

# LYNN HERSHMAN LEESON

## BECOMING ROBERTA

MARCH 7–28 2020



Constructing Roberta Breitmore

*Lynn Hershman 1975*

① Lighten with Dior eyestick light. ② “Peach Blush” Cheekcolor by Revlon. ③ Brown contour makeup by Coty. ④ Shape lips with brush, fill in with “Date Mate” scarlet. ⑤ Blond wig. ⑥ Ultra Blue eye-shadow by Max Factor. ⑦ Maybelline black liner top and bottom. ⑧ \$7.98 three piece dress. ⑨ Creme Beige liquid makeup by Artmatic.

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# SHOWROOM

by Paul van Esch & Partners Art Advisory

The fictional character of Roberta Breitmore – perhaps Lynn Hershman's Leeson most iconic work to date – was part of a private performance that lasted from 1974 to 1978. An imaginary persona created from accumulated stereotypical psychological data, Roberta became a real-life person with her own clothing, driver's license, checking account, credit cards, unique ges-

tures, handwriting, and body language. She factually came into existence when she arrived in San Francisco on a Greyhound bus and checked into the Dante hotel. What subsequently followed was an ingeniously simulated 'real-life' experience, where Roberta placed ads in newspapers to find roommates, went on dates, and even started seeing a therapist. After three years of

In a similar fashion to Cindy Sherman's film stills from the 1980s – with Hershman Leeson's work preceding that of Sherman by many years – Roberta's actual lived experiences are meant to expose a stereotypical image of women in society. Sherman's film stills portray an array of stereotypical Hollywood or New Wave heroines in an atmosphere revealing of their situation and reminiscent of 1950s film noir, producing what Rosalind Krauss refers to as 'generalized memories' and 'remembered fantasy' of fictional characters, a stereotypical view of certain female personae. Drawing attention to the proliferation of images and how these become idealizations of the characters depicted, Krauss explains that Cindy Sherman aims to unmask the process behind the creation of what we commonly refer to as a stereotype. Lynn Hershman Leeson not only points to the stereotype but further exposes how this is created, eventually reenacting it in real life. While Sherman's photographs are made in the studio, Hershman Leeson leaves the studio for this performance, putting herself in extreme risk. She brings the stereotype to life, in flesh and bone, and actively works to confront it. While the performance had to be given up due to an amalgam of negative experiences, the giving up itself manifests as a liberating act. Although it may seem impossible to defeat the stereotype, this performance genuinely manages to crack its surface wide open. Roberta gets to experiment with a different life and move beyond familiar habits. By having several multiples, she evades one fixed identity and is able to express herself in a more diverse manner. Through her exorcism, she in fact liberated all her personas from all past sorrows and



Roberta's Physical Stance, 1975 printed 2003  
Archival digital print, Ed. 5/5 + 1 AP  
76,2 x 101,6 cm  
30 x 40 in  
©Lynn Hershman Leeson



Roberta's Construction Chart #2, 1975 printed in 2003  
Archival digital print, Ed. 12/12 + 1 AP  
74 x 94 cm  
24 x 20 in  
©Lynn Hershman Leeson  
Collection Museum of Modern Art, New York



Lay Off and Leave Me Alone, 1976 Printed in 2003  
Archival digital print, Ed. 4/5 + 1AP  
76,2 x 101,6 cm  
30 x 40 in  
©Lynn Hershman Leeson  
Collection Tate Modern, London



Roberta Remembering, 1975  
Hand painted with acrylic and pen on C Print, d. 4/5 + 1 AP  
76,2 x 81,3 cm  
30 x 32 in  
©Lynn Hershman Leeson  
Collection Whitworth Museum, Manchester

existence and a series of negative experiences, Roberta multiplied herself, with four other people performing as her character on a regular basis. After one more year of cumulated (negative) experiences, the performance ended with Roberta being exorcised in Lucrezia Borgia's crypt, leaving behind sufficient credible proof of her factual existence.

Each performance that takes place in the public sphere (even if the participants are not aware) has a social experimental contingent. Roberta was an interactive performance used to analyze culture, mirroring and reflecting contemporary society and societal norms of the time. Nevertheless, this performance transcended sheer sociological investigation. By literally becoming another person, Lynn Hershman Leeson pushed her performance further, as a manner of transformation and as a transgression of personal limitations. By doing so, the question remains, was the artist able to liberate her character from social, economic, and cultural norms that stereotyped female existence and deprive women of their freedom? A part of the answer is in the artist's own words: "masks may camouflage the physical body, but they also liberate a vulnerable and protected personal voice."



There Are Times When I Can Feel Myself Being Trapped, 1975 printed 2003  
Hand painted on archival digital print, Ed. 4/5 + 1 AP  
76,2 x 101,6 cm  
30 x 40 in  
©Lynn Hershman Leeson  
Collection The Whitworth Museum, Manchester

became an empowering female model for future characters (Ruby from "Teknolust" reverses the role of the victimized woman and becomes the victimizer).

The works resulting from this series are therefore also a reflection of change in progress. These portraits of Roberta are by no means conventional depictions of the subject. Instead of revealing a fixed, stable, and unique subjectivity as traditionally promised by portraits, they record the manner in which subjectivity is changing. Just as in the case of her performances, the photographs are not static products. Instead of recording 'reality', these works were immediately transformed by the artist's interventions consisting of over-paintings, overwriting and image processing. As a result, these photographs become in fact exactly what they are meant to represent: change and transformation. Successfully recording and complementing Roberta Breitmore's performance, these prints show and expose us to the creation of a stereotype, only to confront it and break it open.

Timea Andrea Lelik

