

## Lynn Hershman Leeson: Of Humans, Cyborgs, and AI

*The 21st century arrived with a Pandora's box of ideas, tools and technologies such as genetics, nanotechnology and robotics that will affect the destiny of the human race. Our relationship to computer based virtual life forms that are autonomous and self-replicating will shape the fate of our species and seem to me to be a critical issue of our time.*<sup>1</sup> — Lynn Hershman Leeson

A pioneer of media arts, Lynn Hershman Leeson has produced a protean and prolific body of work that spans five decades and presages many of today's most urgent issues regarding gender, technology, and identity politics. Working across film, video, installation, interactive technologies, performance, photography, artificial intelligence, and the web, Hershman Leeson examines the complicated relationships humans share with their built and social environments, particularly concerning the role of the individual in the face of omniscient technologies and the democratic possibilities (or lack of) therein.

One of her best-known bodies of work centers on the fictional character, or alter ego, Roberta Breitmore, which began as a long-term performance in 1972 and lasted six years. Hershman Leeson constructed and then performed Breitmore's identity as she interacted with various businesses, institutions, and real-life situations, documenting it in conceptual artworks such as drawings, photographs, and artifacts like bank checks and a temporary driver's license. Unlike the artist, Breitmore was even able to get a credit card. Breitmore exists through Hershman Leeson's art as well as the records and artifacts she left behind. The documents of Breitmore's life draw critical attention to certain societal expectations about how a woman should behave, look, and exist in such a gender-coded field of experience. Hershman Leeson has said about Breitmore, "Roberta was a cultural mirror, one who was magnetically drawn to, witnessed, and reflected the world around her. The archive of her existence is constantly being re-performed, as visitors seek to understand the era of her life."<sup>2</sup>

Hershman Leeson has been probing new technologies and making works about cyborgs since the 1960s, while also engaging with issues of surveillance, gender, and privacy. She proffers the cyborg as an inevitable outcome of human development in a technologically-driven society. Defined as "a fictional or hypothetical person whose physical abilities are extended beyond normal human limitations by mechanical elements built into the body," cyborgs are antecedents of artificial intelligence.<sup>3</sup> This exhibition presents three of Hershman Leeson's most recent videos (made in the last five years) that explore the interrelationship between humans, cyborgs, and artificial intelligence, or AI. Together they form part of a tetralogy, *Cyborgian Rhapsody*, which also includes an earlier video *Seduction of a Cyborg* (1994) that will be screened as part of a public program during the run of the exhibition. In these works Hershman Leeson presents different techno-female personas that chronicle the development of cyborgs (and thus AI)—in the last one she introduces her newest alter-ego.

In the first video, *Shadow Stalker* (2018–2021) Leeson alerts people to the fact that everyone has an online alter ego, created perhaps unwittingly, through the mechanical

footprints they generate. Just as Breitmore left behind artifacts of her existence, each of us leaves behind clues of our existence online: data. Leeson calls the protagonist of this video the “Spirit of the Deep Web,” who cautions people about the emergence of predictive policing companies like PredPol (now known as Geolitica), which professor and writer Shoshana Zuboff defines as “surveillance capitalism.”<sup>4</sup> These technologies of control are fueled by data-fed algorithms. Consequently personal information, or behavior, has, in effect, become the most valuable currency since oil. Hershman Leeson’s video illuminates how, while online, people invest in their own market value—the more data that is given, the wealthier and more knowledgeable the technologies become, which in turn impacts individual value. The protagonist warns viewers: “Own your profile. Take hold of your avatar. Honor your shadow. Hold it tight. It contains your future and your past, and, like DNA, history refuses to evaporate.”

The second work, *Logic Paralyzes the Heart* (2021)—the first video to be acquired in the Museum’s Altered Landscape Collection—was featured in the 59<sup>th</sup> Venice Biennale in 2022, for which it received Special Mention by the jury. Here we meet the very first cyborg, played by actress Joan Chen. Hershman Leeson chose Chen, in part, because she shares the same age as the first cyborg—both of whom turned sixty in 2020. While on a retreat, the persona reflects on the past and offers her visions of a troubled future, particularly in relation to the climate crisis. About this sixty-year trajectory, Hershman Leeson has observed: “She was made by NASA, and since her birth robotic devices have populated the world. The difference is that new technologies of surveillance are directed not at an enemy out there but at people in our own country. The cyborg goes on a retreat, which inspires her to meet her human avatar and explain what she’s discovered. She wants to find ways she can be more human.”<sup>5</sup>

The final, and most recent work, *Cyborgian Rhapsody: Immortality* (2023), is the follow-up to *Logic Paralyzes the Heart*. Like in the previous video, she introduces a new cyborg, created with the help of AI, who goes by Sarah and bears a striking resemblance to the artist. Born in the future (2029), Sarah meets two human friends online, after interrupting their social media feeds. The two unsuspecting girls listen to Sarah, who regales them about her origins in the military, and warns them about potential technological dangers and deceptions. The real threat to human consciousness, however, she says, are human vices, “hatred and greed.” In each of these works, Hershman Leeson tells a cautionary tale about the potential misuses and abuses of technology by humans, which has already begun to radically reshape human relationships, societies, and the history of life on Earth.

