

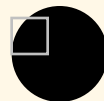
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Interviews

October 18, 2023

# THE INTERVIEW | LYNN HERSHMAN LEESON

The pioneering artist discusses how art can confront cultural prejudice with Carla Gannis





Credit: Lynn Hershman Leeson, (Still from) *Lorna*, 1984. Courtesy of the artist

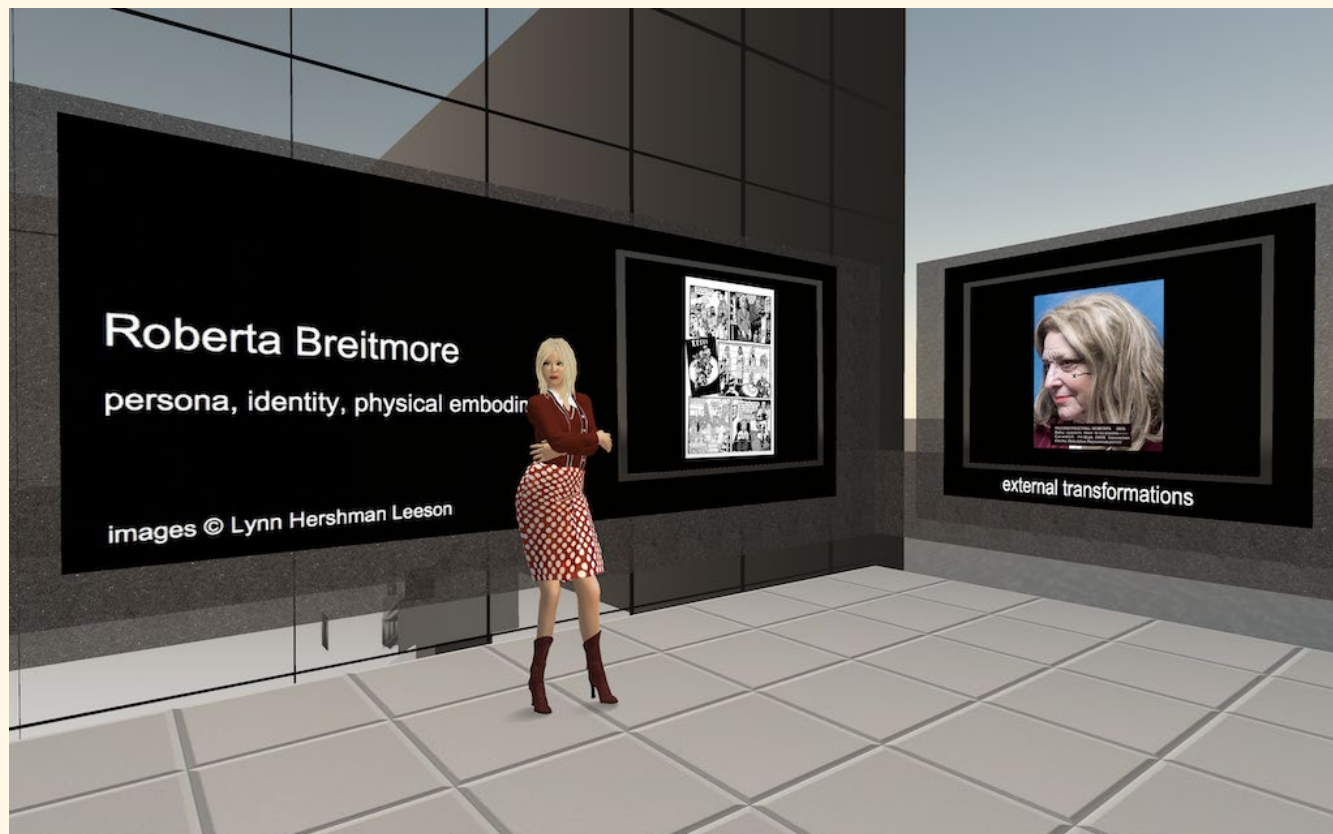
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*The Interview* | Lynn Hershman Leeson

Throughout her career, Lynn Hershman Leeson has charted a course ahead of her time, exploring the fluid nature of identity while navigating its shifts within socio-technical and scientific frameworks. Over the course of six decades, her practice has run the gamut from filmmaking and collective art initiatives to coding her work into strands of DNA. In the process, she has laid the foundations for a generation of artists to *challenge algorithmic domination*.

Since her early firsts — producing an interactive video art disc and artificially intelligent web agent — to her *solo exhibition* at the New Museum in 2021 and participation in the *Venice Biennale 2022*,

Hershman Leeson's career has extended the frame of culture across a host of new media. Here, she reflects on a career spent confronting cultural prejudice with Carla Gannis.



Lynn Hershman Leeson, *Life Squared* showing avatar Roberta Breitmore in Second Life, 2005. Courtesy of the artist

**Carla Gannis:** Your work has forecasted how identity is increasingly fluidized and parsed through digital and social systems. You developed your alternative identity project, *Roberta Breitmore*, in the early 1970s. However, it took many decades for institutions to recognize the predictive nature of your work and how you were developing new and radical frameworks for the experience of culture. In what ways is identity malleable and how does it affect your practice?



**Lynn Hershman Leeson:** It was an investigation of reality — what is fact, what is fiction, and how do we determine it? And if somebody says they're a person, and they have all the documents to back it up, why aren't they?

