

Talk at MOMA NY (1994)

by Lynn Heshman Leeson

In his seminal article of 1974, *WorldView of Subversive Cinema*, Amos Vogel states that "at the core of modern art stands concepts that still strike scorn or fear into the hearts of many, as they are subversive to the very notion of conventional 'reality'. Dissolution, fragmentation, simultaneity, decomposition - these are words in the service not of obfuscation but of clarification.

The art of our century, says Katherine Kuh, has been characterized by shattered surfaces, broken color segmented composition, dissolving forms and shredded images." (1)

Bruce asked me to talk about my own experience with two decades shifts in technology, venues, the nature of art making and the market place. I can talk with authority only about my own experience with these things.

The work I was doing at the time the statements by Kuh and Vogel were written (1971) functioned perversely and pervasively to erode aesthetic preconceptions, offering instead my own work which was random, fragmented, schizoid, nonlinear, disruptive anti-narrative and interactive.

The tension of alienation and disorientation became part of both form and content. At the time, no one understood it. But then, my most relevant work was born on the cusp of disaster.

For example, in 1971, I had an exhibition at the Berkeley art museum. It a work called "Self Portrait as Another Person, which included audio tapes in which people were interviewed as they approached the work.

The exhibition was closed because I was told that media was not art and did not belong in a museum.

This led me to open a room at the Dante Hotel, where people signed in at the desk, received keys and trespassed a room comprised of fictional essences of an identity. It was site specific, and lasted a year, when someone called the police, who took wax body parts to central headquarters, which seemed like an apt ending to that narrative. I believe it was one of the first site specific pieces in America.

No one saw this as art, until Sophie Calle did a piece somewhat similar 14 years later.

There were other site specific pieces, like in San Quentin Prison, the Windows of Bonwit Teller and Shopping Malls.

Because my work was ignored because there was no critical language or context for it, I was forced to write about it myself, both to historicize and explain its content.

I wrote under 3 names, Prudence Juris, Herbert Good and Gay Abandon. They published these texts internationally, one had a weekly column. I would show the articles in order to obtain exhibitions, because the articles gave the work credibility.

I created a work that grew out of the Dante, a ten year piece called Roberta Breitmore, which was one of a successive series of works that critics, curators, and dealers also said was not art.

She was a breathing, simulacrumed persona, played first by myself, and then by a series of multiple individuals. Roberta existed in both real life and real time and during the decade of her activity engaged in many adventures that typified the culture in which she participated. She had a checking account and driver's license, and saw a psychiatrist. Her existence was proved by the trackings of her psychiatric reports and credit ratings.

Her construction included specific language and gestures as well as a stereotyped cosmetic ambience. By accumulating artifacts from culture and interacting directly with life, she became a two-way mirror that reflected societal biases absorbed through experiences. Roberta always seen as a surveillance target. Her decisions were random, only very remotely controlled.

Roberta's manipulated reality became a model for a private system of interactive performance. Instead of a disc or hardware, her records were stored on photographs and texts that could be viewed without predetermined sequences. This allowed viewers to become voyeurs into Roberta's history. Their interpretations shifted depending on the perspective and order of the sequences.

Everyone thought I was schizophrenic. Almost no one saw this objectification of identity as Art, until Cindy Sherman did something similar 5 years later.

After Roberta's transformation, (1979) Lorna, the first interactive art videodisc, was completed. Unlike Roberta, whose adventures took place directly in the environment, Lorna was a middle-aged agoraphobic fearful of leaving her tiny apartment. The premise was that the more she stayed home and watched television, the more fearful she became - primarily because she was absorbing the frightening messages

of advertising and news broadcasts. Because she never left home, the objects in her room took on a magnificent proportion. In the disc, every object in her room is numbered and becomes a chapter in her life that opens into branching sequences.

Viewer/participants access information about her past, future, and personal conflicts via these artifacts. Many images on the screen are of the remote control device Lorna uses to change television channels. Because viewer/participant use a nearly identical unit to direct the disc action, a metaphoric link or point of identification is established between the viewer and referent. The viewer/participant activates the live action and makes surrogate decisions for Lorna. Decisions are designed into a branching path.

