Lynn Hershman Leeson

We honor you, Lynn Hershman Leeson, for your innovative work in performance, video and new media that focuses on gender’s intersection with technology.

Photo Courtesy xxxxxxx.

Lynn Hershman Leeson

By Lucía Sanromán

For half a century now, Lynn Hershman Leeson has made pioneering contributions to performance, conceptual art, new media, and film with works whose formal and technical experimentation is matched by her fearlessness in the deconstruction of gendered identity in a misogynist and technologically mediated world. Her work is of such scope that as I traverse the theater of memory I have constructed in my mind’s eye to understand her expansive and inquisitive practice, the image that arises is less that of a classical building housing art pieces in a neat arrangement of cause and effect, and much more that of a cloud as its particles
of ice and water rub against each other, creating electric arcs discharging flashes of insight—a network of artworks connected in multiple directions whose materials are Lynn’s own condensed time coming together with public life.

It is difficult to name another artist, man or woman, who has so presciently diagnosed the emergence of the cyborg self, illuminating in startling detail the effects that technology has today on our most intimate selves, our social relations, and our biological and political lives. This quality of cultural clairvoyance showed itself very early, when as a young artist managing a crippling heart condition Lynn made the *Breathing Machines* series (1963–72) of self-portraits that combined mechanical and electronic elements, including sensors and tape recordings playing the sound of her own breathing and addressing viewers as they approached. It was the early 1960s and these artworks were virtually alone in their exploration of interactivity, technology, and the feminist self, following only a short distance after the very earliest use of the term “cybernetic organism” by Manfred Clynes and Nathan S. Kline, and anticipating by about 20 years Donna Haraway’s *A Cyborg Manifesto*. Yet this quality of collapsing history, of creating temporal and imaginary loopholes, is a fundamental part of Lynn’s work; I can easily connect those very early, very tactile mechanical self-portraits in wax and electronics to her ground-breaking works in internet-based, artificial intelligence, such as *DiNA* (2004) and *Agent Ruby* (1999–2002). And on to today, with her latest immersive installation *Infinity Engine* (2014–present)—a cross-disciplinary exploration that addresses the life-changing consequences of genetic engineering, bio printing, and DNA data storage on our collective future as a species.

Genetics, biomechanics, and artificial intelligence twine together with a feminist critique of media and to a conceptual understanding of the blending of art and life. These themes and approaches throughout Lynn’s practice weave a narrative that upends the comfortable and expected categories on gender. In this sense, the

durational performance Roberta Breitmore is an early towering achievement that allowed her to live part time as a fictional persona for five years, from 1973 to 1978, with exacting rigor. Roberta evolved from “construction charts” mapping the transformation of Lynn into Roberta—using makeup and clothes—into a person capable of renting her own apartment, opening a bank account, and obtaining a social security number as well as holding increasingly risky relationships with men, all evidenced in photographs, newspaper announcements, letters, psychological profiles, and a comic book illustrated by Spain Rodriguez. There is something uncanny and disturbing about the level of involvement Lynn had with this character; yet, Roberta was a means to an end and the only possible way she could understand in her own body the limits to agency and power experienced by a young, attractive, chronically underemployed and therefore vulnerable woman in California in the 1970s. Roberta Breitmore resonates today with the fury we too feel as the pervasiveness of sexual misconduct by men in positions of power is finally publically acknowledged.

A performance largely captured as photographs conceived for the camera, Roberta Breitmore links to whole bodies of photographic work, including the Water Women series (1976–ongoing) of photo collages and digital images begun more than thirty years ago that continues today. It remains a potent metaphor for Lynn’s many explorations of alternate and parallel selves, of disappearance and appearance, of hybridity and multiplicity, and in the context of her present award also commemorates her present surfacing as one of the most influential and experimental American artists working today.

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Biography

Over the last four decades, artist and filmmaker Lynn Hershman Leeson has been internationally acclaimed for her art and films. One of the most influential media artists, Hershman Leeson is widely recognized for her innovative work investigating issues that are now recognized as key to the workings of society: the relationship between humans and technology, identity, surveillance, and the use of media as a tool of empowerment against censorship and political repression. Over the last forty years she has made pioneering contributions to the fields of photography, video, film, performance, installation and interactive as well as net-based media art.

ZKM | Center for Art and Media Karlsruhe, Germany, mounted the first comprehensive retrospective of her work titled Civic Radar. Hershman Leeson is a recipient of the d.velop digital art Lifetime Achievement Award, the most prestigious award in the field of digital arts, as well as a Siggraph Lifetime Achievement Award, Eureka and Rainen Fellowships, Prix Ars Electronica Grand Prize, and a John Simon Guggenheim Memorial Foundation Fellowship, and in 2014 was named one of 21 Leaders for the 21st Century.

Art work by Hershman Leeson is featured in the public collections of the Museum of Modern Art, the William Lehmbruck Museum, the Zentrum für Kunst und Medientechnologie, the Los Angeles County Museum of Art, The Tate Modern, The National Gallery of Canada, and the Walker Art Center in addition to many celebrated private collections. Recently honored with grants from Creative Capital, the National Endowment for the Arts, and Nathan Cummings Foundation, she is also the recipient of a Siemens International Media Arts Award, and the Flintridge Foundation Award for Lifetime Achievement in the Visual Arts.