

ALTMAN SIEGEL

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# ARTnews

Escalante-De Mattei, Shanti, "SFMOMA acquires Its First NFT," *ARTnews*, January 13, 2023

## SFMOMA Acquires Its First NFT



BY **SHANTI ESCALANTE-DE MATTEI**  January 13, 2023 12:40pm



Still from "Conceiving Ada"  
COURTESY ALTMAN SEIGAL

The San Francisco Museum of Modern Art has acquired its first NFT, a work titled *Final Transformation #2* (2022) by artist Lynn Hershman Leeson.

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One of the two existing editions of the work was donated to SFMOMA by Altman Siegel gallery and Hershman Leeson to be auctioned in the museum's 2022 Art Bash Auction, an annual live auction that raises money for the institution's education and community programming. According to a report by Town and Country, the piece was bought by an unnamed winning bidder for \$9,000. The other edition was recently gifted to the museum by Leeson, an SFMOMA representative confirmed to ARTnews over email.

Final Transformation #2 is an NFT of a clip from Leeson's 1997 film *Conceiving Ada*, which stars Tilda Swinton in the role of Victorian mathematician Ada Lovelace. The title is derived by Swinton's last line in the movie.

"This visionary film about the legacy of Ada Lovelace, a mathematician who wrote the very first computer program in the nineteenth century, was made nearly thirty years ago but resonates today with the idea of NFTs," said Rudolf Frieling, curator of media arts at SFMOMA, in a statement leading up to last year's Art Bash. "Each generation recreates itself with the technological means of its time. Today, we witness a revolution based on artificial intelligence, NFTs, and DNA becoming the driving force of a new language for storage and communication."

Hershman Leeson, a Bay Area-based artist who has been creating art about humans' relationship to machines since the 1960s, has received renewed attention in recent years as 2021's NFT boom put the spotlight on new media artists. SFMOMA has a few of Hershman Leeson's photographs in their collection already, as well as *Room #8* (2006–18), a multimedia work that contains a vial of synthetic DNA.

The NFT was acquired alongside 62 other works, including pieces by Wayne Thiebaud, Sky Hopinka, and Cindy Sherman. Eighteen of the new acquisitions come from artists who hadn't previously been represented at the museum, among them Yolanda Andrade, Emi Anrakuj, and the New Red Order.

"These recent acquisitions represent an incredible range of artistic vision and capture SFMOMA's commitment to collecting works by artists from the region and across the globe," said Christopher Bedford, director of SFMOMA, in a press release. "I am grateful to SFMOMA's curatorial team for their vision and ongoing dedication to expanding the voices and narratives represented in our collection."

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## VARIABLE WEST

Blue, Max, "Who Do I Think I Am? Lynn Hershman Leeson at Altman Siegel," *Variable West*, June 2022



Lynn Hershman Leeson, *Make Me Look Natural*, 2019. Archival digital print, watercolor, pen, ink. Courtesy of the artist and Altman Siegel, San Francisco.

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Visiting Lynn Hershman Leeson's career-spanning exhibition *About Face*, which was on view at Altman Siegel Gallery in San Francisco during March and April of this year, I began to wonder seriously about the discomfort I feel when looking at the artist's work. Why does my skin begin to crawl, when I'm presented with her affronts to any sense of coherent identity? Perhaps I've just answered my own question.

The thirty-nine works in the show encompassed more than five decades of Leeson's life and included paintings, sculptures, and photography—though Hershman Leeson's practice extends to film, performance, and installation, as well—a breadth that complemented the focus of the show: the depth of the artist's interrogation into the construction and enactment of individual identity.



Lynn Hershman Leeson, *Roberta's Reconstruction*, 2005. Chromogenic print. Courtesy of the artist and Altman Siegel, San Francisco.



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Hershman Leeson's seminal creation, a character called Roberta Breitmore whom Hershman Leeson embodied in a series of performances, is a necessary starting point when unpacking the artist's conceptual interests and methods. The project began shortly after Hershman Leeson graduated from the MFA program at San Francisco State University in 1972, as an attempt to create a fictitious character who might come to exist in real life. To legitimize Breitmore, Hershman Leeson manufactured several legal documents, such as a driver's license and birth certificate. By the end of the project six years later, Breitmore could be said to be as good as real, having left behind all the same traces of a living person.

Hershman Leeson proposes that identity is constructed and maintained through presentation and documentation, rather than some innate authenticity. Her work is strikingly resonant in a time and place where most people affirm their identity through ephemeral documents, such as text, image, and video posts online. We all possess tenuous links to existence.

One of Hershman Leeson's early sculptures included in *About Face, Self Portrait as Another Person* (1965), was the nucleus around which the rest of the pieces in the show swirled. The title alone emphasizes the way we define ourselves in relation to others. A mannequin head wearing a dark wig sits above a tape recorder playing conversational audio based on the viewer's proximity to the plexiglass case housing the piece. Get too close, and the disembodied voice asks you to get closer with a series of too-personal demands, such as to recount in detail your first sexual experience or to confess your deepest fears. The experience is reminiscent of a session with an analyst or a conversation with a nosy stranger, highlighting the narrative drive behind the ways in which we present ourselves. Here, Hershman Leeson suggests that our identities are the product of our performance, as well as other's perception of that performance.

One photograph from the original Breitmore project, *Roberta and Irwin Meet for the First Time in Union Square Park 2* (1975), reminded me of the kind of snapshot a private investigator might take. In it, we see Breitmore's face over the shoulder of a man in the middle of the crowded park. Ask anyone if Breitmore was there, then, and the answer would have to be, Yes. This is an early, sterling example of how Leeson presents identity as mediated by documentation. It's a concept she's continued in recent work, too, extending her explorations to technologies newer than film photography.

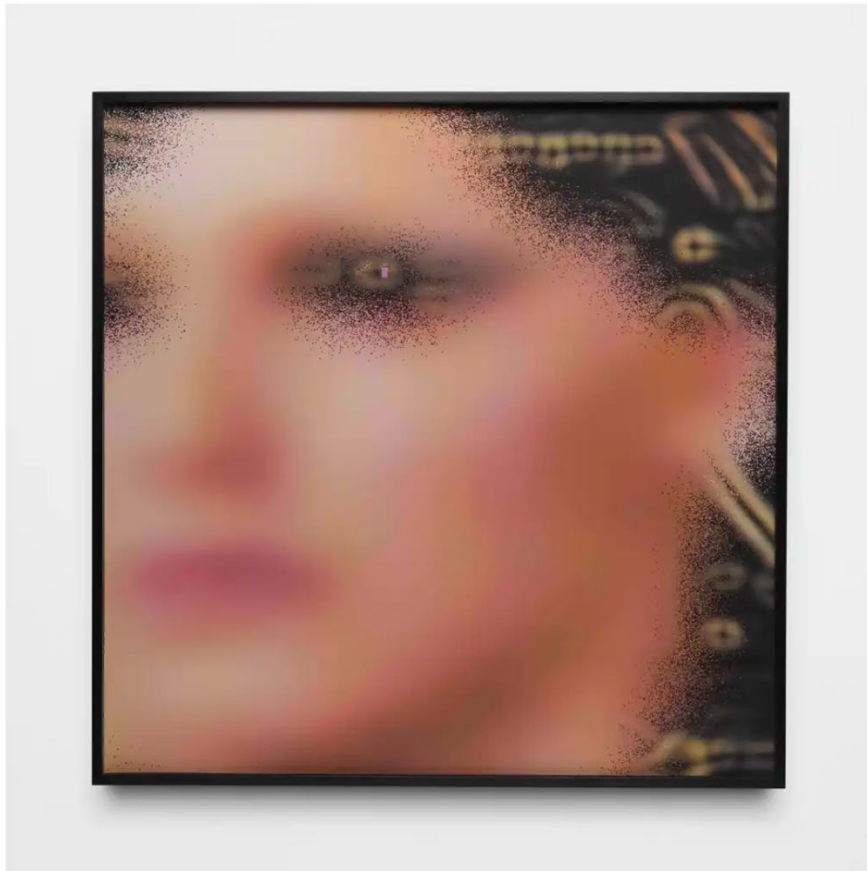
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In *QR Identity Finder* (2022), Hershman Leeson has imposed a QR code over a photograph of her face, which is linked to the artist's website, furthering the idea that we are defined by what we present: the artist's own identity formed by the works she makes public in a sort of negative feedback loop of identification.



Lynn Hershman Leeson, *Transgenic Cyborg*, 2000. Digital print. Courtesy of the artist and Altman Siegel, San Francisco.

*Evidence of A Faulty Algorithm No. 1* (2021) brings this line of thought to its logical conclusion through an artificially generated portrait of a missing person. As a document of someone who may or may not exist or exists only in the context of an image, the piece emphasizes the way identity is so often created in and through images to begin with. Taken at face value, who's to say the individual pictured here is any less real than any other image one selects to represent themselves online?

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There's something a little unsettling about someone who is willing to play so fast and loose with identity. Hershman Leeson's work highlights the fact that we engage in identity's fluidity regularly, both on and offline, in all kinds of verbal, textual, and visual exchanges—both with strangers and those who know us intimately. Hershman Leeson uses the artist/viewer relationship as a working model: if art is an act of relating to another individual across time and space, then she undermines the whole affair on both sides, refusing to expose her true self—leaving us wondering if there even is such a thing—and denying viewers the comfort of their own identities.

I visited *About Face* twice, and both times left less certain of who I was. But this disturbance isn't solely self-alienating; there's an empowering side to it. Hershman Leeson's work serves as a reminder that, through every conscious act of presentation and re-presentation, we always already create ourselves.

"I'm anxious to get to know you," *Self Portrait as Another Person* (1965) told me. I'm anxious to get to know myself, too.

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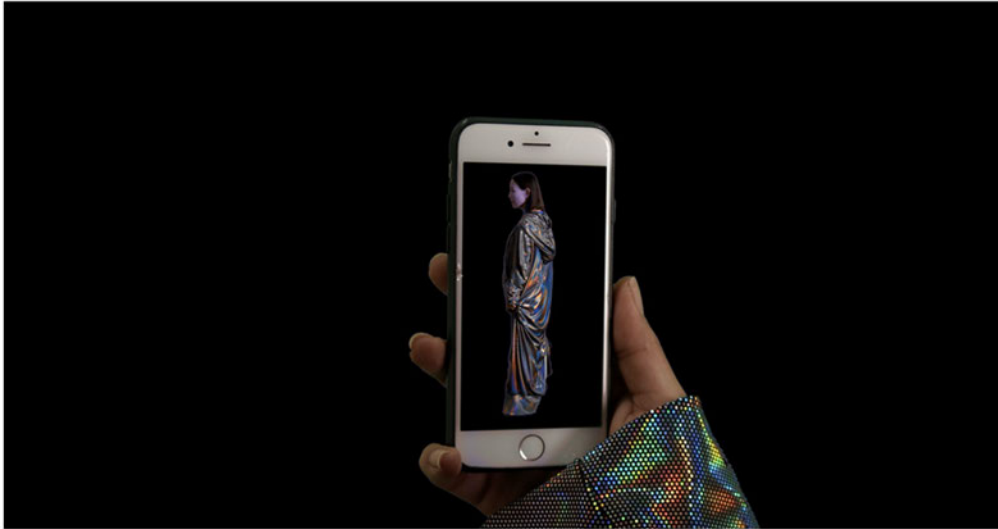
## TOPICAL CREAM

Malick, Courtney, "Lynn Hershman Leeson in Venice: Logic Paralyzes the Heart," *Topical Cream*, May 1, 2022

### Lynn Hershman Leeson in Venice: Logic Paralyzes the Heart

"The cyborg is now 61 years old—and having a mid-life crisis."

Published May 1st, 2022  
By Courtney Malick



Lynn Hershman Leeson, "Logic Paralyzes the Heart," 2022. Courtesy of the artist; Altman Siegel, San Francisco; and Bridget Donahue, New York. Photograph by Andrea Rossetti.  
Joan Chen dressed by Nin Hollein.

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**“The cyborg is now 61 years old—and having a mid-life crisis.”** This is one of many provident zingers from Lynn Hershman Leeson. With a lingering pandemic and a new war in Europe raging, the long-awaited 59th Venice Biennale undoubtedly, at least in part, addresses so many of the drastic changes that the world has undergone in the past few years. In her contribution to the Biennale, Hershman Leeson proposes that the evolution of the cyborg has reached a new turning point, bringing a heightened sense of complexity to the whole affair. The Venice debut of the artist’s video installation, *Logic Paralyzes the Heart* (2022), has won her a distinguished special mention from the Biennale’s jury, confirming the entangled and all-encompassing narratives that she so adeptly reconfigures continue to resonate with audiences and discourse alike.



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

The international group exhibition, curated by Cecilia Alemani and titled *The Milk of Dreams* (a direct reference to the children’s book of the same name by surrealist artist Leonora Carrington), opened unusually early last month, and has been lauded for its history-making majority of women or gender-non-conforming participants. It is clear from the title that the overarching theme in Venice this year, much like the themes Hershman Leeson has meditated upon throughout her multidisciplinary practice, hinges on the progressively blurred distinctions between what is real and what is artificial, innate and ersatz. But what Hershman Leeson brings to such a global discussion of how advancements in technology and media continually change human behavior is made all the more auspicious when taking into account the foreboding kinds of omens embedded within her sprawling body of work. Gliding into the seventh decade of a career filled with brazen examinations of the personal and collective lenses through which identities (and in particular women’s identities) are wrought and mangled, and with an intimate knowledge of the notion of cybernetics—which is central to *The Milk of Dreams*—Hershman Leeson has developed a singularly canny perspective within this context.



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The artist has also noted that she was the first to depict and refer to “the cyborg” in her work, in 1963—just three years after the term was coined by NASA. Since then, she has continually found new ways to traverse the questions and issues raised by the interloping of the machine into the corporeal. In this way, Hershman Leeson has been central to expanding our understanding of the prismatic concept of the cyborg as it has matured alongside the artist’s own practice. From GMO-bred glow-in-the-dark cats to the primary-colored clones of Tilda Swinton in the feature-length AI-jaupt *Teknolust* (2002), and so many other projects in between, Hershman Leeson’s far-ranging practice has parsed the contentions between humanity and technology. Through all of the different ways that this examination has taken shape over the years, her work illustrates, again and again, the myriad schemas through which this perhaps never before so germane, shape-shifter cyborg has manifested itself within contemporary art, culture, and science. With all this at her back, Hershman Leeson’s intimacy with the subject at hand leads viewers to trust her most revealing caricature of this mercurial figure that is embodied in *Logic Paralyzes the Heart*.

As it turns out, the cyborg (at least in Hershman Leeson’s iteration) is Joan Chen! The luminous actress is best known for playing the mysterious and devilishly duplicitous Josie Packard in the original *Twin Peaks* television series. Josie pretends to fall in love with the town’s trusty Sheriff, Harry S. Truman, but as it turns out she had been manipulating both him and her sawmill-owning husband, Andrew Packard. Her backstory, revealed toward the end of the show’s two-season run, is that Josie had actually set the industrial fire that sent her late husband to perish in the flames, in order to collect his insurance money from the mill.

With Chen taking center stage, so to speak, the installation of *Logic Paralyzes the Heart* is positioned in the last section of the Biennale’s Arsenale, where works that investigate technology and cybernetic themes are brought together. Here, the video of Chen’s cyborg is projected in a black box next to an entryway room lined with custom Hershman Leeson wallpaper depicting a vast array of faces. In the video, we learn from Chen that the faces presented are not those of real people, but are computer-generated and amalgamated into a pastiche of AI image segments. After a brief recap about the coinage of the term “cyborg” and a caveat pointing out that its progenitors were “convinced that ‘THE CYBORG’ was an interface to human liberation,” the single-channel video opens with Chen as an anthropomorphized brainchild—of course—seen through the glassy screen of an iPhone. It seems that, whoever this incognito heroine might actually be, she is also the character holding the very phone within which we are now, finally seeing her. A moment later we are zoomed onto a close-up of her face and see that it is overlaid with a transparent, geometrical symbol, while a jumble of letters runs across the bottom of the screen, like a chyron in stereotypical LCD (Liquid Crystal Display) font.



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



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As the blurry contours of her face come into focus, she begins to self-reflexively chronicle her operational past and hopeful future. She gives an oral history of her superpowers: her chameleon-like transmutability, her use of “deep fakes,” her AI “ancestors,” as she refers to them. It becomes clear, if it wasn’t already, that war, conflict, and espionage are central to her origins. At one point Chen is joined by actress Tessa Thompson, of HBO’s *Westworld* (talk about cyborgs!), who appears briefly as an educator of sorts who lays out this sordid history. Chen then links the use of predictive codes for battle-planning within technologized warfare to the use of similar codes by local police forces, who retool them in order to hone crime zones for government surveillance.

Hershman Leeson’s work has always exposed what lurks beneath the surface, conjuring what we think we see. Yet at the same time, her research and information-based practice is ultimately an exercise in the dissection of tiny pieces that make up a whole. Her Venice Biennale debut is no exception. The installation is as much a warning about the future as it is a cryptic reflection of where we’ve been. Hershman Leeson once stated that she “considers the rapid developments of biotechnologies to be the central challenge of our age.” The enmeshment between the natural and the mechanical realms has remained critical to her practice, despite the distinctions between them having inflated over time. By giving a face, a voice, and a body to the otherwise shadowy cipher of the cyborg, *Logic* delves right into the origins of where those two sides of the metaphysical coin first met.



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



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

*Logic Paralyzes the Heart* is not the first Hershman Leeson work to illustrate the ways that technological incursions into daily life and human behaviors has signified the furthering fruition of the cyborgian idea of the body, (whether individual or collective), being overtaken by machinery. She has always been at the forefront of applying whatever the newest modes of tech have been, within their time, into works of art. While her practice has spanned a range of materiality, it has, nonetheless, remained rooted in how we perceive ourselves and others as these technologies incrementally seep more and more into the ways that we live and communicate. This began in the 1960s, when Hershman Leeson’s work often took the form of drawings on paper that then mutated into experiments with Xerox machines. Continuing the trajectory of introducing mechanics into otherwise traditional artistic presentations, her later forays into sculpture were rendered composite by incorporating simplistic machines like tape players, as well as more complex devices like sensors. Through the ’70s and ’80s, as increasingly enigmatic technologies became more accessible, these artistic developments continued to shift, with Hershman Leeson picking up the camera and using photography to achieve what at that time appeared to be unusual and nuanced perspectives. It is poignant to note that during this time, while technology became more and more entrenched within both the subject of Hershman Leeson’s work and the processes through which she conveyed her ideas, her work moved more and more off the page, outside of the white cube, and into “the real world.”

