

# ALTMAN SIEGEL

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Bravo, Tony, “At 80, artist Lynn Hershman Leeson is more relevant than ever,” *San Francisco Chronicle*, April 6, 2022

## At 80, artist Lynn Hershman Leeson is more relevant than ever



Lynn Hershman Leeson looks at her piece “How Did This Happen?” at her exhibition “About Face” at Altman Siegel.  
Photo: Gabrielle Lurie / The Chronicle

In 1972, San Francisco artist Lynn Hershman Leeson inadvertently caused an entire showcase of female artists to shut down. The exhibition was at the Berkeley Art Museum (now the Berkeley Art Museum and Pacific Film Archive), and the issue wasn't one of content or subject matter per se. It had to do with expanding definitions of artistic mediums.

The exhibition featured Leeson's “Breathing Machines”(1965-68), the foundations of which are wax casts of her face that include wigs, glasses and other ephemera. When approached, a sensor would trigger a recording of Leeson speaking and her labored breathing sounds, inspired by her hospitalization for cardiomyopathy, a pregnancy complication. The work in question, “Self Portrait as Another Person” is now on view at “About Face,” a show of Leeson's work at Altman Siegel gallery.

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“Brenda Richardson, the chief curator, closed the show overnight and said it wasn’t art,” said Leeson in a recent interview at the gallery, pushing back a lock of auburn hair, laughing at the memory. “Nobody had ever used sound before, but I didn’t know that.

“You as an artist can see the future in a way that the general populace can’t,” Leeson continued. “Museums and some critics may take their reference from history and the past, but if you’re doing something in your time, they have no reference for it.”

In an art world where interactivity is now commonly touted and sound installations are de rigeur, the controversy feels almost quaint. But it also illustrates how ahead of the curve – and sometimes misunderstood – Leeson has been throughout her career. And in a social climate where feminism and explorations of personal narratives are more a part of the cultural dialogue than ever, Leeson is now held up by many as a pioneer.

“There is this element of identity politics in her work, but it’s steeped within the politics of technology,” said gallerist Claudia Altman Siegel, who has represented Leeson in San Francisco since 2020. “It’s a particularly relevant conversation right now.”



Lynn Hershman Leeson's exhibition "About Face" at Altman Siegel gallery includes her piece titled "Roberta's Construction Chart" from 1975.  
Photo: Gabrielle Lurie / The Chronicle

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For Leeson, being ahead of the culture is part of the job of being an artist – even when it leads to something like the closing of an exhibition.

Now, 50 years later, Leeson is one of the 43 featured American artists at the 59th edition of the Venice Biennale (on view in Italy April 23-Nov. 27), perhaps the most significant international art event in the world. At 80, Leeson is reaping the rewards of a career that has been not only culturally prescient, but also built on her own terms.

Born Lynn Lester, Leeson has been creating at the intersections of art, technology and identity for six decades. In a present driven by social media, issues of identity and scientific innovation, looking at her body of work at times feels like gazing into a crystal ball of contemporary culture. There was her 1972-79 “Roberta Breitmore” project where Leeson crafted and assumed a fictional persona through costuming and makeup, but also by creating materials to “prove” Roberta’s existence, like getting a driver’s license in her name and placing ads for potential roommates for her alter ego.



Lynn Hershman Leeson, “Seduction,” 1985, gelatin silver print. McEvoy Family Collection.

Photo: Courtesy the artist / Bridget Donahue Gallery, New York; and Altman Siegel, San Francisco.

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Then there's "Lorna" (1983), credited as the first work of computer-based, interactive video-disk art, where, as in a video game, viewers use a remote control to navigate the title character through choices that change the possible outcomes of Lorna's narrative. The artist's "Electronic Diaries," a series begun in 1984 where she filmed herself in a confessional style, predated both reality television and online video blogging.

Perhaps most notable is Leeson's "Agent Ruby." Initially created as part of the expanded world of her 2002 film "Teknolust," it was an interactive website featuring an artificial intelligence character users could question and get answers from based on information the program pulled from online. The work, now hosted on the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art website, inspired a 2013 exhibition at the museum and predates the popularity of apps by about six years — and the release of the iPhone's Siri technology by a decade.

"She has kept doing what she's always done, which is to push forward a practice that is hybrid and at the forefront of technology," said Rudolf Frieling, SFMOMA's curator of media arts. "In some ways, I think we as curators, critics and institutions have just become more used to the hybrid nature of works like hers."

