# PORTFOLIO

KRISTINE LARSEN

NEWSMAKER

## LYNN HERSHMAN LEESON

NEW MEDIA AND EMBODIED performance are trendy today, but Hershman Leeson has been mining these veins for more than 40 years. The artist's cutting-edge work has run the gamut from the long-term performance "Roberta Breitmore," for which she lived a double life as herself and an alter ego for most of the 1970s, to a series of feminist science-fiction films starring Tilda Swinton as, among other roles, a Victorian mathematician and a group of replicants. A committed feminist, Hershman Leeson chronicled the movement in the 2011 documentary *Women Art Revolution*. Yet her contributions to technologically sophisticated art have long been underrecognized. Her retrospective "Civic Radar," opening December 12 at the **ZKM Center for Art and Media** in Karlsruhe, Germany, with additional stops next year at the Falckenberg Collection Deichtorhallen in Hamburg and Modern Art Oxford, aims to change that perception. In February 2015 the artist will open a new show at New York's **Postmasters Gallery**. Hershman Leeson spoke with *Modern Painters* senior editor Wendy Vogel in New York about technology, genetic mutations, and why feminism still matters.

**WENDY VOGEL:** From 1968 to 1972 you wrote about your own work under the guise of three fictional art critics. How might those critics start a conversation with you today?
**LYNN HERSHMAN LEESON:** Each critic thought about things very differently; one was a Greenbergian. I have recently thought about reviving the project because some elements that haven't changed much in the last four decades. I think if those critics were looking at what I'm doing now, they would be totally surprised at the effect that they had.
**WV:** I first came to know your work through the "Roberta Breitmore" project when it was exhibited in the show "WACK! Art and the Feminist Revolution." How have your concerns with doubling and embodied performance evolved over the years?
**LHL:** It's a matter of looking at the underbelly of society, and of being invisible for so many years. A lot of these personae tend to be a shadow or a witness of things that people don't normally see. That always fascinated me: the perspective we rely on, what you can see, and what's left out. It's really the blur of the edge that's most interesting.
**WV:** You've said that the Roberta Breitmore character arose from negative space.
**LHL:** It's true. I started out as a painter, and I looked at that negative space and created the rooms Roberta inhabited first at the Dante Benedetti Hotel in San Francisco. I was trying to actualize and embody that negative space that would go out into the world. And that's what she became: a floating negative space, which I hadn't intended. That's what the reflection of her was in the culture of that time.
**WV:** Were there people who did not realize Roberta Breitmore was a fiction?
**LHL:** Nobody knew that she was an artwork until she was over, except for the photographer and some of the multiples who portrayed her. She was totally anonymous, and I wanted it

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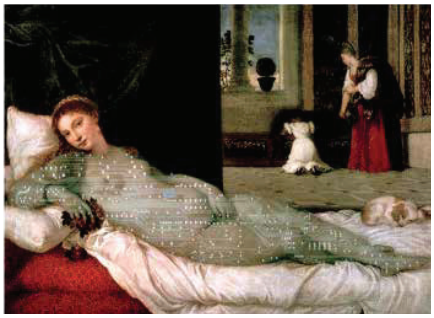
that way. It wasn't a work that would go out and seek an audience. It was one that would seek a reflection, and if I were to let people know that's what I was doing, it would skew how people reacted.

**WV:** You not only documented Roberta Breitmore with a photographer and through a comic book, you made her legally valid. She had a psychologist, a Weight Watchers membership, a driver's license, and a checking account. How did your approach shift as you moved from analog materials of administration to digital traces?

**LHL:** It was important to validate Roberta as much as I could so that people looking back would think that she existed. She really has more validity in that era than I do, because I couldn't get a credit card. Later on, for the project *Myth America,* 1979–81, I became a corporation, and the stock certificates became the identity piece for that. I think the timing was right. If I had done that project 10 years later, I would probably have been arrested for identity fraud. Laura Albert did a project where she created the fictional writer JT LeRoy and got into a lot of trouble for assuming another identity.

"Nobody understood this as art. It gave me freedom; when you're not successful, it allows you to do whatever you want."



**WV:** You made a film about Albert and LeRoy.

**LHL:** I interviewed each of them and then made a short film from it. They're on different sides of the wall—or in a corner, the piece is shown in a corner—and they react to the same questions completely differently.

**WV:** There was a lot of anger when it was discovered that JT LeRoy was a hoax in the early 2000s. The character of JT was a young, gay, male writer during the era of the AIDS crisis who was played by a woman.

**LHL:** Laura said that she was very careful in constructing this figure. She said she was an overweight Jewish woman from Brooklyn and nobody would pay attention to her, so she wanted to embody the cultural politics of that time by deciding consciously who JT LeRoy was so that people would take him seriously. She didn't think people would take *her* seriously, and she was probably right.

**WV:** The way you've used technology, including LORNA, the interactive video art laser disc of the early 1980s depicting an agoraphobic woman, has anticipated the anxieties that we experience culturally today in the age of digital avatars.

**LHL:** I think a lot of it early on was about surveillance. Even in the early '70s, I was really aware of how much we were being watched, and most people were completely unaware until very recently, although the NSA started in 1952. This kind of copying and replicating and loss of privacy is something that I've been keenly mindful of, so much so that I felt that people, as time went on, wouldn't know what privacy was. I think that's true today.

