

The portrait as a process of survival: Lynn Hershman Leeson becoming Roberta Breitmore

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Keywords

Portrait; Performance; Survival; Identity; Subjectivity.

Abstract

Lynn Hershman's Leeson most iconic work to date – her transformation into the fictional character of Roberta Breitmore – is a performative portrait that enacts survival. This paper argues that subjectivity in the artist's portraits and performances is not fixed, but rather an ongoing process in relationship with oneself and the others, enabling these works to 'survive' through her oeuvre.

Introduction

When looking at Lynn Hershman Leeson's six-decade long practice, one understands that survival is an integral part of her oeuvre. Whether it has been her own survival, that of her artworks, or of that which they represent, this has been a central concern for the artist since the beginning of her career. Following an abusive childhood and troubled adolescence, Hershman Leeson was encouraged by a doctor to start making art as therapy. As a result, she channeled her destructive urgencies into creative ones, looking at art as a survival method, or put into her

own words, identifying art with life (Hershman Leeson qtd. Lee, 2016: 59). In this paper I argue that survival is at the core of Hershman Leeson's works, specifically in her portraits, self-portraits, and performances. I will analyze pieces that could be read as portraits and self-portraits regardless of their medium and argue that the genre of portraiture in her oeuvre is not a static product but rather an ongoing process which can be understood as an open-ended work. I contend that Hershman Leeson's paintings, drawings, waxworks, and performances naturally flow from one another and can therefore be read as being part of a larger work-in-progress. This does not imply that these are not finished as individual artworks or negate their own power and importance in art history, but rather that they continue to work through a process of survival in the artist's other works. As Robin Held put it, Hershman Leeson's works operate as series of feedback loops, where earlier artworks reflect on later incarnations, elaborations, or mutations in a variety of technological formats (Held, 2005: xii).

Several of Hershman Leeson's early paintings and drawings could be read as self-portraits as they represent female subjects (and at times are also named 'self-portrait as...'), even though they do not aim to faithfully record the 'identity' of the artist or a specific subject. Rather, these could be interpreted as a collection of identities that the artist fabricated throughout the years. Concerning the genre of portraiture, Hershman Leeson restructured the meaning and relation of her self(portraits) from pieces that traditionally record the stable and fixed identity of the subject portrayed, to works that function as an ongoing process. In this paper I contend that this on-going process is in fact a form of survival, on three different levels. The first level is connected to the artist's personal life and her own need of survival. This paper however focuses on the second and third levels concerning the 'survival' of the art pieces and that of what they represent.

Since the beginning, the construction of subjectivity has played a central role in Hershman Leeson's works. Throughout the years, the artist has showed the self as an unstable play of imagination. According to Peter Weibel, "each of her subjects teems with dramatic personae, exploring the idea of multiplication of identity in order to eventually stabilize the sense of self" (Weibel, 1996: 46). This interpretation of subjectivity in the artist's work is perhaps best summarized in *The Electronic Diaries* (1986-1998) where, in the form of an ongoing diary, the artist

tells stories from different points of view. One of these stories narrates to the camera how the protagonist used to make up alternate identities to escape the uncomfortable reality of her childhood. Her understanding and enacting of subjectivity – as expressed through the title of one of her electronic diary videos, *First Person Plural* (1988) – echoes Jean-Luc Nancy's writings from his book *Being Singular Plural* (Nancy, 1995). In this paper I suggest understanding subjectivity in Hershman Leeson's works through Nancy's lens, who argues that subjectivity is less a *self-in-relation* but rather a *self-as-relation*. Nancy refuses the dichotomy of the self and other by making them both contingent on the open "self" from which they derive. He is suspending, not reordering, the hierarchy of the two, making them part of the same unit. When transposing this idea to the genre of portraiture, Nancy explains in his book *Portrait* the aim of the portrait is not to identify but to expose "the structure of the subject: its subjectivity, its being-under-itself, its being-within- and so its being-outside-, behind-, or before-itself" (Nancy, 2018). The portrait is therefore not the representation of a stable subject, but rather the execution of subjectivity or being self as such, always in relation to itself and the others. In the following pages, I similarly suggest understanding subjectivity in Hershman Leeson's works as a process that is an ongoing relationship with oneself and the others.

