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art journal

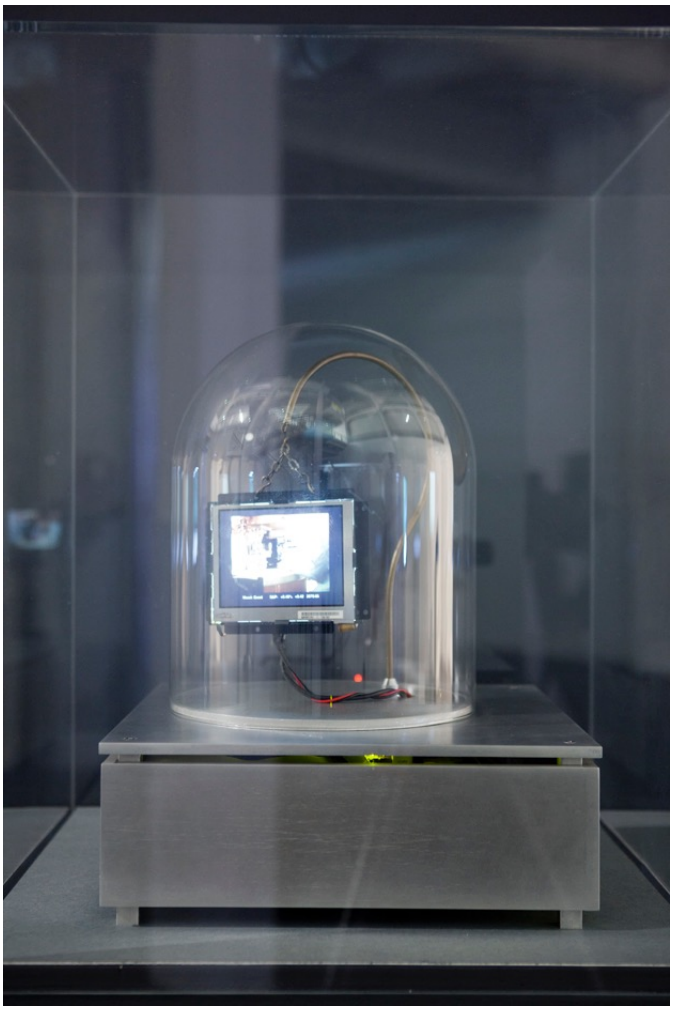
Robert Slifkin

Ladytron

Lynn Hershman Leeson: Civic Radar. Exhibition curated by Peter Weibel and Andreas Beitin. ZKM / Center for Art and Media, Karlsruhe, Germany, December 13, 2014–April 6, 2015; Falckenberg Collection, Hamburg, Germany, June 14–November 15, 2015; Yerba Buena Center for the Arts, San Francisco, February 10–May 21, 2017. Organized for Yerba Buena Center by Lucía Sanromán

Peter Weibel, ed. *Lynn Hershman Leeson: Civic Radar.* Exh. cat. With texts by Andreas Beitin, Hou Hanru and Laura Poitras, Pamela Lee, Peggy Phelan, Ruby Rich, Jeffrey Schnapp, Kyle Stephan, Kristine Stiles, Tilda Swinton, and Weibel. Ostfildern: Hatje Cantz, 2016. 384 pp., 430 color ills., 62 b/w. $70

In our current age of digital avatars, technological surveillance, and turbulent identity politics, few artists seem as relevant—and arguably as oracular—as Lynn Hershman Leeson. For more than fifty years, the artist has explored the ways in which a self is constructed, controlled, and exteriorized through various forms of mediation. The recent exhibition *Civic Radar*, organized by the Center for Art and Media, Karlsruhe (ZKM), and which traveled to Hamburg and the Yerba Buena Center for the Arts in San Francisco, along with its richly illustrated and comprehensive catalogue, provide a valuable and unprecedented opportunity to recognize and appreciate Hershman Leeson's sustained investigation of what of Marshall McLuhan described as "the pattern of sex, technology, and death" that has fueled the imagination, if not the material evolution, of modern humanity.[1] *Civic Radar* effectively positions her works as a crucial and progenitive instance of a tradition of techno-feminism that reaches from McLuhan's *Mechanical Bride* (1951) to Donna Haraway's "Cyborg Manifesto" (1984) and has arguably flourished most effectively in more popular iterations such as films like *Metropolis* (1927), *Blade Runner* (1982), and *Her* (2013), not to mention Hershman Leeson's trilogy of sci-fi-inflected movies, *Conceiving Ada* (1997), *Teknolust* (2002), and *Strange Culture* (2007), which all, notably, feature the actor Tilda Swinton.



