photography, we witness the space of time; simulation/reality; art/life; single and multiple selves buried within the existential dimension of a truthful "reality." A system of appearances and simulations implicate the viewer into participating in postmodern society's mediatic implosion.

The logic of Hershman's work is impressive. From November 1973 to August 1974, she exhibited two mannequins twenty-four hours a day in the rented room of a San Francisco hotel. She is relentless. She organized this piece with Eleanor Coppola in response to difficulties she had encountered in exhibiting sound environments at the University Art Museum in Berkeley. There she had reconstituted the environment of a hotel room, including recorded background sound. The museum had closed the exhibit, arguing that audiotapes and nontraditional media should not be in a space for institutional culture. Fine!

She continued to intervene directly in her chosen sites by re-creating specific existential situations over and over again: in hotel rooms, private homes, a casino in Las Vegas, a high-security jail in San Quentin, California, and even the shop windows of a New York department store (Bonwit Teller).

Then she went even further! Perhaps she was lunging for the heart of Allan Kaprow's definitions of "life-oriented" and "art-oriented" forms of expression when she integrated herself totally into both art and life at once. To compensate for the lack of museum support, she, without hesitation, created and directed the Floating Museum (1974-78), which was a structure dedicated to the realization of projects by artists who worked directly in urban sites.

Why did she name it the Floating Museum? Because the museum had no walls. It existed as an office and a telephone. This minimal structure did not prevent her from creating many important works, including a large mural in San Quentin prison and *The Global Space Invasion*, through which artists toured Europe in 1977 with exhibits and performances. Later, the Floating Museum invited European artists to show works in San Francisco.

During the 1970s, Lynn Hershman's Life/ Art simulations took the dual form of Roberta Breitmore. When Roberta looked for a roommate, it was she who met applicants; it was she who assumed the risks of each adventure. When life became dangerous, like the time a San Diego pimp tried to convince her to prostitute herself, Roberta became Lynn. When Roberta's adventures multiplied, she contacted friends who acted as surrogates. When Roberta practiced her ritual exorcism at the Palazzo dei Diamanti in Ferrara, Italy, it was Lynn who acted in close collaboration with a privileged witness/actress, her friend Kristine Stiles, who had been the first of many Robertas.

The simulation and identification of a persona, missing yet constantly present, is how I describe the state of mind that I now experience as the flow of memories that connect me to Hershmanlandia. This violent, passionate, chaotic flow succumbs to the catalytic effect of her constant presence.

As soon as I entered Hershmanlandia, I saw that a specific destiny was reserved for me – to be Roberto for a Roberta, to exist incidentally to our encounters.

And this is how the Roberto-Pierre that I am now becoming in the

reactivated projections of my memory remembers knowing Lynn-Roberta beginning in September 1976, when we met on the site of Christo and Jeanne Claude's *Running Fence*. Lynn was the associate project director. She supervised hundreds of students and workers in creating this project.

Roberta took advantage of those beautiful autumn days. "This *Running Fence* is a China Wall built with butterfly wings," Roberta said in grand poetic verve, as Lynn quietly stood next to her, extending banner titles of newspapers that announced Mao's death.

Lynn came with her daughter, then five or six years old. Roberta was often her babysitter. I have the impression that Roberto sometimes kept her company. Also I do not know very well from whom I first received information about Hershmanlandia. Was it from Roberta or Lynn?

In any case, Lynn was feeling the effects of 1968. She interpreted them in a very lucid fashion. She assimilated the revolutionary impact of those times that represented the passage from an industrial to a postindustrial era. Despite the times, she lived feminism without anger. She actualized, invented, and reinvented herself, inserting each new persona effectively within the contextual structure of her society.

I must say that all of my meetings with Lynn Hershman have been, for me, an endless, important, and fruitful source of teachings that connect me to an interactive, sensitive energy. She transferred to me a comprehension of the context of our postmodern condition. These meetings were especially helpful in enabling me to define the relationship between natural and artificial intelligence, which is a key element of the man/machine dialogue of the jungle of new technology. Hershman's entire body of work exists within a postmodern technology in which she simultaneously exists both as signal and icon.

