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

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



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

By Tess Thackara
Nov. 8, 2019

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

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

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

One of the pieces that set her free, “The Electronic Diaries, 1984-2019,” is an acclaimed video work created over 30 years in which she shares her personal experiences and reflections with a camera, appearing with evolving hairstyles and body language. The work, which she calls the archive of her life, is set to go on view in expanded, complete form for the first time at the Shed Nov. 13 through Jan.

12. (An earlier version of the “Diaries” is also on view in MoMA’s newly-rehung opening installation). It is part of a group exhibition called “Manual Override,” which Ms. Hershman Leeson anchors with three works — including her more recent forays into the field of genetic science — alongside a younger generation of new media artists, Martine Syms, Simon Fujiwara, Morehshin Allahyari and Sondra Perry.

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

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



The actress Tessa Thompson narrates a film component of "Shadow Stalker" 2019.
Lynn Hershman Leeson, Bridget Donahue and Anglim Gilbert Gallery

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

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

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

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

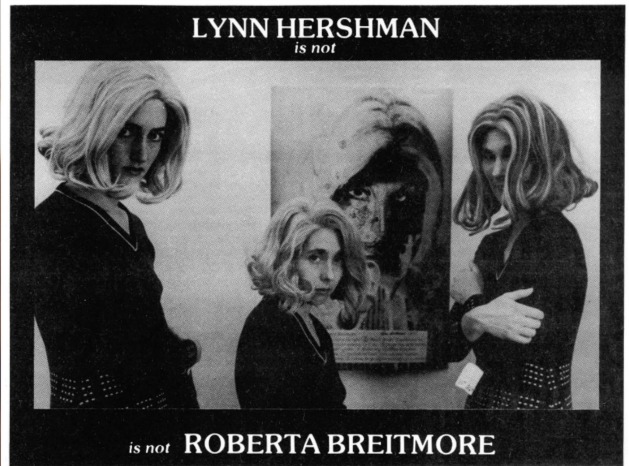
Her best-known work centers on a character named Roberta Breitmore, an alter ego she created in 1972. A shy, neurotic blonde, Roberta conformed to the era’s archetypal feminine ideal. Ms. Hershman Leeson created charts that determined her makeup and hair, and took to various public places dressed as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

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Roberta Look Alike Contest

April 30, 3-5p.m., de Young Museum

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

Roberta's Room: Room 111, Bakers Acres, 3000 Jackson Street, April 1-30, 4-6 daily. Roberta's Multiple: April 1, Square, April 15, #55 bus. Roberta Look Alike Contest: Judging: M.H. de Young Memorial Museum, April 30, M.H. de YOUNG MEMORIAL MUSEUM, GOLDEN GATE PARK, SAN FRANCISCO, CALIFORNIA, APRIL 1-MAY 14, 1978

The artist is always grappling with technology's relationship to our identities, often from a very personal point of view. "Roberta's External Transformations, 1976," chromogenic print from the Roberta Series, created an alter ego.

Lynn Hershman Leeson, Bridget Donahue and Anglim Gilbert Gallery

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



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

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

Peter Weibel, the curator who gave Ms. Hershman Leeson her first and only retrospective, at ZKM in Germany in 2014, believes the artist “was the first to show us identity as a cultural artifact.” In 1974, she rented a room in a boardinghouse for Roberta, where visitors could explore her clothes, wigs, and other external identifiers — a puzzle through which to piece together the hazy outline of a person. Beginning in 1984, the artist turned the camera on the real Lynn Hershman Leeson, and began recording what would become the hourlong edit of her life, the “Electronic Diaries.”

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

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

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

Ms. Hershman Leeson advanced the art world into our cyborgian present with works like "Lorna" (1983), an interactive video work in which viewers explore the contents of an avatar's apartment and make choices for her. "It took 25 years to show her, because no one knew what it was," the artist says. "At that point, it looked like an antique." She began working with programmers on "Agent Ruby," an AI bot now in SFMOMA's collection, in 1995. "Agent Ruby doesn't fail," the artist said with a note of pride.



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



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

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

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

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