Art

MONTHLY

LYNN HERSHMAN LEESON INTERVIEWED BY ISOBEL HARBISON
The San Francisco-based artist discusses constructing fictional identities
and bots, DNA archiving, surveillance and dodgy software.

BECOMING ROBERTA

First Person Plural, the Electronic Diaries of Lynn Hershman 1984-96

Isobel Harbison: When making your diary-format project *First Person Plural, the Electronic Diaries of Lynn Hershman* between 1984 and 1996, the central work of your recent exhibition curated by Anna Gritz and Cathrin Mayer at KW Institute in Berlin, did you have a particular audience or viewing architectures in mind?

Lynn Hershman Leeson: I had neither, only an urgency to speak and an ambition to learn the language of video. I had no idea they would ever be shown or broadcast.

Were there any specific events that triggered *First Person Plural* or did it respond to a more generalised sense of unease? At the time you made this work, surveys conducted between 1983 and 1984 revealed how North Americans were experiencing new surveillance consciousness and screen paranoia, an alertness that your work has constantly played upon.

Surveillance became a subcurrent of that and many other works, like my *Phantom Limb* photographs made between 1980 and 1990, or *Deep Contact* of 1989, or *America's Finest*, made over 1993 and 1994, or *Tillie the Telerobotic Doll* and *Cyberoberta* which I made between 1994 and 1996, and even

Roberta from 1972 to 1979. In the mid 1980s, computers were just coming into private homes and the Electronic Frontier Foundation, a digital rights group, was alerting people to the government's increased access to personal information and probable surveillance through computer wires. So incorporating surveillance was inspired more by the general tenor of the era rather than a specific action.

Would it be fair to say that the *Roberta Breitmore* performance explored how the self is constructed and performed over time, whereas *First Person* looked at how screen-based culture influenced a perpetual circuit of self-analysis and reconstruction, a circuit or cycle we are all now in?

Yes. *First Person* was or is also an electronic mirror of both the self and culture simultaneously, a bit like *Roberta* but a wider swathe.

Have the *First Person* videos been re-edited over time?

A little, not much, but I do keep adding to them. In fact, I am making the last one now. It's about evolution, facing death, and what matters in life.

How you are approaching the most recent episode?

Formally, I'm approaching it the same way I did the others, shooting and editing alone, so it is going to be very similar to the way the others looked but the cameras are better. The premise of the video is my going to sleep for 20 years after I thought I had said everything I had to say, but then waking up to a completely different world, like the character in *Gulliver's Travels*.

It is about realising how much has changed in the world, from programming the genome, to the #MeToo movement, to the shifting species' identities and the possibilities of extinction. It includes interviews with geneticists like Harvard's George Church, the inventor of 'Crispr' gene editing systems. I interviewed Elizabeth Blackburn, who first identified the telomere (or the ageing) gene, Caleb Webber, director of genetics at Oxford, Troy Duster, a sociologist of the genome, Drew Endy, a microbiologist from Stanford, and Anthony Atala from Wake Forest Institute for Regenerative Medicine, who pioneered bioprinting systems. But the work is also about how little has changed, the necessity of love, integrity, friendship and humour, which are the really important things in life.

In previous episodes of First Person*, the narrative is steered by those you select to interview. Is it all quite ad hoc or are the interviews carefully sketched out in advance?*

Nothing is planned. When I started doing this I never knew what I was going to say – in fact, one of my therapists saw the diaries and said, how come you never told me those things? So I never know what I'm going to say but I try to integrate the people that I meet during the time that I'm making them, and the ideas that come out of knowing them. It's called *First Person Plural* because you think you're alone, but when you get to the depth of your own truth you get to the heart of other people who you find are also experiencing the same things.

Is First Person Plural *interpretable as an index to many of your other works?*

Definitely, and what I am also finding out at the moment is how we might keep our archive with DNA, so that it will have a million-year life span. This is something I was able to include in my recent exhibition in Basel at the Haus der Elektronischen Künste (HeK) and as part of 'Art in Motion: 100 Masterpieces with and through Media' in the Zentrum für Kunst und Medientechnologie in Karlsruhe. I was able to take a video that included on its timeline all the information on evolution that I have gathered over the past ten years, as well as my electronic diary, and convert these elements into DNA itself, in this tiny little vial that is practically invisible.

How does that little piece of DNA find form?