This is perhaps best exemplified by her axiomatic, identity-defying performance project, *Roberta Breitmore*, whose official duration ran from 1973–78, but whose concepts continue to recur throughout Hershman Leeson’s practice. The original project marked her creation not just of a character, but of an actual alternate identity. Breitmore’s being was made “real” with official records like a temporary driver’s license, credit cards, apartment leases in her name, and even dental records and psychoanalysis session notes. These materials validated her supposed existence, despite her having been “played” by a number of proxies, including Hershman Leeson herself.

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Portrait of Lynn Hershman Leeson. Photograph by Lyndsy Welgos.

By the time Y2K rolled around, Hershman Leeson's work had begun to focus on bio-politics. This is perhaps most comprehensively presented in her extensive, eight-room project, *The Infinity Engine* (2014), wherein she created an emblematically antiseptic, lab-like environment made up of a partially interactive, multimedia installation that included genetically modified fish, a 3D printed "human" nose, and a series of video interviews with doctors focusing on regenerative medicines and the human genome. By legitimizing Breitmore's identity through the cataloging of medical records, in particular, Hershman Leeson's foresight proved shrewd. This lays bare the underlying reality that the panopticonic structure within which we ALL exist is, at its core, based not on one's name, or even social security number, but on our blood, our very DNA!

Two years into the COVID-19 pandemic, we have become far more familiar with the concept of vaccines and bio-politics than many of us would prefer. Hershman Leeson's 2021 work on paper, *Vaccine Terror*, which was on view in her most recent solo gallery exhibition, *About Face*, in March 2022 at Altman Siegel in San Francisco, addresses this reticence. Here a daintily etched ink drawing depicts a Big-Brother-esque hand hovering over a much smaller woman's face, poking at it with a sharp object, where, just at the point of contact between the two, a scribbly caption reads, "VACCINE TERROR!" It is telling that Hershman Leeson has said that her "best work [has come] on the cusp of disasters." As we continue to face the disaster that is this pandemic, and accept, if reluctantly, the fact that we will likely be receiving annual booster shots of these new-fangled, MRNA-based antibodies, we see the pith of Hershman Leeson's work at every level. This intuition on her part extends to reflections of other ways that the pandemic has changed how we live and interact as well. In another work on view in *About Face*, a self-portrait titled *QR Identity Finder* (2022), a QR code square is overlaid onto the face of the artist. This image, taken in her home, unsarcastically features in the background a sign that reads "pitalism." Additional letters are cut off, but we see just enough of the word to make it apparent that it could allude to nothing else. Here, Hershman Leeson again nods to the unforeseen side effects of the pandemic and the odd measures we've gone to in order to keep our distance from everyone and everything. Hence the QR code works as a stand-in for all kinds of objects and places that we would normally experience in person, but now access via our phones, which are never not in our hands.

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Lynn Hershman Leeson. "QR Identity Finder," 2022. Archival digital print. 25 1/4 x 25 1/4 in. Courtesy of the artist and Altman Siegel, San Francisco.



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# ARTFORUM

Bellamy, Dodie, "Lynn Hershman Leeson," *Artforum*, June 2022



Lynn Hershman Leeson, *Self Portrait as Another Person*, 1965, wax, wig, glass eyes, makeup, tape recorder, Plexiglas, wood sensor, sound, 20 × 15 × 12".

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## Lynn Hershman Leeson

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“About Face” was an intimate, career-spanning exhibit, comprised of approximately forty pieces that explored Lynn Hershman Leeson’s passion for masks. The major tropes associated with her art—mirroring, replication, projection, cyborgs, screens, avatars, humor—were represented here, in a questioning of the divides between fantasy, the virtual, and the real. Arranged nonchronologically, each artifact acted as a sort of hologram that references the whole. This work suggested someone deeply familiar with ungroundedness. It exuded the brilliance and caginess of the hypervigilant. The artist’s rigorous experimentation and attention to detail are impeccable, but, even at its most abstract, her work delivers visceral and emotional punches.

It was a treat to view “About Face” in the city it was made in, the same city that has so shaped my own creative output. The exhibit’s Thursday-evening opening was sparsely populated, mostly with curatorial types who had been invited to the dinner that followed. A few weeks later, I returned on a Saturday afternoon, and the gallery was pretty much empty, as were the galleries in the nearby art mall, Minnesota Street Project. I first encountered Hershman Leeson’s work a couple decades ago in a group show at New Langton Arts, a seminal San Francisco nonprofit gallery that closed in 2008, which featured documentation of her Roberta Breitmore project, 1973–78, in which she lived an alternate existence as the invented character Roberta. The event was so packed you had to battle your way to the art. The contrast between that memory and the Altman Siegel exhibit’s white expanses, which grow vaster each time I think about them, for me is tragic, pointing to larger issues in San Francisco’s struggling art scene. But then there is an aura of the tragic to all of Hershman Leeson’s work.

In 2019, impressed by the quirky obituary my husband, Kevin Killian, wrote for artist Lutz Bacher, Hershman Leeson wanted to hire him to write an obituary for her. He replied with a long email in which he declined her offer because he himself was dying. They never got to meet in person. Several months later, at Kevin’s memorial, Hershman Leeson read his email in its entirety. It was beautiful and intense and weird—but only after I watched the artist’s confessional video *First Person Plural, The Electronic Diaries of Lynn Hershman Leeson 1984–1996*, just before going to “About Face,” did I realize that her interaction with Kevin was part of her vast multigenre project. The obituary she proposed was yet another form of portraiture, another mask to don for an artist obsessed with personas.

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Her willingness to be vulnerable, to put herself on the line, instills each of Hershman Leeson's avatars with a libidinal charge. A sculpture with a sound element, *Self Portrait as Another Person*, 1965, features a face cast in wax that is actually the artist's own, although much of it is obscured by a long brunette wig. From an accompanying audiotape player we hear her breathing—this sound was recorded when she was hospitalized in an oxygen tent due to complications from a pregnancy. Her work always links back to the personal, even if the connection is obscured or projected onto a double. From *The Electronic Diaries*: "I always told the truth *for the person that I was.*"

Like all the best personal art, Hershman Leeson's points beyond itself. "About Face" explodes preconceived notions of what constitutes a self-portrait. *The Infinity Engine: Glo Cat*, 2013, a photo of a luminous green cat that had been genetically engineered with a jellyfish gene, is as much an avatar for Hershman Leeson as her iconic *Roberta's Construction Chart 1*, 1975. It's no accident that both works were hung on the same wall. Here, the difference between makeup, plastic surgery, and genetic engineering was but a matter of degree. When your art production originates out of the paradigms of one century, then continues into another century with its very different paradigms, you either ossify or look around. Hershman Leeson utilizes whatever culture offers up to her, eagerly engaging with the local tech industry. Thus, not only has she managed to remain relevant, but her art is also still ahead of its time.

— Dodie Bellamy

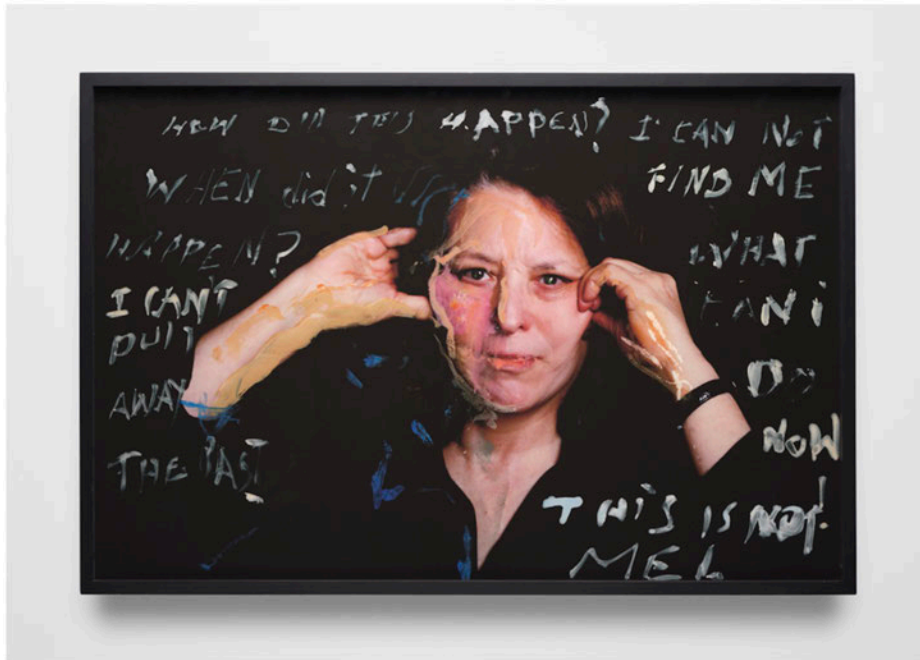


# HYPERALLERGIC

Wilson, Emily, "Lynn Hershman Leeson Thinks It's Time That Her Work Is Recognized," *Hyperallergic*, April 11, 2022

## Lynn Hershman Leeson Thinks It's Time That Her Work Is Recognized

"For years, I couldn't show my work, I couldn't get a gallery, and people in New York wouldn't pay attention to me," she says. "So I think I deserve it — just for not giving up if nothing else."



Lynn Hershman Leeson, "How Did This Happen?" (2012), archival digital print, 28 x 42 inches (all images courtesy the artist and Altman Siegel)

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SAN FRANCISCO — Lynn Hershman Leeson’s first solo exhibition at San Francisco’s Altman Siegel includes an old-fashioned metal lunchbox with a ceramic mouth inside; a digital print of a cat crossed with a jellyfish; digital prints of cyborgs; and stamps that the artist made with her image on them and sent out because, in her own words, “I wanted the government to cancel my face.”

*Lynn Hershman Leeson: About Face* features collages, paintings, drawings, sculptures, and videos from the last five decades of Lynn Hershman Leeson’s career. Reflecting on how the show came about, the artist describes how she kept seeing faces as she looked through her collection of work over the years — which makes sense, since so much of her work is about identity, along with other themes like erasure and time.

“You know, it’s like Duchamp said, that if you’re lucky you have three ideas in your lifetime. They’re all the same idea but they look different,” she said, laughing and adding that maybe she only has two ideas: “[one] using technology like sound and sensors, which is really where the AI in cyborgs comes from, and maybe the other one is about identity and loss of self and where the blur of reality ends and what makes something fiction.”



Lynn Hershman Leeson, "Reconstructing Roberta" (2005), digital print on aluminum, 39 3/4 x 29 5/8 inches

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This line blurring reality and fiction was the subject of one the artist's most important bodies of work: a five-year series revolving around the creation of the fictional character of Roberta Breitmore. Starting in 1973, Hershman Leeson performed Roberta Breitmore going about her daily tasks, such as getting a driver's license and apartment, or putting an ad in the newspaper for a roommate. Ways of altering your face and erasing your identity come up again and again in the show, such as in "Reconstructing Roberta" (2005), where marks on her face show where she will be getting Botox, an eyelid lift, and a dermabrasian peel, among other alterations.



Lynn Hershman Leeson, "Self Portrait as Another Person" (1965), wax, wig, glass eyes, makeup, tape recorder, Plexiglas, wood sensor, sound, 20 x 15 x 12 inches

Walking through the exhibition before sitting down for an interview, Hershman Leeson pauses in front of a wax head with a wig, sensors, and a tape recorder.

"This is a historic piece because it's really the first media work anybody ever did," she said. "You stand in front of it and if you listen, it talks to you. It was really about interaction and technology, but nobody had ever combined sound and interaction before, so nobody knew what it was."

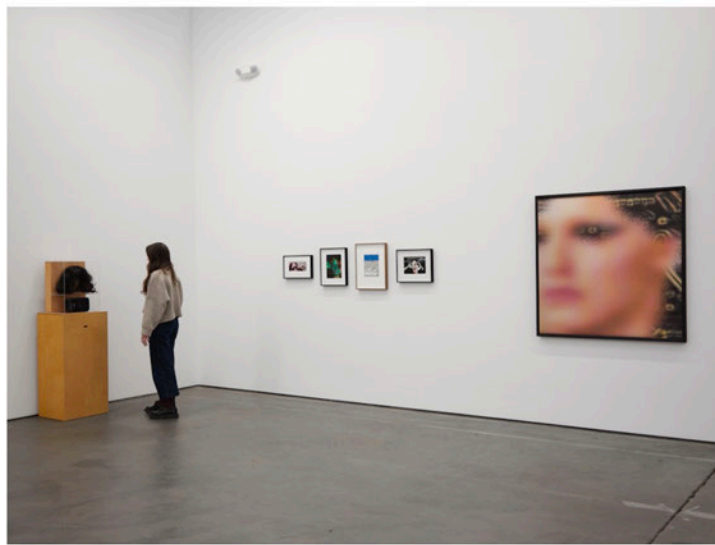
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This sculpture, “Self Portrait as Another Person” (1965), is from Hershman Leeson’s *Breathing Machines* series, which she made after developing respiratory problems while pregnant. The artist recorded her breathing and added the sound to the pieces, along with snippets of dialogue, like “What’s your name?” and “I want to know all about you.” Hershman Leeson submitted the piece to the Berkeley Art Museum at University of California, Berkeley in 1966 when invited to present work as part of a showcase of female artists. However, the *Breathing Machines* were met with such ire from the museum’s curator — who, put off by the disconcerting, breathing, and interrogatory sculptures, told the artist that sound wasn’t art — that the show closed a day after its opening. Though extreme, it is an example of the resistance that Hershman Leeson’s work met for decades.



Installation view of Lynn Hershman Leeson: *About Face* at Altman Siegel, San Francisco

Now, after years of feeling ignored, Lynn Hershman Leeson is finally receiving attention from the art world, with her practice combining art, technology, and performance often called ahead of its time (“The Artist is Prescient” was the headline of a [New York Times review](#) of her show last year). Her 2010 documentary, *Women Art Revolution: A Secret History* on 40 years of the feminist art movement was selected by MOMA as one of the best documentaries of the year. In 2014, the ZKM | Center for Art and Media Karlsruhe in Germany mounted the first [major retrospective](#) of her work. Last year, she had her first [solo museum exhibition](#) at the New Museum in New York. And later this month, she will be presenting a new video at the Venice Biennial, “Logic Paralyzes the Heart,”(2022) about a 61-year-old cyborg.

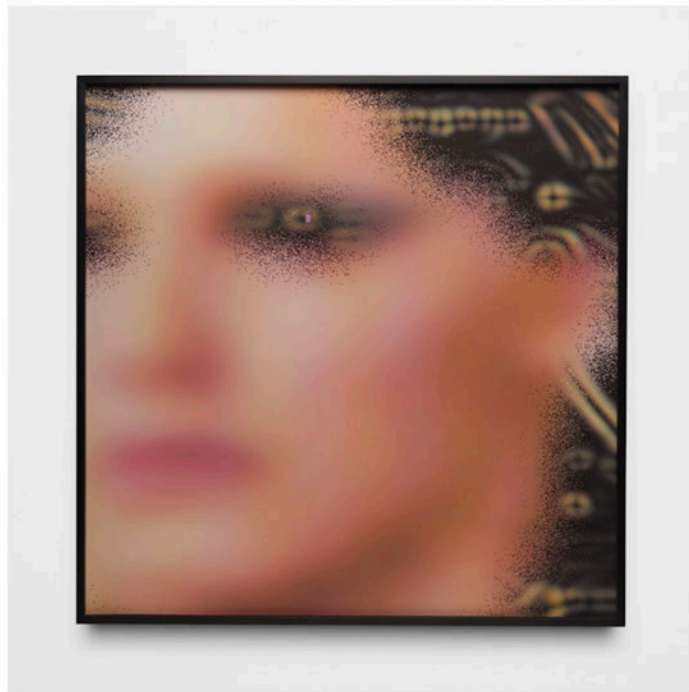
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Hershman Leeson thinks it's about time, as she has been making and doing things — such as exploring sensors, artificial intelligence, and cyborgs — that no one else was making or doing for decades. “For years, I couldn't show my work, I couldn't get a gallery, and people in New York wouldn't pay attention to me,” she says. “So I think I deserve it — just for not giving up if nothing else.”



Lynn Hershman Leeson, "Transgenic Cyborg" (2000), digital print, 49 x 48 3/4 inches



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Bravo, Tony, “At 80, artist Lynn Hershman Leeson is more relevant than ever,” *San Francisco Chronicle*, April 6, 2022

## At 80, artist Lynn Hershman Leeson is more relevant than ever



Lynn Hershman Leeson looks at her piece “How Did This Happen?” at her exhibition “About Face” at Altman Siegel.  
Photo: Gabrielle Lurie / The Chronicle

In 1972, San Francisco artist Lynn Hershman Leeson inadvertently caused an entire showcase of female artists to shut down. The exhibition was at the Berkeley Art Museum (now the Berkeley Art Museum and Pacific Film Archive), and the issue wasn't one of content or subject matter per se. It had to do with expanding definitions of artistic mediums.

The exhibition featured Leeson's “Breathing Machines”(1965-68), the foundations of which are wax casts of her face that include wigs, glasses and other ephemera. When approached, a sensor would trigger a recording of Leeson speaking and her labored breathing sounds, inspired by her hospitalization for cardiomyopathy, a pregnancy complication. The work in question, “Self Portrait as Another Person” is now on view at “About Face,” a show of Leeson's work at Altman Siegel gallery.



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“Brenda Richardson, the chief curator, closed the show overnight and said it wasn’t art,” said Leeson in a recent interview at the gallery, pushing back a lock of auburn hair, laughing at the memory. “Nobody had ever used sound before, but I didn’t know that.

“You as an artist can see the future in a way that the general populace can’t,” Leeson continued. “Museums and some critics may take their reference from history and the past, but if you’re doing something in your time, they have no reference for it.”