Lynn Hershman Leeson, Synthia Stock Ticker, 2000-2002, Custom software, LCD, glass and electronics, first use of stock date and behavior as net motivation, 15 × 11 × 11 in. (38.10 × 27.94 × 27.94 cm)

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The retrospective perspective of the exhibition brings into focus Hershman Leeson's restlessly heterogeneous practice, now spanning over five decades and encompassing assemblage, photography, performance, installation, video, and interactive new media as well as a growing body of feature-length movies (including the important documentary *!Women Art Revolution—A Secret History* from 2010). From her earliest sculptures and collages of the 1960s, which conjoined mechanic and organic forms into proto-cyborgian entities, to recent multimedia installations like *The Infinity Engine* (2014), which examines the brave new world of genetic bioengineering, Hershman Leeson has considered the ways in which gender and sexuality continue to inform the changing contours of humanity's—and *pace* McLuhan, not only man's—technological extensions, provocatively suggesting how the rise of the internet and digital culture more generally have crucially shaped contemporary considerations of sexual identity and desire and, in turn, altered the very basis of what constitutes the boundaries between nature and culture.

Like many other artists working in the 1960s, Hershman Leeson began to reconsider the work of art—and the sculptural object in particular—as a categorically environmental object in which the surrounding space of the gallery was activated, consequently making the viewer's body a constitutive element of the aesthetic experience. Along with Nam June Paik, Charlotte Moorman, Stan VanDerBeek, and a handful of other artists in the second half of the decade, Hershman Leeson examined the environmental impact of technology and the way in which it seemed to increasingly surround a subject, providing a media correlate to the phenomenological circumscription of Minimalism. Incorporating and manipulating ready-made technological objects such as televisions and radios, these artists recoded them as notably kinetic and sonic sculptural objects whose emanations encompassed the space of the gallery.

The exhibition and its accompanying catalogue make the case for Hershman Leeson's crucial role as an innovator in this increasingly influential strand of postwar art, claiming that she is "one of the world's very first media artists" (7). Such celebratory assertions arguably convey a certain degree of defensiveness that may come from the relative paucity of art historical consideration of the artist's career. As Pamela Lee writes in her essay on Hershman Leeson's early series *Breathing Machines*, produced in the late 1960s, "any attention at all" to these strange and rarely exhibited works "is a long time in coming" (57). Lee compellingly aligns these works, which consist of Plexiglas boxes containing bewigged wax effigies of the artist's face coupled with tape cassette players projecting a woman's voice, with the tradition of anatomical sculptures dating back to the Renaissance; the assertion suggests a genealogical link between scientific and technological simulations of life, which find their ultimate conjunction in the recent mapping of the genome and the scientific artifice of genetic modification.

Like Paul Thek, who was also casting body fragments in wax in the 1960s, Hershman Leeson's sculptures from the period display a sense of technologically derived vitalism and not-so-latent anthropomorphism. She called these early assemblages, after all, *Breathing Machines*, and this uncanny nexus between human and technological varieties of animation and artifice would continue to inform the artist's work throughout her career. The works impart a somewhat primitive but nonetheless affective interactive mode of address. Viewers (or, as the artist repeatedly describes her intended audience, "viewers/participants") are invited to respond to a series of statements and questions emanating from the sculpture. (The soundtrack, originally played back on the cassette machine inside the Plexiglas box, now is a digital loop.) A female voice, seemingly belonging to the wax effigy, asks questions like "what's your name?" and "tell me what you're afraid of," along with simple directives such as "talk to me" and startling observations like "I've never met anyone else like you." Asking viewers to engage—often intimately—with an electronic apparatus, the *Breathing Machines* can be seen as sculptural Turing tests, probing the boundaries between human consciousness and digital systems. Yet the litany of commands and questions, expressed in an entreating and anxious tone, also give the impression of existential poetry, so that these animated machines seem to interrogate the essential identity of their human audience.