There are three separate endings to the disc, though the plot has multiple variations that include being caught in repeating dream sequences, or using multiple soundtracks, and can be seen backwards, forwards, at increased or decreased speed and from several points of view.

There is no hierarchy in the ordering of decisions. These ideas are not new. They were explored by such artists as Stephen Mallarme, John Cage and Marcel Duchamp - particularly in Duchamp's music. They pioneered ideas about random adventures and chance operations 50 years before invention of the technology that would have more fully exploited their concepts.

Lorna literally is captured by a mediated landscape. Her passivity (presumably caused by being controlled by media) is a counterpoint to the direct action of the player. As the branching path is deconstructed, the player becomes aware of the subtle yet powerful effects of fear caused by media and becomes more empowered (active) through this perception. Playing Lorna was designed to have viewer/participants transgress into an inverse labyrinth of themselves.

Rather than being remotely controlled, the decision unit was literally placed in their hands.

At the time, critics called it a bad soap opera, it did not fit into the trajectory of grand categories, and for years, no one wanted to show it. It defied any funding categories that existed.

THIS WORK WAS ONLY truly UNDERSTOOD AFTER 20 YEARS.

NEW ART is a reflection of the NEW REALITY. It was not particularly hostile to audiences, as has been the work of other artists, like Jarry, Apollinaire, or Paik. The problem was that delivery systems through which my art would reach its audience was different than one was used to .

Ultimately it was the systems of delivery that were wildly subversive. At least as subversive as the ART itself.

My masochistic tendencies overrode rejection, and I did other works where form/content/and delivery methods co-mingled, like Deep Contact, which invites participants to follow their instincts as they are instructed to actually touch their "guide" Marion on any part of her body. This is done via a Microtouch monitor, attached to a Macintosh IIcx. Adventures develop depending upon which body part is touched.

In Room of One's Own, the very act of "looking" initiates the action.

The viewer/voyeurs eyes are inserted into a small video monitor, so they become a simultaneous virtual participant in the scene being seen. All the while, the protagonist chides the viewer for his persistent gaze. This work is not only about voyeurism and a feminist deconstruction of the "media gaze", but also about the explosive effects attached to media representations of female identity. Furthermore, it repositions the viewer into the victim.

In 1888, Etienne Jules Maray perfected a gun that substituted film for bullets. This camera gun has a direct relationship to not only the history of film and the eroticization of female imagery in photography and pornography, but to the horrors of our century perpetrated by weapons and translated into media by cameras.

As an example, many serial killers photograph their victims, as if to capture and possess them. The associative notions of guns/camera/trigger links all media representation to lethal weapons. AMERICA'S FINEST, an interactive M16 rifle addresses these issues. Action is directly instigated through the trigger itself, which, when pulled, places the viewer/participant within the gun site (this time their entire body, holding the gun). They see themselves fade under horrible examples in which the M 16 was used, and if they wait, ghosts of the cycling images dissolve into the present. Again, the aggressor becomes the Victim.

This work, by the way, was stopped in German Customs, I could never get it back. It was said to be a weapon, and is constantly attacked (liverpool, zkm). In Liverpool its cords were cut, at the ZKM, someone broke it in two.

I have used the internet for some recent projects, such as Tillie the Telerobotic Doll. (<http://www.lynnhershman.com>) and another doll who is dressed and looks like Roberta. Her name is Cyberoberta. They are The Dolly Clones. These dolls have adventures throughout the world, just as Roberta did. Identity

becomes intangible on the internet and Tillie's face becomes a mask for multiple expressions of the self that links people to each other.

