Anti-Bodies

Lynn Hershman Leeson in conversation with Olivia Aherne

Lynn Hershman Leeson is one of today’s leading and influential digital artists. Her oeuvre spans performance, video, film, installation, and photography. As one of the first few practitioners such as social media, artificial intelligence, and genetic modification, Hershman Leeson has continued to create ambitious thought-provoking work, blurring the boundaries between art, science, and technology. Her practice deals with many urgent issues—issues that remain as relevant today as they did fifty years ago—the biological and superficial manifestations of identity; the evolution of art, technology, and its impact on the human body; privacy, surveillance, and censorship; and more recently, biotechnologies and genetic engineering.

Hershman Leeson had her first retrospective, Civic Radar, at ZKM Centre for Art and Media in Germany in 2014, which included over 700 artworks. Her early work in the 1970s, significantly developing and adopting the alter ego Roberta Breitmire, is now viewed as one of the most incisive and critical feminist artworks of the period. The work continues to inspire a flurry of younger contemporary artists.

Photograph by Novartis / Laurids Jensen

3D visualization of the Lynn Hershman antibody, 2018, courtesy Novartis, photo by Novartis / Laurids Jensen

Lynn Hershman Leeson with the Lynn Hershman antibody, photo by Novartis / Laurids Jensen

“Antibodies are highly specialized proteins of our immune system, made up by amino acids. A key determinant of the antibody characteristics is the antigen binding site, represented by ‘fingers’ on the tip of the sketch. We selected a natural occurring antibody framework and introduced a novel binding loop that carries the amino acid sequence LYNNH ERSHMAN. Using biotechnological processes, we have generated the Lynn Hershman antibody and analyzed its unique biophysical and functional properties. The Lynn Hershman antibody is shown as powder in a glass vial.

The structure of the Lynn Hershman antibody was visualized using PyMOL.”

Structure of the Lynn Hershman antibody, visualised using PyMOL and presented as powder in a glass vial. From Lynn Hershman Leeson: Anti-Bodies, exhibition at HeK (House of Electronic Arts Basel) from May 3 to August 5, 2018. Image courtesy of Novartis.

Lynn Hershman Leeson, DNA and Antibody, photo by Franz Wamhof

objects (now including iPhones and Macbooks), and audience DNA was collected from visitors’ used paper cups to form a demographic display, which was presented at the end of the exhibition.

As Hershman Leeson’s practice has developed, so has her interest in burgeoning technologies. In 1984 she created Lorna, the first interactive video art-disc, which then migrated to DVD in 2004, allowing the work to live on in a continually accelerating context. For her most recent solo show Anti-Body at Haus der Elektronischen Künste in Basel (3 May—5 August 2018), Hershman Leeson turned to themes of biological progress, artificial intelligence, and anti-body research, raising questions around the ethics of technology, biology, and its impact on the human body and individuality. The exhibition includes her arguably most ambitious work to date: an eight-room installation titled The Infinity Engine (2014), a laboratory style set up complete with equipment, data files, and other scientific paraphernalia. The work invites viewers to throw on a lab coat and enter a world of antibodies, bioprinting, genetics, and DNA. I spoke to Hershman Leeson about our desire to push the boundaries of the human body, and the ethics that permeate these practices.

QQ: Your work has been important in terms of challenging how we think about the body, both in relation to technology, biology, and a wider social acceleration. What does it mean for you to use the body as your subject and how has this changed over the course of your practice, moving from performance to science, particularly as technology has advanced? Why do you think this desire to break out of ourselves—out of our own bodies—might feel particularly urgent today?

LHL: I think it has been a progressive development, from responding to the outside of the body, looking at the superficial shifts of appearance, to considering the internal direct workings of the body. From the make-up chart of Roberta, for instance, to the creation of a LymphHersman antibody, and the (Rob)erta antibody. We are in an era of mutation and genetic revolution. For the first time, the genome has been programmed. That allows for, and in some cases encourages, gene editing, and I believe this is being done as a means of survival on a polluted planet. I think people have to honour their own instincts and awareness in order to survive. We all take journeys in life. I was integrating my experiences and traumas into science and technology. I was often inventing the technologies that I saw coming before they were widely available, like the remote, or HyperCard for a touch screen with Lorna, and AI (Artificial Intelligence Markup Language), to name a few.

QQ: Thinking about Lorna, which was the first interactive video disc installation artwork, how did the work materialize and what inspired your move into this new medium?

