

Lynn Hershman Leeson's Rejection Letter: "It's always a solitary experience"

06/01/26 5 min read As told to: **Harriet Lloyd-Smith**

85-year-old American artist Lynn Hershman Leeson was dismissed, ignored and misunderstood for her pioneering work – until the world caught up. Here, she shares her Rejection Letter



Roberta Multiple Lies Down Besides Construction Chart. Image courtesy of the artist.

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Some paths to artistic greatness might look smooth, but most are not. Others are defined by a struggle for recognition, and society's eventual realisation that this is someone to listen to – they were just talking too soon. Lynn Hershman Leeson is one such artist, a futurist whose work helped legitimise digital art and anticipated today's avatars, AI, identity politics and deepfakes decades before those terms came into use. The 85-year-old American artist's multimedia and filmmaking practice exposes how technology can dictate

and institutional sabotage, her work treats the self as something editable, unstable, and politically charged. Sound familiar? Hershman Leeson's recently published memoir, *Private I*, chronicles the turbulent journey for her visionary work to be recognised as art, particularly as a woman in the 1970s.

If we can take one lesson from Leeson's Rejection Letter, written in her own words below, it's that shit happens, so you might as well turn it into manure.

Lynn Hershman Leeson's Rejection Letter

In the beginning I was rejected for everything. I decided then that it did not matter. That was not why I did the work. I figured they would understand later – or maybe not ever, doing the work was important no matter what others said.

There was a critic in San Francisco, Thomas Albright, who wrote for *The Chronicle* and he said my work was the worst ever shown in the Bay Area. It spurred me on. I worked despite all this and sent him copies of reviews until he died. There's nothing you can do about it. I do work that I think is right for the time, not for critics.

Because no galleries would show my work so I began showing them in hotel rooms and store windows, including the Chelsea Hotel and Bonwit Teller. They were among the earliest site specific works and I would not have done that otherwise. That was challenging as people did not know how to come to it, look at it, or write about it. Nonetheless they were effective and built an audience.

Rejection is always a solitary experience. Even if others are rejected.

What I would say to those struggling with it is don't listen to critics or those who reject your work, stay focused on what you feel is right for your work, keep your sense of humour.

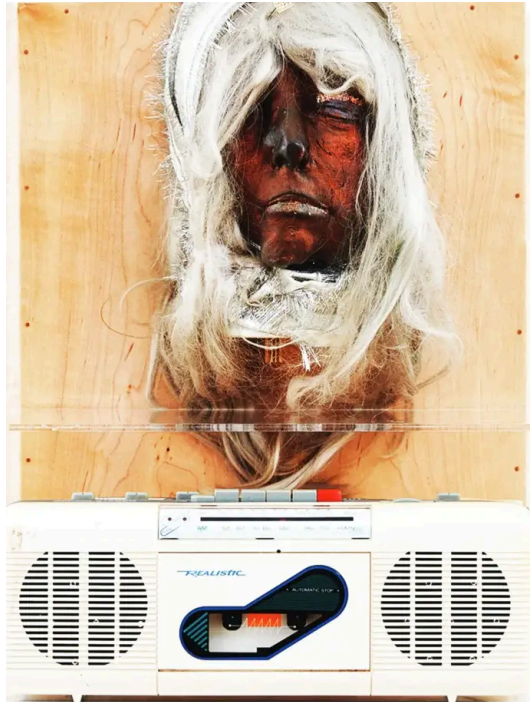
By the way, when I won at the Venice Biennale several years ago, part of the prize was because I was rejected so much!!

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Self Portrait as Another Person, by Lynn Hershman Leeson. Image Courtesy of the artist



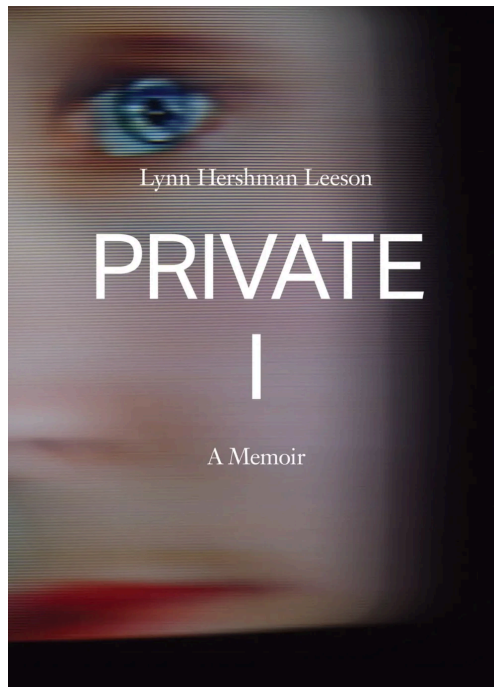
Lynn Hershman Leeson, Self Portrait As Albino (1968). Image Courtesy of the artist



Lady Luck performance, Lynn Hershman Leeson artist

“ Rejection is always a solitary experience. Even if others are rejected. ”

Lynn Hershman Leeson



Information

Lynn Hershman Leeson's memoir, *Private I*, published by Ze Books, is out now. zebooks.com

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