Lynn Hershman Leeson, *Self Portrait as Another Person*, 1965, installation view, *Lynn Hershman Leeson: Civic Radar*, Yerba Buena Center for the Arts, San Francisco, 2017 (artwork © Lynn Hershman Leeson; photograph by Charlie Villyard, provided by Yerba Buena Center for the Arts)

Indeed, the exhibition effectively demonstrated the artist's consistent and cunning engagement with language, both written and spoken. If for various conceptualists the incorporation of linguistic "information" provided a means to dematerialize art and uncover latent aesthetic presuppositions that sustained a modernist faith in autonomy, Hershman Leeson typically drew on narrative and fictive realms of language, such as diaries and screenplays, as a means to, as she put it, "plan narratives for my sculptures." One might argue that for Hershman Leeson, such postmodern paradigms as dematerialization and the critique of autonomy were not purely philosophical or aesthetic issues but rather constitutive to her interest in an art that could tell stories. These narratives would sometimes take the form of sculptural tableaux and performances in which the audience was invited to hotel rooms and private residences where they encountered extensive mise-en-scènes featuring wax effigies and, in certain instances, live actors. Many of these performances, especially when staged in down-and-out venues like the YMCA and the Chelsea Hotel in New York or the Dante Hotel in San Francisco, conveyed a certain noir sensibility, investing the various objects within the installations with a forensic aspect and correspondingly placing the visitors in the position of detectives having to reconstruct the possible motives and meanings surrounding the depicted event.

Even more cinematic were the twenty-five window displays Hershman Leeson cre-

ated for the Bonwit Teller department store in New York in 1976. Expanding on the estimable legacy of artists such as Jasper Johns, Robert Rauschenberg, and Andy Warhol, who early in their careers, in the late 1950s, designed displays for the store, Hershman Leeson, sponsored by the Institute for Art and Urban Resources (which later became the alternative art space, PS1), avoided the promotion of commodities for sale. Instead she emphasized the shop window as interface between fantasy and reality. One window featured live actors who could communicate with passersby through two-way microphones and speakers installed in the glass, while another window contained a mannequin whose arm broke through the glass, suggesting the central theme of connection, often between animate and inanimate entities, in the artist's oeuvre. The works, on view for only six days, were transient, collaborative, and multimedia, attributes that in many ways define a great deal of Hershman Leeson's output and make it at once so radically unique, difficult to categorize, and challenging to display in museum settings.

As the Bonwit Teller works suggest, Hershman Leeson often showed her work in non-conventional venues. These were truly alternative art sites: besides department stores, the artist would exhibit her work in casinos, hotels, and private residences. This tendency to eschew traditional modes of artistic display would be extended in her *Floating Museum* (1974–78) in which the artist organized a temporary exhibition for various friends and collaborators, creating what Kyle Stephan describes in his catalogue essay as a "nomadic, process-based exhibition model" (223). During its four-year existence, the Floating Museum presented over three hundred projects on three continents, including ephemeral "space invasions" (the artist's notably sci-fi-inflected term) by artists such as Eleanor Antin, Michael Asher, Terry Fox, and Newton and Helen Mayer Harrison. As Stephan notes, these projects demonstrate Hershman Leeson's "investment in the democratic potential of interactivity" (224) and, moreover, reveal a fundamental modesty and collaborative ethos at the heart of her practice, which might be aligned with her position within both the feminist and new media movements.

In addition, by working with time-based and collective practices, Hershman Leeson's works often exist primarily through various forms of documentation. This presents another challenge for her work's representation in museums. As in the recent and equally revelatory retrospective of Mierle Laderman Ukeles at the Queens Museum, ephemera serve an essential, rather than supplemental, role in the artist's practice, again proposing a possible feminist interpretation for this model of art making that is not grounded in patriarchal ideals of permanence and power.[2] An obvious care and thoughtfulness can be detected in the presentation of Hershman Leeson's ephemeral materials in the exhibition's horizontal vitrines. They contained elegantly arranged items ranging from unassuming photographs of the self-destructive assemblages known as *Suicide Machines* (1963–68), to various exhibition announcements, invitations to the series of "Performance Dinners" Hershman Leeson hosted, and an array of personal artifacts related to performances, including traces of her most famous and protracted performance, Roberta Breitmore.

