

Lynn Hershman Leeson

Transgressing One(Self)

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With a career spanning more than half a century, Lynn Hershman Leeson's artistic investigations cover a myriad of themes, media and technical languages. From works made with traditional techniques



Mutant, 1964-2018
Wax sculpture in mirror box with net, paper butterflies, pins, eyes, wax parts
13 1/2" x 11 1/2" x 11 1/4"
34.3 x 29.2 x 28.5 cm
©Lynn Hershman Leeson

such as painting, drawing, collage and photography to installations of computer-based art, participatory performances, and virtual realities, Lynn Hershman Leeson tackles such notions and themes as gender, sexuality, identity, biopolitics, genetic engineering, surveillance, control and censorship. Feminist questions about gender, identity and the representation of the female body have been at the core of her work, embodying her relentless quest to understand narratives surrounding the construction of female subjectivity.

Historically, female subjectivity has been regarded as strictly inferior to that of men, resulting in different standards of representation for women that throughout the centuries varied greatly from those of men. Female subjectivity was described as a negative and inconsistent suite of opposites that relied on a lack or absence of personal uniqueness, where women were seen as superficial, solely interested in ap-



Double Header, 1967
Acrylic on canvas
14" x 18"
35.5 x 45.7 cm
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pearances, and therefore depicted as passive, seductive and highly idealized presences. Such representations of femininity appeared in antiquity and were to prevail well into the following centuries.

Hershman Leeson's early works from the 1960s already challenge the notion of the highly sexualized and idealized female representation. Fully aware of what it means to have a historically constituted body, Hershman Leeson's early works transgress simplistic sexualized representations of femininity and depict women with natural, heavy bodies, engaged in everyday activities. Besides a different body, women further gained a voice in Hershman Leeson's works. The early series of *Breathing Machines* started already in 1962 depict wax cast of the artist's faced augmented with sensors and tape recordings playing the sound of her own breathing, while addressing the viewers at the same time. While many of these works still contain symbols of femininity such as glitter, butterflies and veils, they in fact represent real, breathing women, rather than socially constructed passive and idealized versions of female subjectivity. By creating such interactive representations of womanhood, Hershman Leeson not only anticipated interactivity and technologically inclusive artworks, but also alluded to the idea of the "artifact organism" as described by Manfred E. Clynes and Nathan S. Kline in 1960 when discussing astronautics, cyborgs and space travel.ⁱ

Hershman Leeson's work prefigured the kinship with machines in such works as *X-Ray Woman* (1966), where one remarks,

through an x-ray, that the human body is enhanced by mechanical elements. Anticipating by several decades Donna Haraway's main ideas from "A Cyborg Manifesto", where "a cyborg is a cybernetic organism, a hybrid of machine and organism, a creature of social reality, as well as a creature of fiction"ⁱⁱ, Hershman Leeson further investigates women's experiences in the late twentieth-century. According to Haraway, the cyborg is about transgressed boundaries, potent fusions and dangerous possibilities, where "the cyborg skips the step of original unity, of identification with nature in a Western sense"ⁱⁱⁱ and aims for connectivity through kinship. The cyborg is not afraid of partial identities and contradictory standpoints, notions that are all explored in Hershman Leeson's works of the early 1960s.

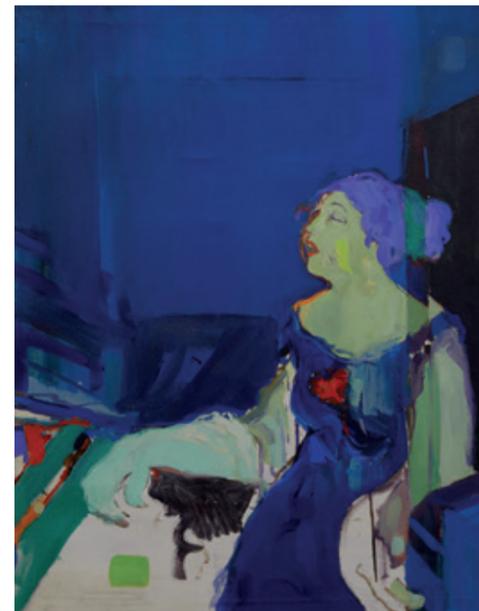
The lack of a singular fixed and stable identity had been ceaselessly examined and questioned by Hershman Leeson in works depicting double-headed women and doubled presences. The doubling of self speaks not only about the desire to escape the notion of the one socially constructed body, but that there is no such thing as a stable identity. Identity is in continuous movement, where traditional singularization is replaced by a sum of interpretations, and where each version attains meaning from its context. Such works also illustrate "who comes after the subject" that is, according to Rosalind Krauss, the decentered, multiple personality.^{iv}

