

# Art in America

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EXHIBITION REVIEWS

## LYNN HERSHMAN LEESON Zentrum für Kunst und Medientechnologie

In a scene in Lynn Hershman Leeson's *Re-Covered Diary* (1994), from the video series "The Electronic Diaries" (1983-98), a child claws at the wall next to her bed. "When I was small and after a particularly bad experience I would make holes in the plaster next to my bed trying to dig my way out," explains a voiceover. "My memory is a powdered past pouring out into the camera." A few feet away from the TV on which the video plays, a painting, *Ripped/Mutilated Self-Portrait—Homage to Fontana* (1966), depicts a woman with a red claw-like hand, bionic or atavistic, in her lap; the canvas is scratched through. From the beginning of Hershman Leeson's career—as this dazzling retrospective at the Zentrum für Kunst und Medientechnologie (ZKM) makes clear—the body appears as radically open to modifications by self and others, to violence and transformation. In a catalogue interview otherwise mainly concerned with technology, Hershman Leeson explicitly states: "One often survives trauma by making oneself a witness to it as it is happening, as a survival tactic. . . . It is something I had learned to do early in my life." In her practice, the development of new technology is implicated in the disassociations and repetitions of trauma, but also associated with the possibility of a reparative break with the past. The video *Seduction of a Cyborg* (1994) features a blind woman who undergoes a medical treatment that gives her the ability to see online images, and who becomes addicted to the stream of fragments. Lost in hypermediation, she is both imprisoned and released by her new access to the visual. Forgetting your body might not mean the same thing to everyone, depending on how that body has been treated in the world.

The show is thoughtfully installed, though a little overwhelming, as sounds from one work drift over to mix with the atmosphere of another. Hershman Leeson's preoccupation with technological novelty also means that some of the works' interfaces now seem less than intuitive, or even dated. All the works have been carefully installed as closely as possible to their original presentation, taking advantage of ZKM's expertise in tech-driven work. But it doesn't always go so well. In *DiNA* (2004), a chatbot played by Tilda Swinton asks polite questions that the viewer is supposed to answer into a microphone, but the bot is unresponsive. It's not clear whether the clumsiness of the conversation is a bug or a feature. Hershman Leeson succumbs to the lure of Second Life—the online community rendered in fanciful 3-D graphics—in *Life Squared* (2007), which consists of a virtual museum she created there to house her video works. But Second Life now looks like a misunderstanding or a lapsed possibility. The Internet is still a space for the performance of self, but on Facebook and Twitter, avatars and personae typically resemble their users, albeit in flattering or exaggerated versions, more closely than those on Second Life. In a practice that usually stuns with its prescience—Hershman Leeson's "Cyborg" drawings from the 1960s look as if they could have been forged in Photoshop—it's a dissonant moment.

But obsolescence rather than novelty is the point of the works.



Video from Lynn Hershman Leeson's miniature installation *Room of One's Own*, 1990-93, mixed mediums, 15 by 14 by 35 inches overall; at the Zentrum für Kunst und Medientechnologie.

Hershman Leeson's creations at the vanguard speak to technology's particular combination of failure and promise. The absence of vitality in the mechanical doppelgänger reveals the living original's hitherto secret deathliness. Technology cannot be counterposed to a fully expressed humanity, because this humanity is unevenly distributed and fissured by trauma and drudgery, as in the installation *Cycles of Contention* (1993-2011). A video playing on a small monitor installed in a dollhouse shows a couple arguing in a kitchen: the woman begs the man not to go to work, not to be physically aggressive, to talk to her, to calm down. The video is a trap, the phrases are a trap, and even the dollhouse—requiring you to peer in—seems trap-like.

*Infinity Engine* (2014), commissioned for the retrospective, seemed to put extra pressure on Hershman Leeson's commitment to working at the bleeding edge of tech. Here, an array of research and objects related to biotechnology added up to less than the sum of its parts. In the catalogue, Hershman Leeson recalls using the first Xerox machines as a teenager to create distorted images of bodies. Now, science has allowed her to give those distortions fleshy form (*Infinity Engine* includes a bioengineered nose), but the sheer logistics of the task prevent her from imbuing the material with her own voice.

Hershman Leeson's engagement with biotechnology is yet another iteration of a message often found in her work: your body is already not you. In *Room of One's Own* (1990-93), a woman sneers at the camera: "Who are you? Go look at your own life, don't look at me." She makes the viewer a voyeur and the avatar of Hershman Leeson's problem: what does it mean to make high-tech artworks with the tools of patriarchal violence? Technologies of representation can disrupt the machinations of trauma, and vice versa, but relations of domination remain. Amid the claustrophobia of some of Hershman Leeson's arrangements, technology's inevitable tending toward obsolescence can seem like a gleeful bid for escape.

—Hannah Black