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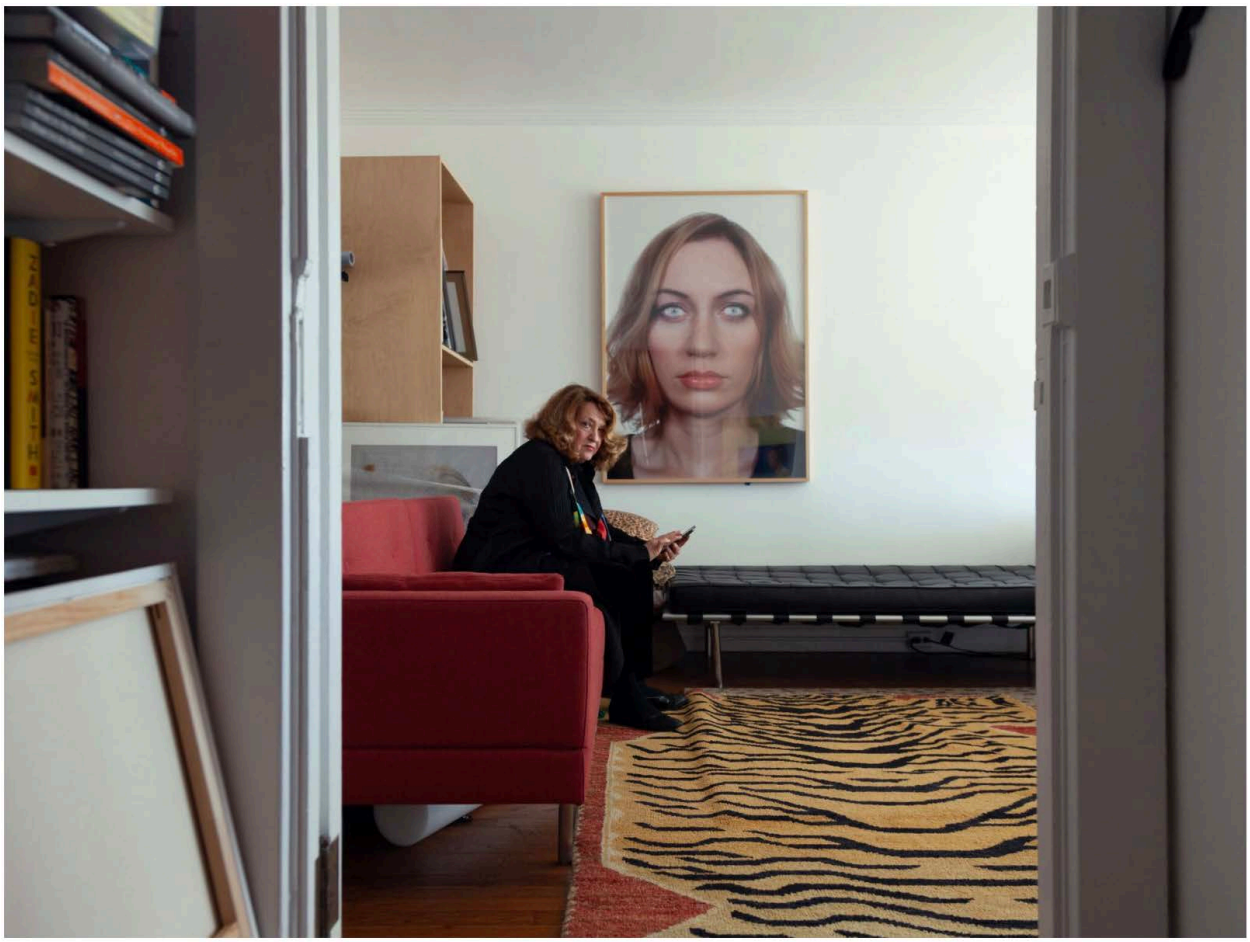
T'S 2021 ART ISSUE

When Bots and Antibodies Are Art Materials

For over 50 years, Lynn Hershman Leeson has anticipated and reflected the ways in which technology might change us.