The artist created Breitmore in 1973 as what she called "a portrait of alienation and loneliness" and would continue to perform and literally inhabit this fictional persona for four years until the character was ritualistically "exorcised" in 1978. Unlike other instances of artists taking on fictive persona such as Marcel Duchamp's Rrose Sélavy—and more like Eleanor Antin's *King of Solana Beach*—Hershman Leeson's Breitmore operated primarily beyond the art world, going so far as to register for a driver's license, open a bank account, visit a psychologist, and place classified ads in the local newspaper for a roommate. (These last interventions led to meetings with prospective lodgers in public spaces which the artist had photographed by a private detective.) Along with the documents related to what Peggy Phelan calls the character's "institutional markers of identity" (103), the exhibition also featured a series of altered photographs that served as diagrammatic "construction charts" for Hershman Leeson's transformation into Breitmore, identifying the type of wig and clothing to wear and noting where the artist would apply makeup. The project suggests a much longer—and much less technological—genealogy of mediated identity that finds its origins in Charles Baudelaire's celebration of *maquillage* as the epitome of modern artifice in his 1863 essay "Painter of Modern Life."

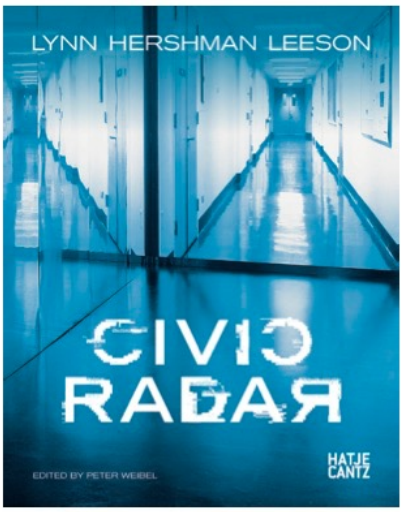
In all these ventures, Hershman Leeson brought her embodied narratives into the realm of the everyday, becoming, as she described Roberta, a "simulated person who interacts with real life in real time" (104). As Phelan notes, the Roberta Breitmore persona entailed a "performance of co-identity" in which Hershman and her fictional double (who was sometimes played by other actors) "forged a third identity" that was simultaneously real and fictive (101). As such, Hershman Leeson acted as both Pygmalion and Galatea, artist and uncanny ideal, suggesting what the literary theorist Wendy Steiner calls the "ontological paradox" of the "real model," who is "a real person who becomes artificial in posing and gives rise to a quasi self in the form of an artistic image." If, as Steiner notes, such figures "symbolize the growing permeation of the virtual into everyday reality," Hershman Leeson would make this virtual existence explicit in the work's ultimate manifestation as a character

Lynn Hershman Leeson, *Roberta Breitmore* series, 1973–78, installation view, *Lynn Hershman Leeson: Civic Radar*, Yerba Buena Center for the Arts, San Francisco, 2017 (artwork © Lynn Hershman Leeson; photograph by Charlie Villyard, provided by Yerba Buena Center for the Arts)

in the online platform Second Life and as an interactive doll, *CyberRoberta* (1996).[3]

Hershman Leeson went on to explore the possibilities of inhabiting fictive persona through a wide array of multimedia platforms. For instance, in her multimedia installation *Lorna* (1984), the artist invited viewers to imagine trading places with an agoraphobic single female character who was in many ways similar to Roberta. Described in the catalogue as the "world's first interactive video art disc," the work consists of a television placed within what appeared to be a somewhat grungy living room, containing unassuming furnishings, magazines scattered on the floor, and a fishbowl (with a real goldfish!). Viewers/participants are then invited to sit down in front of the television, grab the remote control, and select possible options for Lorna from an interactive menu. The relatively limited array of possible choices for the character's cloistered and desperate emotional life is fleshed out by the video's soundtrack, which features songs from Terry Allen's art-country masterpiece, the album *Lubbock (On Everything)* (1979). As in so many of the artist's works on view (such as *Home Front*, *A Room of One's Own*, and *America's Finest*), video imagery in *Lorna* is incorporated into what could be described in somewhat formalist terms as a sculptural support, investing the moving image with a specificity rarely experienced in most aesthetic settings. The same objects depicted in Lorna's living room constitute the setting of the installation, allowing for what the artist describes in one of the short published writings included in the catalogue as a "point of identification between the viewer and the referent" (361). In a recent interview, the artist recognized how a similar empathetic relation based on a shared set of experiences is proposed in the Breitmore work. "Roberta was a fictional character, but in her DNA she carried the same characteristics as any woman who looked like Roberta and lived in the late 1980s, and so her experiences were common experiences."[4]

