

Lea

LEONARDO ELECTRONIC ALMANAC

**VOL 17 NO 1** A collection of articles, reviews and opinion pieces that discuss and analyze the complexity of mixing things together as a process that is not necessarily undertaken in an orderly and organized manner. Wide open opportunity to discuss issues in interdisciplinary education; art, science and technology interactions; personal artistic practices; history of re-combinatory practices; hybridizations between old and new media; cultural creolization; curatorial studies and more.

Contributions from

**Frieder Nake, Stelarc, Paul Catanese**

and other important cultural operators.

M I S H  
W V 2 H

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An interview with Lynn Hershman Leeson

# Hacking the Codes of Self-representation

A B S T R A C T

*This interview with Lynn Hershman Leeson reflects on the meaning and impact of her artistic activity since the Seventies, an important resource for understanding the socio-cultural transformation in the fields of art, technology and body-politics of our present. Today more than ever, we are experiencing the mixing and crossing of virtual and real worlds; dynamics of social networking and net-based participation are influencing not only a small group of experts, but everyone with access to technology. Through the art of Lynn Hershman Leeson, it becomes possible to access a critical space-in-between, a liminal state of performativity, in which to redefine powers and hierarchies, to question the meaning of identity, and to hack the codes of self-representation. As a “cultural infiltrator”, Lynn Hershman Leeson opens up a critical interstice in the everyday life to a constant redefinition of ourselves.*

**CybeRoberta** 1995, Lynn Hershman

telerobotic doll, programming and fabrication by Palle Henkel,

Colin Klingman, edition of 2. © Lynn Hershman 1993

by

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**Every society goes through transitional states of socio-cultural transformation, what anthropologist Victor Turner dubbed *liminal phases* (Turner, 1982).**

These are potentially fertile areas of rewriting and hacking of cultural codes, a cultural limbo where individuals are “betwixt and between”. People experiencing these *liminal states* are not anymore who they were before, and not yet what they will become. They work in a critical space-in-between, a fluid territory in which to play with the structure of representation, hacking the codes of self-representation, and recombining them into something unpredictable. In this free, active, experimental space, new cultural elements and new combined rules can be introduced. It is in these instances that technology is used with artistic, cultural and political goals. The joint action of different subjectivities which show how it is possible to create the first step in redefining powers and hierarchies; in terms of dismantling and opening social, cultural and sexual categories.

Lynn Hershman Leeson has transformed the idea of art into a corporeal practice necessary for a critical redefinition of reality. Her artistic work since the 1960s can be seen as a *liminal zone*, where to understand the transformation of the social itself. Through her artificially constructed alter egos, active both in real and virtual life, cultural symbols are recomposed according to unedited modalities. Gender power structures, the representation of subjectivity, or the artificial construction of identities; all these have found perfect balance in her works.

Lynn Hershman Leeson created a critical reflection putting her body on the performance stage through more than thirty years. Starting in the 1970s with the creation of the multiple personality Roberta Breitmore and continuing through her works to this day with her film *!Women Art Revolution* (premiered at the Toronto International Film Festival last September). The works

stress the cultural implication of gender in daily life thereby rewriting the codes of both art and technology. Dynamics of interaction, dialogue and collective exchange acquire a particular relevance in her works.

This interview reflects on the meaning and impact of Lynn Hershman Leeson's activities, which constitute fundamental resources for understanding of key aspects of contemporary culture. Today more than ever, we are experiencing mixing and crossing of virtual and real worlds, and dynamics of social networking and artistic creation are influencing not only a small group of experts, but also everyone with access to technology.

**Your early works date mid 1960s, and since then you have been working as an artist playing with the structure of cultural representation, the construction of female identity and artificial alter egos. Projects like *The Dante Hotel* (1973–74) and the very well known *Roberta Breitmore* (1974–78) anticipated later artistic investigations into identity and self-determination. Who was Roberta Breitmore in the 70s?**