Lynn Hershman Leeson at home in San Francisco. On the wall behind her is Michael Najjar's "Tamara_2.0" (2000). McNair Evans

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By Jori Finkel

June 18, 2021

Saying an artist works across a range of mediums usually means they create videos or photos as well as sculptures, or maybe installations on top of paintings and drawings. Lynn Hershman Leeson has made all of these things and then some: an interactive LaserDisc, an overactive chatbot, a shadowy surveillance system, vials of synthetic DNA. That's because, for over half a century, she has explored the relationship between the body and technology, suggesting that the self is more porous than we might think.

For four years in the 1970s, Hershman Leeson staged real-world interventions by going around San Francisco as a rather hapless character she called Roberta Breitmore. In addition to a blond wig and a flirty red-and-white polka-dot dress, Roberta eventually acquired her own apartment, psychiatrist, interim driver's license, checking account and other indicators of specificity and adulthood. Episodes from her day-to-day life — Weight Watchers meetings, bad dates — were documented in photographs, a graphic novel and other artifacts.

Starting in the 1990s, Hershman Leeson took Roberta online in different forms, transforming her from alter ego to avatar. One version was "CybeRoberta" (1996), a telerobotic doll implanted with a webcam that allows internet users to see through her eyes. The artist also created a bot, DiNA, her name a reminder that computers can have a life of their own, who can hold a conversation much like Siri, though "DiNA's much smarter," Hershman Leeson assured me. This was after she'd made "Lorna" (1984) the first known interactive artwork using a LaserDisc, which invites viewers to control the actions of a female character suffering from agoraphobia so that she might, in the end, leave her apartment, which is outfitted with a television, a phone and a fishbowl.

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Hershman Leeson's "CybeRoberta" (1996) lets you see the world through her eyes. Courtesy of the artist; Bridget Donahue Gallery, New York; and Altman Siegel, San Francisco

Recently, and perhaps most radically, the artist, who is 80, has turned to actual DNA as an artistic medium. Collaborating with the Harvard genetics professor George Church, who has been called "the father of synthetic biology," she translated some of the images, videos and texts in her archive into binary code that was then converted to the famous double helix form, which has generated interest as a long-term information storage system — a process Hershman Leeson compared to making a "haiku of the universe."

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In all of these ventures, she was driven by an interest in how the real and the virtual, or the biological and the artificial, converge. The New York Times art critic Holland Cotter once called her work "an advance warning system" for identifying dangers of supposed advances like genetic engineering. Others simply describe her as ahead of her time. But Hershman Leeson says it's more that she's open to her own time: "A lot of people are resistant to change. They automatically reject anything new, or they are blind to it. I don't think I have that prejudice."

Hershman Leeson's "Seduction" (1983), from a series called "Phantom Limb," for which the artist replaced women's body parts in photographs with technological equipment. Courtesy of the artist; Bridget Donahue Gallery, New York; and Altman Siegel, San Francisco

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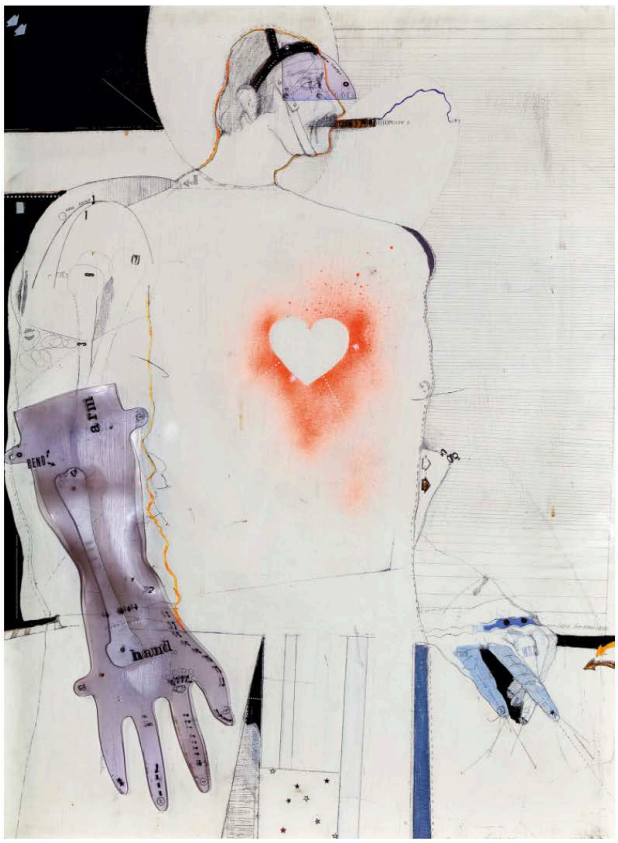