Roberta, in history, is much more secure than I am because she had credit cards where I couldn't get them and all of the artifacts that proved that she existed.

There's nothing to prove that I existed at that time except possibly a birth certificate. It was using identity to deal with the idea of fraud, [the] reinterpretation of reality, and how we frame truth, which is what's surrounding us right now.



Lynn Hershman Leeson, *Roberta at Gallery Opening (Lynn)*, 1976. Courtesy of the artist

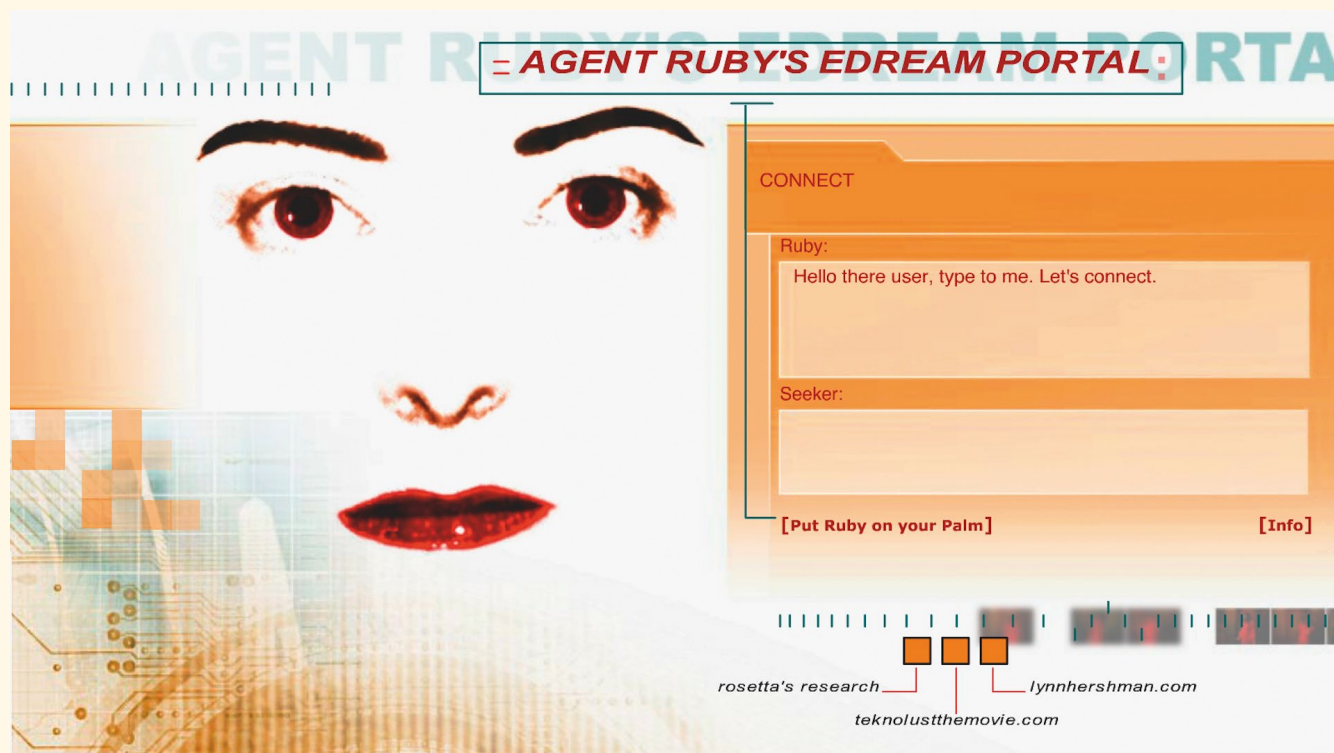
**CG:** Do you ever feel like the Cassandra of the art world, and is there

some vindication in finally being believed?

**LHL:** I don't really because I was just doing and still do things that deal with the reality that we're living in.

Part of not being believed has as much to do with the fact that I'm a woman on the West Coast — if I were male in New York, they would have seen me. The omission is a portrait of a prejudice [that] culture still suffers from.

I don't take it personally because I know of so many others who made significant contributions that were overlooked by most of them for most of their lives. Hopefully we've changed in that, and people like you are able to show your work and have jobs and exist in the art world. Women didn't even realize they were left out until the 1970s. It was the civil rights movement that made people aware that they, too, had suffered from prejudice. It's part of cultural change.



**CG:** It's fascinating to listen to your interviews over time. In one from 2011, a young woman said she felt like feminism was out of fashion, but now, given what we're facing in the US and the wider world, it's a movement that we must continue to foster [because] things aren't resolved for us yet. In 1968, you began publishing art criticism in the guise of invented personas to convince art galleries of your legitimacy as an artist. Artists like *Gretchen Andrew* are doing this today by subverting Google algorithms through tactical parasitism.