In an art world where interactivity is now commonly touted and sound installations are de rigeur, the controversy feels almost quaint. But it also illustrates how ahead of the curve – and sometimes misunderstood – Leeson has been throughout her career. And in a social climate where feminism and explorations of personal narratives are more a part of the cultural dialogue than ever, Leeson is now held up by many as a pioneer.

“There is this element of identity politics in her work, but it’s steeped within the politics of technology,” said gallerist Claudia Altman Siegel, who has represented Leeson in San Francisco since 2020. “It’s a particularly relevant conversation right now.”



Lynn Hershman Leeson's exhibition "About Face" at Altman Siegel gallery includes her piece titled "Roberta's Construction Chart I" from 1975.  
Photo: Gabrielle Lurie / The Chronicle

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For Leeson, being ahead of the culture is part of the job of being an artist – even when it leads to something like the closing of an exhibition.

Now, 50 years later, Leeson is one of the 43 featured American artists at the 59th edition of the Venice Biennale (on view in Italy April 23-Nov. 27), perhaps the most significant international art event in the world. At 80, Leeson is reaping the rewards of a career that has been not only culturally prescient, but also built on her own terms.

Born Lynn Lester, Leeson has been creating at the intersections of art, technology and identity for six decades. In a present driven by social media, issues of identity and scientific innovation, looking at her body of work at times feels like gazing into a crystal ball of contemporary culture. There was her 1972-79 “Roberta Breitmore” project where Leeson crafted and assumed a fictional persona through costuming and makeup, but also by creating materials to “prove” Roberta’s existence, like getting a driver’s license in her name and placing ads for potential roommates for her alter ego.



Lynn Hershman Leeson, “Seduction,” 1985, gelatin silver print, McEvoy Family Collection.

Photo: Courtesy the artist / Bridget Donahue Gallery, New York; and Altman Siegel, San Francisco.

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Then there's "Lorna" (1983), credited as the first work of computer-based, interactive video-disk art, where, as in a video game, viewers use a remote control to navigate the title character through choices that change the possible outcomes of Lorna's narrative. The artist's "Electronic Diaries," a series begun in 1984 where she filmed herself in a confessional style, predated both reality television and online video blogging.

Perhaps most notable is Leeson's "Agent Ruby." Initially created as part of the expanded world of her 2002 film "Teknolust," it was an interactive website featuring an artificial intelligence character users could question and get answers from based on information the program pulled from online. The work, now hosted on the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art website, inspired a 2013 exhibition at the museum and predates the popularity of apps by about six years — and the release of the iPhone's Siri technology by a decade.

"She has kept doing what she's always done, which is to push forward a practice that is hybrid and at the forefront of technology," said Rudolf Frieling, SFMOMA's curator of media arts. "In some ways, I think we as curators, critics and institutions have just become more used to the hybrid nature of works like hers."

Leeson's installation "Room #8" will be part of the SFMOMA exhibition "Speculative Portraits," opening April 9. The new acquisition is part of Leeson's "Anti-Bodies" series and the final installation in the eight-room "Infinity Engine," which explores genetic engineering and DNA manipulation.

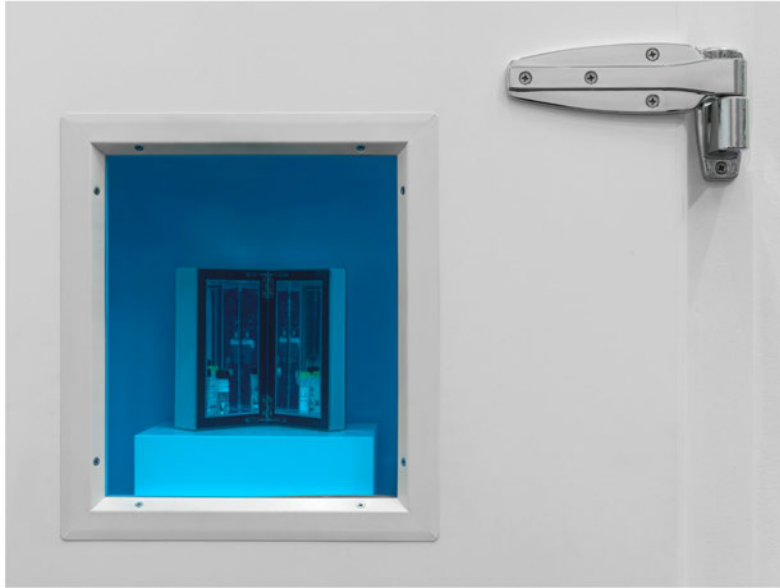
The centerpiece of "Room #8," bathed in blue light and observed only through a window, consists of two glass vials: One contains the powder of the LYNNHERSHMAN antibody developed by Thomas Huber, head of antibody research at Novartis, to reflect the artist's name in its molecular structure. The second vial holds 300 nanograms of synthetic DNA in which the digital documentation of the exhibition, as well as Leeson's diaries and portions of her research, are stored. (Synthetic DNA is an archival method of storing information developed by George Church that first became available to Leeson in 2017.) Frieling sees the work as a culmination of Leeson's career body of work and her scientific collaborations.

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Lynn Hershman Leeson, Room #8, 2006-18.  
Photo: Dario Lasagni / Courtesy the New Museum

Recent months have been especially fruitful for Leeson. In addition to her 2021 retrospective “Twisted” at New York’s New Museum, Leeson was also a featured filmmaker on the Criterion streaming app, where her work with actor Tilda Swinton, including “Teknolust,” was highlighted. One of her most well-known images, the 1985 photograph “Seduction,” showing the reclining body of a woman with a television in place of her head, is on view at the McEvoy Foundation for the Arts show “Image Gardeners,” exploring depictions of women through the female gaze. Leeson is also contributing a billboard to the project “A Cool Million,” an art campaign to raise awareness of climate change during Earth Month that the Fine Arts Museums of San Francisco is partnering with her on at 967 Mission St.

In some ways, “Seduction” is a kind of visual shorthand for some of her best-known themes, including ideas of hybridization of humans and technology, and specifically her interest in the concept of cyborgs. It’s a subject that her work selected for the Biennale, the short film “Logic Paralyzes the Heart,” featuring actor Joan Chen, also addresses.

While Leeson will not reveal specifics of the Biennale entry, she agreed that her selection has been a pinnacle in this new stage in her career, one where she is being acknowledged more widely for her work. But she is not ready by any means to rest on her laurels. Leeson maintains a daily art practice from the kitchen table of the apartment she shares with her husband, George, and also has studio space at the Minnesota Street Projects in Dogpatch. She hopes to continue working on developing film projects and is involved in an ongoing collaboration with Huber on an environmental art project, “Twisted Gravity,” that removes plastic from water.

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Tilda Swinton in Lynn Hershman Leeson's 2002 film "Teknolust."  
Photo: The Chronicle

"These women (like Leeson) who are living long enough to be excavated or self-excavated, I take my hat off to them," said writer and cultural critic Hilton Als, a friend of Leeson's. "But they should also be telling us to kiss their ass. I think it took two generations, mostly of women, to even comprehend her language."

At 80, Leeson said she holds no bitterness toward curators and critics who have dismissed or excluded her from the cultural narrative: With continuing distinctions like her Biennale selection, she doesn't have time.

"Making art is something that I have to do," Leeson said. "Sometimes it's ridiculous, when I look back at it, I don't know, it's like someone else did it. The real key is doing your work and living your life, and I think I've done both in a healthy way. I was able to do a significant amount of the things I was dreaming of."



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Lynn Hershman Leeson poses for a portrait while looking at her piece "Reconstructing Roberta" from 2005 at her exhibition "About Face" at Altman Siegel gallery in March in San Francisco.

Photo: Gabrielle Lurie / The Chronicle

**"Lynn Hershman Leeson: About Face"** 10 a.m.-6 pm. Tuesday-Friday; 11 a.m.-5 p.m. Saturday. Through April 23. Free. Altman Siegel, 1150 25th St., S.F. 415-576-9300. <https://altmansiegel.com>

**"Speculative Portraits"**: 1-8 p.m. Thursday; 10 a.m.-5 p.m. Friday-Monday. Saturday, April 9-Sept. 5. \$19-\$25. San Francisco Museum of Modern Art, 151 Third St., S.F. 415-357-4000. [www.sfmoma.org](http://www.sfmoma.org)

**"Image Gardeners"**: 11 a.m.-6 p.m. Wednesday-Saturday. Through April 30. Free. McEvoy Foundation for the Arts, 1150 25th St., Building B, S.F. 415-580-7605. [www.mcevoyarts.org](http://www.mcevoyarts.org)



# ARTFORUM

Hershman Leeson, Lynn and Canada Choate, “Lynn Hershman Leeson on Her Work for the Venice Biennale,”  
*Artforum*, April 2022

## LYNN HERSHMAN LEESON ON HER WORK FOR THE VENICE BIENNALE

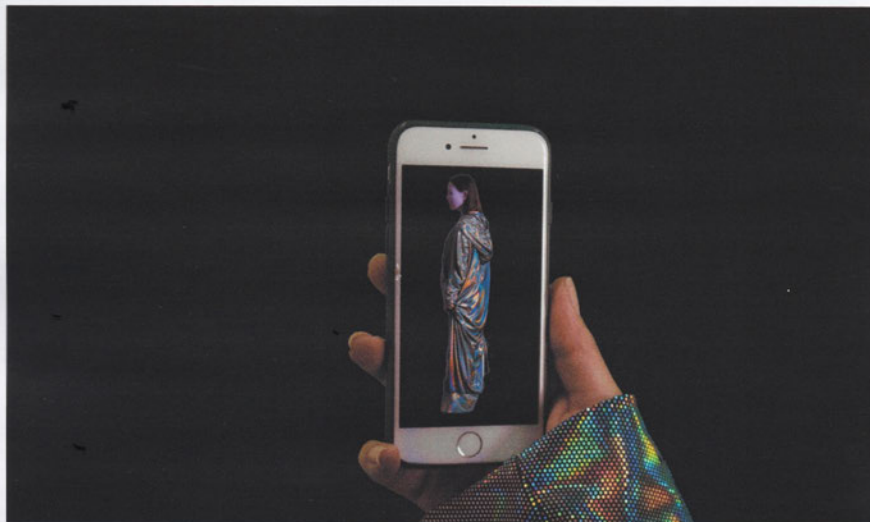
**THE TERM CYBORG** turned sixty in 2020. I realized this just last year, so my project, *Logic Paralyzes the Heart*, is about a sixty-one-year-old cyborg, played by the actress and filmmaker Joan Chen, who is reconsidering the trajectory of her life. She was made by NASA, and since her birth robotic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

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

the Bay Area is driving the whole world right now . . . minus the art world.

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

—As told to Canada Choate



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

# BORDERCROSSINGS

Shearer, Steven, "Found Everything: An Interview with Lynn Hershman Leeson," *Border Crossings*, January 20, 2022

## Found Everything An Interview with Lynn Hershman Leeson

Interviews

In her life so far, the San Francisco-based artist Lynn Hershman Leeson has lived the lives of many women. If, in addition to making films, a film were to be made about her, it could take a clue from the 1957 drama *The Three Faces of Eve*. But to be accurate, the film would have to increase the number in its naming. Her biopic would be called *The Multiple Faces of Lynn*, and what it might lack in drama it would more than compensate for in intelligence and technological innovation. Hershman Leeson's practice as an artist has been going on now for 55 years, and over that time, she has continued to make compelling and groundbreaking work. In *The Dante Hotel*, 1972–73, she set up one of the first site-specific, interactive environments in a rundown San Francisco hotel; in *Lorna*, 1984, she constructed an installation that used the first interactive video disc; in *Teknolust*, 2002, she employed state-of-the-art high-definition video and graphics to make a feature-length film about love in the age of artificial intelligence; and in *The Infinity Engine*, 2014, she designed a functional replica of a genetics lab, which included among its specimens genetically modified fish and animals. As early as 1970, she was making table settings and hosting performance dinners before Judy Chicago's first exhibition of *The Dinner Party* in 1979. Hershman Leeson has always been ahead of her time.

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



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

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The generative confusion that afflicts Emmy is Lynn's as well. The most complex of her adopted characters was Roberta Breitmore, a fictional alter ego she created in 1973 and then performed for the next five years. She called Roberta "my own flipped effigy—we were living encrypted lives." Miss Breitmore managed to secure a driver's licence and credit cards and to place a classified ad for a roommate, and had her own wardrobe, speech patterns, gestures and mannerisms. By 1977 she had divided into four personalities, all of whom were performing in public as Roberta. For Hershman Leeson, living two lives became so complicated that she felt the need for an exorcism, which occurred in 1978 in a ceremony at the Palazzo dei Diamanti in Ferrara, Italy, over the crypt of Lucrezia Borgia. For the most part, Roberta was gone, or at least one of her manifestations stopped turning up. But she came back on numerous occasions: in 1978 as the heroine of a graphic novel drawn by Zap Comix artist Spain Rodriguez; in the form of a telerobotic doll in 1996; and as a Second Life avatar in Life Squared in 2005. It seems that once you're someone else, it becomes increasingly difficult to be only yourself.

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



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Roberta and the other women whom Hershman Leeson invented traced a rich and layered psychological profile. Any persona is a mask, and any mask performs a double function: it is a way of assuming one identity while hiding another. In a 1993 text called “Romancing the Anti-body: Lust and Longing in (Cyber)space,” Lynn underlines the need for a personal mask. “Masks camouflage the body and in doing so liberate and give voice to virtual selves. As personal truth is released, the fragile and tenuous face of vulnerability is protected.” Hershman Leeson has admitted to a number of traumatic periods and events in her life, and in response her adoption of other selves functions as a strategy of disengagement. Her most revelatory project in this regard was *The Electronic Diaries*, 1984–2019, an extended series of video recordings where she speaks to the camera as if it were a cross between an intimate companion and a therapist. She describes the diaries in a straightforward way—“I began to reconstruct myself by talking into a video camera”—but what she records is disarmingly direct and devastating. In a combination of association and stream-of-consciousness, she relates incidents that include eating disorders, marriage breakdown, abandonment, domestic violence, physical and sexual abuse, incest, the Holocaust and horror. At one point in the *Diaries* she says, “We need to perform major surgery on our psyches.” These unrehearsed spoken diaries are that surgery, and as a viewer you can’t look away.

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



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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Yes. It depends on what the subject is. This one is going to be an installation. It's called *Logic Paralyzes the Heart* because the Internet and logic from AI are all based on predictions and expectations rather than empathy. It'll be just a small installation, a micro-film, similar to *Shadow Stalker* (2018–21). It's the next one in that line.

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

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

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

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

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## AnOther

Allsop, Laura, "How Lynn Hershman Leeson Became The Art World's Most Prescient Pioneer," *AnOther*,  
November 24, 2021



# How Lynn Hershman Leeson Became The Art World's Most Prescient Pioneer

The artist has spent six decades at the forefront of emerging artistic practices, exploring the internet, biotechnologies and Artificial Intelligence years before any of her contemporaries. Here, she reflects on her formidable career

Among the rare early works by **Lynn Hershman Leeson** – now showing as part of group exhibition *Code of Arms* at London's Gazelli Art House – is a small collage titled *Looking Forward*, from 1974. It shows a face in profile superimposed onto a backdrop of vertical lines, with the phrase "A Head Looking Forward" printed across the top half. As a metaphor for Hershman Leeson's life and career, it couldn't be more apt: with her pioneering, six-decade practise combining performance, film and biotechnologies, the artist has always been ahead of the times. A casual list of the now 80-year-old's startlingly prescient works would have to include her disarmingly confessional videotapes, *The Electronic Diaries*; her "e-dream portal" AI chatbot, Agent Ruby; and of course, her years-long performance in the 1970s as alter ego Roberta Breitmore.

Fresh from a celebrated solo exhibition at Manhattan's New Museum, in *Code of Arms* Hershman Leeson is honoured as part of a group of early adopters of Artificial Intelligence and machine learning in art. Though ostensibly analogue, the drawings by Hershman Leeson on display show a fascination with cyborgs and the relationship between humans and machines. It's a fascination Hershman Leeson has carried throughout her career, including into her film work (her 2002 film *Teknolust* featured Tilda Swinton as a pioneering bio-geneticist, who replicates herself into three Yohji Yamamoto-clad cyborgs). But though Hershman Leeson has always been excited about the potential of new technologies, she has also always been aware of their potential for abuse. (Her 2019 short film, *Shadow Stalker*, starring Tessa Thompson and January Steward, explored the dangers of predictive policing and data mining.)



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Here, she tells AnOther about her long career at the forefront of emerging artistic practices, her instinct to archive her own work and that of other pioneering women, and why we need to dissolve the boundaries between art and science.

**Laura Allsop: Your work is so fascinating and wide-ranging, it's difficult to focus on just one area. But let's start with the early works in *Code of Arms*. What attracted you to the idea of the cyborg?**

Lynn Hershman Leeson: Well, I had copied a Da Vinci drawing from the Cleveland Museum. It was a really good drawing and I wanted to show people, so I put it in a Xerox machine – which was new at the time; nobody had done that – and it got mashed. I was horrified. But then I found that it was better after that: the merging of the machine and my own drawing, even though it was mangled, [showed that] humans really were partners with machines, that we weren't separate from them any more. So that's when I started to think about cyborgs. The word cyborg was coined in 1960 and I think I started to do the cyborg works in the early 1960s, so I just felt like there was something coming where technology was not an enemy, but a partner.



Lynn Hershman Leeson. Missing Heart = Heartless?, 1970. Courtesy the artist and Gazelli Art House

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**LA: And you were hospitalised around that time, with struggles related to cardiomyopathy – was it your own physical fragility that made you think about what machines could do to help the body?**

LHL: I think it was just my interaction with things like MRIs and EKGs, and having them become part of me. Once you go through that, it's with you forever.