I put the vial that they gave me from the lab inside a mirrored box. They've only been able to do this process for a year so nobody really knows about it, I only found out about it by interviewing all these scientists. One of the scientists actually took pity on
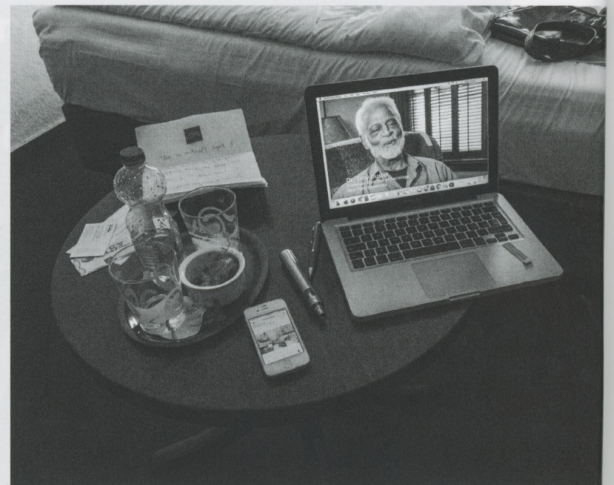
me because his brother was a sculptor so he finally helped me to do it. Montreux Jazz Festival just had its archives converted into DNA, and Technicolor has been working on archiving films with DNA, so it really is the next step of archiving.

This is DNA without biomedical function?

Yes, it's synthetic DNA that they create. Information is very expensive to convert so I could only archive 20 megabytes. Basically, you take a video timeline to put everything on, so I put the entire electronic diary as one, as well as excerpts of information I have been collecting – JPEGs, lists on everything about evolution and so on – and then I gave it to them as a digital file, and it took them four months to convert it into DNA code.

It's a form of digitisation?

It's a conversion of digital code from video into the modifiable code of DNA. They did it with *Voyage to the Moon* because it is one of the rarest films. Georges Méliès tried to destroy everything he ever made so they're finding fragments of his films and converting them. That's why Technicolor, Microsoft and Harvard got together to try to convert it correctly and they have achieved a beautiful resolution. You can also unconvert it at any point and not lose any resolution and it

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The Novalis Hotel 2018 installation

Lorna 1979-82 installation

lasts a million years, perhaps longer than the planet. I think of it as extended cinema.

Your current instalment of *First Person Plural* will exist as DNA and as video, and it also ruminates on this material coexistence.

Yes, it ends up with me realising that this can be done. Because many times I feel like I'm being buried by my own history and the weight of my past, and the stigmas and traumas that I have endured, so if I can put that all in one place then I can be safe, and I don't have to think about it any more.

Juliana Huxtable interviewed you for *Artforum* in 2016 and you talked about *Roberta* aiming at 'the blur that exists in spaces where people perceive reality, and to show and exhibit flawed belief systems'. What belief systems?

I set out to examine how you define and commodify 'reality', particularly when it is openly set up as a fiction. When, just before that work, I created *The Dante Hotel* in 1972 (reworked as The Novalis Hotel this year in Berlin), I wondered what it would be like if we created some living entity that existed in real time and real space but wasn't real. I was completely open as to what it would produce or how long it would last. I think you have to keep an open mind and not be too specific about what your expectations are, like when you're making a documentary. You have to be able to see all sides of it without restricting it to what you presume it is going to be.

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I made *Dante Hotel* with Eleanor Coppola. She did hers for two weeks with a performer, documenting the changes to the artefacts in the room. Mine featured a fictional person, evident through the artefacts in the room, which were moved around by people as they visited. They could be there 24 hours a day. I didn't sit in the room and watch people but I was amazed that nobody stole anything and that they pretty much left everything intact. Some people spent several hours there and some came back. It was all discovered by word of mouth because it wasn't advertised apart from with a little Xerox flyer, but then people heard about it, people wrote about it, it existed as a myth, the same way Roberta did.

So it went viral, pre-social media?

I actually did think of Roberta as a virus, as someone that would go out and infect the space that she was living in, and especially when I viralised and cloned her into three beings later on in the work. She multiplied around 1976, about halfway through. This really was what verified the research aspect of that work, in that one Roberta having these negative experiences – like getting her purse snatched, or terrible experiences with men – was relatively meaningless but when all three of them would go out and have exactly the same negative experiences it was like a scientific experiment proven three times with consistent results: they were three living proofs of the adverse reactions to this specific being.

So when you assumed the identity of Roberta did you have to relinquish your own identity, administratively speaking, your own driving licence etc?

Not at all. I personally couldn't get credit cards but Roberta had no credit problem so she was able to get credit cards and all these government-assisted proofs of her existence. I was really lucky that I did it in the 1970s because somebody did it in the 1980s and got arrested for identity theft.

So Lynn and Roberta were coexisting quite separately during the mid 1970s?

