

STATUS UPDATE

"Status Update #10: Lynn Hershman Leeson Is the Taylor Swift of Media Art," *Status Update*, April 8, 2025

Status Update #10: Lynn Hershman Leeson Is the Taylor Swift of Media Art

On Resistance, Political Art and the Feminist Art Movement



STATUS UPDATE

APR 08, 2025

Just as I started writing this newsletter, I received a notification. It pings, and I see the subject line of another newsletter—from Dazed. “What’s the problem with Adolescence?” Of course, I click immediately. “What Adolescence teaches us about misogyny.” I would love to listen to the podcast right now, but I have already postponed writing this newsletter for too long. I wanted to follow the discussions around Adolescence a bit more first. What’s being overlooked: why isn’t there any discussion about the female victim, Katie? And why isn’t there any discussion about the fact that there is no discussion about the female victim, Katie? Everyone is talking about Jamie. And about Owen, who plays Jamie. And about the fact that all episodes were shot in one take. I quickly check Instagram; maybe there’s a different summary or more insight into what the Dazed conversation is about. There, I find this quote: “I feel a lot of the female characters were sidelined a bit. In the second episode, the female police officer remarks that no one will remember the name of Jamie’s victim. But then the show, ironically, kind of falls into the same trap.” I actually had to Google the name of Jamie’s victim.

Hito Steyerl asked in a text back in 2013 whether the internet is dead. In *Adolescence*, the internet is somehow blamed for everything. However, the internet is as neutral as technology; it depends on how it is used. Steyerl’s essay begins like this: “Is the internet dead? This is not a metaphorical question. It does not suggest that the internet is dysfunctional, useless, or out of fashion. It asks what happened to the internet after it stopped being a possibility. The question is very literally whether it is dead, how it died, and whether anyone killed it.” The internet will certainly be declared dead more often in the coming years, just like the author (Hello Substack!), painting (Hello Instagram!), and NFTs (Hello AI!). What happened to the internet? The very short answer will be Trump, Elon, Andrew Tate, and AI. No one has the time to read anything longer than a half-tweet anyway.

In the past few weeks, I have taken more time than usual for reading. And not because I had to delve into Selena Gomez and Benny Blanco, about whom I quickly realized I didn’t know much. I hadn’t even seen the documentary about Selena Gomez until the album was released. No, I needed to write a few texts and exhibition concepts, and that doesn’t happen without reading, reading, and reading. So, I read about *Delightmare* (Ben Davis) and *Opp Art* (Jonah Primiano), *Red-Chip Art* and techno-fascism.

And while I was sitting at home, reading and writing, I was invited on a press trip to the ZKM Karlsruhe for the new presentation of the collection. I immediately accepted. By the way, the ZKM collection consists of 12,000 works of media art. The institution has had a new director for some time now, Alistair Hudson, who wants to ensure that this collection will continue to exist well into the future. Some of the works now on display under the title *The Story That Never Ends* have actually not been shown before and thus have not been installed yet. Hence the title: it doesn’t end; when it comes to media art, one must ensure that the works can continue to be viewed. Of course, I asked Hudson for his opinion on NFTs and whether the hype and focus on the market have benefited digital art and the ZKM. He is interested in NFTs beyond the art market; everything related to speculation does not interest him. Instead, he asks, “How can we make NFTs to support social causes?”

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The collection and the new presentation, there's no other way to say it, are impressive. For the opening, artists from all over the world traveled to Karlsruhe and stood before their works in the evening like graduates of an art academy at their final exhibition. They reminisced and shared their stories. Some even said that it was more important for them to be represented in the ZKM collection than at MoMA. Of course, many of them also have their works at MoMA. Analivia Cordeiro, an artist and, yes, the daughter of Waldemar Cordeiro, mentioned that an acquaintance of hers had asked various AI tools which museums were the most important for media art internationally. The ZKM always ranked number one or at least was mentioned, while all the others varied depending on the tool.



Lynn Hershman Leeson in *San Francisco Bay Area Season 9 Art in the Twenty-First Century* by Art 21.