**WV:** How did you get into making feature-length feminist sci-fi films? What obstacles did you encounter as a female director?

**LHL:** I didn't know of any other women who were doing sci-fi. A lot of the dialogue was based on things that scientists have said, but it was easier to accept if you thought about it in terms of sci-fi. As for their production, I was fortunate that I won a prize in Europe for my videos and I got an opportunity to work with German television, which funded those two films and a few others. I immediately had funding to make the film, and an audience.

**WV:** Can you talk about the final work in the trilogy with Tilda Swinton?

**LHL:** I hope to make that film next year. Tilda is going to play a cat named Matilda, who is a genetic cross between a jellyfish and a feline that was created in order to better track viruses for AIDS research. After I made the feminist art documentary *Women Art Revolution* and the film *Strange Culture*, I wondered, What can I do to make a difference? Because I think those two films did. So I started doing research on the Human Genome Project and its implications—how things are being crossbred, how many bioprinted organs are being implanted, how much can be regenerated, how species themselves are completely shifting and mutating. The film is about a 19-year-old girl who was the first person to have a bioprinted implant, which I see as an

**Lynn Hershman Leeson**

ABOVE:
*Digital Venus-Titian,* 1988. Archival digital print, 30 x 40 in.

LEFT:
Still from the installation *Room of One's Own,* 1995.

FROM TOP: LYNN HERSHMAN LEESON; LYNN HERSHMAN LEESON, GALERIE WALDBURGER, BRUSSELS, AND GALLERY PAULE ANGLIM, SAN FRANCISCO

extension of photography. Cyborgs now are bioprintable elements extended into living beings.

**WV:** Your retrospective at the ZKM will also include a piece with DNA sequencing.

**LHL:** I'm going to make a genetics lab. I've been doing these interviews with scientists and ethicists for the past three years. There will be a room for bioprinting and regeneration, a room for some of the ethical cases with all the files that you can look through, a mutation room, and we're going to try to reverse-engineer people's DNA based on facial recognition.

**WV:** Has your new media work been considered not only difficult to canonize but also difficult to conserve?

**LHL:** I think it would be too simple to say that it was a matter of technical capacity. It's just that nobody understood this work as art. In a way, it gave me a lot of freedom; when you're not successful, it allows you to do whatever you want. I feel fortunate that it's being shown now and that it's going to be historicized.

**WV:** Are there other works in the ZKM show that have rarely, if ever, been seen?

**LHL:** Yes, like my "Suicide" pieces from the '60s, where I made wax casts of myself, or people I knew, and set them on fire. My work has always dealt with transience, transformation, and regeneration. Also, I have storyboards for a piece I made with John Cage and Calvin Tomkins about Duchamp. The show will have most of my films in it, even the short films.

**WV:** Your work is inspiring in the way that it continues to link the project of feminism to your ethical concerns.

**LHL:** Feminism was always about issues. It was about censorship, a quest for equality and transparency. With this new work, I'm finding out that genetics issues are very central to the world's moral stances, and they need to be addressed now. It's like when they passed the law allowing the government to tap anyone's computer for information. Nobody except the Electronic Frontier Foundation protested that. I think the same thing is happening now with some of the new manufacturing linked to genetics, like brain chips that will erase trauma.

**WV:** How has the Bay Area influenced you?

**LHL:** Going to Berkeley in the 1960s and being in that environment is what allowed me to think about being an autonomous agent, the way Tilda Swinton's replicant character Ruby is in *Teknolust*, not being part of any organization or presumed dominant force. And with the explosion of the tech industry over the last 30 years, I could make things there that I couldn't make anywhere else, particularly with out-of-work programmers or people who wanted to do something with technology that wasn't linked to product. MP

JAMES EWING

**Douglas Gordon**
A rendering of *tears become...streams become...*

A/V LAB

# AFTER THE DELUGE, A CONCERT

## Douglas Gordon's watery collaboration

The **Park Avenue Armory**'s Drill Hall is no stranger to dramatic site-specific art. The 19th-century edifice on New York's Upper East Side has hosted events from Aaron Young's daredevil motorcycle ride as action painting in 2007 to Ann Hamilton's dreamy swing sets in 2012. This month, artist **Douglas Gordon** will collaborate with acclaimed French pianist **Hélène Grimaud** on *tears become…streams become…*, an installation that will transform the former munitions stronghold with "an inundation of water," explains the Armory's artistic director, Alex Poots. Conceived by Gordon, the water will reflect the space's architecture, effectively doubling its already impressive height. Against this mise-en-scène, Grimaud will perform water-inspired works by composers such as Debussy, Ravel, and Liszt.

Although Gordon is best known for his films and videos, Poots says he tapped him to collaborate with the pianist because "he's a very musically literate artist." Not surprisingly, the work will take on a cinematic quality: "Once the surface of the water is lit, it becomes reflective, like a screen," Poots adds. Grimaud will perform for 10 nights between December 10 and December 21, and the installation will be open to the public through January 4. Poots sees the collaboration as evolving the concert format. "The artwork will be pregnant with expectation during the day, and activated by Grimaud at night," he promises. —WENDY VOGEL