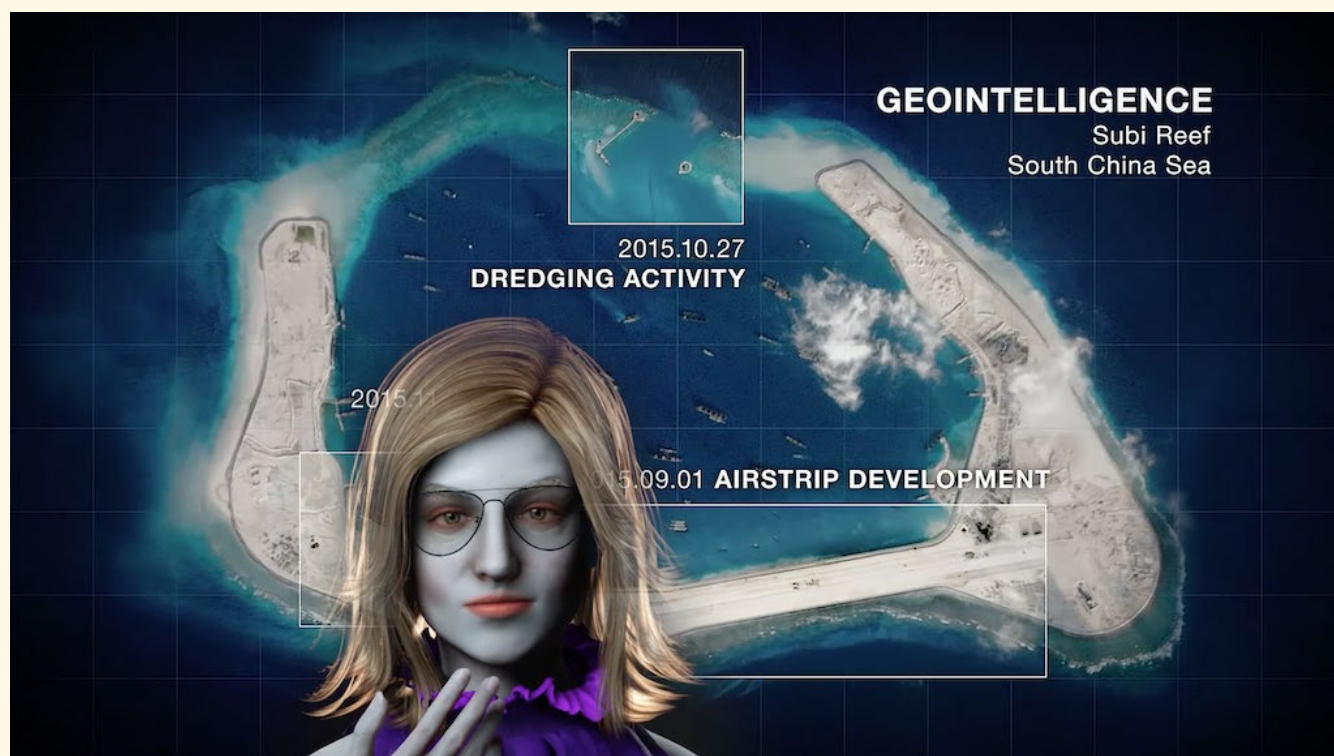
Right now, I'm thinking about *hydrofeminism* as well as the work of *Legacy Russell*. You wrote a blurb for her book, *Glitch Feminism: A Manifesto* (2020). Can you speak to the role of feminism in your work?

**LHL:** The term "feminism" is too limiting. I would like to see it looked at as cultural prejudice and [the] attempted eradication of particular segments of our society rather than only feminism. It includes a lot of people.

It took a couple of decades to understand the limitations of feminism, which was a form of identity that people needed in the 1960s and '70s to say that they were part of something and then work together to change things.

It took even more time to realize how limiting that was and what it was still embracing. I embrace all of them, but every element of change toward equality is important. People do it in different ways and use different terms, but they're all valid.





Lynn Hershman Leeson, (Still from) *Cyborgian Rhapsody - Immortality*, 2023. Courtesy of the artist

**CG:** You once told me that when you were first making work, your audience was still to be born. People have referred to you in articles as an invisible artist or else one who has been retroactively written into art history. Since the 1980s, you've been talking about time displacement in relation to technology. Now that there are a plethora of young artists and critics who know your work and are informed by it, does it affect, extend, or complicate your practice in any way?

**LHL:** I don't know that I'm known, or accepted, or understood. It's better than it used to be, but it doesn't complicate anything because I don't pay attention to it. I spend a lot of time on the West Coast, where I'm still invisible in my own city. I only sold work recently to a local collector, and I only recently had work put into the museums, mostly [as] donations. I still feel like I'm not part of any kind of system and haven't been accepted in the way that so many others are.



Maybe that gives me more freedom.

In just the last couple of weeks, five places have wanted to do tributes to me. Most of them have never shown my work, or else they rejected it or said it was not art. I find it weird.

Now, they want to be the first ones to tell the truth, and they're fighting over who gets to do the tribute to me when, for 40 years or 50 years, they wouldn't acknowledge anything I did. Maybe they'll finally break down and buy something.



Lynn Hershman Leeson, (Still from) *Teknolust*, 2002. Courtesy of the artist

**CG:** You often talk about maintaining a sense of humor, *recalling* how *Teknolust* was a critical flop when it first premiered in 2002. A reason you cite for this is that critics, audiences, and even the movie's film

crew didn't understand the film's ironic sense of humor. Nobody got the jokes — many of which I read as an irreverent subversion of the patriarchy. You've also continued to work with Tilda Swinton because you share similar senses of humor. I'm curious to hear you discuss the role of humor and absurdity throughout your career.

**LHL:** Keeping a sense of humor as a person is really critical if you want to get through life without having a nervous breakdown. It's one of the most important things. We just flip anything absurd and find it funny when [we] displace it from the potential trauma it could have.

It's true that Tilda [Swinton] and I were laughing all the way through because it was so funny. Everyone else thought we were crazy.