Hershman Leeson's "X-Ray Man" (1970), part of a series of early drawings that explore her subject's interiority. Courtesy of the artist; Bridget Donahue Gallery, New York; Altman Siegel, San Francisco; and Paul Van Esch & Partners, Amsterdam. Photo: Tobias Wootton, © ZKM | Center for Art and Media

A photograph of a genetically modified cat from the artist's 2014 installation "The Infinity Engine," which was modeled after a genetics laboratory. Courtesy of the artist; Bridget Donahue Gallery, New York; and Altman Siegel, San Francisco

The daughter of a pharmacist and a biologist, Hershman Leeson grew up in Cleveland and moved to Berkeley, Calif., to get an M.F.A. in painting in 1963. Though she dropped out of the program, she was schooled in the political movements of the day, from feminism to the Free Speech Movement to civil rights. "There were so many performances and protests on the streets. The Black Panthers were just getting started. It gave me this idea that individuals who had no power in the culture could have a voice and make change," she says. "It really shifted my whole view of what was possible."

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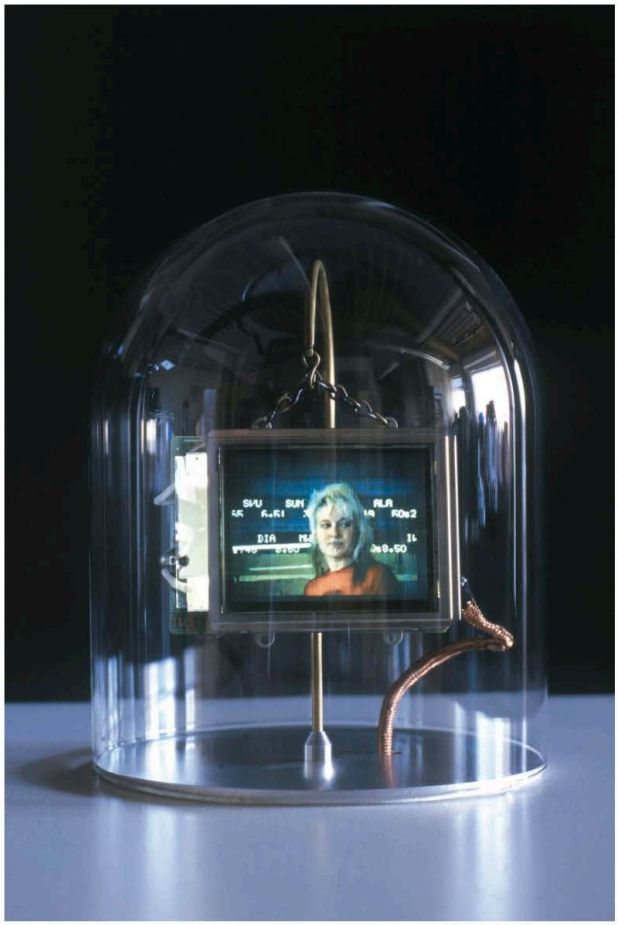
While Hershman Leeson is often relegated to the periphery of the feminist art movement because of her interest in technology, much of her work engages deeply with issues of gender. Roberta Breitmore is best understood in the context of other role-playing projects of the 1970s, from Adrian Piper's performance as a man in "The Mythic Being" (1973-75) to the disguised self-portraits that make up Cindy Sherman's suite of "Untitled Film Stills" (1977-80), and it's no coincidence that Hershman Leeson's bots are all female. She seems to believe that while technology can indeed be dangerous, in the right (ethical) hands, it can also, as the scholar Donna Haraway argues in her essay "A Cyborg Manifesto" (1985), be empowering. And of course it can be both of these things at once, a notion Hershman Leeson explores through the cyborg-clone characters in "Teknolust" (2002), one of two sci-fi feature films that she's made starring Tilda Swinton.