Roberta had her own walk, her own language, her own gestures, which is what I had to teach to the multiples, which is why in 1976 I chose to cast dancers as the multiples, because they could move that way. She wasn't me – we shared a heartbeat but we were separate.

How close was their resemblance to Roberta?

They were made up to be almost physically identical. They had the same dresses made for them, same wigs, same make-up …
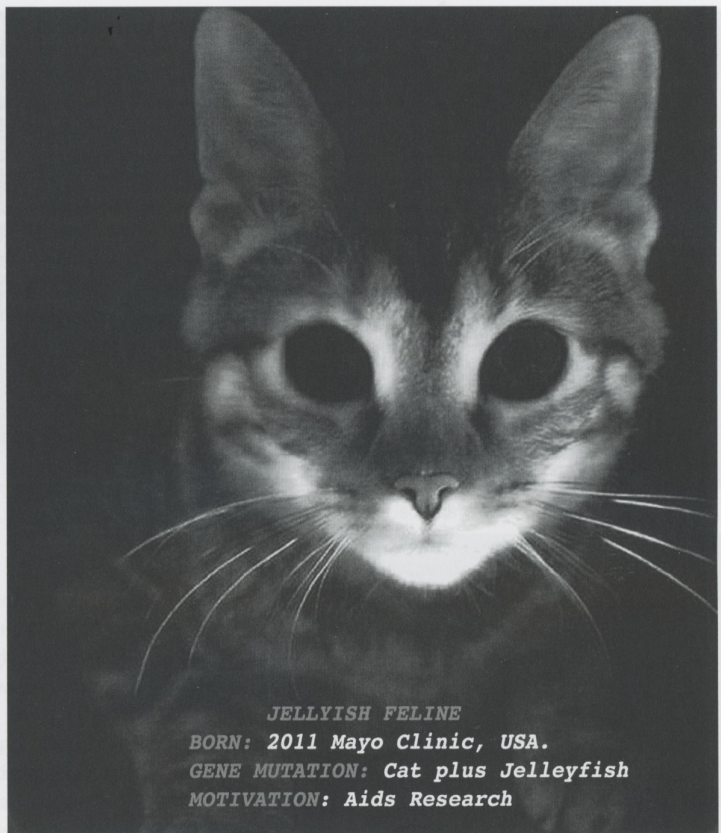
In your conversation with Huxtable you spoke about your work engaging with multiple personae. I wonder how best to retroactively understand Roberta.

Roberta was a prism, and we all live in prisms or, in fact, prisons, of who we think we are. Nothing is stable because we live through time, and time and perception change how things appear and move and age, so nothing is fixed that is living.

Was Roberta set up explicitly or exclusively as an art project?

JELLYISH FELINE
BORN: **2011 Mayo Clinic, USA.**
GENE MUTATION: **Cat plus Jelleyfish**
MOTIVATION: **Aids Research**

I look at these things as investigations. You could say they're art investigations, but I think it's broader than that. They are investigations into reality or its blurring, or what living is, or how people put frames on what they see and how that affects the perception of the thing inside the frame. I was just exploring these ideas through the process of her. That said, I did set up surveillance photographers around her – photographers of whom the public remained unaware – so I think I had to prove the project as I was doing it in different ways.

Before making *Roberta*, I was certainly affected by André Breton's book *Nadja* from 1928 where he took the city of Paris and turned it into this being. I also knew about Marcel Duchamp's very short-lived transition and why he made the choices he did, to create Rrose Sélavy instead of some other being, because he was thinking about being a Jewish person – he was thinking about all kinds of alternative personae. But it was *Nadja* that made me want to explore the situation of living within the context of a space and a time, how that affected how you were perceived as an individual.

So where is the complete archive now?

I was very lucky because I had one collector for many decades, Donald Hess, and in 1994 he bought the original archive of *Roberta*. Maria Balshaw, who was then at the Whitworth in Manchester, acquired the second set for that museum. The third archive is being split up. There are about 30 pieces at MoMA, several at Tate and the Jewish Museum in New York, with other pieces going elsewhere. I have kept one artist's proof.

Have you specified how material within those archives is shown in the future or are you open to multiple possible configurations or retellings?

There are over 200 elements in each, including notes, clothes and objects, but I think that when people look through and rearrange the material, it's like they are reperforming her and I am completely open to how they do that, and I like the fact that it is never the same.

How did your 2014 short film, *The Ballad of JT LeRoy*, come about?