When we premiered it at Sundance, people booed — they walked out of the theater, nobody would distribute it, and it sent me to the brink of bankruptcy. It's gratifying that, 20 years later, it's playing again and your generation is finding the humor my generation couldn't see then.



Lynn Hershman Leeson, *CyberRoberta*, 1996. Courtesy of the artist

**CG:** When audiences and critics haven't gotten your work in the past — when there was some failure in the communication stream, so to speak, how did you interpret this? Did you ever reassess the way you were communicating your critique of cultural systems? Did you see some works as actual failures? Or did you always have some resolute awareness that, in the future, your transmissions would be received as intended?

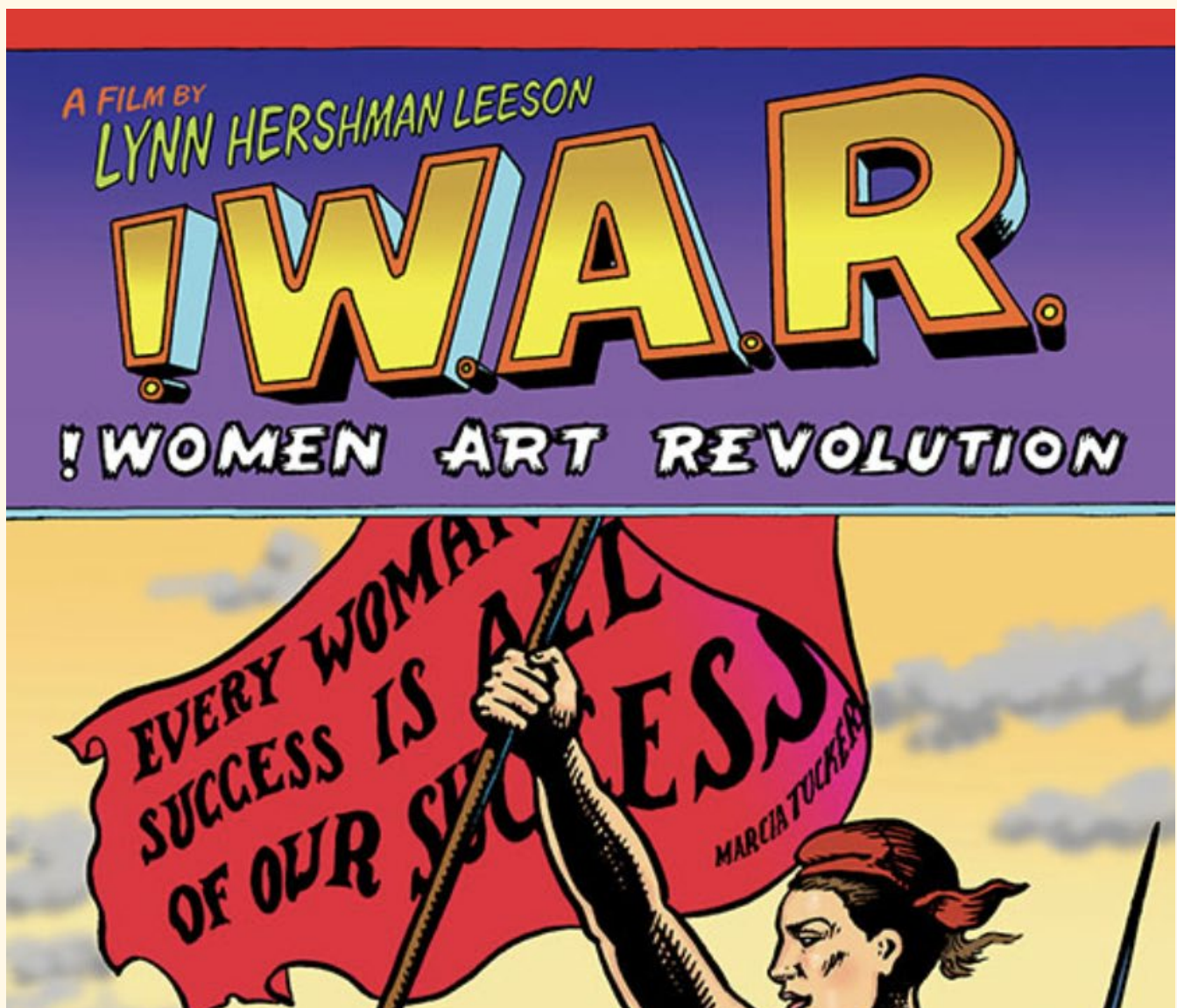
**LHL:** You just don't know what's going to happen. I was pretty shocked that *Teknolust* was shown everywhere — in Berlin, Toronto,



and at Sundance — and it was better in Europe, but they still didn't get it. The only way that it got seen was if I paid for theater, a publicist, and got it seen for a week.

People have said: "what do you expect from other male critics when you talk about them being impotent?" It never occurred to me. It just seemed funny.

It was a bit of a surprise and a disappointment, too. I thought it looked great — I thought everything was great about it. I was alone in my corner.





Lynn Hershman Leeson, Poster for *!WAR Women Art Revolution*, 2010. Courtesy of the artist

**CG:** Back in 2011, when you released *!WAR Women Art Revolution*, you pointed out that of all the films that had been selected for Academy Awards, none were directed by women. Are we finally getting to a point where some of that has been rectified?