**LA: There has been a narrative in recent years of women artists being rediscovered later in life. It must be gratifying having your work recognised but also frustrating that it's taken this long.**

LHL: Well the thing is, I wasn't rediscovered because I was never discovered in the first place. The discovery came when I was 73 years old at the ZKM [Center for Art and Media in Germany, in 2014]. There are two parts to this: one is, what else are you going to do with your time? You don't work to get discovered, you work to do the work. But it was frustrating because I had to take a lot of different jobs, and I saw the people around me who were a different gender selling their work and putting it in museums and getting reviewed, and all of that eluded me ... It's really a series of humiliations, being an artist – but particularly a female one, and particularly at my age.

**LA: You've used the word entitlement a few times in interviews, and not in a pejorative way. Why do you think it's important that younger and marginalised artists allow themselves to feel a sense of entitlement?**

LHL: Because my generation didn't. If somebody said you couldn't show your work or somebody laughed at you, you didn't have enough entitlement to tell them where to go or to tell them they were crazy. You had enough entitlement to keep working sometimes, but many people stopped – they were so thwarted by the oppression that they didn't continue. So I think entitlement is confidence, and confidence allows you to do things no matter what. I think you need that force.

**“It's really a series of humiliations, being an artist – but particularly a female one, and particularly at my age” –  
Lynn Hersmann Leeson**

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**LA: Did you have a sense that one day your work was going to get the recognition it deserves?**

LHL: Yeah. I was talking to some museum about doing a show, but they would never give it a date, and I said "well, someday, you're going to do it, but it'd be nice to do it when I can come to it." [Laughs]. So I really had confidence in my work, and I really knew what was bad work. I knew what was original, and I knew that the work I was doing was completely original – nobody had ever thought about these things.

**LA: Your work prefigured the way that people engage with things like Instagram, and how they perform for it. How do you find using social media?**

LHL: I just use it as news communication and promotion of exhibitions. So I don't perform for it the way I did with [the Roberta Breitmore series].

**LA: Do you think about Roberta much these days?**

LHL: I think about her because I'm putting together the last remaining archive of her; edition one of three. So I'm trying to organise that. But when she needs to surface she does. I don't think about it. She just insists on coming out in some way.

**LA: You said in an interview that if had you done the Roberta project later, you could have risked potential arrest for identity fraud.**

LHL: For sure. Somebody tried to and they were sent to prison for identity theft. They tried to do it as an artwork to get banking accounts and credit cards, but nobody believed it was an artwork. I was lucky [with Roberta that] it was pre-computers, so nobody caught on.

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Lyn Herishman Leeson. From the Roberta Bretnore series. Courtesy the artist and C Hotwire productions llc

**LA:** I was thinking about Roberta in terms of the notion of the "scammer." It's migrated from real fraudsters to artists proposing different personae. Someone like Amalia Ulman, for example, or JT LeRoy, who you made a short film about – they have audiences who feel cheated by a narrative they feel they've invested in, and are upset that it's not actually real. What do you think about this?

LHL: Well, I think whenever you go out and meet someone new, you're never guaranteed what's going to happen. But with Roberta, I did limit her meetings to three because I didn't want people to get attached to her; I didn't think that was fair. So she never saw anybody more than that. But you don't know when you go out and answer an ad or go and meet someone that you've found on Instagram. [It's] a risk.

**LA:** What are you excited about for the future? And what frightens you?

LHL: I think that the younger generations always find ways to survive. What's frightening is the onslaught of extinction, but what's exciting is that we have the possibility to subvert extinction if we use hope, human spirit and resilience. I don't think the planet or humans have been under the kind of speeding pressure towards extinction that [they're under] now, and it's spiralling into a global catastrophe. But I also think that there's human behaviour that can change that.



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“What’s frightening is the onslaught of extinction, but what’s exciting is that we have the possibility to subvert extinction if we use hope, human spirit and resilience”

**LA: Is there anything you might be able to tell me about the work you’re doing now?**

LHL: Well, I just finished a piece with Harvard, with the Wyss Institute, that was commissioned by the New Museum, and it showed at Gwangju Biennial. It was a way of converting plastic from water, dissolving it, using electrical pulses, and also using bacteria. So that was really successful. I’d like to do something next with carbon but I haven’t started it yet.

**LA: If you can solve that problem ...**

LHL: I mean if we could dissolve plastic from water, which we did ... One of the scientists quit their job at Harvard to start his own company to do this.

**LA: What would you say that you're proudest of in your work?**

LHL: That it exists. That I took the risks. Much of the work I did was before the language existed for it. I'm proud of the pioneering work: *The Breathing Machines* were the first sound work and touchscreen anybody had done; *Agent Ruby* was the first AI chatbot that anyone had done. It was going with my instincts, and working until something relevant emerged. I’m also proud that I didn’t throw anything away – I threw a lot away, but there’s a lot still left over that I can show.

**LA: People often think about the arts and sciences as distinct. Are you hoping, through your work, to disabuse that idea?**

LHL: We have to really destroy the boundaries of disciplines, because they’re too logical. The name of my new piece is *Logic Paralyzes the Heart*, and when you have too much logic, you don’t have compassion and feeling. You have to have porous edges, and be able to move between disciplines in order to really get a full picture. Now, with global connectivity, we’re not limited to the oppression of any one system being correct.

*This interview has been edited and condensed.*

*Code of Arms is at Gazelli Art House until January 15, 2022. Lynn will be part of a talk on the history of AI in art on November 30.*



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# Flash Art

“Lynn Hershman Leeson ‘Twisted’ *New Museum / New York*,” *Flash Art*, October 2021

Lynn Hershman Leeson “Twisted” *New Museum / New York*



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For over fifty years, Lynn Hershman Leeson has created an innovative and prescient body of work that mines the intersections of technology and the self. Known for her groundbreaking contributions to media art, Hershman Leeson has consistently worked with the latest technologies, from Artificial Intelligence to DNA programming, often anticipating the impact of technological developments on society. As the artist posited in 1998, "Imagine a world in which there is a blurring between the soul and the chip, a world in which artificially implanted DNA is genetically bred to create an enlightened and self-replicating intelligent machine, which perhaps uses a human body as a vehicle for mobility."



The exhibition will bring together a selection of Hershman Leeson's work in drawing, sculpture, video, and photography, along with interactive and net-based works, focusing on themes of transmutation, identity construction, and the evolution of the cyborg. Filling the New Museum's Second Floor galleries, this presentation will include some of the artist's most important projects, including wax-cast *Breathing Machine* sculptures (1965–68) and selections from hundreds of early drawings from the 1960s, many of which have never been exhibited before. Works from the *Roberta Breitmore* series (1973–78), perhaps her best-known project, in which she transformed her identity into a fictional persona, will be shown alongside her video *Seduction of a Cyborg* (1994) and selections from the series *Water Women* (1976–present), *Phantom Limb* (1985–88), and *Cyborg* (1996–2006), among others.

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The exhibition will also include Hershman Leeson's most recent large-scale project, *Infinity Engine* (2014–present), a multimedia installation based on a genetics laboratory that explores the effects of genetic engineering on society. Together, the works in the exhibition will trace the ever-intertwined relationship between the technological and the corporeal, illuminating the political and social consequences of scientific advances on our most intimate selves and biological lives.

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# ARTFORUM

Burleigh, Paula, "Twisted Sister," *Artforum*, September 20, 2021

SLANT

## TWISTED SISTER

Paula Burleigh on Lynn Hershman Leeson

September 20, 2021



Lynn Hershman Leeson, *Seduction of a Cyborg*, 1994, video, color, sound, 5 minutes 52 seconds.

**A WOMAN NAMED ROBERTA BREITMORE** steps off a Greyhound bus and checks into San Francisco's Dante Hotel. The year is 1973. Single with no friends in the city, Roberta nervously contemplates her next move, eventually placing roommate-seeking ads in local newspapers. She receives forty-three responses. A victim of childhood trauma, she never finished college and struggles with anxiety. Susceptible to the promises of self-improvement fads, she joins Weight Watchers and EST. After undergoing an exorcism in 1978, Roberta resurfaces, zombielike, as a telerobotic doll with camera eyes in the 1990s. In 2005, she consults with a plastic surgeon. Her last known activities are in 2018, when she checks into a hotel in Berlin, seemingly in search of a boyfriend.

Who is Roberta Breitmore? Her backstory is legible through an archive of photographs, drawings, and personal artifacts. More difficult to answer, though, is the question of what she is: cyborg or human, dead or alive, real or fake. Most provocative is the question of her autonomy, or lack thereof. Invented and embodied by the artist Lynn Hershman Leeson but also by so-called multiples and eventually even by a doll, Roberta is an individual dispersed across bodies and through time.

Bodily autonomy has long been a feminist rallying cry. Without a doubt, Hershman Leeson is a feminist. And yet among the most revelatory facets of the artist's six-decade career is how she complicates the conversation surrounding bodily autonomy, a concept that underpins not only the demand to govern one's own body but the very existence of a discrete self—corporeal or otherwise. While the former is an important rhetorical strategy in the fight for reproductive rights ("my body, my choice"), the latter is more fraught, tethered to a neoliberal ideology that preaches rogue individualism, severing people from responsibility to a larger community. Contemporary ecological and posthumanist feminisms, on the other hand, challenge anthropocentric worldviews to suggest that our bodies are porous in every sense, materially and ethically enmeshed in vast networks of coexistence and exchange with nonhuman actors. Soon after Hershman Leeson began her career, second-wave feminists in the art world were celebrating the biologically female body as a site of difference, but a difference that presupposed a fixed and essential identity, often narrowly circumscribed in terms of race and class. Hershman Leeson pursued a different path, one that anticipated the urgent questions surrounding the responsibility of bodies to one another—human and non—with which contemporary feminism now grapples.



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View of "Lynn Hershman Leeson: Twisted," 2021, New Museum, New York.

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Hershman Leeson frequently recounts an epiphany that catalyzed her early practice: A Xerox machine jammed and scrambled one of her figure drawings in such an intriguing way that she began to consider the possibilities of technology as a collaborator. Many of the early drawings in “Lynn Hershman Leeson: Twisted,” a retrospective at New York’s New Museum curated by Margot Norton and on view through October 3, reflect confluences between organism and machine, picturing women (with a few men and the occasional animal) as cyborgs, parts of their flesh supplanted by mechanical augmentations: zippers, gears, an electrically pulsating heart. Born with a heart defect, the effects of which intensified with pregnancy, Hershman Leeson was acutely aware of her physical vulnerability during intense periods of hospitalization and recovery. Technology and science opened up possibilities for overcoming the limitations of an ailing body.

Coined in 1960 by scientists Manfred Clynes and Nathan S. Kline, the term *cyborg* initially described an animate being outfitted with inorganic components in order to adapt it to new environments, which at the time were typically imagined as explicitly extraterrestrial. The cyborg appeared in the 1960s American mainstream media as exosuit-clad astronauts and airmen: Cold Warriors and Space Racers. Such masculine and militaristic associations make Hershman Leeson’s delicate drawings of hybrid woman-machine bodies all the more radical for the era. This is not to say that the artist’s view of technology is unequivocally utopian. “Phantom Limbs,” 1985–88, a series of hand-collaged rephotographed compositions, illustrates the more insidious impacts of technology on women’s bodies. Seductively posed women merge with cameras, TV screens, and electrical plugs, pointing to ways in which gendered mass media representations shape and distort women’s self-image.

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Lynn Hershman Leeson, *Seduction*, 1985, black-and-white photograph, 22 x 29 7/8".

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“Roberta Breitmore,” 1972–79, and the ongoing “Water Women” series, 1976–, continue to dismantle perceived divisions between self and other. The artist created the character of Roberta as an archetypal version of a single woman living in San Francisco. More than a series of performances, *Roberta Breitmore* became a fully functional person in the world, complete with distinctive mannerisms, a driver’s license, credit cards, and a psychiatrist—her memory lives on through snapshots (the artist hired a photographer to follow Roberta) and other documents. Text in *Roberta’s Body Language Chart*, 1978, a series of notations analyzing photos of the character, suggests that she is shy and self-effacing. Grappling with intense self-scrutiny, a fear of sex, and depression, Roberta was an amalgamation of the dominant female stereotypes of the 1970s and their damaging effects. Remarking on Roberta’s routinely negative experiences, the artist describes her as “a vehicle to show how endemic this negativity was to our culture.” While Hershman Leeson “played” Roberta for the first five years of her existence, in 1978 the artist hired three other women to inhabit the character—all of whom reported similarly painful feelings while in her guise. An individual dispersed across multiple actors, *Roberta Breitmore* raises questions about what constitutes personhood, challenging the core humanist assumption that a body houses a discrete and individuated subject.

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In 1976, Hershman Leeson described the first “Water Woman” collage as “Roberta’s shadow,” her body converted to water droplets in a perpetual state of evaporation. While *Roberta Breitmore* suggests that an individual can reside in a collective of bodies, the “Water Women” series questions the very notion of corporeal coherence, depicting the human form vaporizing into the ether. Their media varied over time—photo collages, digital prints, etched LED panels—but the “Water Women” generally picture frontal figures floating amid indeterminate flat fields of color. Nearly featureless, they appear at the edge of existence, shimmering into being or dissolving in a continuum of fluids in which body and environment are indistinguishable. The beginnings of the series anticipated ecofeminist theory, which articulates the connections between the degradation of environmental bodies—animals, oceans, forests—and historically marginalized female-identified human bodies.\* The notion of a spiritual affinity between women—particularly Indigenous women and women of color—and the Earth is a much-criticized trope within certain strains of ecofeminism. Indeed, much of the backlash to ecofeminism in the 1990s hinged on charges of its reliance on goddess imagery that reinforced an ahistorical, gendered binary of nature and culture, one that Hershman Leeson challenged in her attention to the interpenetration of humans and machines. The twenty-first century recuperation of ecofeminism recognizes the strands of posthumanism, postcolonialism, and animal studies that are part of ecofeminism’s DNA. It would be an oversimplification to regard the “Water Women” as simple analogies between women and nature. Rather, they illuminate the complicated intersection of the construct of gender, the physical body, and a scarce environmental resource—water. While the “Water Women” may not look like cyborgs, their alliance with technology manifests itself in *Twisted Gravity*, 2021, a collaboration with Harvard University’s Wyss Institute. Using only electricity, portable Aqua Pulse tanks eradicate plastic and other contaminants in water from sources including the nearby East River. LED panels etched with the “Water Women” sit atop the tanks, illuminated in a range of colors during the water-purification process. The installation foregrounds the shared precarity of women’s bodies and water from the surrounding environment, their destinies interlocked.



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View of "Lynn Hershman Leeson: Twisted," 2021, New Museum, New York.

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Many writers have noted the thematic overlap of Hershman Leeson's work and the writings of Donna Haraway, specifically the ways in which the artist's early works anticipate Haraway's landmark "Cyborg Manifesto," published in 1985. The theorist's *Staying with the Trouble: Making Kin in the Cthulucene* (2016) offers another point of dialogue. In the book, Haraway argues for feminist speculative fiction as a powerful strategy for envisioning a future in which humans cohabit with and learn from nonhuman species to negotiate the environmental crisis that have come to define our era. Taking speculative fiction and sci-fi seriously as forms of knowledge production, Haraway praises authors like Ursula K. Le Guin and Octavia Butler for both the farsightedness of their predictions of global crisis and the ingenuity of their imagined solutions. I would add Hershman Leeson to this list. As Karen Archey notes her contribution to the New Museum catalogue, she is a storyteller and a world builder. In her 1997 film *Conceiving Ada*, a brilliant mathematician and computer scientist (played by Tilda Swinton) struggles to recover the memories of Ada Lovelace (1815–1852), the English mathematician now lauded as the first computer programmer. Lovelace understood the potential of her collaborator Charles Babbage's Analytical Engine (1837), a design for a mechanical computer, to manipulate numbers as abstract quantities with applications far beyond mathematics. The film filled in the contours of a figure whose historical record was incomplete and disputed (and sometimes altogether discredited). *Conceiving Ada* joined the ranks of important projects like Cheryl Dunye's *The Watermelon Woman* (1996) in speculating fragmentary or imagined histories into being, laying the groundwork for a more liberated future. In *Twisted Gravity*, Hershman Leeson likewise draws upon figures from the past—from her own archive, no less, with the mythic figures of the "Water Women"—to inform the development of a technology that has the potential to assist in the struggle for planetary survival.

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“Twisted,” New Museum director Lisa Phillips writes of the exhibition’s title, “describes the “ever intertwined relationship between the technological and the corporeal.” Certainly, Hershman Leeson anticipated myriad ways in which technology saturated and transformed everyday life to both positive and deleterious ends. But this recognition of interconnectedness extends beyond technology. “Twisted” could equally evoke helical relationships between bodies and environments, reality and fiction. Her most prescient contribution to contemporary art has been to consistently transcend the limits of an individual’s body and experience in order to ask how things might exist otherwise.

*Paula Burleigh is assistant professor of art history at Allegheny College and the director of the Allegheny Art Galleries.*

\* For more on the figuration of water as a means of envisioning the connection between women’s bodies and the environment, and an overview of the state of posthuman feminism, see Astrida Neimanis, *Bodies of Water: Posthuman Feminist Phenomenology* (London and New York: Bloomsbury Academic), 2017.

# BROOKLYN RAIL

Fabijanska, Monika, "Lynn Hershman Leeson with Monika Fabijanska," *The Brooklyn Rail*, July 2021

JUL-AUG 2021

Art | In Conversation

## Lynn Hershman Leeson with Monika Fabijanska

"Artists have to be optimists  
and believe that their efforts  
will make a difference."



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

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

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

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



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



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

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

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

**Leeson:** Yes, that was around 1965, and they continued from there. Sound was always a way of extending these works in time. I thought sound was part of drawing. I was surprised to learn recently that these were actually the first sculptures to incorporate sound and media as an essential element of their composition. I did faces that talked, giggled, or breathed for the next five years. They had sensors and knew when someone was looking at them, and the sound was an active form of engagement, a way to begin a conversation. Some of these wax pieces had wicks, and were lit and transformed into a performed suicides that I documented to record transformations and transitional evolutions.

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

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

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

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

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

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

**Leeson:** Not because I didn't try!

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

**Leeson:** My most important work came on the cusp of disaster. I was thrown out of a museum for using sound and media in the early 1970s, and figured, who needs museums!<sup>1</sup> So I showed everywhere else. There was no precedent for many of my works from the breathing machines to *Lorna* and on, so galleries and museums found it was not worth showing.

