



Karen Archey on Lynn Hershman Leeson

15 April 2018

In 1925, Thea von Harbou wrote the proto-science-fiction story *Metropolis*, which was soon after adapted by her erstwhile husband Fritz Lang into the landmark film we know today. Set in a dystopian 2026, *Metropolis* tells the story of a worker's rebellion led by Freder, the son of the cold-hearted master of the city Metropolis, and Maria, Freder's love interest and communist rabble rouser. Through the misdeeds of the evil inventor Rotwang, the likeness of Maria is transposed onto a robot, and an evil, destructive cyborg version of her emerges to incite workers to rise up and slaughter the city's rich. *Metropolis* ends with the "good," non-Cyborg Maria emerging to help the socially liberal Freder unite the workers with the ruling class. Created in Weimar Germany, *Metropolis* was soon after heavily edited down by Nazi censors into a much shorter version of the 153-minute original. Canonically situated somewhere between communist propaganda and aesthetically virtuoso science fiction, *Metropolis* provided one of our first cultural references to the cyborg, uniting the well-trodden narrative tropes of good and evil with a new vision of man and machine.

Maria, the evil, working class, communist cyborg, has long been a key influence for the artist Lynn Hershman Leeson, whose artwork has for decades explored the relationship between the body, both human and non-human, and technology. Born in 1941 in Cleveland, Ohio, Hershman Leeson is a pioneering artist working in media art, film, and biotechnology. Inspired by the Frankensteinian Maria, her work considers notions of aliveness in series such as her 1960s-era *Breathing Machines*, entombed, seemingly half-alive funereal masks that make breathing sounds as a viewer approaches. Inspired by Ada Lovelace and Charles Babbage's Infinity Engine proto-computer—which Lovelace originally created to write poetry—are Hershman Leeson's mid-1990s *Dollie Clones*: two telerobotic dolls that feed live images of their surroundings online (a hard-won technological feat for the era). The evil, Maria-inspired of the two actually pirates the feed of the other, in a proto-sci-fi twist of its own. Critically examining the burgeoning biotechnology industry, Hershman Leeson's naughts-era work *Infinity Engine* creates an image-based index of genetically manipulated organisms.

Waldburger Wouters

Boulevard d'Anvers 49 Antwerpselaan, 1000 Brussels
www.waldburgerwouters.com, info@waldburgerwouters.com

Hershman Leeson's early work, made while the artist was living in Cleveland in the 1950s, consisted of material experiments in painting and drawing as she taught herself these techniques. While she looked to modernist masters such as Rembrandt, Leonardo da Vinci, Paul Cézanne, and Jean Tinguely, Hershman Leeson's own work depicting the female figure was marked by its darkness, and at times abjection. Her subjects are often bulbous and exist in porous relationships with their surroundings, and are colored with muddy greens, dark purples and blacks. These figurative early works provide a glimpse into Hershman Leeson's expressive background that informs her contrasting later work in scientific fields such as bioengineering and media technology.

In her landmark 1984 essay "A Cyborg Manifesto," Donna Haraway writes that "a Cyborg is a cybernetic organism, a hybrid of machine and organism, a creature of social reality as well as a creature of fiction. Liberation rests on the construction of the consciousness, the imaginative apprehension, of oppression and so of possibility. The cyborg is a matter of fiction and lived experience that changes what counts as women's experience in the late twentieth century." Upon moving to San Francisco in 1963, over twenty years before Haraway's famous words were written, Hershman Leeson began to draw versions of Maria in her series of cyborg drawings. In them, bits of technology replace body parts: a man has a rotor for a heart, a kneecap is diagrammed as a black plastic sheath addendum to the body.

While *Metropolis's* Maria was a primary influence on Hershman Leeson's interest in the cyborg, so too was it informed by her personal experience with various forms of technology, ranging from a mundane office mishap with paper getting stuck in a copy machine to more severe dealings with the medical-industrial complex. A severe heart ailment kept Hershman Leeson in the hospital for months in her mid-20s, and required years of special attention afterward. Long-term illnesses such as Hershman Leeson's force the sick to have a heightened awareness of their body—both a superpower and a curse. Focusing on staying alive, and the technology that helped her to do so, initially inspired Hershman Leeson to consider aliveness as a material itself.

Hershman Leeson's incredibly varied six-decade oeuvre touches on many themes that a new generation of artists today find incredibly urgent, such as the definition of life, the manipulation of biology for corporate capital gain, received notions and stigma around the body, ability and attractiveness. At the time of their creation, Hershman Leeson's works were rarely afforded the support, value and attention that they are now recognized to have today. It is through her perseverance in keeping a meticulous archive and soldiering on making new work, and her insistence on keeping a perspective beyond one's situated presence, that we are able to experience and appreciate her works today.