The 1978 transition from Roberta-Lynn to Lynn-Roberta did not necessarily signify a change of scenery in Hershmanlandia. It represented a transition from performance to videodisc and, most especially, the blossoming of an interactive sensibility that began to exist in a mature vision and style. Lorna-Lynn is, in a way, Lynn raised to the square root in the mastering of audiovisual semiotic programming. If Lorna can still appear autonomous and separate from Lynn, it is only because of either the grace of optional illusion or of a retinal

persistence in which the viewer occasionally identifies with the stubborn Roberto. The degree of Lorna's autonomous existence depends on the work's strategy of global programming. There is no hierarchy left in the order of decisions.

At the installation or performance level, Roberta becomes emancipated from Lynn via the interstitial space that exists between art and life. This interactive strategy that exists in videodiscs tends to eliminate the "infrathin" last obstacle in this game of uncertainty.

In *Deep Contact* (1984-89), the playful structural aspect is reinforced by the tactical + tactile. The subtitle of the new work underlines that it is a videodisc about sexual fantasy. Desirably sexy, Marion appears on the screen and asks to be touched on one of three body parts: head, bust, or legs. The initial decision releases an unfolding chain of options that involve a permutating series of corresponding situations. Viewer-participants locate themselves according to Marion, the hostess, as they follow her guidance!

In *The Electronic Diaries*, a video cycle begun in 1986, Lynn expresses herself in the first-person singular, as is expected in the "confessions" of intimate diaries. The third work of this series, *First Person Plural* (1988), is very meaningfully entitled. No one can deny her the right to speak. She has paid dearly to conquer her silence. Though ambiguities still exist, she displaces in this work, once and for all, the idea of fluctuating truth. Ultimately, it does not matter what is true or what is fictitious. The only truth that is viable has to do with an aesthetic point of view rather than an ethical one. In essence, Hershman has created an art that has revolutionized the idea of truth.

The truth of the chameleon resides in the mimicry of its changes. The truth of Hershmanlandia is consigned in *Confessions of a Chameleon*, the first part of *The Electronic Diaries*. How many times will Lynn have us touch this lively reality with the tip of a finger? My Roberto side of Roberta will long remember the hand of the mannequin seen while walking by shop window 11 of 25 *Windows: A Portrait of Bonwit Teller*. Roberta told me so much about this installation. I saw it in New York in 1976. And the hand of Roberta opening the door of the Dante Hotel room that Lynn had reserved for me in North Beach one evening in April 1985 . . . was it Roberta or Lorna? The Dante Hotel or the Millefiore? It doesn't matter.

Please Touch: a practical gesture that, in my eyes, characterizes Lynn Hershman's work and that she will undoubtedly interpret as an homage to the great clairvoyant Marcel Duchamp. What is more truthful than the contact of the finger getting ready to caress?

Please Touch: it is the negation of the museum's law. Art reunites with the life of the streets. The beautiful becomes true. Reality is a product of appearance. From the axis of these directions, Lynn Hershman's work is exemplary. She has provided, in her work, a perfect representation of the postmodernity of our times.

Born in a postindustrial society, she assumes its mediatic implosion and its fragmented chaos. However, she has confronted new technology and staked a claim to the dialogue between the two brains of a new culture – natural and artificial intelligence!

Lynn Hershman joins Nam June Paik's mediatic genius and takes her place along with Allan Kaprow and John Cage as Duchamp progeny. She, like the others, is a rare clairvoyant who searches the permanent present of the human condition and knows how to make us touch not only with our head, but with our heart.

Pierre Restany was an art critic, curator, and editor of *Domus* magazine. A champion of the artwork of the Nouveaux Realistes, he was the author of numerous catalogue essays and books, including *L'Autre Face de l'art* (1979), *Une Vie dans l'art* (1983), and *Yves Klein, le feu au coeur du vide* (2000).

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