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

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

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

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

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

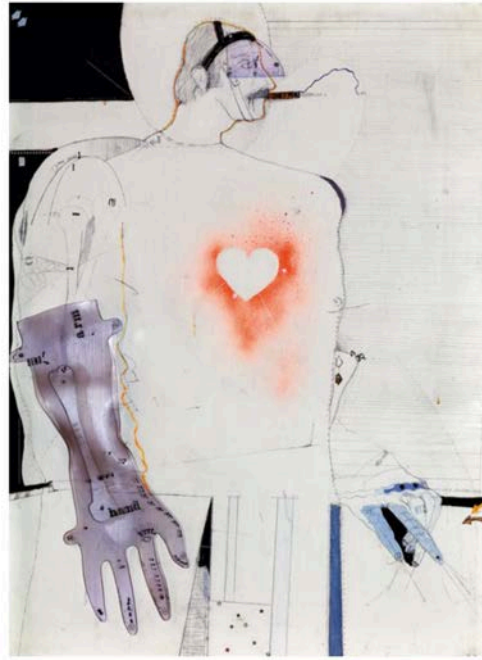
**Leeson:** No. I was pregnant.

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

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

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

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



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



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

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

**Rail:** In what way?

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

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

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

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

**Leeson:** Luck, yes.



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



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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

**Rail:** I agree. I find it problematic that there is excitement about a few women artists getting recognition equal to that of men—while so many other names will fade unless their legacy is written in the history of art. Speaking about feminist historiography, artists often become curators but for an artist to contribute to art history is quite rare. You organized and filmed the re-performance of Yoko Ono’s *Cut Piece* in 1993 and made a video about Ana Mendieta’s death and the murder trial of her husband, *Conspiracy of Silence* in 1991. Later, you did two films about women’s art, *Women Art Revolution* (2010) and *Tania Libre* (2017), directly contributing to feminist historiography. Why, as an artist, did you take up this role?

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

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

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

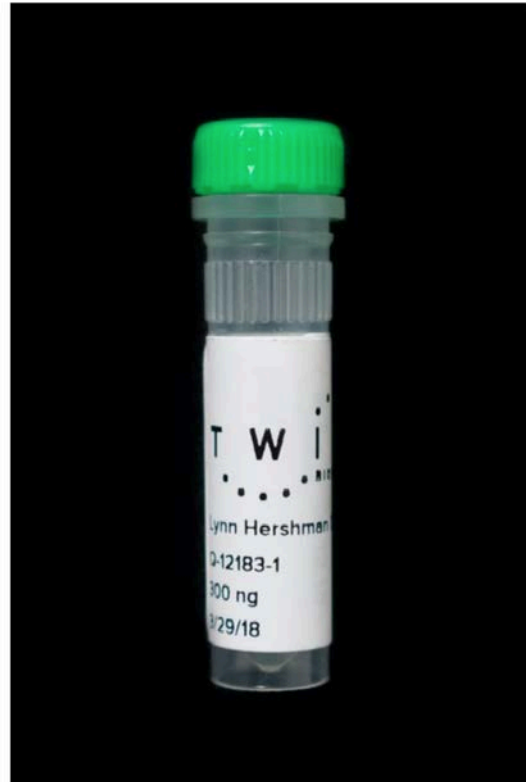
**Rail:** The collaboration with Steve Kurtz led to your interest in biotechnology, and you now have an archive bio-stored in your DNA in addition to your archive at Stanford. So your interest in history as a key to the past and as a key to the future are truly interlocked.

**Leeson:** Yes!

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

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

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



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



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

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

**Leeson:** Yes!

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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



Lynn Hershman Leeson, *CyberRoberta*, 1996. Custom-made doll, clothing, glasses, webcam, surveillance camera, mirror, original programming, and telerobotic head-rotating system, Aprox. 17 ¾ x 17 ¾ x 7 ⅞ in (45 x 45 x 20 cm). Courtesy the artist; Bridget Donahue Gallery, New York; and Altman Siegel, San Francisco

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

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

**Leeson:** I know them, of course, but our work is very different. They were creating works for performance photographs—and in doing so they did not take the risks involved with interacting in real life. I admire their work but presumptions of identities and then performing or photographing them in an art context is different from an investigation into live experiences without expectation. Life improv, so to speak. There was no rope to hold on to. The next generation—which was all about the image, not about the essence of what it means—garnered a lot of recognition for the projects many of us instigated a decade or more before, but that has happened throughout history.

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

**Leeson:** No, not at all.

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

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

**Rail:** What are you afraid of today the most?



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

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

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

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

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

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



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



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

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



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

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

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

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

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

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

**Leeson:** That is a very kind thing to say. Survival and preservation of the planet I think, will have to come from both a spirited ethos and collaboration with all living things. Finally it is essential to replace endemic contamination and ravaged systems, which by the way, includes discrimination and racism, with unity, sentient awareness, and compassion.

# The New York Times

Steinhauer, Jillian, "Lynn Hershman Leeson: The Artist is Prescient," The New York Times, July 8, 2021



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

**By Jillian Steinhauer**

July 8, 2021

For me, and I suspect for many others, the pandemic has prompted much soul-searching about different aspects of my life. Foremost is my dependence on technology, which I found especially troubling over the past year. At a certain point, after months of social

isolation punctuated by video calls and Twitter binges, I felt almost like I was losing my mind, as if my ability to distinguish between the virtual and physical worlds were slipping. It was a strangely mesmerizing and frightening sensation that I recalled recently, after seeing [Lynn Hershman Leeson's](#) exhilarating and intense solo show at the New Museum, "[Twisted.](#)"

A pioneering new media artist and filmmaker who has spent most of her life in San Francisco, after growing up in Cleveland, Hershman Leeson has been [contemplating](#) our connection to machines since the 1960s. Starting out in more traditional forms like drawing, painting, and collage, she went on to make wax sculptures, then videos and artworks using laser discs, touch screens (in the '80s), webcams, artificial intelligence, and most recently, in collaboration with scientists, a water purification system and DNA.

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



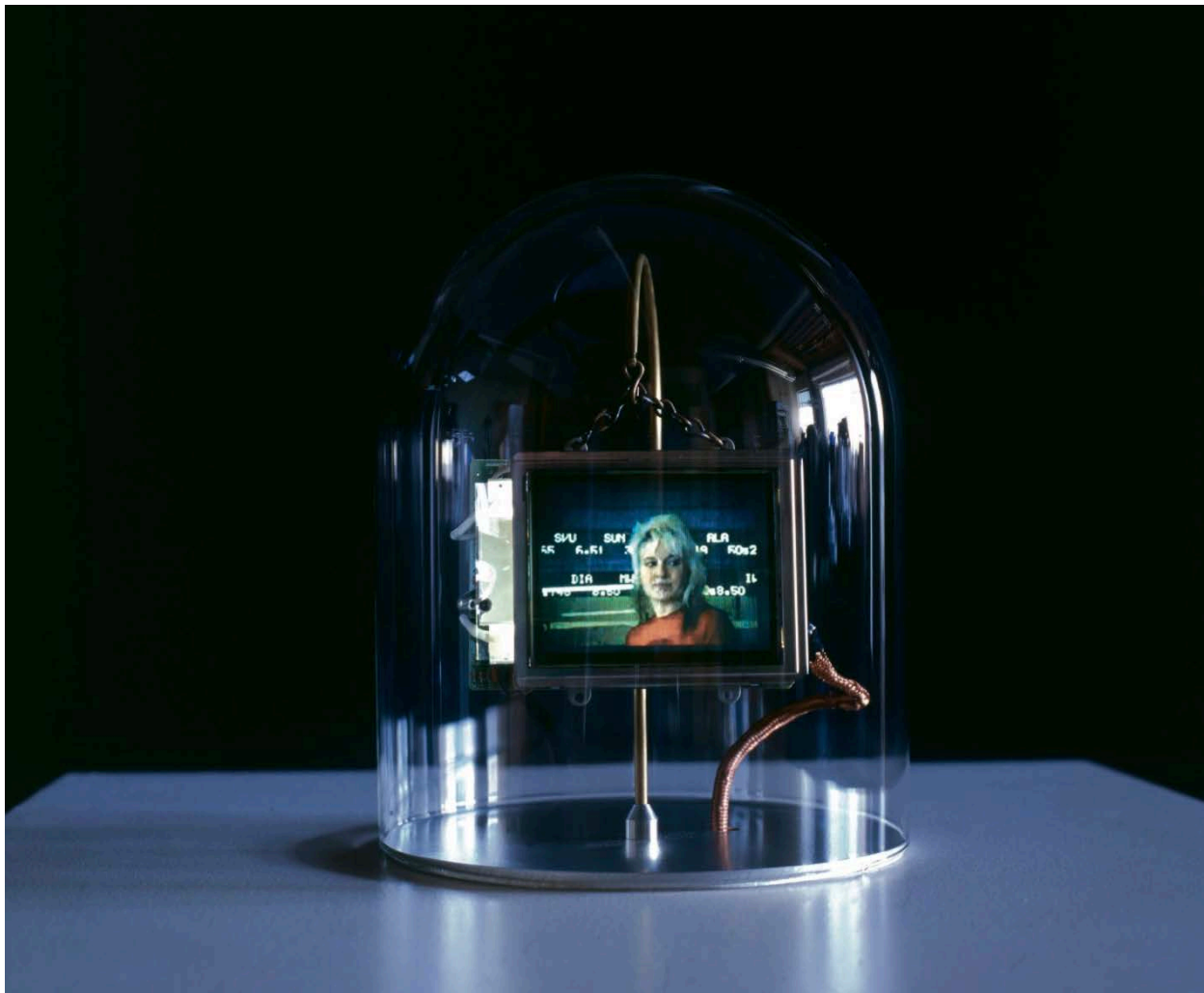
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The exhibition, curated by Margot Norton, goes some way toward rectifying her exclusion: It's a strong, smart survey that gives her overdue credit. It also feels limited and sometimes cramped, omitting a lot while squeezing too much into basically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



Hershman Leeson, "Synthia Stock Ticker," 2000. The changes in the stock market are registered through a woman's moods. Bridget Donahue Gallery and Altman Siegel

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

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



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



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

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



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

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

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



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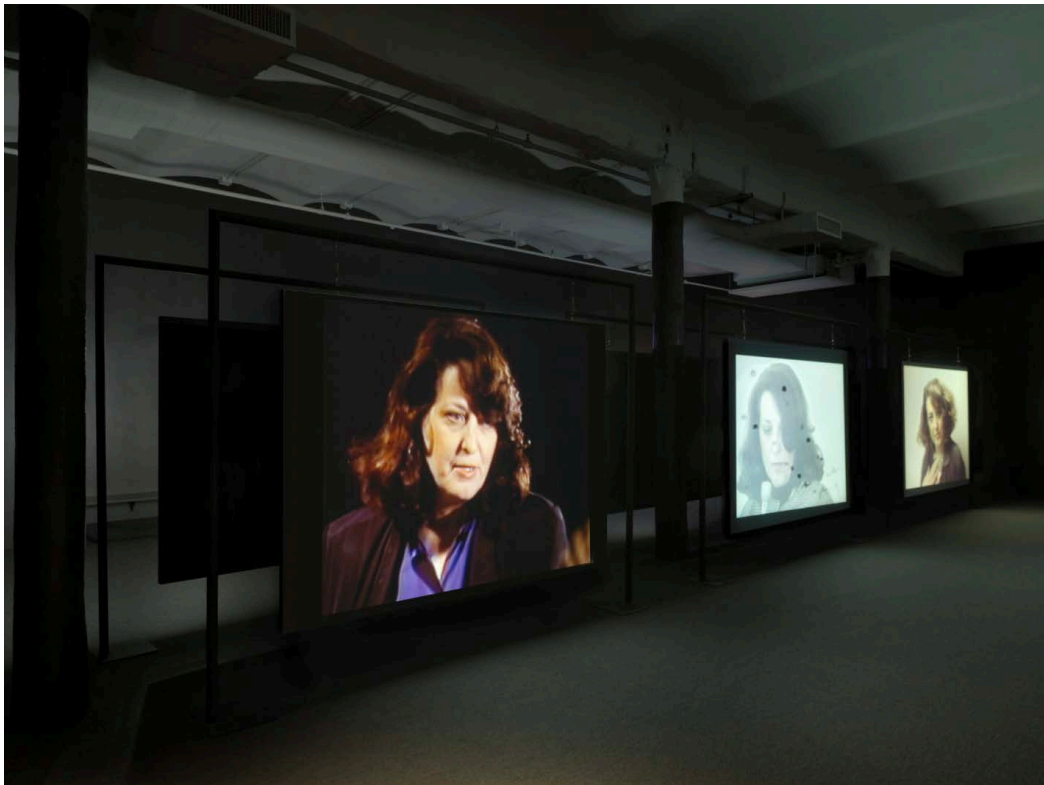
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Installation view of “Lynn Hershman Leeson: Twisted,” at the New Museum, with “Breathing Machines” on plinths, and the artist’s early works on the walls. Dario Lasagni/New Museum



Installation view of “Electronic Diaries.” Dario Lasagni/New Museum

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

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



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“CyberRoberta,” 1996. A robotic doll Leeson Hershman made surveils visitors with its eyes. Bridget Donahue Gallery and Altman Siegel

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

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



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



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

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

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

**Lynn Hershman Leeson: Twisted**

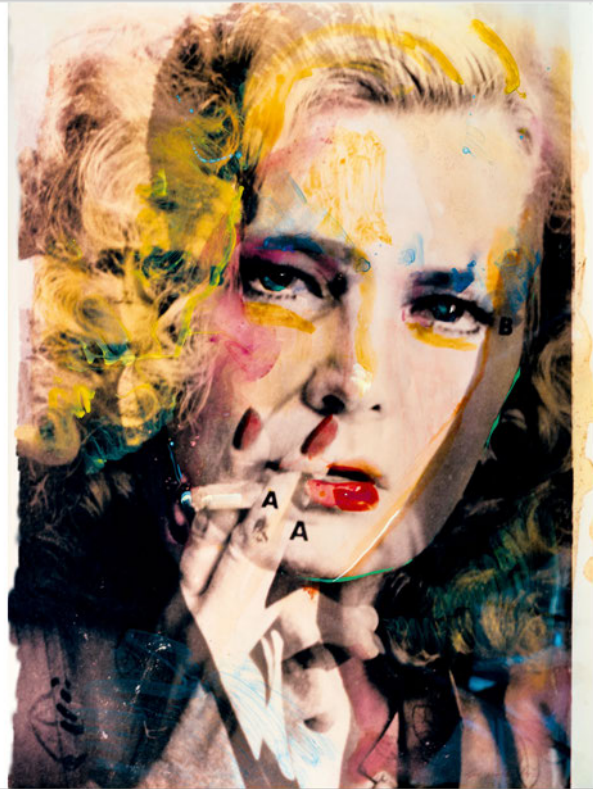
Through Oct. 3 at the New Museum, 235 Bowery, Manhattan. (212) 219-1222, [newmuseum.org](http://newmuseum.org).

# aperture

Myles, Eileen, "Why Lynn Hershman Leeson Is Always Ahead of Her Time," *Aperture*, June 23, 2021

## Why Lynn Hershman Leeson Is Always Ahead of Her Time

The pioneering performance, video, and multimedia artist speaks with the poet Eileen Myles about the connections between technology and society.



Lynn Hershman Leeson, *Rowlands/Bogart (Female Dominant)*, 1982, from the series *Hero Sandwich*

Interviews - June 23, 2021  
By Eileen Myles



In a 1978 film called *Lynn Turning into Roberta*, the artist Lynn Hershman Leeson applies makeup to her face, sets a wig on her head, and gradually eases into the role of her fictitious persona and multiyear performance piece *Roberta Breitmore* (1972–79). Roberta rode buses around San Francisco, went to a psychiatrist, and had her own credit card. "Several times I left my house as Roberta, forgot something, and had to return in Roberta costume and makeup," Hershman Leeson recalled of the years she spent enacting her alternate self, "which was a continual annoyance to my then eleven-year-old daughter."



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To say that Hershman Leeson was ahead of her time would be an understatement. A pioneer in performance, video, and multimedia art who throughout her life has probed the connections between technology and society, she recently converted her collected works into synthetic DNA. As early as 1980, in an interview with Nam June Paik, Hershman Leeson asked, “How long will it be before ordinary people supersede movie stars, and intercommunicative TV and computers supplant fictional film?”

During the 1970s and '80s, while Hershman Leeson was redefining contemporary art, Eileen Myles was writing the stories that would be celebrated in her iconic 1994 book, *Chelsea Girls*, in which life becomes art and the body becomes poetry. “Nothing I said was forgettable,” Myles, who is also a photographer, has noted. “It was all designed to be remembered.” Here, for *Aperture* magazine’s “Orlando” issue, Hershman Leeson and Myles speak about past glories, present fame, and the long life of an artist.



Lynn Hershman Leeson, *Exorcism (Roberta Multiple, Michelle Larson, Being Transformed)*, 1978

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**Eileen Myles: Well, what should we talk about?**

**Lynn Hershman Leeson:** I don't know. It's up to you.

**Myles: I was thinking you would know.**

**Hershman Leeson:** What they told me was that you were going to interview me, so I didn't prepare anything.

**Myles: This is very funny. See, I think they told me the same thing.**

**Hershman Leeson:** [*Laughs*] Well, that makes sense. We could start with doubles.

**Myles: What does "doubles" mean?**

**Hershman Leeson:** Well, I once lived as another person for close to seven years. In the 1970s, I was trying to focus on the blurriness between fiction and reality, so I created a kind of fictional person. Her name, and the name of the project, was *Roberta Breitmore*. She had real artifacts, though, and a documented physical presence in the world. She saw a psychiatrist. She had an apartment. She had a driver's license and checking accounts. And she put ads in the newspaper. I lived as this other character for almost a decade.

**Myles: When you say she went to the psychiatrist, does that mean you went to the psychiatrist under her name?**

**Hershman Leeson:** Yeah, as her. She was blonde; I wasn't. She had a particular taste. She had a certain way of walking and speaking; she had her own language—it was English, but it was her language, not mine.