Many of Hershman Leeson's more recent projects have taken this genetic/technological connection as their primary subject. In *Agent Ruby* (2002) and *DiNA* (2004), the artist, working with programmers, has constructed interactive artificially intelligent characters that are able to "learn" and "evolve" through their interactions with users and the World Wide Web. This interest in the genetic construction of identity, across species, provides the central theme of the artist's *Infinity Engine*, which greeted visitors to the exhibition at the Yerba Buena Center for the Arts. The installation appears to be a stylized natural history museum display with videotaped interviews with scientists, immersive wallpaper featuring an encyclopedic array of bioengineered entities, an aquarium containing live GloFish (an early patented bioengineered species), and open browsable file folders that held legal documents related to bioengineering copyright infringement cases going as far back as the 1970s. By emphasizing the creativity and artifice motivating scientific practices, these works blur the boundaries between artist and scientist.



Due to its treatment of the artist's prolific and varied output, the accompanying catalogue provides a valuable synopsis of her entire oeuvre, and the accompanying essays usefully situate her practices within larger milieu. Like many recent catalogues, the book contains shorter texts by numerous authors (twelve, if one includes the artist) as well as interviews, and in this instance the array of different voices work in tandem to produce a comprehensive, cohesive, and remarkably multifaceted account of the artist's work. Of particular note is Kristine Stiles's essay, which considers the importance of the Bay Area in the artist's oeuvre. Hershman Leeson assembled around her an impressive coterie, including the countercultural guru Timothy Leary and the feminist sex worker activist group COYOTE, as well as the gonzo journalist Hunter S. Thompson (with whom she communicated via telephone), and Christo and Jean-Claude, for whom she served as the associate project manager for *Running Fence* (1973). Many of the texts focus on the artist's investigation of the constructedness of identity. Peter Weibel's introductory essay capably situates Hershman Leeson's gender-bending practices in an avant-garde genealogy and considers her place within a tradition of recoding the "male mythology" (51) explored by the Surrealists and Dadaists like Francis Picabia, in which femininity is aligned with nature while masculinity is related to technology. Andreas Beitin's contribution considers the artist's sustained interest in the theme of the mask, both in literal manifestations and through virtual avatars, both digital and analogue (such as her reviews published under pseudonyms.) Most valuable of all, perhaps, are the collected writings by the artist herself at the end of the catalogue. It is in these texts that one can discern Hershman Leeson's wide-ranging intelligence and her vision of art as a viable means of discovery rivaling any scientific endeavor. "Fiction, at its best," she writes, "makes truth accessible" (200). One senses a moral integrity and modesty even in Hershman Leeson's darkest and most inhuman inventions. Her work eschews spectacle even when most technological. Whether such a vision offers a constructive means of recalibrating our relationship to technology or envisages the consequences of our refusal to do so remains provocatively unresolved.

Robert Slifkin is an associate professor of fine arts at the Institute of Fine Arts, New York University. He is the author of *Out of Time: Philip Guston and the Refiguration of Postwar American Art* (University of California Press, 2013). He is currently working on a book project entitled "The New Monuments and the End of Man: American Sculpture between War and Peace, 1945–1975," which will consider the intertwined histories of sculpture and nuclear war in postwar US culture.

1. Marshall McLuhan, *The Mechanical Bride: Folklore of Industrial Man* (New York: Vanguard, 1951), 13.
2. *Mierle Laderman Ukeles: Maintenance Art*, organized by Larissa Harris and Patricia C. Phillips, Queens Museum, New York, NY, September 18, 2016–February 19, 2017.
3. Wendy Steiner, *The Real Real Thing: The Model in the Mirror of Art* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2010), 4, 12.
4. Evan Moffitt, "All Lynn," interview with Lynn Hershman Leeson, *Frieze*, April 14, 2017, at https://frieze.com/article/all-lynn, as of August 28, 2017.