Hershman Leeson's "Roberta Construction Chart #1" (1975), which describes how to embody Roberta Breitmore, Hershman Leeson's artistic stand-in. Courtesy of the artist; Bridget Donahue Gallery, New York; and Altman Siegel, San Francisco



In Hershman Leeson's "Synthia Stock Ticker" (2000), the featured character registers changes in the stock market in real time. If the market goes up, she shops. If it drops, she drinks. Courtesy of the artist; Bridget Donahue Gallery, New York; and Altman Siegel, San Francisco

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A still from Hershman Leeson's video "Seduction of a Cyborg" (1994). Courtesy of the artist; Bridget Donahue Gallery, New York; and Altman Siegel, San Francisco

Also focusing on DNA and human identity is "Lynn Hershman Leeson: Twisted," which is set to open at the New Museum later this month and will be the artist's first solo museum show in New York. It starts in the 1960s with her "Breathing Machines," tinted wax sculptures, typically casts of the artist's own face, with sound recordings triggered by a viewer's presence. (One asks a mix of pedestrian and probing questions, from "How tall are you?" to "Who do you think you are?") Another highlight, and one bound to be seen in a new way given the pandemic, is a project Hershman Leeson developed in 2017 by working with scientists at the Swiss pharmaceutical firm Novartis. They created a pair of antibodies, using the letters of her name, along with "ERTA," short for Roberta, to dictate the amino acid sequence in what could be seen as a novel form of self-portraiture. The antibodies are displayed, alongside

her DNA concoctions, in vials housed in a blue-lit mirror box that looks like something out of one of her films. “My antibody bound with everything, so it had absolutely no use. But Roberta’s wouldn’t bind with anything, which is basically unheard-of, so scientists actually used it in some research,” said Hershman Leeson, delighted that the work had real-world applications.

At the same time, though, she’s thinking in metaphorical terms. “When we develop antibodies, they target pathogens and attempt to neutralize them,” she says. “I think artists do the same thing for society: They look for the toxins in society, shed light on them and, in so doing, can begin the healing process.” A couple of months ago, while sitting in front of a computer in her apartment in San Francisco’s Pacific Heights neighborhood, the artist answered T’s Artist’s Questionnaire.

Part of Hershman Leeson’s desk area at home, full of external hard drives and books such as Legacy Russell’s 2020 cyberfeminist manifesto, “Glitch Feminism.” McNair Evans

Do you have any routines or rituals to start your workday?

I like to go for a walk in the morning just to get grounded; I try to get a couple of miles in every day, and I usually walk in nature, whether in a park or alongside water, like at Fisherman's Wharf or the Palace of Fine Arts, which has a lake outside and many swans I've come to know. I feel it's crucial because I spend so much time indoors alone.

What is the rest of your day like?

I don't really have a typical day. It depends on the project I'm working on. When I'm editing video, for example, that's all I do. I try to work in the morning because my concentration is purest then; later on, my brain runs away.

What's the first piece of art you ever made?

When I was young, my brothers were given art lessons at the Cleveland Museum of Art. No lessons for me. I was the girl. Instead, I'd spend that time looking at Cézanne and Gauguin, memorizing the Rembrandts and Turners, the artworks that became my teachers. One afternoon, when we returned home from the museum, I was determined to paint. I mixed some food coloring into glasses of water, cut off some of my hair with a scissors, found a pencil and rubber bands and made a brush. But it didn't work — my hair was too curly. I think the first real art, the first original works I made, were the "Breathing Machines," which got kicked out of the Berkeley Art Museum in 1972 because they had sound. It was a drawing show, and I thought sound sculptures worked because sound travels through the air like a line. I installed the pieces in the show, but when I went back with friends the next day, the gallery was empty. All my work had been taken out. Gone. The curator accused me of putting media in, which she insisted was not art. So my first museum show was a completely empty room. After that, I thought, "Who needs a museum anyway?"

What's the first work you ever sold?

