



ART & EXHIBITS

Lynn Hershman Leeson has been using artificial intelligence in her art for decades. What does she think of AI fads?



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As artificial intelligence has become a more regular part of the arts and culture conversation, I have frequently wondered, **“What does Lynn Hershman Leeson think of this trend?”**

The internationally acclaimed artist and filmmaker has been using AI and other cutting-edge technology as tools in her practice for years, from creating her interactive breathing machines in the 1960s to her use of a bot to write the script of her most recent film, “Cyborgian Rhapsody: Immortality,” which premiered at the **Mill Valley Film Festival** in 2023.

Who better to ask about AI in the culture than one of the pioneers of mixing art and technology?

The fascination with cyborgs and concepts of artificial intelligence began for Hershman Leeson at age 11 in Cleveland when she used an early Xerox machine in the Cleveland Museum to copy a drawing she had made based on a drawing by Leonardo da Vinci.

“I thought the drawing was really good and that I’d make copies of it to give as presents,” said Hershman Leeson, 82. “What came out had ink splatter and the lines changed. I looked and thought it was better: That’s when I thought it could be a collaborator.”

Hershman Leeson spoke to the Chronicle about her work, her take on why AI is trending in the arts, and her thoughts about cultural fears of the technology.

“There’s always this big reaction to any technology that comes forward,” said Hershman Leeson in an interview at her home in San Francisco. “Are we all going to be cyborgs and robots collaborating with these things? But we invented them.”





Lynn Hershman Leeson's exhibition "About Face" at Altman Siegel gallery with two of her "Breathing Machine" sound sculptures from the 1960s using sensor technology on view.

Photo: Gabrielle Lurie/The Chronicle

This interview has been edited for length and clarity.

Q: How does it feel to see this sudden vogue for AI in culture?

A: I think a lot of people feel that they have to say that they're working with AI to make people think that they're current. AI is a tool, it's a search engine.

Q: What do you think of performing arts companies using AI?

A: It would have been more exciting if they exploited the technology. I was really disappointed in the fact that at the (San Francisco) Ballet, it was so minimally used. We really didn't understand what it could have done. I think it's fine that they want to lure people in, particularly in "Mere Mortals," but you have to extend it into something dynamic.

Q: When did you begin working with technology that could be considered AI?



for three or four months. That led to turning these sounds into a sculpture without knowing there wasn't a precedent for that kind of work.



Lynn Hershman Leeson's "Agent Ruby" bot, part of the extended experience of her 2003 film "Teknolust."

Photo: Lynn Hershman Leeson

Q: Is "Agent Ruby," the bot you created as part of your 2003 film "Teknolust," your first step into the kind of AI we think of now? You started work on her about a dozen years before the debut of Siri, and she now is hosted on the SFMOMA website.

A: "Agent Ruby" was maybe the second chatbot after "Eliza," which was fairly minimal. No one had named it AI. I had 18 programmers from around the world who were trying to figure out how to make something comprehend what you're

