Digital Body
by Britta Helm

For 50 years, the American artist Lynn Hershman Leeson has been addressing questions of technology and identity, creating works that are as disturbing as they are fascinating. She was one of the first to use artificial intelligence and interactive elements in her installations and for years she lived as the art figure Roberta Breitmore. In her new project "VertiGhost", Hershman Leeson chases the ghosts of Hitchcock and Modigliani through a museum, capturing again the current zeitgeist.

Spooky things are happening at the Fine Arts Museum of San Francisco. A woman sits on a bench and looks at the painting of a woman who resembles her except for her carefully styled hair - or is it the other way around? Another painting remains locked away for years until it is checked for authenticity one last time and thereupon appears on a wall - but does that change anything about the picture? How fictional is the man who in the movie "Vertigo" forms a woman after his ideals, and how much of his persona is modeled after the actual director Alfred Hitchcock? What does actually constitute the authenticity of a painting and what the identity of a person? Lynn Hershman Leeson has been engaged with such issues for decades, and with her latest project "VertiGhost" she revisits ideas that are scarily topical in times of Twitterbots, virtual face recognition, and big data.

"VertiGhost" is about the ghosts of two paintings that haunt the museum: the Portrait of Carlotta Valdes, in front of which Kim Novak sits in a key scene of Hitchcock's "Vertigo", which, however, doesn't actually belong to the collection of the Legion of Honor museum; and Pierre-Edouard Baranowski by the painter Amedeo Modigliani, which has only been in the De Young museum since its authenticity was verified using complicated methods. Hershman Leeson connects both works via an installation made of a GoPro camera and a motion detector, which trigger a spooky 3D projection. She complements it with a film that features Kim Novak and a number of art experts. This does not solve any of the questions. That would be too easy for the artist.

"These ideas are not new," says Lynn Hershman Leeson. "I've always been concerned with how science, technology and culture shape our identities in different ways, from surveillance to intervention in DNA. These themes were relevant in the 1950s, and they still are." Since the late 1960s, the American artist has worked with these issues. Early works, like her 1967 Breathing Machine, already unsettled visitors with their unexpected use of technology - the wax cast of Hershman Leeson's own face began to moan and groan as soon as a motion sensor detected people nearby. In the 1984 video installation "Deep Contact", a character named Marion could be touched in various places on her body on a touch screen and visitors could thus control the story – while being themselves observed at the same time. In 1990, "America's Finest" invited them to become a sniper in a virtual war through interaction with an assault rifle and to release the trigger and shoot at a picture of

themselves, which was captured by a surveillance camera and transmitted to the scenario. "Such works have always been explicitly political," says Hershman Leeson. "They demanded change."

At the same time, the artist herself repeatedly felt how necessary it was to change something. With her multimedia installations, she often did not fit into the art world and was sometimes forced to exhibit in rented apartments away from classical museums and galleries. The science community, on the other hand, snubbed her, considering her an unscientific artist in spite of her pioneering work. Over time, she has learned to deal with it. "I just do my job, despite all the setbacks and obstacles." Her roles as a woman and her feminism pervade all the more relentlessly through her work. In the 1970s, she created Roberta Breitmore, a fictional character of an average American woman, who had her own driver's license and apartment and who existed completely independently of the artist who personified her. In films like "Conceiving Ada" and "Teknolust" she sent actress Tilda Swinton as a scientist through bizarre colorful worlds. And she tirelessly points surveillance cameras at the male gazes of visitors looking at her computer-generated women. When asked if it's a coincidence that in the film "VertiGhost" it is only women who judge the paintings of the men Hitchcock and Modigliani and, in doing so, aren't always acting all that respectfully, then she answers cleverly only halfway: "Well, most of the paintings on view in museums' collections are by men."

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WHO IS ROBERTA BREITMORE?

From 1974 to 1978, Lynn Hershman Leeson conceived, developed and lived as the fictitious person Roberta Breitmore. Not only did she change her physical appearance with make-up and wigs, but she also created an independent personality. According to Hershman Leeson, Roberta appeared in the world one day, just divorced, with $1,800 savings in her pocket, traveling by bus to San Francisco and checking in to the Dante Hotel. From then on, Roberta received a traceable biography. She searched for roommates, wrote letters, got a driver's license, even took part in blind dates or went to a psychologist. Roberta Breitmore is designed as a study of the zeitgeist of the 70s. Hershman Leeson describes this transformation as a private performance, as a temporary sculpture rooted in its time and virtual role that acted as an independent person, detached from the other art context. Decades later, "Cyber Roberta" continues the life of Roberta Breitmore. This new, technologized form of identity is characterized by the period "After Digital" (A.D.), based on Hershman Leeson's timescale, who today groups her works into "Before Computers" (B.C.) and "After Digital" (A.D.).