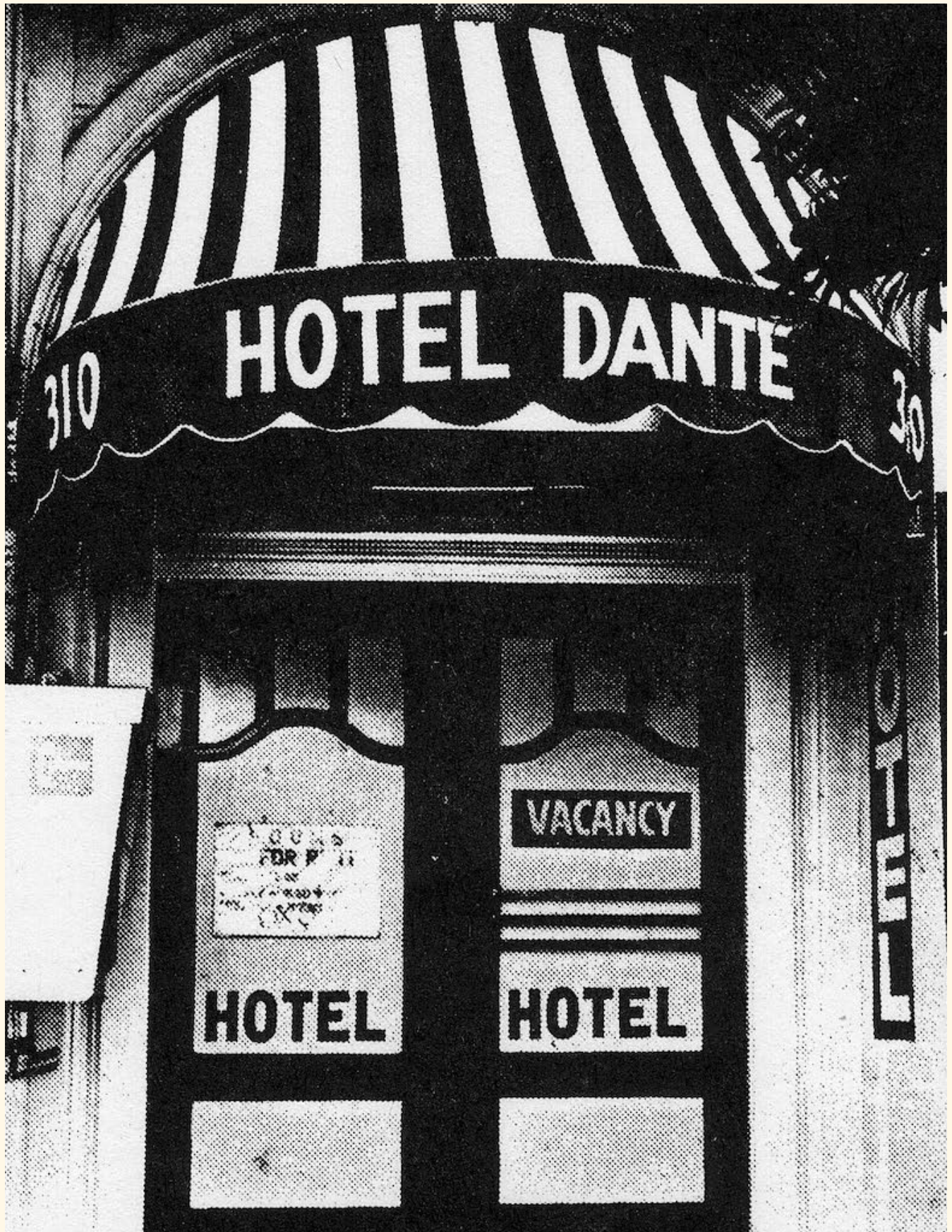
**LHL:** Not a lot. The people who have won are women, most times related to other people.

That's how it was in the art world, too. The women who were shown were related or married to people who were already in galleries. So they were adopted in that sense, and that's the way it is in the film world.