By looking at the world through Tillie The Telerobotic Doll's eyes, viewers not only become voyeurs, but they become virtual cyborgs, part human, and part machine. Viewers literally use the doll's eyes (which are quickcams) as a vehicle for their own remote and extended vision. The doll's eyes are constructed such that her two eyes are replaced by cameras. I call them "eye cons." As you press on them, they turn the doll's head physically 180 degrees. The left eye sees in color and records exactly what she's seeing on a monitor when you are in the physical space. So, you are captured in her monitor. The right eye is connected to the Internet, and sees with a gray scale, refreshed at one every 30 seconds, to accommodate visitors with slow connections. And, the doll is holding this mirror, and when you turn the doll's head, you see in the mirror everything the doll is seeing. Viewers in the physical space can see themselves on the small monitor in Tillie's environment, and viewers on the Internet, or the virtual space, can see what Tillie is looking at in black and white, through her right eye.

Tillie uses some of the same principles of The Difference Engine No. 3. This piece was designed after Charles Babbage's Difference Engine. This piece is permanently installed at the ZKM Media Museum. In the physical space, a viewer walks up to one of three bi directional browsing units, their photograph is taken by a sensor driven quickcam, a number is put across the image created, and this image becomes an avatar that travels for one minute through a VRML2 environment that replicates the actual museum.

You can interact then with up to 45 different avatars in this environment. The Avatars live a synthetic human life cycle. They are born, travel through a virtual museum, arrive in a suspended purgatorial space where they cycle until they are finally archived where they can be called up at any time on the internet.

All of these works depend upon a collaborative interaction of people in both the physical and the virtual space. The Difference Engine is cryogenic resting-place in the archive permanently housed on the internet and it allows visitors to navigate telerobotically through both a virtual and real world - a multi-user environment. As a work, it explores the physical and ethical boundaries of virtual space, boundaries that intersect with revised notions of identity, voyeurism, surveillance, and the digital absorption and spiritual transformation of the physical body.

When I was working on The Difference Engine 3, my dealer called it a "disaster" and bumped me from his stable of artists.

The same thing happened with another gallery when I showed Tillie.

Again, these pieces were done in 1994 and 1996. There was no critique. They are unstable. Like me.

There is a relevant anecdote John Cage once mentioned. After composing the music for Hans Richter's film *Dreams Money Can Buy*, he mentioned to Marcel Duchamp that he used his (Duchamp's) ideas in the musical score. Duchamp replied "I must have been 50 years ahead of my time."

In fact, Duchamp was right. His experiments with Rotodisks and Chance operations were thought of nearly a century before the technology was invented to allow full manifestation of his vision's potential. Duchamp was not alone in his insight. New technologies and their interactive uses by artists now extend ideas previously thought of, such as the use of multiple perspective and simultaneous viewpoints explored by the Cubists: incorporation of randomness, every day experience and the audience as investigated by the Surrealists and the destruction of form as explored by the Dadaists.

In much of my work I have created a process through which illusion and icon become a simulacrum of origin and authenticity. The illusion IS the substance of truth. One of the more subversive elements of art that uses interactive community based systems is the shift of positioning. Artists who work in this genre are no longer separate from society, but, if effective, create non-hierarchical systems that address fundamental perceptions and REQUIRE responses.

Perhaps the most subversive element of new technology is that it forces "real life" to transgress space and enter an artificially based environment, thereby diabolically transfiguring the essence of the participant, who not only simultaneously becomes artificial through this process, but can be recognized only when electronically disguised.

So, the venues have shifted from isolated cubes to worldwide screens; from limited access to dynamic access, from market based rules to new communities and opportunities.

Although it is true that showing and making my work has been a persistently and painful process... it usually takes 3-20 years to see, and is instantly obsolete - the process and gestation has given me the advantage of being able to reflect, unencumbered by the constraints of what Tennessee Williams' writes about in his essay : "The Catastrophe of success" when he was unable to work because of the excessive laudatory reaction to his play.

The market will always find a way to sell the residue of pertinent ideas, but it may take a while. The shift in art making and has gone from a single hand to collaborations and art viewing from single showings to

remote multiple participants. Technology has helped the appreciation of work go from omnipotent limited control to individual empowerment and dynamic access. .

For me, the miracle is that it has been an extraordinary ride, and that it continues and that I'm even invited here to speak about it, and for this, I'm enormously grateful.