

Don't Say "Sci-fi"
Say "Sci-tru"

Lynn Hershman Leeson

"If you live in the present, most people think you live in the future, because they don't know what happens in their own time." Across half a century, Lynn Hershman Leeson's searching, future-facing work has combined art, science and technology to pioneering effect. Anna McNay discusses the "female filter" and identity with "the inaugural portraitist of the information age".





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Previous pages
A Double Portrait of Lady Luck, 1975
Photograph
48.5 x 25.6 cm

This page, above
Lynn Hershman Leeson with
America's Finest, 1992–94
Interactive multimedia
installation
Photo by Ethan Kaplan

Left
Close-up of *War Occupant*
Crying (Hotel Chelsea), 1974
Black-and-white photograph
40.6 x 43 cm

"I am unable to be normal," says Lynn Hershman Leeson candidly, when asked, probably for the trillionth time in her five-decade career, what it is that makes what she is doing art, as opposed to, say, science, technology or maybe just living in a peculiar, multi-personalised fashion. "I am unable to do things that have what society labels 'an intrinsic value'. Being an artist is the only thing I've ever done, and it is very easy for me."

Hershman Leeson is perhaps best known for her alter-ego characters, *Roberta Breitmore* (1973–79, in which the character was initially played by her, alternating with her own real life, and later by a series of other people) and *Lorna* (1983). *Roberta Breitmore* was a breathing, simulacrumed persona—"everyone thought I was schizophrenic"—who existed in real life and time, engaging in typical daily activities.

Her existence was "proven" by the tracking of her psychiatric reports and credit ratings. Her construction included specific language and gestures, as well as a "stereotyped cosmetic ambience". By interacting directly with life, *Roberta Breitmore* became, as Hershman Leeson described in a talk at MoMA in 1994, "a two-way mirror that reflected societal biases absorbed through experiences". Her decisions were random and her records were stored in photographs and texts, allowing viewers to become voyeurs into the character's history.

Lorna, on the other hand, was "a middle-aged agoraphobic". "A bit like Cubism—looking at things from all sides and using varying soundtracks and multiple narratives and endings", *Lorna* was the first interactive laser disc ever made. Hershman Leeson says she read about the process in consumer reports, tracked down the manufacturer, and figured out how to make something that was more interesting. "Eventually I was able to do it, but it was not easy."

Through the videodisc, viewers were able to access information about *Lorna's* past, future and personal conflicts, through messages attached to the objects in her apartment, also taking on decision-making roles, leading them down different paths and sequences of events in the "plot". From just seventeen minutes of moving image on the disc, thirty-six chapters could be sequenced differently for several days.

Using non-hierarchical orderings, Hershman Leeson explored ideas pioneered by Stéphane Mallarmé, John Cage and Marcel Duchamp. She explains: "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 viewers/participants transgress into an inverse labyrinth of themselves. Rather than being remotely controlled, the decision unit was literally placed in their hands." Pressed in an edition of twenty-five, only fourteen *Lornas* now exist.

Hershman Leeson further believes that male viewers looking at her work, or interacting with *Roberta Breitmore* or *Lorna*, in some way get sensitized to what she terms "the female filter" and might therefore start to experience things from a more female point of view. An analogy, she suggests, is the way the public receiving information from the mass media only experiences it through the specific frame provided by the cameraperson or journalist photographer at hand. "I relate to female figures," says Hershman Leeson, "and there were not a lot of examples around; hence I used them. All my work plays with gender in one way or another."

This idea of vantage points, viewing and being viewed, is central to her work, a lot of which, she says, is about vulnerability and sexual abuse. From the beginning, she has been interested in social and political roles of women and minorities, as shown by the very early *Breathing Machines* (1967), for which she made wax casts of her face and painted them partially black, as a sign of equality and to counter racism.

Of Hershman Leeson's multiple identities, some have, however, been male. In the mid-1960s, for example, she invented three art critics—Prudence Juris (female), Herbert Good (male) and Gay Abandon (male)—and regularly wrote under the pseudonym of each, Juris even having a regular column in *Artweek*. The three critics often disagreed with one another but all tended to favourably mention Hershman Leeson's work.

Ultimately, this project—conceived with the twofold aim of being both a part of her art practice as well as a means of getting her art practice noticed, in an

arena where, in the absence of appropriate critical language, it was not being recognized as art or spoken about—became her master's thesis, "Aesthetic Morphology and its Application to Art Criticism", at San Francisco State University. "When you're doing something that's new," says Hershman Leeson, "nobody knows the language, so you can't explain what you're doing... I just had to not let it go."