Leeson's installation "Room #8" will be part of the SFMOMA exhibition "Speculative Portraits," opening April 9. The new acquisition is part of Leeson's "Anti-Bodies" series and the final installation in the eight-room "Infinity Engine," which explores genetic engineering and DNA manipulation.

The centerpiece of "Room #8," bathed in blue light and observed only through a window, consists of two glass vials: One contains the powder of the LYNNHERSHMAN antibody developed by Thomas Huber, head of antibody research at Novartis, to reflect the artist's name in its molecular structure. The second vial holds 300 nanograms of synthetic DNA in which the digital documentation of the exhibition, as well as Leeson's diaries and portions of her research, are stored. (Synthetic DNA is an archival method of storing information developed by George Church that first became available to Leeson in 2017.) Frieling sees the work as a culmination of Leeson's career body of work and her scientific collaborations.

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Lynn Hershman Leeson, *Room #8*, 2006-18.  
Photo: Dario Lasagni / Courtesy the New Museum

Recent months have been especially fruitful for Leeson. In addition to her 2021 retrospective “Twisted” at New York’s New Museum, Leeson was also a featured filmmaker on the Criterion streaming app, where her work with actor Tilda Swinton, including “Teknolust,” was highlighted. One of her most well-known images, the 1985 photograph “Seduction,” showing the reclining body of a woman with a television in place of her head, is on view at the McEvoy Foundation for the Arts show “Image Gardeners,” exploring depictions of women through the female gaze. Leeson is also contributing a billboard to the project “A Cool Million,” an art campaign to raise awareness of climate change during Earth Month that the Fine Arts Museums of San Francisco is partnering with her on at 967 Mission St.

In some ways, “Seduction” is a kind of visual shorthand for some of her best-known themes, including ideas of hybridization of humans and technology, and specifically her interest in the concept of cyborgs. It’s a subject that her work selected for the Biennale, the short film “Logic Paralyzes the Heart,” featuring actor Joan Chen, also addresses.

While Leeson will not reveal specifics of the Biennale entry, she agreed that her selection has been a pinnacle in this new stage in her career, one where she is being acknowledged more widely for her work. But she is not ready by any means to rest on her laurels. Leeson maintains a daily art practice from the kitchen table of the apartment she shares with her husband, George, and also has studio space at the Minnesota Street Projects in Dogpatch. She hopes to continue working on developing film projects and is involved in an ongoing collaboration with Huber on an environmental art project, “Twisted Gravity,” that removes plastic from water.

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Tilda Swinton in Lynn Hershman Leeson's 2002 film "Teknolust."  
Photo: The Chronicle

"These women (like Leeson) who are living long enough to be excavated or self-excavated, I take my hat off to them," said writer and cultural critic Hilton Als, a friend of Leeson's. "But they should also be telling us to kiss their ass. I think it took two generations, mostly of women, to even comprehend her language."

At 80, Leeson said she holds no bitterness toward curators and critics who have dismissed or excluded her from the cultural narrative: With continuing distinctions like her Biennale selection, she doesn't have time.

"Making art is something that I have to do," Leeson said. "Sometimes it's ridiculous, when I look back at it, I don't know, it's like someone else did it. The real key is doing your work and living your life, and I think I've done both in a healthy way. I was able to do a significant amount of the things I was dreaming of."

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Lynn Hershman Leeson poses for a portrait while looking at her piece "Reconstructing Roberta" from 2005 at her exhibition "About Face" at Altman Siegel gallery in March in San Francisco.

Photo: Gabrielle Lurie / The Chronicle

**"Lynn Hershman Leeson: About Face"** 10 a.m.-6 pm. Tuesday-Friday; 11 a.m.-5 p.m. Saturday. Through April 23. Free. Altman Siegel, 1150 25th St., S.F. 415-576-9300. <https://altmansiegel.com>

**"Speculative Portraits"**: 1-8 p.m. Thursday; 10 a.m.-5 p.m. Friday-Monday. Saturday, April 9-Sept. 5. \$19-\$25. San Francisco Museum of Modern Art, 151 Third St., S.F. 415-357-4000. [www.sfmoma.org](http://www.sfmoma.org)

**"Image Gardeners"**: 11 a.m.-6 p.m. Wednesday-Saturday. Through April 30. Free. McEvoy Foundation for the Arts, 1150 25th St., Building B, S.F. 415-580-7605. [www.mcevoyarts.org](http://www.mcevoyarts.org)