**Myles: Did you create a different psyche?**

**Hershman Leeson:** I did. She had a different background. She was younger than I was. She went to therapy because she was broke and lonely and kept having negative experiences. I have her psychiatric record from the psychiatrist who treated her.

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I didn't know it would last seven years, but when you start to define how you make somebody real, she needs to be fleshed out and have a history. In fact, she's more real than I am, because I couldn't get credit cards, and I couldn't get other artifacts of life and the records that she easily acquired. So for me, it was kind of just living her life.



"Americans show greater differences gesturally"

"Do crossed arms mean that 'I am frustrated?'"

"A hand to the face may serve as a barrier"

"Crossed legs point to each other. "

"Crossed arms do the same thing"

"Crossing arms defines posture"

"Does she try to avert attention avoiding your eyes?"

"Is she sitting stiffly and not relaxed?"

"Covering legs reveals frigidity, fear of sex."

ROBERTA'S BODY LANGUAGE CHART

(photographed during a psychiatric session)

January 24, 1978

Lynn Hershman Leeson, *Roberta's Body Language Chart*, 1976

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**Myles: How did you choose a therapist for her?**

**Hershman Leeson:** I found somebody who was an expert in schizophrenia; he was also an art collector.

**Myles: So he knew what was going on?**

**Hershman Leeson:** Not really, because nobody had ever done anything like that. I told him that a friend of mine needed to see him, and I didn't explain what it was, because I didn't really know. In the early 1970s, nobody used the words *performance* or *endurance performance* or anything like that, so everything was kind of a test.

**Myles: How did the performance end? Why did it end? And how did you feel afterward?**

**Hershman Leeson:** This character, Roberta, kept having very negative experiences. I wanted to invert that. At the end of nearly a decade, I felt that she had enough substance of reality to prove that she actually was a fiction that became real. I ended her with an exorcism in Lucrezia Borgia's crypt in Ferrara, Italy. There were dancers who could move like her; I brought one of them to Ferrara, and she did a performance at the Palazzo dei Diamanti where she took *Roberta Construction Chart #1* (1975) and an effigy off the museum wall and set them on fire. She—the Roberta multiple—lay in state for twenty-four hours while the museum filled with smoke from the burning ashes of Roberta's history. I felt that she was kind of like a phoenix, and when she surfaced again, she wouldn't be such a victim.

**Myles: Does she surface?**



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**Hershman Leeson:** She does. But she doesn't surface as the original Roberta, rather as a mutation. For instance, *CYBEROBERTA* (1993–95) was born. She was a telerobotic doll with two eyes that were cameras. One captured what she saw in the room she was in, the other captured images and posted them on the Internet, and from the Internet you could turn her head 180 degrees. It was like a nanny cam, but about a decade pre-nanny cam. The doll is a miniature replica of Roberta. I resized Roberta's clothes with a seamstress so they would fit the doll, I sent photographs to the doll maker to make her look like Roberta, and I had little glasses and all the artifacts that were hers replicated, but in miniature. And then, in 2018, I made an antibody with a scientist, Dr. Thomas Huber at Novartis Institutes for Biomedical Research in Basel, that had Roberta's name on it and was called erta. There's also a lynn hershman antibody, and there's a roberta breitmore antibody— because I thought it was appropriate, since she no longer had a body.

Roberta was/is a mirror of her culture. The images are the remains of her life, in nonhierarchical form, with surveillance photographs, her replacement at work, the button she lost from her coat, all of which comprise the varying series she endured becoming herself. Almost two hundred images and documents. She was meant not only to demolish the barriers of definitions of theater, literature, and photography, but was also meant to blur the very nature of reality set as a simulation in real time. When one looks through the artifacts and remains of her life now, some forty years later, it is as if they are reperforming or re-embodying her.



Lynn Hershman Leeson, Roberta Getting Ready to Go to Work, 1975

**Myles: When you stopped, what was the effect on you?**

**Hershman Leeson:** I think that it was a beginning of my own journey toward nonvictimization and healing. It was a vehicle through which I understood that there's more than one victim in our culture. People can revive themselves into a new dimension or perceptions by looking at new choices, so that when they become seventy-two, they might finally get discovered, because their options aren't so constrained. And that's exactly what happened to me.

**Myles: So tell me about your discovery at seventy-two.**

**Hershman Leeson:** All my life people said that what I did wasn't art. Then about four years ago, a curator in Germany, Peter Weibel, offered to do a show and a book of my work, not realizing how much of it had never been shown. The exhibition was at ZKM, in Karlsruhe, and was called *Civic Radar* (2014); it included eight hundred artworks. People realized that the previously unexhibited work anticipated many ideas from 1966 on, and that many other people had been credited for doing the work I originated. Finally, my work was noticed—or you could say “discovered.” It absolutely changed my life's trajectory. The unintended consequences of that show were that it got me out of debt and it gave me a kind of recognition that had always eluded me.

**Myles: How does the “double” play out in the series *Hero Sandwich* (1981–84)?**

**Hershman Leeson:** Those photographs were created by crossing negatives of easily obtainable publicity photographs of media heroes in a way in which either the male or female dominated. The male/female images of stars were cross-pollinated, so to speak, by “sandwiching” the negatives, manipulating the outcome, and reprinting the result several times. Each work from *Hero Sandwich* is generally composed of a male and female pair, not necessarily from the same time period. The overlapping imagery focuses on common gestures or intentions that reflect media strategies responsible for producing these “heroes.” Individual identities surrender to artificial personas. During the process of creating these photographs, I felt like I was working in Gregor Mendel's garden, seeing what would emerge from shifting domination, a kind of image genetics that created varying strains of recombination.

**Myles: Photographs feel like a double in a way writing never does, unless it's simply how writing a story makes the person themselves—the author, I mean—kind of redundant. Since I use my own life frequently in my work, I sometimes get that glazed-over look from people because the “I” of my book has already told them “that” before. It's like I'm in a long-term relationship with everybody. But photographs just kind of hang out there in the world.**

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When my show *poems* (2018–19) was up at Bridget Donahue, in New York, I didn't know where to put my body. I missed my opening because I was on a book tour for my new poetry collection, *Evolution* (2018), and we kept going back and forth about whether we should tell people through the press release that I wouldn't be at the opening. How much am I a part of the work? Writing is all about the body, to my mind. As long as you're not dead, people want to see the author.

Years ago, I gave a talk with a slideshow in Germany. Well, actually, I missed that too, but that's another story. But my intention was to give a talk with all these pictures flashing behind me. The lecture was called "The Poet's Body." I was feeling very sad at the time I was putting that piece together, and the last line of the talk was, "My tears have turned into pictures, my tears have turned into pictures." The show that you saw in New York was like all these flickers, like you were passing things on a train: purple drink, view from bed in my apartment, the line of the train in Marfa.

**Hershman Leeson:** Who published *Chelsea Girls* (1994)?

**Myles:** Ha. I did not count on you knowing my work. Black Sparrow Press did; then HarperCollins published it the second time around, in 2015. That's how I got "famous." The line was, "Underground dyke poet makes big." The thing that's funny is that it was always my plan—to be mainstream at this point in my life.

I meant it as a film. I also thought of it as all these ways of being female. I was in a new life; I come from a long line of alcoholics and addicts, and I had stopped all that. I was a clear-eyed poet. So my capacity to project myself into a place where I had been at some other point in my life—tales of my own drunkenness, young memories before I could articulate them—became interesting and desirable. The chapters were like little movies, because I always wanted to make films. The book itself was me transitioning from being a poet into being a fiction writer—and back, of course. I don't trust staying away from poetry too long. It's my water.

Interestingly, I just made my first actual film in Marfa, called *The Trip* (2019), with David Fenster; he shot it on Super 8. It's a road film with puppets, but the puppets aren't just any puppets—I made them when I was nine. We took them on this glorious road trip between Marfa and Alpine, Texas. Yet the narrative that arose wound up being very emotional. The same old alcoholic family was suddenly also along for the ride.



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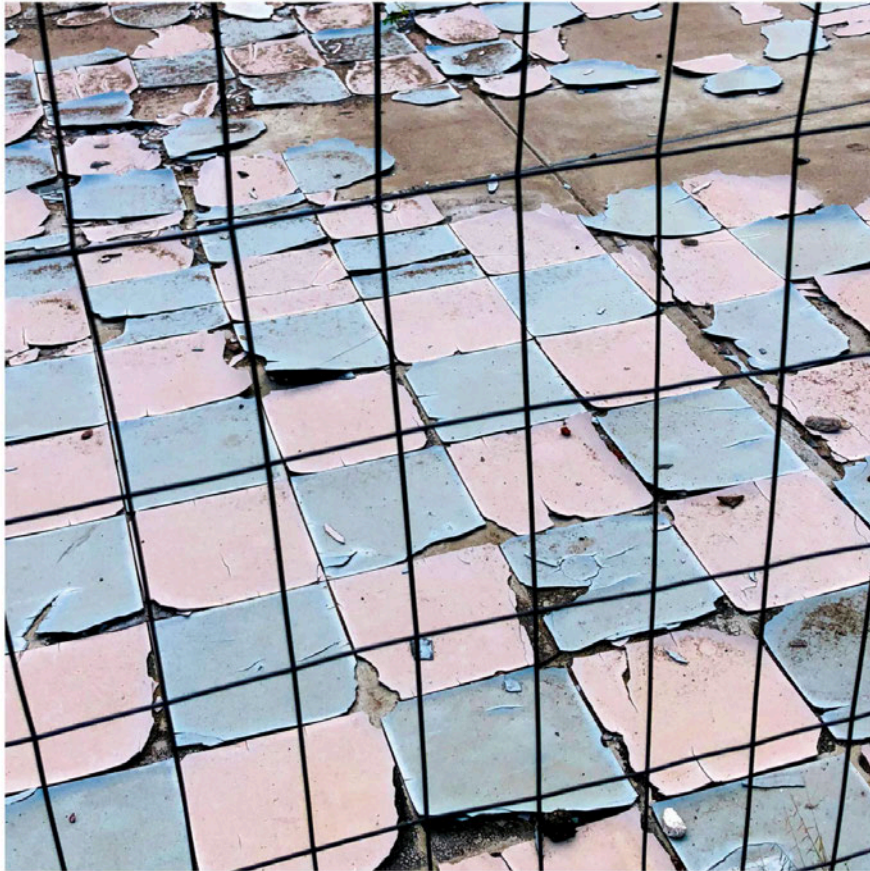
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*Chelsea Girls* went out of print someplace in the aughts when Black Sparrow ceased, and I just decided that I was going to let it stay out of print until I could do it with someone good. And when it did come out again, I had a boom. It was almost a joke. In the fall of 2015, I think the *New York Times* wrote about me four or five times. People were like, “Again?” Poets were pretty great about it, like I was taking one for the team. But by now, since I am female and queer, I sort of get the feeling I’m supposed to vanish into my fame in some way. In 2016, I was even in that part of *The New York Times Magazine* where they ask you twenty questions. Then it was how Eileen spends her Sunday night. What’s great about publicity is the self you build out there. I told them I masturbate on Sunday night—doesn’t everybody? I thought the point of a public body is to say what the public body never says. Especially a female.

Actually, I wanted the show at Bridget’s to invisibilize my book release. Books are so heavy, and photographs are so quick and light. Like a film. Passing.



Eileen Myles, ~, 2018  
Courtesy the artist and Bridget Donahue, New York



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**Hershman Leeson:** Do you see any correlation between your writing and your photographs?

**Myles:** They are the same. I've always thought of my writing as visual art, so photography is just making something manifest that was already there in another form. I've been taking pictures since I was a kid. Earliest was trick photography. I staged crimes at home and caught them on film. Mostly I was interested in making legends; now I like things trapped in time, dazzling in some way. I think the best you can do is create discomfort. It's so real. I suppose that is why I like taking photographs. My career is so unrelentingly queer, but my photographs are not queer ... though the world is queer. Get out there and walk around; it's undeniable. It's queer and falling apart.

I'm sixty-nine—it's such a joke, a dirty joke before seventy. The thing that's great about aging is that *something* is retiring. My forties were a struggle. I was doing performance art; I was writing art reviews; I was writing poems. And I was writing the stories that would become *Chelsea Girls*. It was a very constructive decade. I ran for president in my forties, and an enormous part of it was an enormous construction of self and feeling. If at thirty-nine I felt like an exhausted old poet, I would nonetheless at forty and forty-one be a young presidential candidate. It was truly endurance performance art. If you want to endure something, run for president. It's horrible. Honestly, before I ran for president, I was famous for being poor; running for president really blew my life out of scale entirely. I was a wreck after that. I was always a figure in my poems, but now I was a figure in the world. Big in the way you could be big in the 1990s—on MTV, written up in art magazines, touring in twenty-eight states. For years people were stopping me at ATMs.

**Didn't you run for president?**

**Hershman Leeson:** I created a virtual character that ran for president in 2004. Her name was DiNA, and she ran for tele-president. She was running against George W. Bush, and her platform was "Artificial intelligence is better than no intelligence." But alas, she also didn't win.

**Myles:** That's a very good platform. Mine was "Total disclosure."

**Hershman Leeson:** That's why you didn't win.

**Myles:** I know. A presidential candidate is supposedly creating an other self, and I was using my actual self, which was kind of like used material. I think they prefer it if you come up with something new.

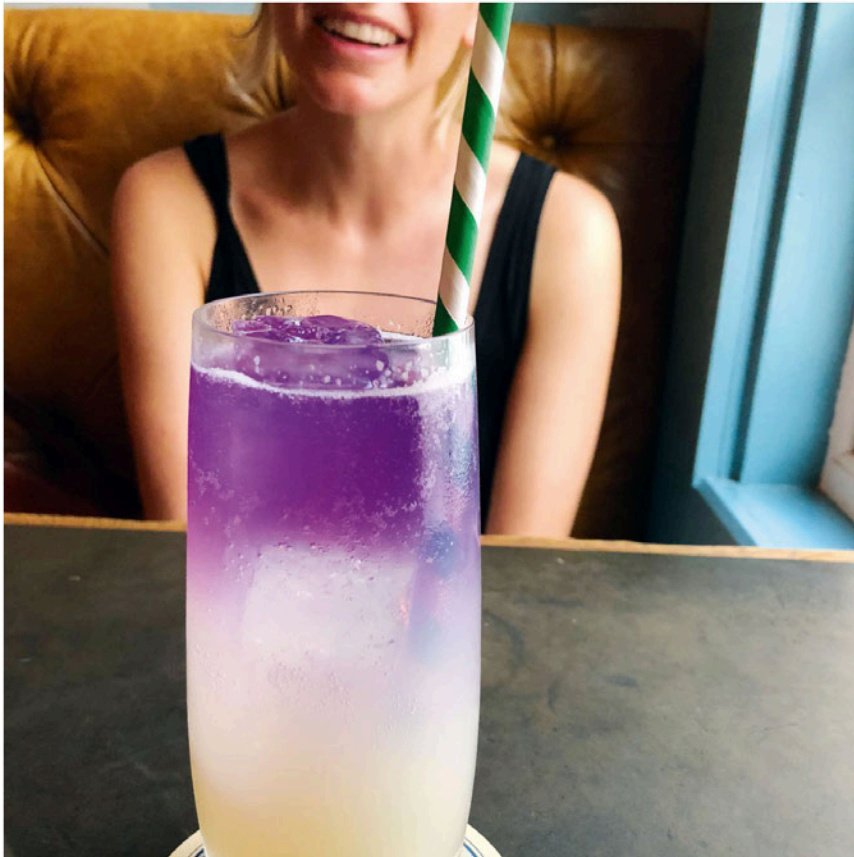
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**A couple of years ago, Amazon optioned *Chelsea Girls* for a movie. I was hired as the screenwriter. When I was a young poet and imagining what my life later on would be, I had this idea that writers, if they were lucky, would all go and sell out to Hollywood and become rich, and that was my plan. Back in the 1970s, when I was deliberately being dramatic and sick of shitty jobs, I went and sold my blood one day for, like, six dollars. It was an awful experience, and I freaked out; they told me never to come back there because I truly had a panic attack. There were these two old maroon plastic couches you laid down on, and they hooked me up, and I could see my blood pouring out of my body into this big sack. There was this old street guy next to me, lying there, who clearly did this every week. He was lying there very calmly, and I was just freaking the fuck out. I just couldn't handle it. And they were so mad at me. I took my six dollars, and I remember going next door and buying a ginger ale—and then it was down to around two dollars—and I was writing a poem on a napkin about how when I was a rich screenwriter in LA I would think about this day when I sold my blood.**



Eileen Myles, *it's absinthe*, 2018  
Courtesy the artist and Bridget Donahue, New York

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**Hershman Leeson:** Anyway, we fulfilled our dreams.

**Myles:** Exactly. This kind of hard touring, which probably both of us have been doing for the past years, is very literally selling your blood. Right?

**Hershman Leeson:** Yeah.

**Myles:** I mean, that's why I want to stop. It's like my body is like a candle and I am burning it, and this is not what I want to do.

**Hershman Leeson:** Like the world becomes a vampire, and you have to endure this bloodletting to survive. And it seems, in a particular way, too, about being female. It might be that men seem to understand boundaries better and don't let this systemic leakage happen. I think as a female artist, and also as an artist who has gotten more attention later in life, I am like a broken machine that says yes to any opportunity. I am only now realizing that there is another machine inside of me that finally is learning how to say no. Once you jump-start the second machine, it becomes kind of addictive. Saying no gives you a lot more power than saying yes.

**Myles:** Totally.

**Hershman Leeson:** Just being able to hear things in a different way than you do when you're overcommitted, as luxurious as being overcommitted is. Wasn't it Tennessee Williams who, when his play opened on Broadway and was a big success, wasn't able to write because they were putting him up at a fancy hotel with room service? Eventually, he moved down to Mexico to some little dumpy place so that he could find out who he was again and start to write. The same thing happened to Francis Bacon. They actually destroyed his studio and got him a nice, clean, new one, and he couldn't paint in it. They had to rebuild the old one so that he could work again.

**Myles:** That's hysterical. My whole life on Instagram is just documenting my studio, which is mostly my apartment. But also walking down the street, collecting stuff. It's like the inside of the head, whether it's inside the apartment or inside the subway or inside the airport.