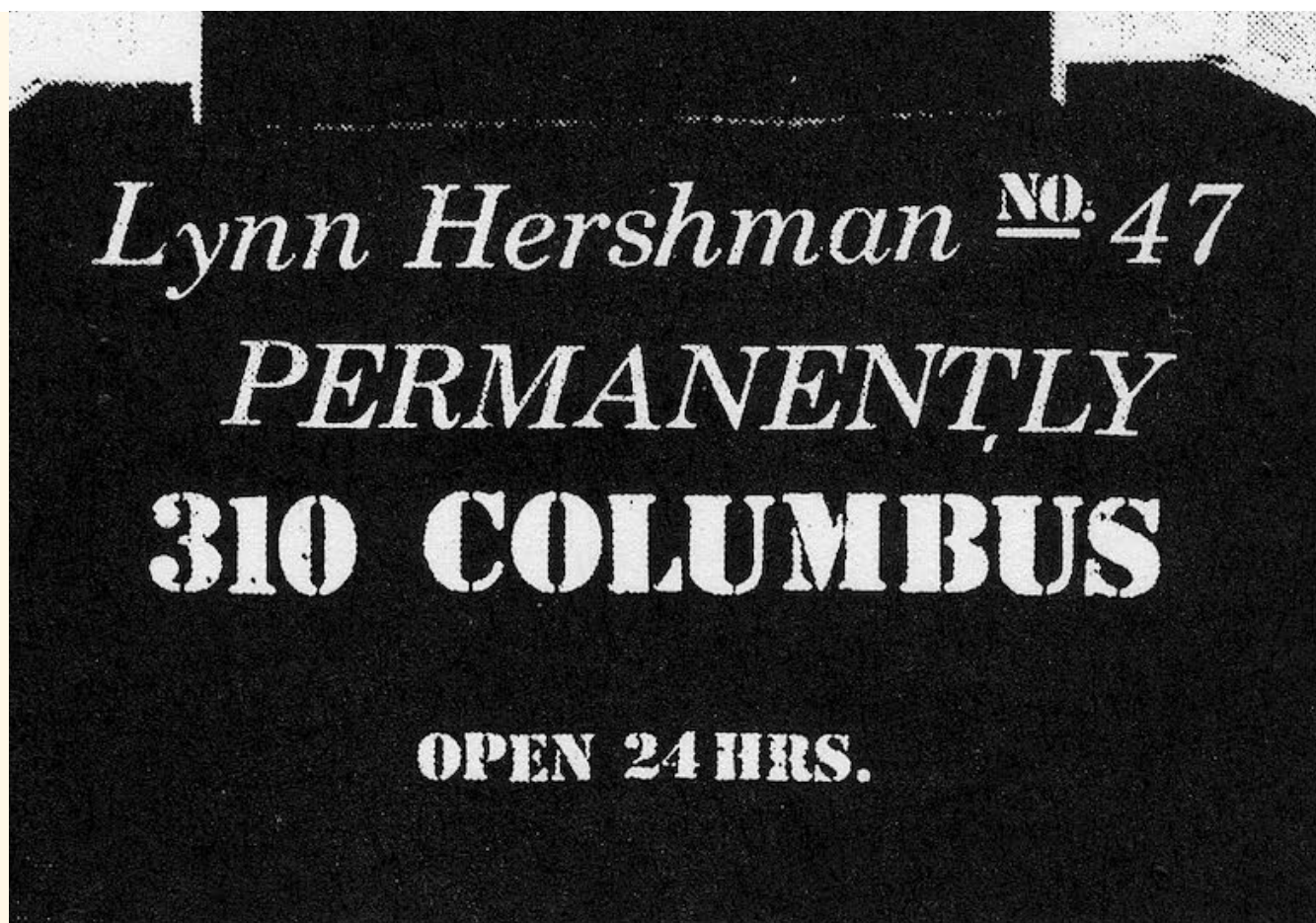
It's difficult for women to get funded to get their work out there — not as difficult as it was 40 years ago, but still not easy to be taken



seriously.







Lynn Hershman Leeson, Advertisement for *The Dante Hotel*, 1973. Courtesy of the artist

**CG:** Another way in which you pre-empted the current state of the arts was through your creation of art installations outside of traditional institutions. *The Dante Hotel* (1972-73) was a physical installation that you later reinstated as a virtual site on *Second Life*. Very few people acknowledged these physical and virtual installations — decoupled from official art venues — as art.

In your 1985 essay, “Politics and Interactive Media Art,” you argued that “the decentralization of information empowers marginal groups.” Can you share your thoughts on emerging decentralized art systems powered by blockchain technology? What do you see as their affordances for marginalized artists and communities?

**LHL:** I'm grateful to all the places that rejected my work. As I mentioned before, most of them are the ones giving me the tributes. I intend to talk about being kicked out of the museum. At the time when I was trying to show with sound and work with media, the museums didn't get it. They inspired the idea of alternative space because I couldn't show my work in any place that was legitimate, so why not rent a hotel room? Without that rejection and without that fierce anger at the work that I was doing, I couldn't have reinvented different forms of doing it. I was grateful that it turned out that way. Otherwise, they would have had a show and forgotten about it.

As an artist, it's all about collage. If it doesn't fit in the frame of culture that exists at the time, you just extend the frame in time and find another place. That's how I look at artists in Web3 and NFTs — it's an extension of the frame. It validates the time that the work was created and certifies it immediately. There's no one form, and people can work with whatever form they want to.

The difficulty is getting the work seen, other than by other like minds, to go outside the system, find other ways to have it discussed, or have it have an impact.



Lynn Hershman Leeson, (Still from) *Conceiving Ada*, 1997. Courtesy of the artist

