

# ArtReview

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# Lynn Hershman Leeson

by Karen Archey



Spanning everything from comics and cyborgs to full-length feature films, the American artist's 40-year output has pioneered investigations into the relationship between technology and the body, and now its time has come



One of the most successful tools deployed by second-wave feminist artists was mathematical calculation. By calculating female representation in gallery and museum exhibitions – which often amounted to none – second-wave feminist artists were able clearly, factually to express the egregious gender imbalance that plagued twentieth-century culture and which continues today. This is all explicated in *Women Art Revolution* (2010), a 40-years-in-the-making documentary film by artist Lynn Hershman Leeson, who has seen her own fair share of elision from the art-historical record.

Hershman Leeson has been active as an artist since the 1960s, focusing on issues relating to technology (specifically biotechnology) and the body, and although the influence of her work can be seen in that of artists of younger generations – such as Cory Arcangel, Cécile B. Evans or Ann Hirsch – and has won innumerable honours, including a Guggenheim Fellowship and a National Endowment for the Arts grant, she is just now seeing widespread recognition. Her first major institutional solo show was mounted this past winter, at Zentrum für Medienkunst in Karlsruhe, and in New York the artist was recently the subject of a daylong celebration and panel series at MOMA PS1, as well as a solo show at the new gallery Bridget Donahue on the Lower East Side. As we all know, artworld taste and time work cyclically, and for the first time it seems as if the two have paired for Hershman Leeson. Her work appears to be a decades-preceding preamble to much of what is being produced in New York, Berlin and London today. For example, if you were to take a look at the New Museum Triennial, curated by tech-savvy artist Ryan Trecartin and curator Lauren Cornell, you'd see a concerted interest in reimagining the body in light of advances in biotechnology and mass communication. So, too, is this interest expressed in contemporary art discourse in Europe, as, for example, in the group exhibition *Inhuman* at the Fridericianum in Kassel, which offers 'visions of the human being as a socially trained yet resistant body, transcending biologically or socially determined gender classifications, as a digitally immortal entity, or as a constantly evolving self'. In other words, we're thinking about the cyborg again. In a recent phone interview, Hershman Leeson told me she has been hiding her work under her bed for all of these years waiting – hoping – for the artworld to catch up. Looking back at Hershman Leeson's career now, the pieces to the puzzle easily fall into place – the artist was on the vanguard of both burgeoning feminist and new-media art movements during the 1960s and 70s, with a concerted interest in the cyborg that unites these fronts.

Hershman Leeson, originally from Cleveland, moved to Berkeley in 1963, longing to take part in the activist scene there. From her early days as an artist during the 1960s, her work was political in tone. Her first major drawings,

shown at ZKM, were giant renditions of cyborgs. At Bridget Donahue, Hershman Leeson's early work includes hand-painted female bodies on canvas from 1965 that are deceptively haptic in contrast to the rest of her oeuvre. Her *Breathing Machines* of the late 1960s are an early example of work that employs sensor technology. *Breathing Machine 11* (1968) comprises a wax face covered with a wig, paint, butterflies and feathers entombed in a wood-and-Plexi vitrine that, when you come near it, begins audibly breathing. These materially revelational works tap into an aesthetic depicting the hybrid state of subjectivities; one both stereotypically feminine (the fragile butterfly), and morbid (the disembodied, rotting face). This depiction of a woman as alive but entombed, rather than ebullient and brimming with vim, represents the female body in a realistic way that's still severely underrepresented in both art and popular culture. The female bodies most visible in contemporary art today are so often cisgendered, conventionally

attractive and at least partially nude, and attempt to cater to, and perhaps overpower the male gaze in a battle of erotic forces. Hershman Leeson acknowledged as early as the 1960s that one cannot fight false idealisation of women by creating another false idealisation of herself, but rather focused on revealing abject femininity to collapse those ideals. A woman in 1968 could be many things, but not simultaneously feminine and funny, or simultaneously sexy and intelligent – and certainly not feminine and morbid.

While leading feminist thinker Donna Haraway saw the cyborg as a utopian vision of freedom from our gendered bodies, Hershman Leeson goes further and seemingly uses the motif to suggest an escape from the self. In her landmark 1975 essay 'A Cyborg Manifesto', 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.'