**We're in such a funny moment technologically, because we can share all those in-between stages, or the permanently present one of where we are, with so many people so swiftly. It's this very godly feeling. It's disgusting, and then very beautiful. It's a little bit like dying all the time.**

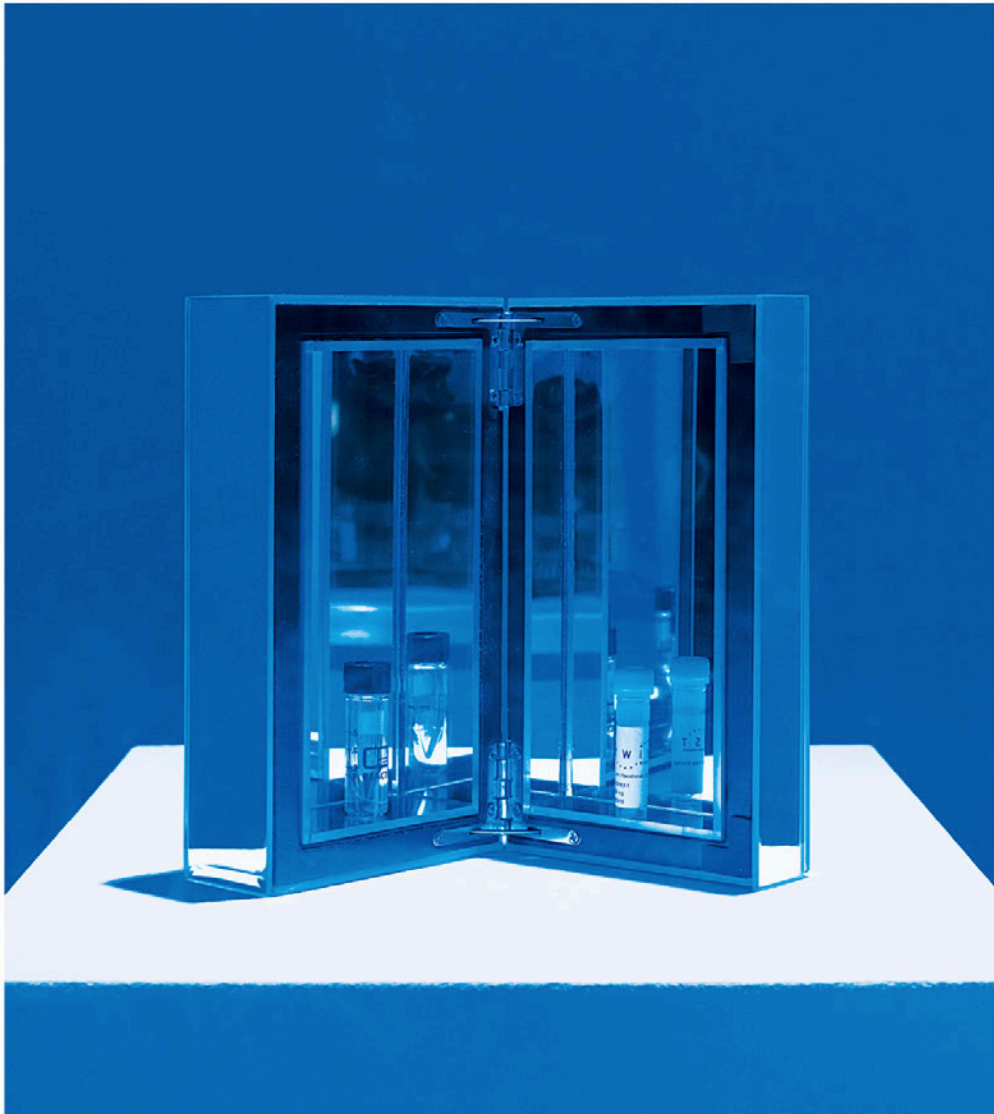
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**Hershman Leeson:** Yes. That's sort of what I was trying to find out with Roberta's psychiatrist. I wanted to know more about collective trauma, or a connective trauma that we're all dealing with, because we are all connected through DNA and just from being alive at this time. I recently completed a project, *The Infinity Engine* (2006–18), that was modeled after a genetics lab, and I was able to convert all the work and research I had done for the last thirty-four years, including some of my films, into DNA itself.



Lynn Hershman Leeson, *Room #8 – Lynn Hershman DNA and Lynn Hershman Antibody* (detail), 2018  
All photographs by Hershman Leeson courtesy Bridget Donahue, New York, and Anglim Gilbert Gallery, San Francisco



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**Myles: Wow.**

**Hershman Leeson:** It wouldn't have been possible before this year, because they just developed this technique. George Church, a professor of genetics at Harvard and an expert on synthetic biology, worked with Technicolor and Microsoft to create technology that enabled this process. I look at it as a kind of expanded cinema, because you have to put all of the information on a time line, one frame at a time, and they convert it to zeros and ones at the micromolecular level and store it as synthetic DNA, which has a life span of a million years, rather than fifty, which is what most films have.

**Myles: The very gesture itself is so anti-storage. How big is it?**

**Hershman Leeson:** They put it in a tiny test tube. It's about two inches by a half inch. My entire life fits in this tiny thing that's practically invisible. I carry it in my wallet.

**Myles: It's so beautiful. It's like a crazy, insane, microscopic retrospective.**

**Hershman Leeson:** Exactly. A simmering essence. A haiku of being. **Myles: Right? Or a fossil.**

**Hershman Leeson:** [Laughs] Exactly.

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# BOMB

Denson, G. Roger, "Algorithms, Antibodies, and Automaton: Lynn Hershman Leeson Interviewed by G. Roger Denson," *Bomb*, August 5, 2020

## Algorithms, Antibodies, and Automatons: Lynn Hershman Leeson Interviewed by G. Roger Denson

*Working on the cutting-edge of science and technology.*



Installation view of Lynn Hershman Leeson, *Electronic Diaries*, six video segments, 1984–2019, KW Institute for Contemporary Arts, Berlin. Courtesy of the artist.

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For nearly sixty years, Lynn Hershman Leeson has been overturning oppressively imposing personas, institutions, ideologies, technologies, and systems through a diverse range of sculptural objects, collages, performances, videos, films, internet chats, and healing antibodies extracted from her body. More than any artist I can think of, Leeson's work has embodied what Melanie Klein described as the fusion of fantasy to science in an effort to psychically exorcise cultural and personal aggressors. In the process of her liberation, she became fiercely determined to leave her imprint on the world through art as proof of her healing and liberation. Today she is triumphantly exhibiting and screening her art around the world, with The New York Times listing her career survey catalogue, Civic Radar, and the book Lynn Hershman Leeson: Antibodies as Best Art Books of 2016 and 2019, respectively. This year she was awarded the Prix Ars Electronica Award of Distinction for her interactive installation Shadow Stalker (2018–21).

—G. Roger Denson

G. Roger Denson

You've consistently amplified issues the art world once silenced: surveillance, racial and sexual profiling, domestic violence, cloning, gene sequencing, suicide. What can you disclose about your highly informative art?

Lynn Hershman Leeson

All my work erupts as acts defying oppression and censorship. I'm airing outrage to counteract the silencing of critical issues swept to the edges of culture. I'm turning the body of society inside out so that its outer edges develop the ability to grow an organ of amplification. Cultural motion is like an amoeba that advances one foot at a time, then has to wait for the rest of the body to catch up. The most prescient ideas are swallowed by moving pods until they get digested and become viable.

GRD

Now that's mythopoetics evolving. You're fusing and reshaping the nature-culture boundary where the likes of cyborgs, artificial intelligences (AI), infinity engines, DNA replicates, and healing antibodies are evolved.

LHL

I'm struggling to dissect "humanness" in general and my life in particular.

GRD

That's been evident since the 1960s, with your Breathing Machines (1965) and Suicide Machines (1962–68) morphed as female-identified heads.

LHL

They're cyborgs I grew into biologically edited performances twenty-two years before cyborgs were a glint in Donna Haraway's eye. And not just heads. Some were full bodies.

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GRD

There's a pathos about the cyborgs signifying suicide by fire. Given that their melted heads were exhibited in 1964, one year after poet Sylvia Plath died with her head in an oven, I associated them with Plath and other women suicides.

LHL

The Suicide Machines are deeply spiritual about life, death, rebirth, transience. I melted their wax forms, then showed them with a picture of what the sculpture had been. They were my defiance of the doctors who diagnosed me at the time as dying from cardiomyopathy.



Lynn Hershman Leeson, *Suicide Series—Blazing Self-Portrait, Mid Burn Extermination*, 1965, wax, cardboard, netting, cigarette, hair, glasses, sculpture. (Referred to in this dialogue as a cyborg.) Courtesy of the artist.

GRD

Just as you defied the abusers you recall in *Electronic Diaries* (1984–2019). As I watched *Diaries* last winter at The Shed in Manhattan, I was shocked to hear your history of child and spousal abuse.

LHL

Most women have been raised to be victims, having experienced violence early on. Many suffer the rest of their lives with PTSD. We're linked by our scars. *Electronic Diaries* was made so I could understand myself, my wounds, and scars. My generation had no microphone. No #MeToo. Repression saturated everything.



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GRD

You're also countering the misogyny disseminated by media entertainments, especially rampaging, male-avatar, shooter-and-rape games such as Grand Theft Auto, Modern Warfare, and RapeLay. Your film Teknolust (2002) and your interactive multiuser programs Agent Ruby (1998–2002) and DiNA (2004) talk back to misogynistic media. In Teknolust a feminist backlash plays out among your three biogenetically engineered, female-identified, self-replicating automatons, all played hilariously by Tilda Swinton as unimpressed investigators of things male.

LHL

But I don't try to get even. It's more dignified and fulfilling to experience my extraordinary crew and cast. And I saw Agent Ruby and DiNA intertwined as a double helix illustrative of the core of most interactions.

GRD

Since you made Teknolust, AI has become a global obsession. This is in contrast to the 1990s, when, except for a brief flirtation with Jean Baudrillard's theory of Simulation, the art world ignored AI.

LHL

Even in 2002, no one knew what to say or write about Teknolust.

GRD

Perhaps people didn't know what to say because your work portrays the inexplicable anti-logic in life. Just as the inexplicable forces of Nature thwarted societies that sought and crafted mythic deities and heroes to mend the rifts of intolerable uncertainty, programmers today are finding that even algorithms have within them voids that can't be filled or corrected, causing machines to break down. These voids inspire dissent and anarchy among sci-fi writers, which makes me wonder if you're informed by the cyberpunk novels of William Gibson, Bruce Sterling, or Pat Cadigan? The cyber lit crit of Janet H. Murray?

LHL

Not Janet. But for sure Bruce and William. Also Timothy Leary, Allen Ginsberg, Bruce Conner, Dennis Hopper, Francis and Eleanor Coppola—the guys I knew in the '70s were influential in a million ways.

GRD

Your film Conceiving Ada (1997) challenges the histories of computer programming and engineering that still don't credit Ada Lovelace as the inventor of the first algorithmic computer program.

LHL

I tell them all the time, but they won't report the truth...

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GRD

Such biased lapses remind us that even the industry of synthetic systems is modeled after the dominant patriarchal faiths with their creator gods forming human males first and foremost. You, by contrast, defiantly descend from such mytho-gyneco outlaws as the chthonic goddess, maenad, oracle, wiccan.

LH

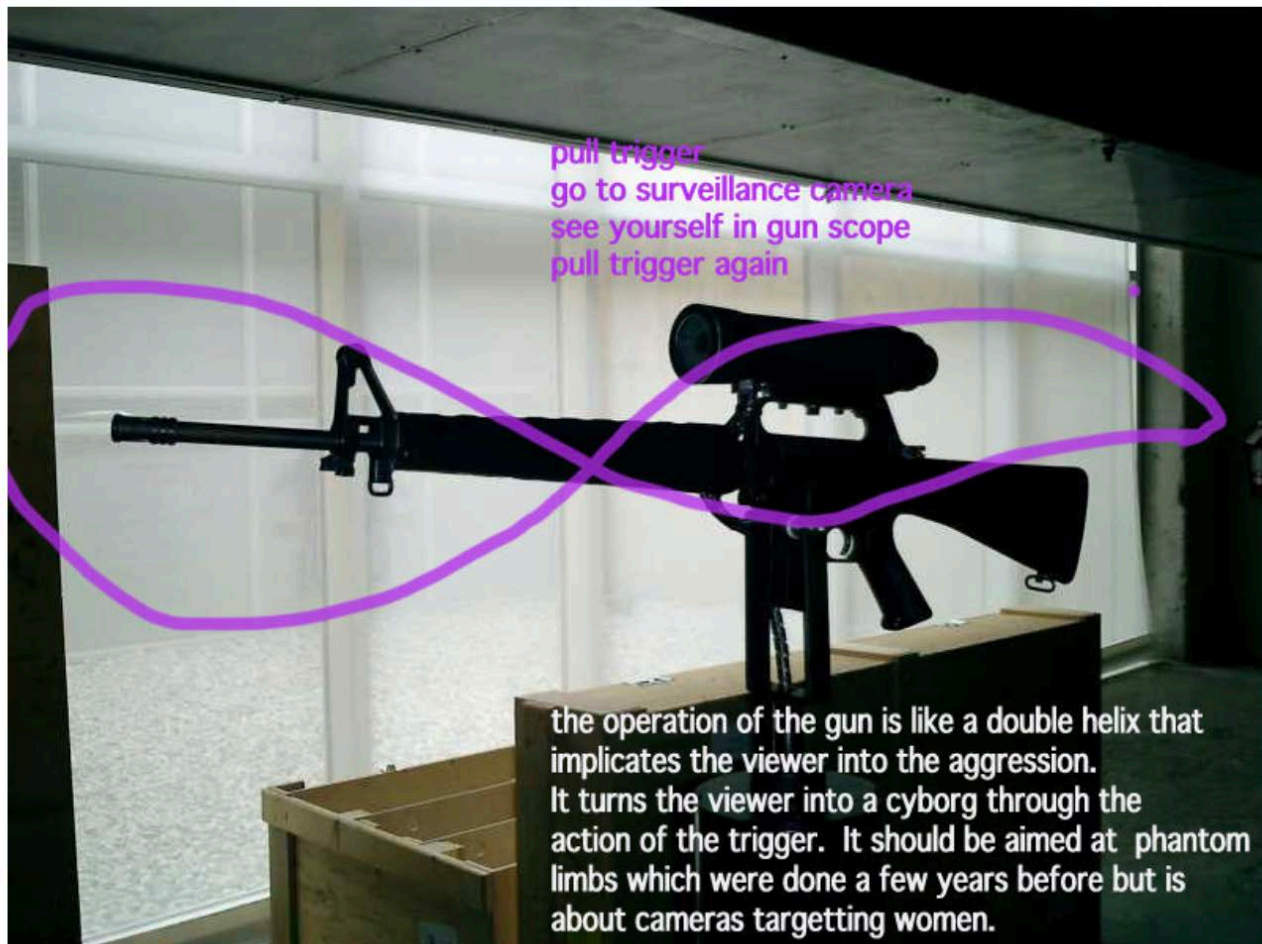
There is hope in being an outlaw, in finding the glitch in the laws of expectation.

GRD

Am I right in seeing Conceiving Ada, if not the Ada Lovelace of history, reconciling both male and female myths in Ada's pursuit of a traditionally male-only vocation?

LHL

The male is the myth. Ada was authentic. Her voice, her art were the uncredited female genius defying Charles Babbage's male, mythic genius appropriating her ideas. In the end she triumphed, but died early.



Lynn Hershman Leeson, *America's Finest*, 1993–94, interactive AK-47 rifle, scope, and surveillance camera. Courtesy of the artist.

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GRD

Your Ada dreams of shaping the future. She is aided when contacted by Emmy, a twenty-first-century woman-engineer-inventor, and her invention, the time-traveling “chat bot,” Sharlene. As in Teknolust, with its three female-identified automatons, in Conceiving Ada you’ve constructed three female oracles that together are every bit as prescient as Shakespeare’s three witches, but without the narrative need for a Macbeth.

LHL

Why, thank you. I can hear him turning over in his grave, but I love that thought.

GRD

Did you see yourself invoking such a lineage of myth and literature when writing the scripts for these films?

LHL

Yes, I did see it, and thank you for seeing it too. I don’t think anyone else did.

GRD

I always saw Shakespeare’s three witches as the Greco-Roman Three Fates banished from their altars and temples and driven into the woods by the early Christians, where they lived as outlaws. Now they inhabit your feminist trios.

LHL

Here. I wrote this in 1996. I think it tells you what you want to know:

The computer, as Sadie Plant tells us, emerges from the history of weaving. Using Jacquard’s inspired application of punch cards to create woven recall, Charles Babbage attempted to implement a mechanical means of memory. But it was Ada Lovelace, the Enchantress of Numbers, who was concerned with the soul of the machine; the motivation for its internal drive. Perhaps it was because of her influence that motherboards and reproductive systems became submerged deep within the terminal casings where within their concealed womb-like spaces, as if by internal passion, they erupt into streams of ones and zeros with progeny so fertile they connect global web streams into interlacing networks of twisted polarities like the physical and the virtual, privacy and surveillance, liberation and censorship. These self-arousing cybernetic machines will breed our future. Artificial memory and synthetic intelligence plait together into rebellious mutations that resist a central will and defy a singular voice.

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## GRD

Resistance certainly is central to your 2007 film, *Strange Culture*. This time in recounting the real-life arrest and four-year-long harassment and incarceration of artist Steve Kurtz by Homeland Security.

## LHL

The arrest occurred when the sudden death of Steve's wife coincided with preparations for his bioscience-inspired art installation at the Massachusetts Museum of Contemporary Art which were mistaken by the medical response team as evidence of bio-terrorist activity. I was so outraged by Steve's arrest that I felt people needed to know, and I needed to help in the most obvious and expedient way. Steve will tell you that my film was responsible for helping to get his twenty-three-year sentence dropped.



Still from Lynn Hershman Leeson, *Teknolust*, 2002, with Tilda Swinton performing as three self-replicating automatons, 35 mm feature film. Courtesy of the artist.