I was always fascinated by Laura Albert's story and felt that when her literary persona was revealed to the media she was treated unfairly, and how in fact LeRoy's persona had been a brilliant ploy for her to do her work. Then she contacted me out of the blue and asked me to make a film about her. So I started to do it. I made the short at my own expense and as I was doing it I looked for funding. What I did not know at the time, however, was that she had also contacted many other people as well, asking them to do it. One of the other people she asked secured funding for a feature-length documentary. They even wanted to buy my footage for it, but I wouldn't sell it. I didn't see any point in doing two, so I left it as the short.

Throughout your work you have switched between media, but you have also created some of your own, within modest budgets and during a period when artists working with technology didn't necessarily have access to funding.

In terms of media, I developed many things with zero money, including two artificial intelligence or bot pieces. The first, in 1996, was *Agent Ruby*, and the second, Dina, was finished in 2004, 11 years before Apple's virtual assistant Siri – Dina is much better. To develop AI, MIT had millions of dollars, so did Carnegie Mellon, and they came up with something that falls far short of these things that I did from the mid 1990s on 25 cents.

You have spoken about *Agent Ruby* in the past as 'the expanded cinema element' of your film *Teknolust* from 2002.

I think of expanded cinema as something that extends the screen into real life. When I made *Teknolust*, I had the idea for the bot before I had the idea for the film. I almost

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word files, video and jpegs from *Infinity Engine* and *Electronic Diaries* 1984-2018 converted into DNA

The Infinity Engine 2010- detail

Reach from the 'Phantom Limb' series 1968

had to make the film, as weird as it was, to justify and secure the budget for making *Agent Ruby*, and when we first opened the film people were using PalmPilots and we developed a way that the code for *Agent Ruby* would leap off the screen and into the devices so that when people left the theatre they could go home and talk with her. *Agent Ruby* still refers to the earlier film through its central female character, and through the central narrative track of confessions within the film, so they're joined together, the two of them.

After making *!Women Art Revolution* in 2010, you spoke about all your work as being about 'loss and technology, about the erasure of identity and how technology adds to it and creates it. And how art can defeat that'. Do you still feel that art is capable of combating technology's erasure of identity?

I do, I think that's our major hope and the reason I tell people that this is why we need art more than ever, not only to neutralise the toxicity of our environment but also to create optimism and hope which art does better than anything.

Art also has the capacity to intervene in a visual field in a way that can be troubling. Artists can really challenge new modes of attention capture and I think that is something that your work has done for decades. When you are making work, are you conscious of the viewer's attention and how you want to channel that?

I want the viewer to be aware that they are viewing but also to be conscious that they're being watched. Many times I have brought surveillance into the piece so that the viewers are aware of the absorption of their presence into different media environments. I think that we have to be conscious about how our image is being stolen and what we can do to protect it.

You have been working with facial recognition technology for a while, anticipating an incredibly widespread usage of it, most recently by Facebook …

In one of the pieces I made, *Venus and the Anthropocene* from 2017, I used off-the-shelf software rather than software I had written myself or with my team. It is software made in China and it is totally wrong, as in it logs incorrect data. It's the same software that major corporations are now using to strategise how to make commercial items for sale based on facial recognition, and this is software that essentially doesn't work. They have facial recognition for crowds, to scan for things, to judge what people like and what they don't like, so they base their conclusions on a product that is faulty. It is a new and highly unreliable form of surveillance data.

Are there artists whose works disarm you, in a similar vein to your own?

I am not sure that I have felt this way about a work recently. When my work was included in 'Art in Motion: 100 Masterpieces with and through Media', curated by Peter Weibel and Siegfried Zielinski, I was thrilled to see Étienne-Jules Marey's early work of a bullet going through glass, and how that affected William Eggleston's work, as well as an 8th-century automaton. So seeing things I didn't know about, and considering how early and how forgotten these pieces were, really resonated. In terms of contemporary artists, I have some concerns with how they use technology, because often it becomes problematic in its surface or shallow resonance. I would prefer not to mention names because sometimes a failed piece of work leads to a good piece and they are at least trying to make something relevant, I think. Other female artists that have inspired me include Leonora Carrington, Tina Modotti and Emma Goldman. All my mentors have been found through books. Paul Cézanne or JMW Turner have equally been of influence: people who were doing true explorations in their work and generally not accepted for their most important work during their lifetimes. ∎

Isobel Harbison is an art critic based in London; her book *Performing Image* will be published by MIT Press this autumn.

Lynn Hershman Leeson's exhibition 'First Person Plural' was at KW Berlin from 19 May to 15 July, and will be travelling to Museum Centro de Arte Dos de Mayo, Madrid in February 2019. 'Art in Motion: 100 Masterpieces with and through Media' continues at ZKM, Karlsruhe to 24 February.