Roberta was a construction of a personality that was objectified. We looked at all the varying factors that make something a human or that collect an identity. It was a time when women, particularly women artists, were beginning to realize they had no history. You weren't taken seriously and there was a stereotype construction. It was also around the time when we got to the first step of the equal rights amendment, that would eventually be passed, giving women rights in the USA. Women were becoming conscious of who they were. Roberta was a kind of portrait of how culture represents the identity of women. A stereotypical identity: a beauty, a blonde, what you look like, what your history is, what your construction is, what your constrictions are, what you are limited by. So, rather

than drawing or painting, I wanted to do something that encompassed all of culture during that era. That is why Roberta expanded into a lived experience, as well as a documented experience, and all of those experiences were talking to each other. Later Roberta became three other women, the multiples. I wanted to have three, because in science they always have to prove things three ways. It was also a beginning of a virtualization. You create something and you brand it as something, and then you make three others, and you send them out, and see what happens with those. It was a matter of infecting the environment with multiples, like a virus. Between 1995–2000, Roberta transformed into the CybeRoberta, which is an interactive artificial intelligent sculpture on the web. In 2006 *Roberta Breitmore* developed into a character in Second Life, another Roberta, who is very much like the first Roberta that goes out into virtual space. Essentially Roberta was living in virtual space in the seventies, a fictional space. So those remnants exist to make the new Roberta more resonant.

**You defined Roberta Breitmore as an “interactive vehicle used to analyze culture”. What was the result of this analysis? If you would create Roberta today, how would you represent her?**

Well, you can't go back, but essentially today you could run the Roberta software through Second Life or any other virtual space and track it. You could track the people that you meet and the exposures you have, and all the effects of that. I don't think it is necessary anymore to do that. Roberta still lives in Second Life and many people can become her, they can go out there as her avatar. But the Roberta in Second Life is completely different from the Roberta of the seventies. The one in Second Life doesn't face dangers. When Roberta went out in the early seventies she didn't know who she was meeting – if she was going to be invited into a prostitution ring, if she was going out with some murderer or serial killer. In Second Life



*When Roberta went out in the early seventies she didn't know who she was meeting – if she was going to be invited into a prostitution ring, if she was going out with some murderer or serial killer.*



you can always escape. You don't have to reveal as much, physically. It is all done on a second meta-level, which is much safer because you can log off. Roberta even had personal counselling with a psychotherapist for about six weeks: he knew she was wearing a wig and all this makeup, but he didn't know it was an artwork. Everything was happening in a fictional space, but it was for real.

**Many of your performances and installations since the seventies have opened the concept of art, bringing it into daily life. That was something that was very present in the early Avant-gardes and in the later ones, i.e. Fluxus. But with your works, art was able to reach not only a selected audience, but people in the city, common buildings, streets and unusual stages. I am thinking about the *Floating Museum* (1974–78), which was a pioneer project for that time. Recently, you brought art into Second Life, with the project *Life Squared*. Again, we have a connection between art and life, even if this happens in Second Life. What did this new experience add to the early networking in Real Life?**

This new experience in Second Life was very different

from the early ones, which connected art and life in the seventies. But I didn't invent the idea. It happened during the Russian Revolution and Grotowski and Kantor brought theatre into life. At the time, something like the *Floating Museum* was completely radical to do in the USA. When we started the project in Second Life it was moderately radical. It was absorbed in a way where it doesn't have an impact in real life. It's dealing with a very narrow group - Like Fluxus dealt with Fluxus artists, Second Life deals with Second Life people, and it really doesn't go beyond that. It's very limited. We tried to bring our project out of Second Life in 2008 with *No Body Special*, but not many people knew about it and it wasn't advertised much. In the *Floating Museum* we managed to involve around 400 people from all over the world. It was very active and exciting at that time, there was a good reaction, people liked and they didn't expect it. The same happened with *The Dante Hotel*. One person even called the police because he didn't understand that it was a work of art and he thought that the waxes in my hotel room were real people. The project in Second Life started when Stanford University took care of my archive. I wanted to make my archive accessible, and be

in a library. So I talked with Henry Lowood (Stanford Humanities Lab) and we decided to try the Second Life project to see if we could convert it into something accessible for a broader public. We started to work on two projects: *The Dante Hotel* and *Roberta Breitmore*, to recreate and re-enact them in a virtual space. The two projects were connected in Second Life with the avatar of Roberta living in the Hotel. We thought to expand the Roberta project into the virtual Dante Hotel to create a new narrative environment. Thousands of people responded in Second Life, but it was merely a space of interaction for the SL public, so in this sense, a very limited experience.