Perhaps Hershman Leeson's best-known work revolving around the fictional character of *Roberta Breitmore* illustrates this concept most successfully. A private ongoing performance started in 1973, Breitmore - Hershman Leeson's alter-ego - arrived in San Francisco by bus to check into



Velvet Voodoo Breathing Machine, 1967 (reconfigured 2014)
Wax face, glass eye, gold paint, butterflies, pins, sensors, sound, wood base, glass box
13 1/2" x 11 1/2" x 11 1/4"
34.3 x 29.2 x 28.5 cm
©Lynn Hershman Leeson

the Dante Hotel, where she would spend several years before having this site shut down by the police. During these years Roberta Breitmore had a parallel existence to that of Hershman Leeson's, with her own clothing, signature make-up (for which a specific construction chart was created), driver's license, bank account and even therapy treatments. By the forth



Woman Singing with Heart (Early Work 52), 1962
Acrylic on canvas
32" x 48"
81 x 122 cm
©Lynn Hershman Leeson

year of the performance Roberta Breitmore herself had become a multiple personality, with four other people appearing in her guise. The performance ended in 1978 when Breitmore was exorcised and transformed through elements of fire, water, air, and earth, all visible in the ongoing *Water Women* which began in 1976, consisting of photo collages and digital images. As investigations of disappearance and reappearance, multiple and parallel selves, these water women often appear inverted, doubled, or multiplied, continuing Hershman Leeson's investigation of fluid identity. Earlier collages from the late 1970s which show anagrammatic bodies of women - one of the artist's alternative modes of representing female subjectivity - are yet again similar to the cyborg, fragmented and in continuous search to reinvent themselves.

Timea Andrea Lelik

ⁱ Manfred E. Clynes and Nathan S. Kline, *Cyborgs and space*, *Astronautics*, September 1960, p. 26.

ⁱⁱ Donna Haraway, "A Cyborg Manifesto" in *The Cybercultures Reader*, David Bell and Barbara M. Kennedy, eds., Routledge, 2001, p. 291.

ⁱⁱⁱ Idem, p. 292.

^{iv} Rosalind Krauss, "Who Comes After the Subject" in *The Life & Work: Art and Biography*, Charles G. Salas ed., Getty Research Institute, 2007, p. 32.



X-Ray Woman, 1966
Pencil, acrylic and pen on canvas
36 5/8" x 19 1/8"
93 x 48.7 cm
©Lynn Hershman Leeson
Courtesy Private Collection, The Netherlands



Untitled 76, 1966-67
Acrylic on canvas
9 7/8" x 7 7/8"
25 x 20 cm
©Lynn Hershman Leeson
Courtesy Private Collection, The Netherlands



Water Women 5, 1978
Unique photo collage with mirrors
10" x 4" / 25.4 x 10.1 cm
16 1/2" x 10" / 41.9 x 25.4 cm (framed)
©Lynn Hershman Leeson
Photo: Marc Brems Tatti
Courtesy Bridget Donahue Gallery, New York



Water Woman Black to White, 1995
Archival digital print
Edition 7/8 + 2 AP
47.6" x 30.4"
121.5 x 77.3 cm
©Lynn Hershman Leeson



Water Woman Violet Shadow, 2004
Archival digital print
Edition 5/8 + 2 AP
44 1/2" x 30 1/2" / 113 x 77.6 cm
©Lynn Hershman Leeson
Courtesy Private Collection, The Netherlands