LHL: It came naturally after the ‘Dante Hotel’, which in a sense was the flow chart for ‘Lorna’. I wanted to make a work that incorporated time, light, colour video, and interactivity, that could be accessible to people who could not visit the room. I read about videodisks in a consumer report journal, tracked down a videodisk publisher, and designed a program that was relatively easy. I shot Lorna in Texas while working on another project, working in the middle of the night at a TV studio in San Jose where I knew someone. No one funded it. No one understood it. It was not exhibited for about 20 years, except in a very few places early on. Most of my best works are rejected when I make them, but then end up surfacing decades later.

QQ: Identity has always played a huge part in your practice, with gene editing being the subject of your most recent work. Where do you think the potential lies for new hybrid bodily forms and identities? And what do you think we need to be aware of as we continue to recreate and redefine a more cyborgian self?

LHL: This has been a process of changing how we think about the body, both in relation to technology, biology, and a wider social acceleration. What does it mean for you to use the body as your subject and how has this changed over the course of your practice, moving from performance to science, particularly as technology has advanced? Why do you think this desire to break out of ourselves—out of our own bodies—might feel particularly urgent today?
I do think the question of ethics are important, and understanding why we are re-defining ourselves with the inclusion of biological or Artificial Intelligent elements. There is now a problem of losing the original identity of life forms. The phantom life we displace and how it will be remembered is an important element to consider in genetic and molecular engineering. We need to invest in integrity, understand the long-term consequences of our actions, and honour and help other people and their work.

OA: Can you give an example of this in your recent work?

LHL: The Infinity Engine (2014), for instance, can infer the unintended consequences of gene editing, or the ethical and legal elements of how we use genetic engineering. But everything I do really speaks about how we will care for and cure the pollution of our lives.

OA: Can you explain the significance of this term ‘anti-body’, which you’ve used throughout your practice to refer to your research, work, and as the title for your recent exhibition in Basel?

LHL: I used the term in earlier works, like the anti-body photographs I made in the 1980s, or the article Romancing the Anti-body that I wrote in 1984. The article was about bodies outside and inside bodies, the alien body being like the anti-hero, a virtual body, and how we need to take care of it as well as our physical one. I think antibodies identify toxicities in culture and art does the same thing. It can neutralize or point out toxicities and help to breed a healthier environment.

OA: So they refer to a form of critique, something viral or infectious, which enter spaces of technological, economical, or social acceleration to critique and break down their structures?

LHL: Yes, that is exactly why I did Anti- Bodies in Basel, and needed to work with a pharmaceutical company.

OA: And what toxicities did you feel required neutralising?

LHL: Anger and greed, particularly in relation to the pharmaceutical opioid epidemic.

OA: Collaboration plays a big part in your work. It’s fascinating that you collaborated with the Swiss multinational pharmaceutical company Novartis to produce the ‘Lynn Hershman Antibody’. You have previously worked with many different world-renowned biologists, including Elizabeth Blackburn, who won the Nobel Prize for developing the telomere in 2009. Why is it important for you to
A requirement of being truly plugged in or grounded in cyberspace is to create a personal mask. It becomes a signature, a thumbprint, a shadow, and a means of recognition. The justification for this is similar to the one used to describe why primitive tribes also use coverings. Masks camouflage the body and in doing so liberate and give voice to virtual selves. As personal truth is released, the fragile and tenuous face of vulnerability is protected.

One of the more diabolical elements of entering CMC or Virtual Reality is that people can only recognize each other when they are electronically disguised. Truth is precisely based on the inauthentic!

Masks and self-disclosures are part of the grammar of cyberspace. It is the syntax of the culture of computer mediated identity which, by the way, can include simultaneous multiple identities, or identities that abridge and dislocate gender and age.

Identity is the first thing you create when you log on to a computer service. By defining yourself in some way, whether it is through your name, a personal profile, an icon or mask, you also define your audience, space and territory. In the architecture of networks, geography shifts as readily as time. Communities are defined by software and hardware access. Anatomy can be readily reconstituted.

Masking through computer mediated communication is read differently than in real life. You can be anything you can imagine, instantly, with very few props or prompts. Self-created alternate identities become guides with which to navigate deeper access of internetting. You do not need a body to do this.

Not only do you not need a body, but entering cyber space encourages a disembodied body language. Posing and emoting are some of the terms for phantom gestures that can be read through words, or seen in special video programs through simple movements such as waves. Codes of gestures can be read by attachments on the computer that articulate hidden meanings of voiceless and mute speech.

Actions are constantly under surveillance, tracked, traced, digitized and stored. Icons as masks are of particular importance because the disguises used today may determine an archetype of the present that will eventually reflect the ephemeral nature of a society geared towards image manipulation and self recreation.