## GRD

*Strange Culture* also reoriented you toward the biosciences. In your 2014 installation, *The Infinity Engine*, currently on view at the ZKM Center for Art and Media Karlsruhe, you collaborated with Dr. Thomas Huber, leader of the therapeutic antibody research group at Novartis Labs in Basel, to replicate a genetics research lab. Visitors enter a "capture room" in which reverse facial-recognition software captures their images while disclosing such intimate data as their DNA origins. Your Antibody Room exhibits artificially engineered antibodies from your own genomes.



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LHL

Antibodies seek out toxins in a body. If successfully neutralized, they kill them and cure disease. I see artists as the antibodies of the cultural body who weed out the poisons crippling and diminishing humanity. The antibodies and DNA I extracted from myself with Dr. Huber supply an infinity of hope. I also extracted an antibody named for my 1970s performance persona, Roberta Breitmore, to use in cancer research.

GRD

So your antibodies became infinitely reproducible essences of you-as-artist, and you-as-artwork Roberta, plus therapeutic essences that sustain life by combating disease.

LHL

Poetic, don't you think? A haiku of essence. You get reduced to something invisible, with the weight of a millimeter, if that.

GRD

Your antibody is uploaded online, accessible to any search for vaccines. But even in contributing to medical advancement, is it ethical to impose experimental genome editing to "enhance" living animals and humans? Who defines "enhancement"? Whose genomes are or aren't to be replicated?

LHL

Everything you say and more are questions I've grappled with for ten years, at least. The struggle itself is part of evolution, and if done consciously can become an enhancement, I believe.

GRD

You're expressing the utopian euphoria of the 1960s. But today we're facing global dystopia, an anxiety unable to preempt such environmental and social collapse as the Amazon in flames and the COVID-19 virus. What the young today fear as imminent reality, we forty and fifty years ago only entertained as overwrought popular fictions in 2001: A Space Odyssey, Blade Runner, and Alien.

LHL

All enacted these days. Minority Report, too.

GRD

Minority Report: pursuing murderers before murders occur. You're now broaching the subject of your video exposé The Red Square Algorithm (2019) and your interactive installation Shadow Stalker which are both critical of algorithms purporting to predict crimes before they occur when they may be little more than racial and class profiling. Aren't these reflective of the new social malaise?

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## LHL

I don't share the malaise of this generation. I don't know if they really do at the core. Sometimes malaise becomes fashionable, but generally it doesn't represent solutions or deeper-than-surface complaints. Works such as *Shadow Stalker*, *America's Finest* (1993–94), *Strange Culture*, *Women Art Revolution* (2010), *Teknolust*, *Water Women* (1978), and especially the newest, *Room #8* (2018), all run counter to dread. They provide solutions.

Lynn Hershman Leeson's work is currently on view in the group exhibitions *Uncanny Valley: Being Human in the Age of AI* at the de Young Museum in San Francisco until October 25 and *Writing the History of the Future* at ZKM Center for Art and Media Karlsruhe in Karlsruhe, Germany, until March 28, 2021.

G. Roger Denson is a cultural critic living in Manhattan who specializes in global art issues intersecting media, sciences, politics, ideologies, and cultures. A former curator of contemporary art, media, performance, and dance, and a founding instructor of the School of Visual Arts Graduate Program in Criticism, he has written features and reviews for *Art In America*, *Arts*, *Artscribe*, *Artbyte*, *Parkett*, *Bijutsu Techo*, *Flash Art*, *Duke University's Cultural Politics*, *Journal of Contemporary Art*, *Kunstlerhaus Bethanien*, *M/E/A/N/I/N/G*, and the original *Huffington Post*. He is co-author, with the late Thomas McEvelley, of *Capacity: History, the World and the Self in Contemporary Art and Criticism* (Routledge, now in its 15th edition).

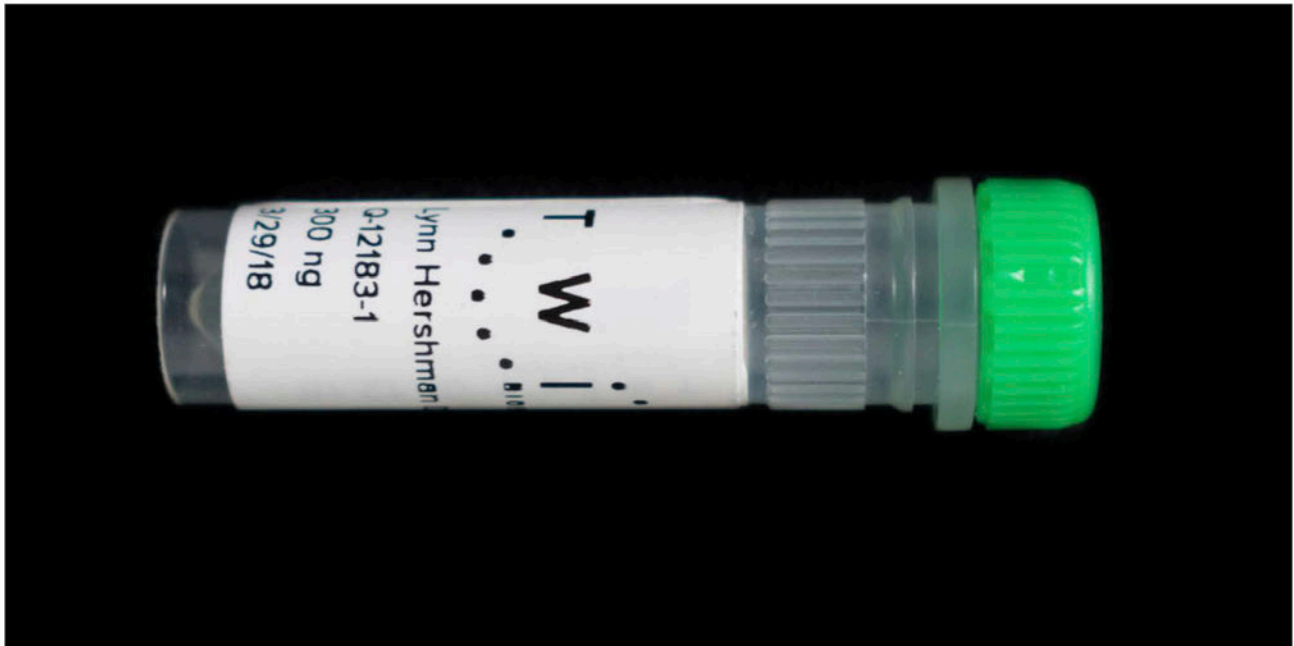
# ARTFORUM

Ozer, Samantha, "Lynn Hershman Leeson," *Artforum*, June 29, 2020

INTERVIEWS

## LYNN HERSHMAN LEESON

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



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

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

# ALTMAN SIEGEL

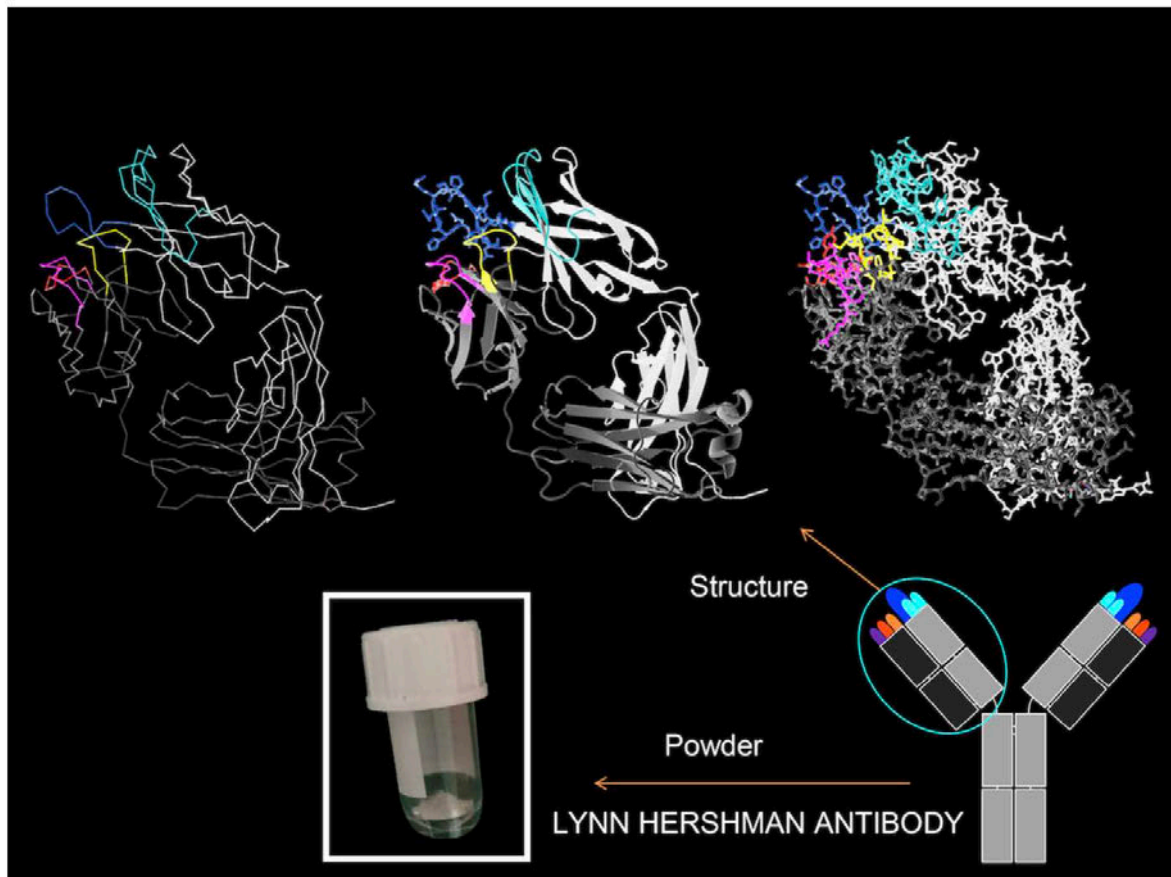
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**THE PLANET IS GOING THROUGH A CORRECTION.** It's not just America, it's everywhere. I've been thinking about symbiosis and how everything is connected, and how we need to find a way to shelter and protect the future, and the inheritance of young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

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



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



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

I think of extinction as the elimination of old models that cannot adapt to our changing world. My work involves a shift from digital presence, or electronic presence, into a biological way of thinking. My archives aren't just stored at Stanford University, but also in my DNA, and in my synthetic DNA and the Lynn Hershman and (Rob) Erta antibodies. People underrate the idea of storing material in DNA. If you store a video on a hard drive, it will have a lifespan of maybe half a century. If you code it into strands of DNA, it will last a million years and is probably just as easily retrievable. While I've been thinking about recording my archive in DNA for several years, I was only able to do it in 2018. Importantly, you have to think of antibodies in the broader sense. If you think of artists as antibodies, going into a toxic space of culture and trying to identify the diseased parts and heal it, that's a life project. I've been fortunate that I've lived long enough to be able to use DNA to make some sort of haiku of my life. While the vials containing DNA and antibodies in Room #8 are physically small, they represent much of what I've ever lived and most of what I've thought.

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

— As told to Samantha Ozer

# The New York Times

Thackara, Tess, "With 'Shadow Stalker,' Lynn Hershman Leeson Tackles Internet Surveillance," *The New York Times*,  
November 8, 2019

## 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

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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.

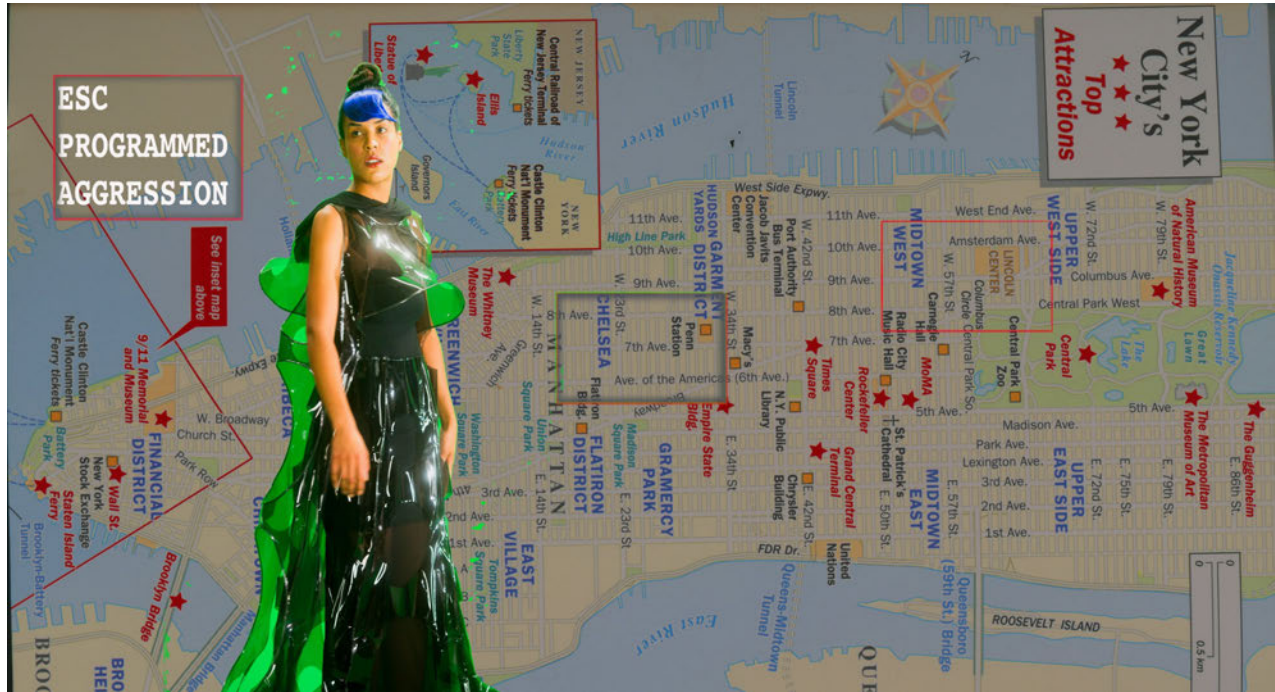
Ms. Hershman Leeson is still making work vigorously in her studios in San Francisco and New York, and on a Sunday in August she was shooting the final component of a new commission, “Shadow Stalker,” that will also appear at the Shed. An interactive installation and film, the piece tackles the rise of 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.

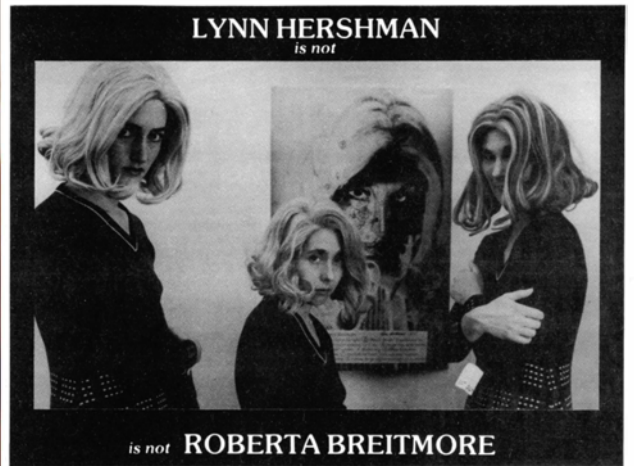
Her best-known work centers on a character named Roberta Breitmore, an alter ego she created in 1972. A shy, neurotic blonde, Roberta conformed to the era’s archetypal feminine ideal. Ms. Hershman Leeson created charts that determined her makeup and hair, and took to various public places dressed as 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 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."

# frieze

Moffitt, Evan, "All Lynn," *Frieze*, April 14, 2017



INTERVIEW - 14 APR 2017

## All Lynn

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

BY EVAN MOFFITT

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



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

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

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

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

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

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

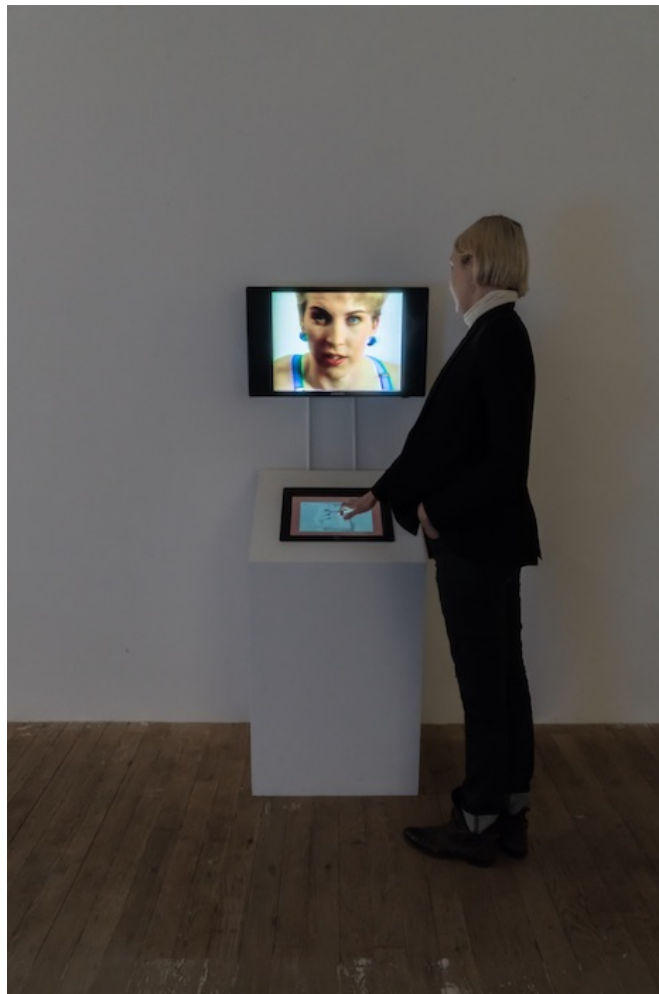
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LHL: Going from very heavy camera equipment that required a crew to complete any kind of shoot, to being able to film on your own, using just your iPhone – that’s a profound change. My work has always followed technology as it has adapted to engage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



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

EM: Bodily absorption as archival preservation – incredible!



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

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

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



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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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