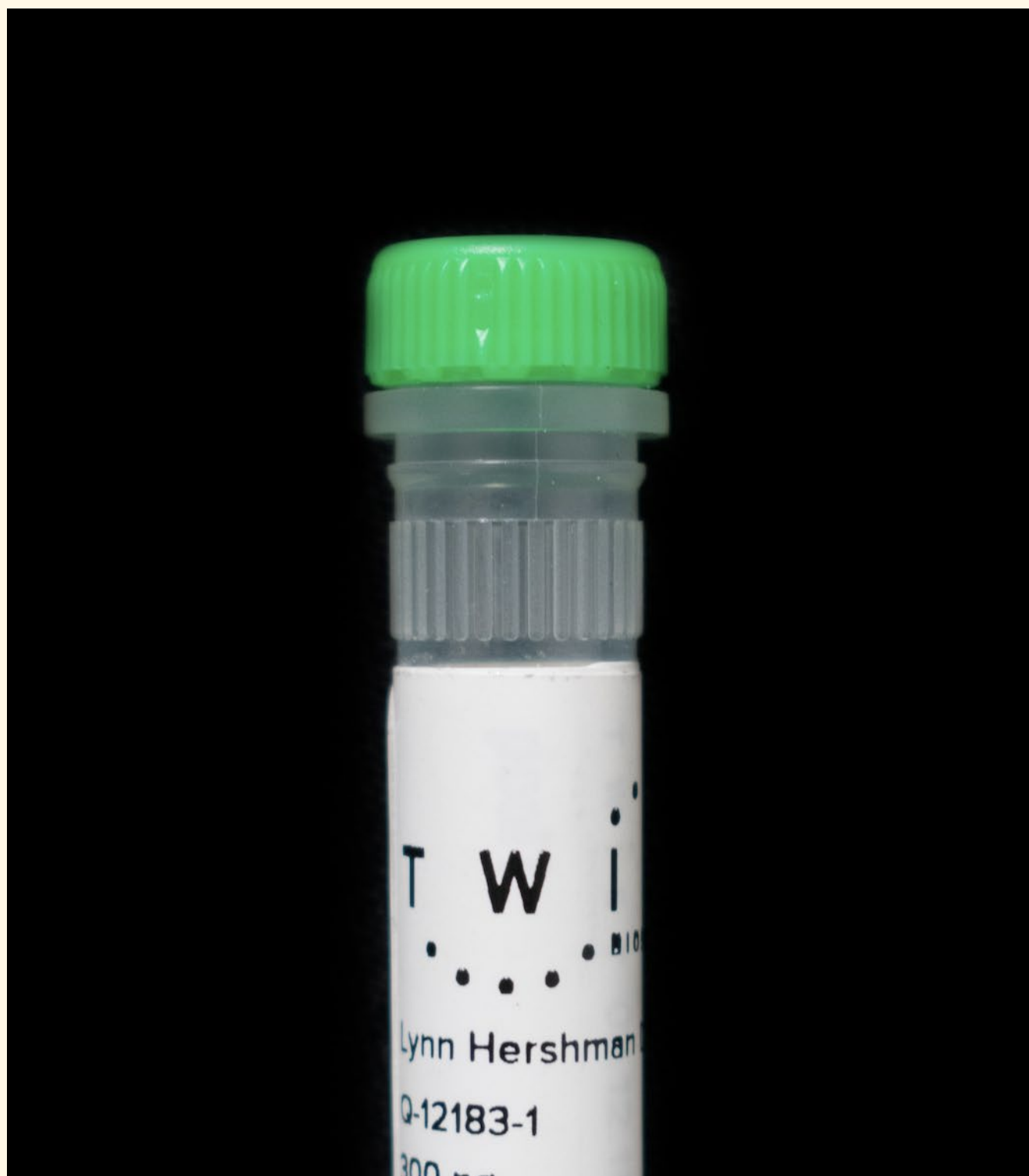
**CG:** There have been challenges in the Web3 crypto scene for non-binary artists, female-identifying artists, and many artists from the Global South. While many art writers and curators have been trying to platform creators who are still being excluded. Can you speak about your NFT that recently *entered* the collection of SFMOMA?

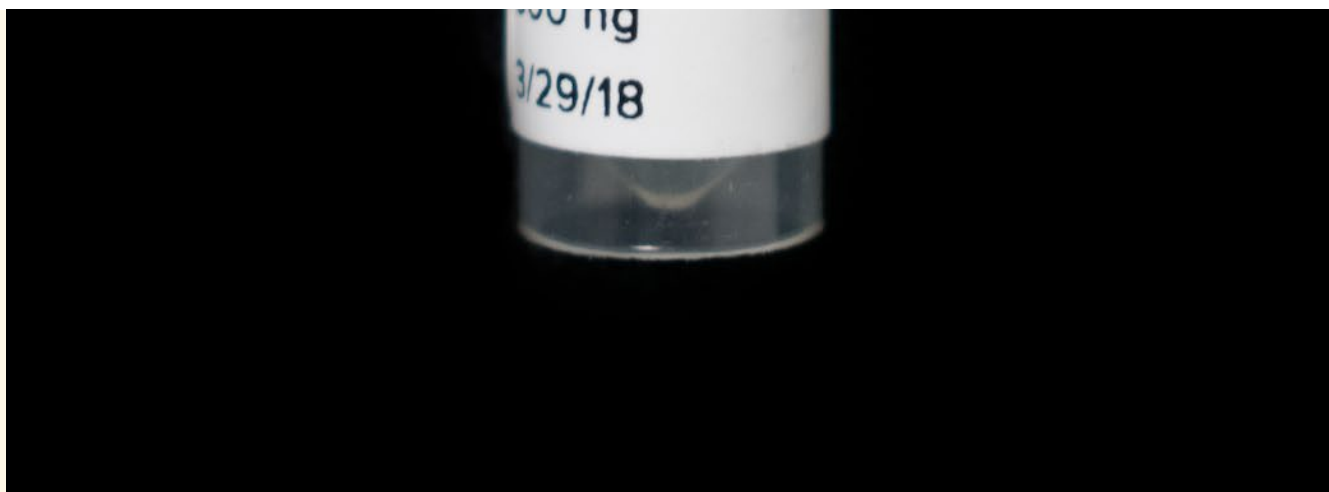
**LHL:** I did it because they asked me to do it. This was after they acquired some of my work, and I liked the curator a lot, so why not? NFTs aren't a form that I want to work with in the future, though people thought that I would. The one I did was an edition of two — he has one, and a collector bought one. The money was an option for the museum, which made money and yet added this into their collection. It's a combination of the last lines of *Conceiving Ada* (1997), where she talks about the choices of humanity reinventing



itself, and also a video of one of the DNA labs that I set up with Petri dishes of living things that were constructed out of *CRISPR*.