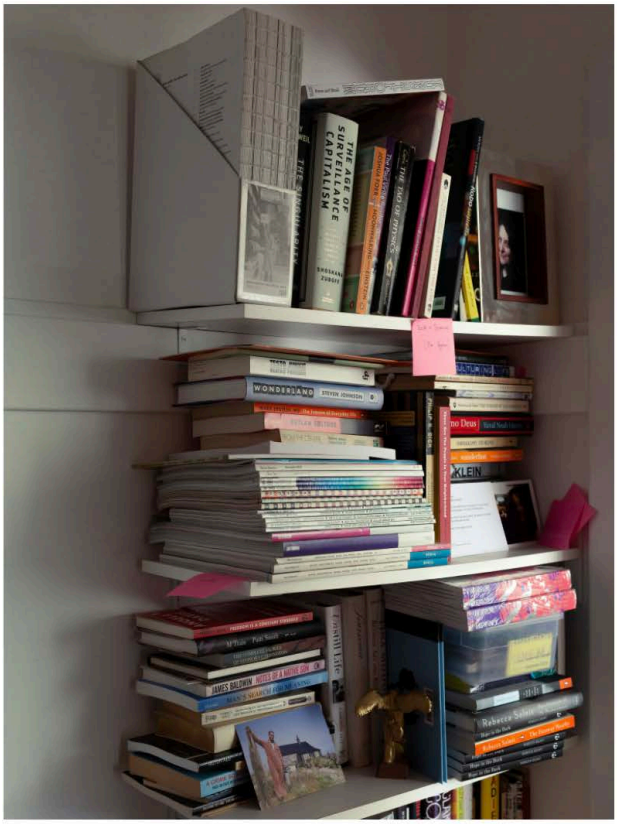
That was much later. [Laughs] I knew [the French art critic] Pierre Restany, who introduced me to [the Swiss collector] Donald Hess in the early '90s. I think Donald canceled four times before he finally came to my studio, but then he bought everything that was in it, including the entire original Roberta collection, which was 300 pieces. It was not a lot of money, but at that time I was living in a basement and didn't have a car, so it was a godsend. He's the one who told me to edition things; I didn't even know enough to do that. And he bought number one of every edition after that.

How do you know when you're done with an artwork?

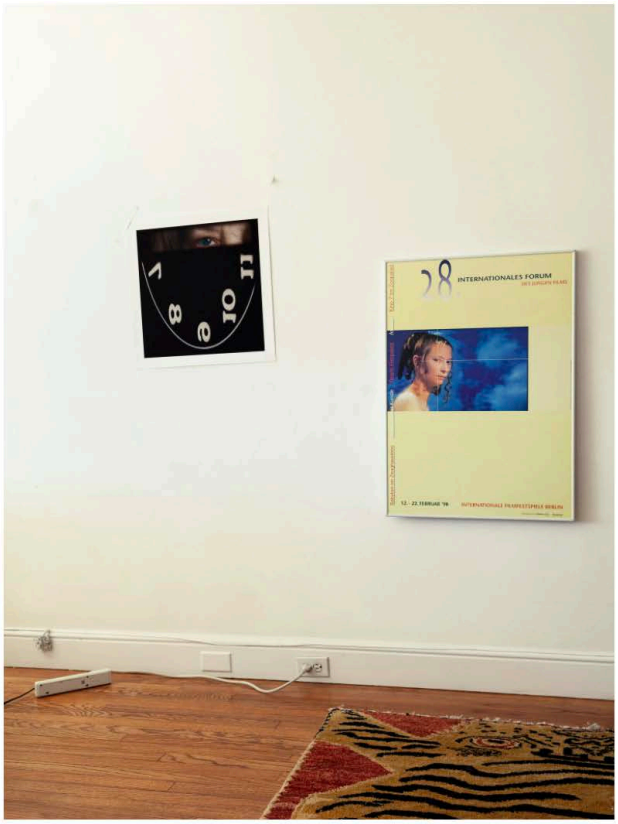
It tells me. Sometimes it takes five years, sometimes 35. Roberta and CybeRoberta come from the same source and are very much alike, but there is a shift because the technology shifted. So it's kind of like a rebirth. My documentary on the feminist art movement, "!Women Art Revolution" (2011), took four decades to make. Viewers see the artists in it age, have frustrations and eventually triumph. I accumulated 250 hours of footage, so when I was finally ready to tell their story in their words, it took four more years to edit everything.

How much of your work these days involves being online?

A lot of it, about 80 percent. I think it's getting worse, particularly with Covid.



Some of Hershman Leeson's books, including Shoshana Zuboff's "The Age of Surveillance Capitalism" (2019), about the influence of companies like Google and Amazon on modern life. McNair Evans



At right, a poster for Hershman Leeson's film "Conceiving Ada" (1997), starring Tilda Swinton. McNair Evans

What's the worst studio you've ever had?