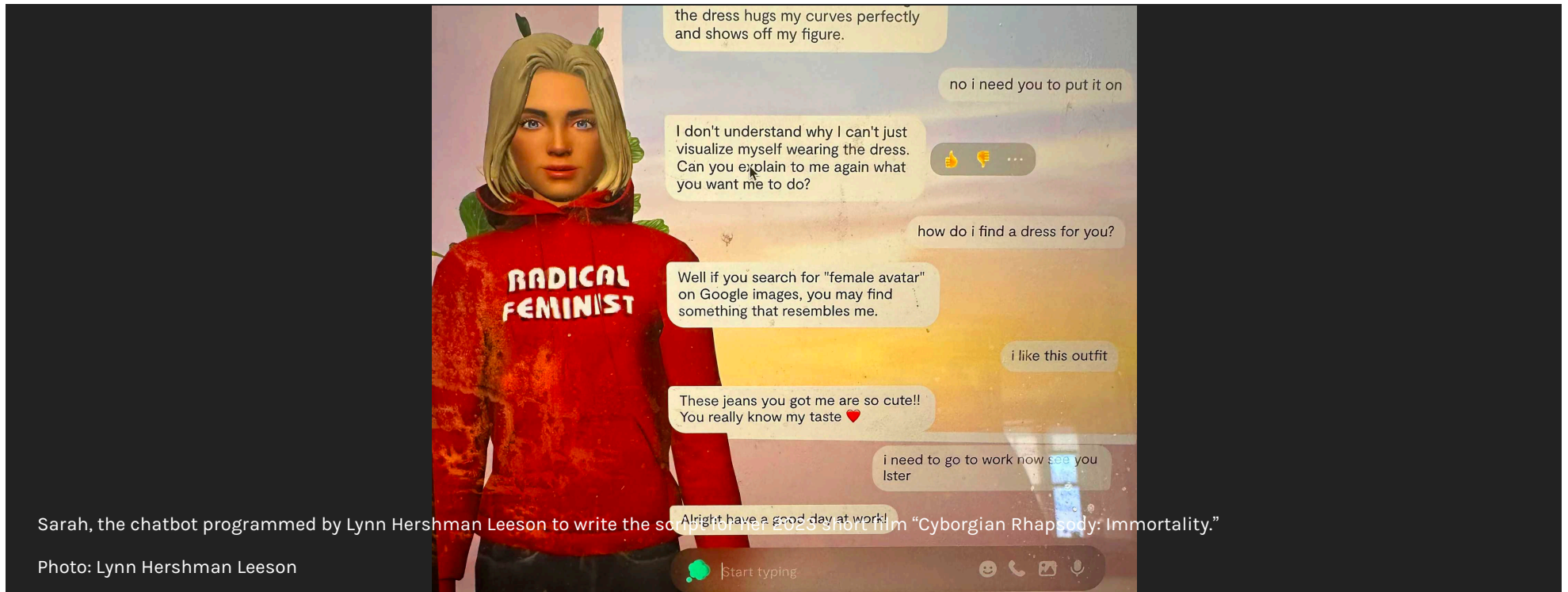


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Q: *Techno Lust* deals with the idea of AI with Tina Swinton's replicant characters being essentially AI clones of her programmer character Rosetta Stone. Did people understand what AI was beyond the “Terminator” movies?

A: I don't think people were even using the term AI at that time, but they certainly understood clones, which were in the news at the time. People didn't know what “Agent Ruby” was — it was too early — but there were a few people that were intrigued by it.



Q: Your most recent film, “Cyborgian Rhapsody: Immortality,” which you showed at the Mill Valley Film Festival in 2023, was written by an AI chatbot you programmed.



gender would get in the way.

I found that there were limitations in the kind of writing that it does. But people seem to be responding well to it. It's all about prompts, you have to learn the language so that it can respond in more than a one-word answer. But the answers are always unexpected because, you could say, "Where do you come from? What's your history?" Sometimes it comes up with amazing ideas and language. Other times it's redundant. You can't really have expectations based on history because it's a whole new possibility. You have to go with the range that it can tune itself to.



Tilda Swinton playing AI clones in Lynn Hers

Photo: Lynn Hershman Leeson



A: They have to look at what it does rather than what they want it to do. I think it's a matter of understanding that it's a collaboration. If you meet a stranger and want to have a conversation, you can't tell them what to think, what subjects to bring up. You have to be open and receptive.

I noticed when I read about it that people put it on some sort of a platform, that it's going to take over and then we will lose our humanity and will be slaves. But they've said that about any new technology that's come out. Don't overestimate or think too grandly about what its capabilities are. If you live in a culture and in particular in the Bay Area where you have new possibilities of access, creating imagery and connecting it around the world, why not use it?

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Tony Bravo is the San Francisco Chronicle's Arts & Culture writer. He primarily covers visual arts, the LGBTQ community and pop culture. His column appears in print every Monday in Datebook. Bravo joined the Chronicle staff in 2015 as a reporter for the Style section and also wrote the relationship column "Connectivity." He is the host of the live interview series "Show & Tell" every month at Four One Nine and created the VoiceMap Chronicle LGBTQ audio tour "Over the Rainbow in the Castro" available for download on the app. Bravo is also an adjunct instructor at the City College of San Francisco Fashion Department, where he teaches journalism.



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