—Apsara DiQuinzio, Senior Curator of Contemporary Art

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<sup>1</sup> Lynn Hershman Leeson, “Feminist Artist Statement,” Brooklyn Museum, accessed December 20, 2024, [https://www.brooklynmuseum.org/eascfa/feminist\\_art\\_base/lynn-hershman-leeson](https://www.brooklynmuseum.org/eascfa/feminist_art_base/lynn-hershman-leeson).

<sup>2</sup> Lynn Hershman Leeson, “Cultural Mirror: Antibodies, Critics, and Roberta Breitmore,” January 16, 2020, art21, accessed December 20, 2024, <https://art21.org/read/cultural-mirror-anti-bodies-critics-and-roberta-breitmore/>

<sup>3</sup> See the Oxford English Dictionary’s definition of cyborg. Merriam-Webster describes it as “a bionic human.”

<sup>4</sup> See Shoshana Zuboff’s *The Age of Surveillance Capitalism: The Fight for a Human Future at the New Frontier of Power* (Profile Books, 2018).

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<sup>5</sup> Canada Choate, "LYNN HERSHMAN LEESON: Lynn Hershman Leeson on her work for the Venice Biennale," *Artforum* (vol. 60, no. 8), accessed December 20, 2024, <https://www.artforum.com/columns/lynn-hershman-leeson-on-her-work-for-the-venice-biennale-251687/>

## Biography

Lynn Hershman Leeson (b. 1941 Cleveland, OH) lives and works in San Francisco and New York. Recent exhibitions include La Biennale di Venezia 2022, 59th International Art Exhibition: *The Milk of Dreams*; and in 2021, her solo exhibition, *Twisted*, at The New Museum in New York. Her retrospective exhibition, *Civic Radar*, traveled from ZKM | Center for Art and Media Karlsruhe, Germany (2014) to Deichtorhallen Hamburg / Sammlung Falckenberg, Germany (2015); Lehmbruck Museum, Duisburg, Germany (2016); and Yerba Buena Center for the Arts, San Francisco (2017). Recent solo exhibitions have been held at Altman Siegel, San Francisco (2022); bürobasel, Basel, Switzerland (2021); Rozenstraat, Amsterdam, The Netherlands (2021); Centro de Arte Dos de Mayo Comunidad de Madrid (2019); KW Institute for Contemporary Art, Berlin (2018); Haus der elektronischen Künste, Basel (2018); Modern Art Oxford, UK (2015); San Francisco Museum of Modern Art (2013), and the Whitworth Art Gallery, Manchester (2007). Her work has been included in group exhibitions at Museion, Bolzano, Italy (2022); the Institute of Contemporary Art, Los Angeles (2022); Museum Brandhorst, Munich (2022); Jut Art Museum, Taipei City, Taiwan (2022); de Young Museum, San Francisco (2020); the Shed, New York (2019); Walker Art Center, Minneapolis (2019); Institute of Contemporary Art Boston (2018); Whitney Museum of American Art (2017); and Whitechapel Gallery, London (2016); as well as international exhibitions, including the Gwangju Biennial, Korea (2021), Riga Biennial of Contemporary Art (2018) and the Glasgow International (2018). Her films have screened at the Sundance Film Festival, Toronto Film Festival, and the Berlin International Film Festival, among others. Hershman Leeson has received numerous awards, including an Prix Ars Electronica 2020 Award of Distinction (2020); a VIA Art Fund Award (2019); a Siggraph Lifetime Achievement Award (2018), the College Art Association's Distinguished Feminist Award (2018), the Golden Gate Persistence of Vision Award from the 60th San Francisco International Film Festival (2017), a United States Artists Fellowship (2016), an Anonymous Was a Woman Award (2014), and a John Simon Guggenheim Memorial Foundation Fellowship (2009).

## Checklist

### *Shadowstalker*, 2018–2021

Digital video, run time: 9 minutes 56 sec.

Courtesy of the artist, Altman Siegel, San Francisco, and Bridget Donahue, New York

### *Logic Paralyzes the Heart*, 2021

Featuring Joan Chen dressed by Nina Hollein

Digital video, run time: 13 min., 53 sec.

Collection of the Nevada Museum of Art, the Altered Landscape, Carol Franc Buck Collection

### *Cyborgian Rhapsody – Immortality*, 2023

Written and performed by a CBT3 Chatbot named Sarah

Digital video; run time: 11 min., 48 sec.

Courtesy of the artist, Altman Siegel, San Francisco, and Bridget Donahue, New York

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