

Lynn Hershman Leeson

Zentrum für Kunst und Medientechnologie

An important precursor of the Pictures Generation, Lynn Hershman Leeson has been left out of traditional accounts of conceptual photography. Her retrospective at Zentrum für Kunst und Medientechnologie (ZKM) has finally injected much-needed momentum into this staid discourse. Entitled 'Lynn Hershman Leeson: Civic Radar', and curated by Peter Weibel and Andreas Beitin, the exhibition spans the length of Hershman Leeson's career, from the early 1960s to the present. This massive but meticulous and intelligently organized show brings hundreds of objects into a single space – presenting a beautifully vibrant archive that never feels dated. Hershman Leeson's career has encompassed performance, photography, film and painting – work that has often prefigured the projects of other artists.

Discussions of Photo-Conceptualism have changed little since curator Douglas Crimp's initial manifesto for the movement-defining 'Pictures' exhibition at Artists Space, New York, in 1977, in which he concluded that 'underneath each picture is always another picture'. After viewing Hershman Leeson's retrospective, we cannot repeat the same truisms about the construction of identity and the constant citation of the image. Something different is happening here: for Hershman Leeson, behind each body is always another body, in a strange dance of presence and absence.

For example, in the 1973–79 'Roberta Breitmore' series, Hershman Leeson lived as an imagined woman named Roberta, starting some years before Cindy Sherman created her *Untitled Film Stills* (1977–80). During the six-year span of the project, Hershman-Leeson-as-Roberta got a driver's licence, was psychoanalyzed, opened a bank account and interviewed potential roommates for an apartment share. Hershman Leeson meticulously documented the scenes, clothes, objects and paperwork involved in this performance and, in doing so, summoned a human being into existence from photographic evidence. Inviting other women to act as surrogates, Hershman Leeson produced a number of iterations of Roberta, until the character was ritually exorcized on Lucrezia Borgia's grave at the Palazzo dei

About this review

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Shower, still from the film
Teknolust, 2002

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Diamanti in Ferrara in 1978.

In the photograph *Roberta's Replacement At Her Temp Job After She Was Fired* (1978), a nameless woman has replaced Roberta, herself a fiction, producing the effect of a double absence. Hershman Leeson's signature crosses slightly onto the edge of the silver gelatin print, as if to ground the imagined situation in the real via the corporeality of the artist's hand. The piece marks an oscillation between embodiment (the body of the woman who replaces Roberta) and disembodiment (the absent Roberta who, in turn, has already replaced Hershman Leeson). Similarly, another photograph, *Roberta Contemplating Suicide on the Golden Gate Bridge* (1978) reminds us of the importance of the (specifically female) body to the discourse of Postmodernism. We see Roberta from behind, standing near the edge of San Francisco's iconic bridge. The moment is charged with the potential for a body to hurl towards the water, but whose body – Hershman Leeson's or Roberta's?

Such explorations of photography and performance reach a pinnacle in Hershman Leeson's most recent project, *The Infinity Engine* (2013–ongoing): a functional replica genetics lab that explores the limits of Postmodern insights into identity in light of developments in regenerative medicine, bio-printing and DNA programming. Created in collaboration with a team of scientists working in the fields of synthetic biology and bioelectronics, the lab has created a flesh-like human nose using biological print technology and interactive facial-recognition software that attempts to predict the viewer's DNA profile. This work suggests ways in which we can copy bodies through images, as well as the potential realization of the Postmodern vision of endless citation – a future free of bodies and populated instead with discursive chimera. But Hershman Leeson also uses *The Infinity Engine* to ask whether this is a world we want: in which we become a series of bodies-cum-photographs and photographs-cum-bodies. This may be the limit of the Pictures Generation – the final coalescence of art and life – but to what end?

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