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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!

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.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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