On the opening day, there wasn't enough time to view everything in peace, so I went to the exhibition again on Sunday with my Dad. By the way, *The Story That Never Ends* begins with a large room featuring works by women and non-binary artists (pezoldo, Marie-Jo Lafontaine, Rebecca Horn, Ursula Neugebauer, and Lynn Hershman-Leeson). It is also an acknowledgment to admit that the collection has been predominantly shaped by male artists for a long time. I asked if there was an explanation for this. One reason mentioned was that more men reach out, inquire, make offers, and demand things. I can confirm this. In recent years, it hasn't happened that a female artist has contacted me and said she is now ready for a solo exhibition. Male artists ask when they can talk about a solo exhibition with me and if we can set a date for it. Female artists hardly ever reach out on their own, offer, inquire, etc. This has only changed since Margaret Murphy and I founded *The Second-Guess*. Since then, we regularly receive inquiries through all channels. When I teach or give lectures, I always say to the women and non-binary artists in the room, Be like the boys!

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Since leaving the exhibition on Sunday, I've been reading everything I can find about Lynn Hershman Leeson (some of it for the umpteenth time, happily) and watching all the lectures and videos on YouTube. Lynn Hershman Leeson is the Taylor Swift of media art. She is a role model; adult women become fangirls in her presence (including Legacy Russell and me), and she is as significant and influential as it gets. And she is as modestly unmodest as Taylor Swift and doesn't let resistance defeat her. "You make the work to question the very culture that's resisting it," Hershman Leeson said. In a conversation with Claudia Schmuckli, curator at the Fine Arts Museum of San Francisco, after her lecture in Berkeley, she casually mentions that her works have been featured in essentially all AI exhibitions of the past few years. Both agree that many works created with AI use tools in illustrative ways. *Uncanny Valley: Being Human in the Age of AI*, curated by Schmuckli in 2020, is one of the best AI exhibitions for Lynn Hershman Leeson, as it addresses the impact of technology on life.

When Lynn Hershman Leeson started making art, sound was considered media, and media wasn't considered art. That's why her first museum exhibition was closed immediately. So she rented a room in the Dante Hotel and exhibited her work there 24/7. Women's art was not shown in galleries. Therefore, she invented three art critics who wrote in various media, including *Artforum*, and occasionally mentioned a Lynn Hershman in their texts. With this, she approached galleries and was eventually exhibited. Who needs museums, she thought, and created her own infrastructure, including the Floating Museum, to showcase artists' works. Living in the Bay Area, she was able to use technology that had just been invented, such as the first interactive computer-based video disk (Lorna) and the first touch screen (Deep Contact). "A lot of these things seem really easy, but at that time nobody had heard of doing that, which was why they weren't shown," she said.

Lynn Hershman Leeson has sent personas, alter egos, avatars, and cyborgs into the world to interact with reality and challenge what reality is. "Art for me has to be political. Why do it otherwise? (...) Women artists of my generation were courageous to participate in their culture by using social content rather than just working with formalist issues," said Lynn Hershman Leeson. From 1968 to 2011, she filmed women artists and documented in conversations with them, as well as with curators, critics, and historians, what and how women made it possible to become part of the culture. Her documentary was released under the title *!W.A.R. Women Art Revolution* in 2012; she tells the story of the feminist art movement.