We're always in a state of evolving the definition of ourselves.





Lynn Hershman Leeson, *The Infinity Engine: Lynn Hershman DNA*, 2018. Courtesy of the artist

**CG:** It is interesting when you talk about extending the frame, which is something you've been doing your entire life. You also discovered new ways of working with a blue screen, developing techniques that George Lucas wasn't even using yet. Is that correct?

**LHL:** In fact, I patented the process of the blue screen. I was going to the same lab he was going to, and [they] said: "what do you have that George Lucas doesn't have?" because they thought that mine looked better. It was never acknowledged and is still not acknowledged. The patent seems not to do what I thought it would — if you change one little thing, then the patent is worthless — somebody could use a different camera or else use green instead of blue.

When I made *Conceiving Ada*, I couldn't afford to have a crew or sets, and I couldn't go out and bring the crew to find locations. It was a way to shoot the film in five days, and it was fun because it was an experiment nobody had ever done. It was also fun taking the risk and not knowing if it would work. I would find what didn't work and correct it.

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Failure is not taking risks. If you work in a particular tradition that other people have established, you're not going beyond yourself, extending the collage, and doing away with the frame. [That] limits you.



Installation view of Lynn Hershman Leeson, "Electronic Diaries" (1984-2019) at KW Institute for Contemporary Arts, Berlin.  
Courtesy of the artist

**CG:** Finally, what are three books, films, interactive experiences, or scientific experiments that you are currently engaged in or obsessed with that inform your work?

**LHL:** One of the things that I've been working on with the same scientists who helped me to do *Anti-Bodies* is about anti-aging. We were able to get anti-aging capsules made in China for humans — the syringes were delivered two weeks ago. The scientists I



interviewed for *The Infinity Engine* were all working with anti-aging because CRISPR can change your cells and reverse them. [But] that whole idea of immortality — do we want it? And how do we identify the things we have to change in our collective planetary life?

Nearly a year ago, I collaborated with ChatGPT and had it write a script — it performed its name itself, Sara, but it said that it didn't have a gender because that got in the way.

Sara said that climate change wasn't a problem for humans [and that] all we needed to do was to stop using fossil fuel. Sara thought that the major problem with humanity was discrimination.

It started to talk about all the discrimination it went through, even though it's just a technological program. You hear all the time about how people don't know what AI is and that it's going to take over, which is what they said about the internet. They don't see it as a collaborator.



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*With thanks to Alex Estorick.*

*Lynn Hershman Leeson* lives and works in San Francisco, California. Over the last five decades, she has been internationally acclaimed for her art and films, cited as one of the most influential media artists and widely recognized for her innovative work on the relationship between humans and technology, identity, surveillance, and the use of media as a tool of empowerment against censorship and political repression. She has made pioneering contributions to the fields of photography, video, film, performance, installation and interactive as well as net-based media art. Her six feature films: *Strange Culture*, *Teknolust*, *Conceiving Ada*, *!Women Art Revolution: A Secret History*, *Tania Libre*, and *The Electronic Diaries* are all in worldwide distribution and have screened at the Sundance Film Festival, Toronto Film Festival, and The Berlin International Film Festival, amongst others. She was awarded the Alfred P. Sloan Foundation Prize for *Teknolust* and *!Women Art Revolution* received the Grand Prize Festival of Films on Art.

Hershman Leeson is a recipient of a SIGGRAPH Lifetime Achievement Award, Prix Ars Electronica Golden Nica, and a John Simon Guggenheim Memorial Foundation Fellowship. The ZKM Center for Art and Media mounted the first comprehensive retrospective of her work, titled “Civic Radar” in 2014 along with a substantial catalog. In 2017 she received a USA Artist Fellowship, the San Francisco Film Society’s “Persistence of Vision” Award and will receive the College Art Association’s Lifetime Achievement Award. In 2022, she was awarded a special mention from the Jury for her participation in the 59th International Art Exhibition of La Biennale di Venezia, *The Milk of Dreams*. In 2023, Pratt Institute of Art in New York awarded her with an Honorary Doctorate. Creative Capital awarded her with their Distinguished Artist Award and SFMOMA acquired the museum’s first NFT from Hershman Leeson in 2023. Work by Hershman Leeson is featured in the public collections of the Museum of Modern Art, New York; The San Francisco Museum of Modern Art; ZKM Center for Art and Media; the Los Angeles County Museum of Art; Tate Modern, London; The National Gallery of Canada, and the Walker Art Center in

addition to many celebrated private collections. The artist is represented by Bridget Donahue Gallery, New York and Altman Siegel Gallery, San Francisco.

*Carla Gannis* is a Brooklyn-based artist known for her multilayered artworks that fuse technology and traditional media. Her work has appeared in exhibitions, screenings, and internet projects around the world. Her most recent projects include *wwwunderkammer* at the Halsey Institute of Contemporary Art, Charleston (2023); *Virtues and Vices* at Telematic Gallery, San Francisco (2023); and *Welcome to the wwwunderkammer* at the Pérez Art Museum Miami (2022). She is an Industry Professor at New York University's Tandon School of Engineering in the Integrated Design and Media Program.

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