

Speech from Laura Sillars, FACT Liverpool

Laudation for the [ddaa] 2010, Lynn Hershman Leeson

I met Lynn Hershman Leeson for the first time in Second Life. In the game interface of her online project *Life to the Second Power: Animating the Archive* the super-human, super-sexy bodies of our Avatars wandered around the virtual space of a re-creation of *The Dante Hotel* exploring a reconstruction of archival materials produced in earlier performance works. In that oh-so-real shadow-land of re-contextualised presences, we navigated the strange objects that were left behind by other guests in the rooms. We walked through the corridors, explored works from the archive and discussed the shifting themes of identity, politics, technology, performance, the net and how to operate across time-zones. In the physical world, I was sitting in front of a live audience in FACT in Liverpool at event about Media Art Histories and the artist was sitting in front of a live audience at the Sundance Festival in Utah. And yet this was a real encounter. We'd made a date, we'd prepared, I'd built an avatar for the first time with a colleague (labouring over the colour of her hair and outfit). It was a real-life exchange set inside a temporal bridging zone that exists in technology's space and time and within the collective imaginations of those who witnessed the event. Whether Second Life will sustain as a collaborative creative platform I don't know, but the reason I nominated Lynn Hershman Leeson for this life-time achievement award is that her work has sustained in its relevance and potency while migrating across platforms and consistently engaging new tactics, spaces and meanings. Lynn Hershman Leeson has clearly demonstrated an unwavering commitment to a practice that questions what it is to make art in life, even as both art and life change.

I nominated Hershman Leeson for her innovation, relevance and influence.

This was of course not the first time I had encountered Hershman's work. Far from it. But it is an indelible moment when you encounter an artist whose work you admire and when you are coming from different spectrums within the life-time continuum. My interest in Lynn Hershman Leeson's work came first in the work that she made as an emerging artist in the realm of performance.

The act of transformation has been played out across the centuries in dance, carnival and ritual, and in literature, theatre and film there is a rich canon of identity duplicity (accidental or otherwise). The Modernist precedent for the identity manipulation can be traced through Dada performance and, most famously, Marcel Duchamp's alter ego Rrose Sélavy. Emerging at the intersection between identity politics, performance, video and conceptual art in the 1970s and 80s, Lynn Hershman Leeson was part of a 'scene' of artists including Adrian Piper and Eleanor Antin who developed semi-real, semi-fictional characters through which they explored racial and gender-based identity issues, reinvigorating an interest in transformation. Even part of Hershman's master's thesis involved writing art criticism under three pseudonyms: Prudence Juris, Herbert Goode and Gay Abandon. And, she suffered for her experimental practice in those early days as the art world struggled to come to terms with new forms of creativity – which even included sound! Radical! It is notable that one of her early exhibitions of wax figures alongside audio of breathing voices was cancelled alongside a declaration from the University Art Museum in Berkeley that there was no place for audio in a museum. It is hard to imagine such things now, but when re-viewing Lynn Hershman Leeson's expansive practice it is worth remembering that the political, social and technical context in which her work was produced across an almost 40 year period has shifted dramatically. In 1972 it was still legal in California for a man to rape his wife!

In 1973, with Eleanor Coppola, she created an early site-specific installation with *The Dante Hotel*, for which each artist rented a hotel room which they furnished with a miscellany of objects. It was in the shadow of this place that I was later to have my first encounter with the artist in albeit a space with a very different psychic character! The objects in Hershman's room evoke traces left by previous occupants and by visitors, who could re-create fragments of fictional lives. Here Hershman was interested in the multiple strata of life contained by a place or site in a given

socioeconomic environment. From then on, her work was characterized by such elements as the use of masks and personae to explore "identity, reality and truth." As early as 1972, a work titled *Self-Portrait as Another Person* revealed her interests in masquerade and in the persona, so central to her work.

The infamous early personae developed by Leeson, *Roberta Breitmore*, took her first 'lived' breath in 1971 through placing an advert for a housemate in a local paper. She had her own handwriting, sartorial style, identifying characteristics and temperament. She went to art galleries and dated men – of various suitability! And her adventures were documented by private investigators hired by the artist. A set of fragmented data – diaries and letters are all that remains and these remind us of the power Hershman Leeson found through the legitimacy of the published, printed and hand-written text gives. Breitmore's presence is verified through an official media archive of documentation such as a library card, driver's license, dental records and an employment contract. Leeson's investigation through and in the persona of Roberta Breitmore is not merely research into performing identities but into the malleability of identities dependent upon contingencies such as access, place and power. As Kelli Dipple, Curator of Intermedia at Tate and one of the judges of this prize has written, 'Roberta reflected the values of her culture and penetrated trends like weight watchers, whilst addressing directly the acute gaze on women in her era and exploring inextricably the ramifications of sexed subjectivity.'¹

For Hershman Leeson, this character gathered a power that forced her to write later that her own identity was put at risk: 'Roberta's traumas became my own haunting memories. They would surface without warning, with no relief. She was buried deep within me, a skin closer to my heart.'² The artist ritually exorcised her alter ego in order to move on.³

These extreme moments of transformation and re-invention are part of a practice that is rigorous in its research and it is this that see her work maintain its cultural cogency. While her early work investigates lived experience through a feminist, identity politics it sets in motion a wider discourse that positions identity signifiers into broader territories. What is it to exist in independent multiple forms simultaneously? How do the development of artificial intelligences intersect with the construction of relationships? In 2006, for example, I found myself in conversation with *DiNA*, an intelligent web agent who I met with in the Museum of Art, San Jose as part of Zero One San Jose festival. The questions that the artists asks through her work are as central to our society now as they were where when she first started producing work.