Hershman Leeson's performance *Roberta Breitmore* (1973–9) saw the artist living a double life as a self-loathing blonde with a personality disorder. She had an apartment across the street from the artist's own, as well as a part-time job, a shrink and a driver's license. Breitmore cruised around the city, meeting people through classifieds, but she served no grand, dramatic purpose in Hershman Leeson's life. "Nothing she did was really remarkable," said the artist to me in a recent phone interview. "Roberta was activated by me putting on the outfit, getting into character and really becoming her. She had

her own handwriting, her own gestures, her own manner of speaking and voice." Perhaps the most interesting aspect of Roberta is that she is not terribly dissimilar to Hershman Leeson herself. Roberta isn't the (supremely



above Self Portrait As Another Person, 1966, wax, wig, sound, makeup, sensor, tape recorder

joining page *Women Art Revolution*, 2010, drawing by Spain Rodriguez for graphic novel and film



misguided) social-justice fantasy experiment that Donelle Woolford is for Joe Scanlan, but an investigation into the often unstable boundaries of the self. Breitmeyer continued to be a motif in her practice, as she resurfaced in 1996 as *CyberRoberta*, a telerobotic made-to-order doll with webcam eyes. Even though desktop computers weren't popularised until the mid-1990s and the iPhone didn't debut until 2007, Hershman Leeson was already thinking about digital surveillance.

Especially in her work of the 1980s and beyond, Hershman Leeson tends to deal in the machine-made, mass-produced and mediated image. Past the 1960s, her work has few moments of haptic touch or aesthetic delight, as in the case of her *Breathing Machines* or painterly collages, but rather focuses on the brutality of the image, specifically of the female body and the scientific infographic. Take for example her *Construction Chart Drawing* (1973), a photograph scribbled upon in pen with markings appearing similar to plastic surgery directions, such as 'lighten eyebrows'. Or, at ZKM, her installation *The Infinity Engine* featured wallpaper, titled *GMO Animals, Crops, Labs* (*The Infinity Engine*) (2014), comprising images and brief descriptions of endless genetically manipulated organisms. *The Infinity Engine* also features genetically modified glow-in-the-dark fish that one can easily buy in a New York City pet shop, but are considered illegal in Germany due to their genetically modified status.

Since the late 1980s, Hershman Leeson has also worked as a successful filmmaker and documentarian, her films exploiting the popular fascination with sci-fi to address polemical topics such as gender inequity and the precariousness of bioengineering. Actress Tilda Swinton has starred in nearly all of Hershman Leeson's movies (which have had modest budgets), seemingly in political solidarity with the

artist, who knows that Swinton's presence will help popularise her filmwork and disseminate her message. "When I was making video or new-media art, it was so often shown in the corner of a gallery and never seen," says Hershman Leeson. "So I decided I wanted to expand the format, to make feature-length films, in an attempt to expand my audience. I also needed the expanded amount of time to really develop a story." She has been working on a sci-fi trilogy for decades. *Conceiving Ada* (1997), her first in the series, features a young female computer programmer obsessed with Ada Lovelace (the nineteenth-century mathematician and computer-programming pioneer) and a knack for manipulating the time-space continuum. *Teknolust* (2002), her next, features Swinton as Rosetta Stone, a scientist specialising in biogenetics who creates a part-human, part-machine organism. The last in the series will come out in the near future, and will further deal with genetic manipulation. Hershman Leeson has also directed the documentaries *Strange Culture* (2007), on biogenetic artist Steve Kurtz's run-in with the FBI, and *Women Art Revolution*, which

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historicised the second-wave feminist art movement, with much of Hershman Leeson's original footage spanning four decades. Having been making both films and artwork for nearly 40 years, Hershman Leeson's work now vacillates between long editing periods, and then building up the desire to make something. "A lot of the work is hybrid, because the ideas are always intertwined, but I do alternate," she says to me. Whatever her next wave brings, we should all be along for the ride. ar

Lynn Hershman Leeson: *Origins of the Species* (Part 2) is on view at *Modern Art Oxford* from 30 May through 9 August



HYBRID ROOM WITH GMO FISH, 2014 (installation view), from *The Infinity Engine* series, 2013–. Photo: Tobias Wootton. Courtesy Zentrum für Kunst und Medientechnologie, Karlsruhe





Roberta's Construction Chart 2,  
from the subseries External Transformations, 1975.  
c-print, 58 x 76 cm. Courtesy MOMA, New York  
all inager © the artist