I didn't have a studio for most of my life. I worked at home and kept all of my work under the bed or in closets. But a few years ago, before I was able to get into the Minnesota Street Project studio building, I had a studio that was a dump. It had a leaky basement with cockroaches and rats, *and* it was expensive: San Francisco real estate.

How many assistants do you have?

I have two assistants who each work two half-days a week: One is really good at archiving my work so I can find things, and then someone else organizes, does web-based upkeep and even helps with refining images with Photoshop. I also have three consistent programmers whom I continue to work with, even though they've all taken real jobs.

Have you assisted other artists before? If so, who?

I like to help artists and always have, and I started the Floating Museum in 1974 to show temporary artworks in public sites. It showed something like 300 artists, including Michael Asher, R. Crumb and Cindy Sherman, in its lifetime, and in a wide range of sites, from San Quentin State Prison to a stairway in a shopping center. I also had the opportunity to work with Christo and Jeanne-Claude for about four years in the 1970s. I was the associate project director on their "Running Fence" (1976), which ran for 24.5 miles in Northern California, from the ocean up through Petaluma and Valley Ford. I would drive Jeanne-Claude up to Petaluma, sometimes with my daughter, who was 9 at the time, to try to sign farmers up to participate in this crazy project on their land.

What music do you play when you're making art?

I don't play anything — I like it silent. There is some buzzing in my studio because I have nine computers, but I don't even hear that anymore.

When did you first feel comfortable saying you're a professional artist?

I think it was after we did "The Dante Hotel" (1973-74). My friend Ellie [Eleanor Coppola] and I got the idea to rent a couple of rooms at the Dante Hotel in San Francisco — they were each $10 a week — and make installations there. All we did to promote it was Xerox announcements and tack them up all over town, but hundreds of people came to see it at all hours. It was open 24 hours a day. The year after it was up, The San Francisco Chronicle listed it, along with watercolors by Turner, as one of the 10 best shows of the year. That gave me the idea that I could do something original without any external authority. I realized you don't need someone else to create the frame.

Files and records on Roberta Breitmore, Hershman Leeson's fictional alter ego. McNair Evans

What's your worst habit?

Obsession. Sometimes when I start working, I can't stop. And there's more to life than working.

What's the weirdest object in your studio?

There are a bunch of wax heads with glass eyes that I made in the late 1960s. I went into heart failure in my fifth month of pregnancy and had to go into intensive care under an oxygen tent. The only thing I could hear was my breath. Before I got sick, I had started doing wax casting in a sculpture class, so after my daughter was born, I took these casts of my face and added sound and also sensors to make these "Breathing Machines." When you walk up to them, they respond. Some of them laugh, some just breathe, some

have conversations with you. [The curator] Christiane Paul told me a few years ago that she thinks they were the first sculpture to use sound. I used wax because it was a transformative medium. Some of the works were burned until they expired, which I considered a type of performance. These were way before Bruce Nauman or Paul Thek, and I don't think Urs Fischer was even born yet.

What's the last thing that made you cry?

I cried learning about Breonna Taylor and the horror of what happened to her, and I cried when the octopus dies in the film "My Octopus Teacher" (2020).

What do you bulk buy with most frequency?

Probably printer cartridges.

What are you reading these days?

I'm reading Rachel Kushner's book of essays, "The Hard Crowd" (2021). Before that, it was "The Overstory" (2018) by Richard Powers, and the writings of the artist Leonora Carrington — since the mid-1980s, I've wanted to make a film about her.

What artwork have you gone way out of your way to see in person?

Donald Hess created a James Turrell museum in Argentina. To get there, you have to go to Buenos Aires and then take a two-and-a-half-hour plane trip to a tiny airport, and then drive four hours on a rocky road, where everyone gets flat tires, to his vineyard in the mountains to see nine Turrell light installations in one place. Donald had said they could best be seen in that open environment because of the quality of the light there, and he was right.

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How often do you talk to other artists?

As much as I can. I do a lot by email, too, but I meet up with artists whenever I travel. Younger artists seem to understand what I'm doing. Nobody understood my work when it was first made, because there was little precedent for it. I was even accused of being schizophrenic. That changed with younger generations, especially the millennials. I think of them as my cohorts and collaborators, as they have the ability to translate my work so it can be understood.