And this in turn is another aspect of why I believe she is deserving of an award with 'life time achievement' in its title. Her practice undergoes such subtle sea-shifts and continually looks beyond the fabric of her own lived experience giving it a relevancy that demands frequent re-reading. Her insistence in there being two clearly defined phases of her practice – BC, Before Computers & AD, After Digital - means that all the work she made before this point can be re-explored and re-mapped against a new set of conditions within the artist's later thinking. Would we read her early performance interventions as 'predicting the avatar' had she not followed this through by developing a body of work that starts with a series of projects where she embodies the figurative personae of fictional others such as the notorious *Roberta Breitmore*, created and enacted by the artist from 1973 – 79, and which leads to the first interactive computer-based artwork with *Lorna* (1983-84) and the artificial intelligent web agent *DiNa* (2006)?

To try and sum up Lynn Hershman Leeson's work or to list it all today, would I think defeat the object of the fact that she has been chosen to receive a life-time achievement award. If we could

1 Kelli Dipple – The Judges Decision for the [ddaa], for the jury, Kelli Dipple, Curator, Intermedia Art at Tate Modern, London, May 2010

2 Lynn Hershman Leeson reflects back on her experience as Roberta in Sabine Breitwieser, *Double Life: Identity and Transformation in Contemporary Art*, Walter König, Köln, 2002

neatly package this huge body of work into a speech of a few minutes I suspect we would not all be standing here today. Her work is wide ranging across media and diverse. From photography to tele-robotic works, sculpture to web-infrastructure, films to performances, Hershman's work is characterized by a commitment to a field of investigation as opposed to a mode of articulation. Scattered across the globe in the collections of various prestigious institutions. At times it is relational, such as *The Difference Engine 3*, an interactive net-based artwork about identity, that won the Golden Nica at Ars Electronica. At times her style is narrative such as through her films *Conceiving Ada*, *Teknolust* (2002) and *Strange Culture* (2007) that all expose the institutional power relationships between private and public identities at a social and political level.

Pleasure, passion, sexuality and desire all weave their way through Hershman Leeson's work which is as much visceral as it is conceptual, technical or theoretical. The early interactive work videodisk artwork entitled *Lorna* (1979-1983) and *Deep Contact: The Sexual Fantasy Videodisk*, (1984-86) which used touch-sensitive screen technology show her work sustaining a playful light touch. *Room of One's Own* (1990-1993) which was followed by *America's Finest* (1993-1995), which enacted the idea of Étienne Jules Marey's camera-gun and *Paranoid Mirror* (1995-1996) are installations in gallery spaces that require a double take and as well as explicitly talking about the production of meaning through the gaze, through the power of looking they intrigue the viewer.

The return, repeat and rethinking of early practice in Hershman Leeson's recent work enriches the field of media art histories. It re-positions the multiple histories of practice – of performance, feminist and activist art into an engaged dialogue with a field of practice which has at times struggled to prove its legitimacy within the expanded debate of art. By re-looking at this archive, Hershman Leeson casts a light not only on an isolated body of work, but upon the histories, lineages and creative communities that intersect within the field of media art.

When Wolf invited me to nominate an artist to for a life-time achievement award I felt quite positively traumatized! As an arts professional who was only just born at the end of the decade at which someone like Lynn had been making important breakthroughs I felt poignantly aware of my own limitations of anecdotal and experiential knowledge. It is no co-incidence that when I first met Lynn I was an event entitled *Had to be There* at FACT which was a symposium situated alongside our exhibition *Re:Video Positive* where we were re-presenting artworks from a 20 year history of the commissioning and presentation of Media Art. The discussion was around how it was possible to produce accurate histories when so many artworks have been lost through the technology becoming obsolescent or through lack of maintenance as artists moved on in their practice or even left the field feeling that they would be unable to sustain a living making this kind work.

Despite my anxiety at this sense of responsibility, I felt no hesitation in nominating Lynn Hershman Leeson for this award! Her work speaks to me on a personal level. I see its influence in young and emerging artists in the field. Hershman Leeson has carved a path that can be seen to form bridges between art forms and ideas

There are three key reasons why I nominated Lynn for this award: innovation, relevance and influence.

Finally, there is an enormous generosity in her work, and in film projects such as *Strange Culture* where she tells the story of Critical Art Ensemble's Steve Kurtz, she insists again and again that the personal and private of the microcosm of lived experience is a manifestation of macro political forces. The artist's latest work *!Woman Art Revolution!* is a case in point, bringing together the stories of the creative community of women artists she was so connected with and exploring their struggles to carve out a space in which they could exist in the world of art.

She is a campaigner. A story-teller. An oracle. Part of a community and a voice that speaks out. An activist and an artist whose work represents a life-time of incisive, timely and meaningful

interaction with a world that is constantly seeking re-invention.

It was a privilege to nominate an artist for this fantastic prize – and it is a delight that Lynn Hershman Leeson has been presented this award.

Thank you!