For example, a 1966 exhibition at Berkeley University Art Museum, offered "because the museum was afraid it would have its funding cut if it didn't start to show women", was taken down mid-run since Berkeley deemed the sound element incorporated in Hershman Leeson's work—she was showing *Breathing Machines*, early self-portraits with wigs and audiotape sound—to be neither art, nor appropriate for the museum.

"Some of her earlier works really deal with the influence of media, magazines, photography, internet," says Margo Crutchfield, a curator at the Moss Center for the Arts at Virginia Tech, who is curating a show of Hershman Leeson's work. "How does media define women and how that can be denigrating, how that can control you, how that can splinter you." The *Phantom Limb* series (1985–87), for example, which includes an image of a woman with a TV in place of her head, is a clear statement along these lines. Likewise, *Deep Contact* (1984), the first touchscreen artwork, requires viewers to touch the screen on the woman's body. Depending on where on her body you touch, it takes you to different options—for example, she might end up following a Zen Buddhist master or a demon.

"In much of my work," notes Hershman Leeson, "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."

Hershman Leeson is usually labelled a feminist artist, and her documentary film *Women Art Revolution* (2010), which Holland Cotter of the *New York Times* called "the most comprehensive documentary ever made on the feminist art movement", is a personal history, including archival footage and interviews with the women who fuelled it. Her work is, however, distinct from that 1970s

generation of female artists who typically used their bodies in their art in a fairly direct way.

As the only daughter in a family of three, with a biologist and a pharmacist for parents, it is perhaps not surprising that science, technology and bioethics play such a part in her work. "I was interested in doing something no one else was dealing with and the morality and ethics of culture, and the technology that was being invented interested me," she says. For the recent exhibition *Civic Radar* at ZKM in Karlsruhe, Germany, Hershman Leeson created a replica genetics lab, *Infinity Engine* (2014–), complete with live, glowing, genetically modified fish and cats, and exploring DNA sequencing, biogenetic research, artificial intelligence, cloning, mutations, transgenic experiments and regenerative medicine—not "sci-fi", she says, but "sci-tru".

For Hershman Leeson, art and science (or, in other instances, art and technology) are two sides of the same coin. "Artists can use any materials they choose," she explains, "but usually one of their era can best describe the cultural interests. I try to live in the present, because more people live in the past. If you live in the present, most people think you live in the future, because they don't know what happens in their own time."

Looking back at her earlier work, in an interview for *ArtSlant*, she said: "I keep saying that I needed the millennials to be born because they really get this work—it's their language. I can't anticipate the future, but as an artist, you sort of have to do the things that come to you, and culture will slowly catch up. Culture has now caught up in a way that, to me, seems obvious. Because the ideas were present in the days that I created the works, but they weren't disseminated as widely as they are now."

Looking back over her career, she does not think that much has changed in terms of what defines identity—perhaps one of the key questions she is grappling with—despite the spread of the internet and digital technologies. "[There are] still the same insecurities both psychologically and technologically," she points out. She is glad to see young women reclaiming the term "feminist", after a period when it was considered uncool to use that label, and potentially damaging to one's career. "I see a resurgence of younger women who are now claiming that for themselves," she has said. "Now that they understand the history and what it really stands for and how hard fought it was."



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Previous pages, from top
Deep Contact, 1984
 Interactive videodisc installation
 Infinite duration
 Video stills

Lorna, 1983
 Interactive videodisc installation
 Infinite duration
 Video stills

This page
CyberRoberta, 1996
 Custom-made doll, clothing, glasses,
 webcam, surveillance camera,
 mirror, original programming and
 telerobotic head-rotating system

Opposite page
Conceiving Ada (still)
 Feature film, 1997
 Tilda Swinton in a virtual set



As well as the documentary *Women Art Revolution*, Hershman Leeson, who taught herself to make films in the 1980s, has made five films featuring the British actress Tilda Swinton. In *Conceiving Ada* (1997), for example, filmed in just five days, Swinton plays Lord Byron's daughter, Ada Lovelace, a nineteenth-century English mathematician, now credited as the writer of the first computer program, while in *Teknolust* (2002), she takes on the triple role of three replicants, as well as the scientist who created them, Rosetta Stone, in a world where men are necessary only for their DNA. Initially, on being told Hershman Leeson's budget, Swinton's agent had declined on her behalf. But, by chance, the artist met a friend of the actress, who told Swinton about the film and managed to get her on board—the start of an enduring relationship.

If, as Hershman Leeson suggests, the key feature of identity is understanding one's place in the world, it certainly seems as if she has understood—and thoroughly put to use—her own. As Stanford professor Pamela M. Lee notes, Hershman Leeson could be described as "the inaugural portraitist of the information age".