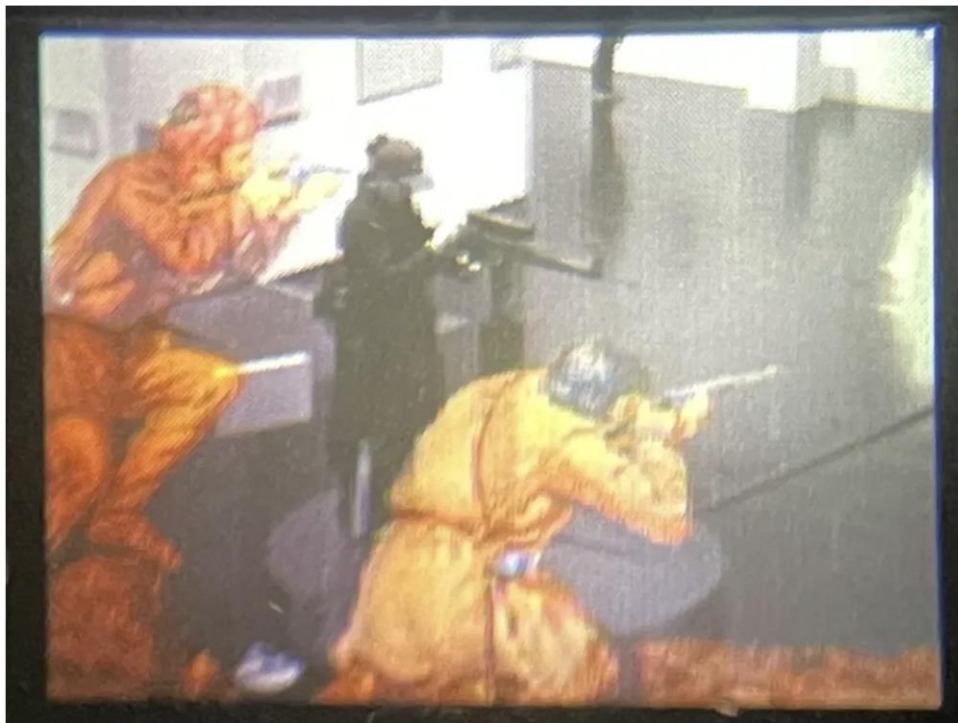
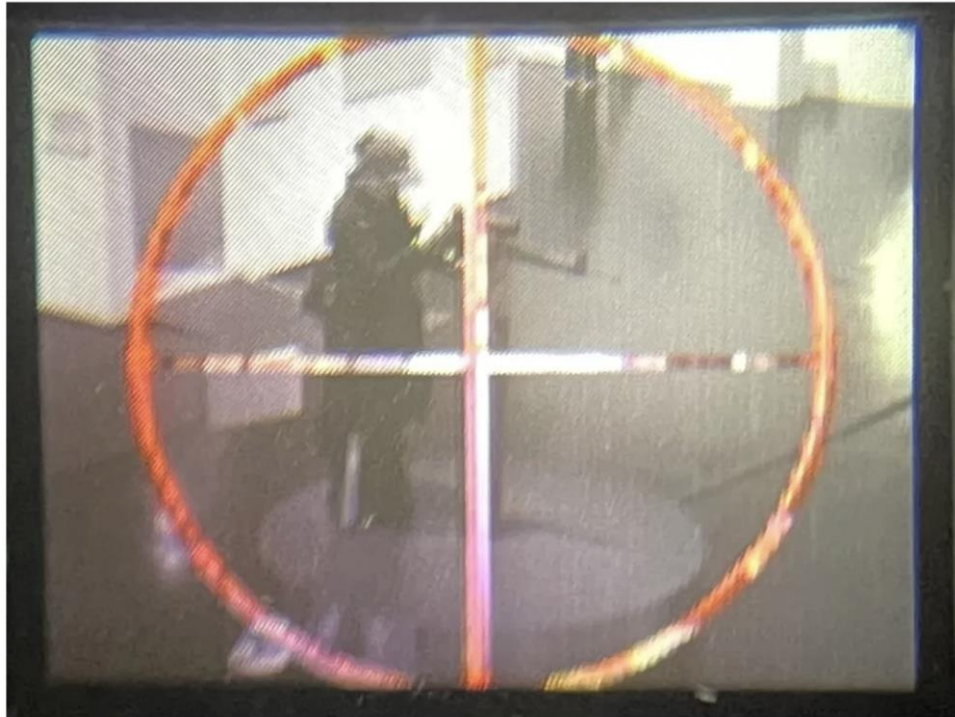
In the collection presentation at ZKM Karlsruhe, two works by Lynn Hershman Leeson are on display: the *Phantom Limb* series and *America's Finest*. The bodies of women merge with technology, and through the viewfinder of a weapon, one sees themselves when pulling the trigger, overlaid with images of atrocity and war.

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Myself through the viewfinder of a weapon: *America's Finest* by Lynn Hershman Leeson as part of *The Story That Never Ends* at ZKM Karlsruhe.

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In the catalog Civic Radar for Lynn Hershman Leeson's solo exhibition at ZKM Karlsruhe in 2014-15, a conversation between her and Nam June Paik is printed. I will end today's newsletter with this excerpt from the conversation:

LH: Can't business and playing be the same?

NJP: Yes. But playing is more interesting. Yet playing is harder. The futurist thing is how to play without being bored. (...)

LH: Do you have trouble playing?

NJP: I think I have this guilt complex... must work all the time. My doctor told me I should get enlightened. But I always think I must get enlightened after the next job. Then, with the next job, I get more and more in debt. Then I need another two jobs to pay the bills. So my enlightenment gets postponed.

LH: Do you think being enlightened and being in debt are related?

NJP: You can get enlightened even if you are hopelessly in debt. There's a guy I know... he's a Catholic. He drinks. He's very fat... but he drinks one quart of Coca-Cola every day. He thinks he'll just work until he dies. But I don't want that kind of enlightenment.

Take care,
Anika