**In 2005 you wrote: “As each new technology enters a society, something is sacrificed. Perhaps it is the notion of what privacy means”. Today we are living interconnected between diverse social networks and we are getting used to a daily identity theft. In your project *No Body Special* (2008), you combined photos on Flickr, GPS traces on Google Maps and interventions in Second Life. Could you tell us more about that?**

The project *No Body Special* started because some museums in San Francisco wanted to create an event, which could interconnect them with each other. It involved museums like the SFMOMA, the UC Berkeley Art Museum, the Pacific Film Archive, the de Young Museum, Hess Art Collection, Berne, New Langton Arts, the San Jose Museum of Art, and the Stanford Humanities Lab. But I think it really didn't work because there was not much support other than for the idea. There was no money, no advertising and no structure. The idea was to make a linking system between the museums, where things from one museum would cross over to the other. I used GPS tracking to map the way people went through the city and posting images taken by surveillance cameras on Flickr. It worked, but on a very small scale, and nobody really understood it or knew about it. All the museums had different publicity departments and nobody took charge or knew what to do about it.

**Today you would rather think that because of the social networks, more people are potentially open to possibilities of major interaction and participation. You can address more people than was possible for the Fluxus performances in the sixties.**

**Maybe now people are more ready to interact online than to go out in the streets and do something collective. What do you think?**

In the future I'll be working with people who understand these media better. We could design things specifically, that will create global sparks around different things we are doing, including mapping systems. Among these projects is of course my new film about the *!Women Art Revolution*. Here, the outtakes are more important than the film itself. It shows a way to redefine what a document is and what outtakes are, by finding ways to use mobile technologies, mapping system and linkage systems, to bring information out in a broader sense.

**Let's speak about your film *!Women Art Revolution*. Could you tell us more about it?**

The movie is a history of women artists, which I've been shooting since 1968. I have collected three hundred hours of footage to make a film of 85 minutes, and what do you do with the left out films? The film has an overall history, but different narrative strategies could be brought from the remixing. So much is about remixing and re-conceptualizing what your narrative is, and having the entire material out to be re-cut in varying ways and shapes. At the moment, I have a piece in South Korea, called *An Emotional Barometer*. It started four years ago and it consists of a face that you can text message any subjects. She collects tags on various issues – like Obama, the war, anything at all – and her facial expressions react to the collected emotions portrayed by many people. This way you can feel globally how people are thinking and feeling about various matters. Again it's taking a broader idea of a network that will create patterns that inform the entire planetary structure that we are living in, rather than a private personal perspective.

**Among your activity as a media artist, you are also a film and video director. What is the thread that connects films like *Conceiving Ada* (1997), *Tek-nolust* (2002) and *Strange Culture* (2007) with your upcoming film about the *!Women Art Revolution* in the 1970s?**

The films are all about loss and technology. Ada Lovelace invented computer language, but was never credited and was basically erased from history. *Tek-nolust* is about artificial intelligence clones: the bots

that escape into reality and interact with human life, in effect a symbiosis between technological life and human life, and how the two can marry. *Strange Culture* again was about misidentity, where the media created a fictional character that they blame this crime on, rather than the actual person. All of these works are about erasure of identity and how technology adds to it and creates it. And how you can defeat that.

**In many of your projects, you have been a “cultural infiltrator”, managing to rewrite the codes we use to represent ourselves and our identity constructions. I think about the fake art curators you created in 1968–72 to write about your artworks and be able to organize your first exhibits as a woman artist. Do you think social networks could be an effective territory exploring the unpredictable, the cultural “Trojan Horses” – or better, social hacks – as a strategy for art?**

I think many people are already using the social networks to playing with identities. But the point that matters is not really to create a hoax, but a hoax that has meaning, that is really able to change things. So far what we have seen have been pranks, rather than something that goes beyond the first surface. There is a lot of potential to do that, infiltrating almost like a spy.

**You said that the real gift for humanity is that each generation can re-create itself. In which way could the American feminist movement of the 70s inspire the new generation of women (and men) working with art and self-representation?**

I think it already has. I think most of the art that you see today, whether is by Matthew Barney or Camille Utterback, or even Cindy Sherman. All the artists now are dealing with the ideas that were put into the mix in the seventies. They are remixing ideas about identity place, collaboration, social structures and change. Stanford University is taking care of the archive of materials collected since the seventies – hundred of hours of film and hundreds of pictures, which will be available online when the film is released. ■

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