Survival in Wax

Hershman Leeson began working in traditional media such as painting and drawing, but in 1963 she also started experimenting with wax. Her choice of the latter was at first a pragmatical one, as this was easy to prepare and handle. Nevertheless, after a serious medical condition that forced her to spend several weeks in a hospital under an oxygen tank, her continued work in wax sculptures gained another layer of meaning. While immobilized to her hospital bed, Hershman Leeson created *Conversation* (1966), a small sculpture consisting of two miniature wax heads isolated in their own vitrine but still connected by strands of colorful yarn, seemingly engaged in a mental conversation. Pamela Lee connected this work and instance of the usage of wax to the "artist's prospect for survival, raising questions concerning the maintenance of the self and the will to connection that her virtual quarantine inspired" (Lee, 2016: 59). As Georges Didi-Huberman has argued, ceroplasty is

an art of survival, as it places itself on the limit between death and life (Didi-Huberman, 2008). Literally teetering between life and death, the artist's own existence paralleled that of wax making and its goal to record and reproduce the living flesh.

This medical condition further impacted her work in other media as well. Hershman Leeson's work prefigured the kinship with machines in such works as *X-Ray Woman* (1966), where one remarks, through an x-ray, that the human body is enhanced by mechanical elements. It seems that these mechanic elements kept their subjects alive, just as the artist had once been kept alive by the oxygen tent. Anticipating by several decades Donna Haraway's main ideas from "A Cyborg Manifesto" (1985), Hershman Leeson metaphorically represented her own survival, but equally addressed the future survival of human kind.

It was therefore a logical step for the artist to combine these two formats in order to create her iconic series of 'breathing machines' which consist of both of wax figures as well as mechanical parts. The *Breathing Machines* series are comprised of wax casts of the artist's face augmented with sensors and tape recordings playing the sound of her own breathing. Some of the pieces, such as *Self Portrait as Another Person* (1965) or *Self Portrait as Albino* (1968) directly address the viewers at the same time. These works are not only about one's own literal survival – where breathing means surviving – but also about survival through connection: these works address the viewers, transforming them into 'alive' sculptures. When discussing these works, Lee has accurately remarked that just as "waxworks throughout history have inspired questions or invited discomfort as to the liveness of the subject represented, so too these works occasion a new kind of presence in the museum, 'a presumed kinetic force,' as Hershman Leeson has since called it" (Lee, 2016: 63).

Even though these works were already seen as too 'life-like' and consequently expelled from the exhibition where they were displayed, they pushed even further their process of 'survival.' As they could not 'survive' in the museum, Hershman Leeson decided to continue showing her works by staging her own site-specific exhibitions. One of such was installing two life-sills dolls with wax cast faces under a bedsheet in a room in the Dante Hotel in San Francisco in 1973. Constructing the work with the ephemera of somebody who might have lived in that room, she then placed ads in art journals to inform people about the exhibit and to invite them to go and check in at the hotel to see the works, while

imagining the lives of the people living there. After only a few months of display, a visitor confused the wax figures with corpses and called the police, who eventually shut down the exhibit. It turned out, that the figures were, after all, too ‘alive.’ As Uta Kornmeier explains, “a well-made wax figure can exude such a string of ethereal presence that we are convinced, against our better judgement, that we are in the company of a fellow human being rather than a lifeless image.” (Kornmeier, 2008: 67). Even though her wax figures were once again removed from their exhibition space, the artist was determined to come up with a new survival method. Consequently, these works paved the way to the creation of Roberta Breitmore by releasing the presumed character living at the Dante Hotel into the real world.

Becoming Roberta

The fictional character of Roberta Breitmore was part of a private performance that roughly 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 gestures, handwriting, and body language. She 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 existence and a series of negative experiences, Roberta multiplied herself, with three other people besides Hershman Leeson regularly performed as her character. Kristine Stiles, Michelle Larsen, and Helen Dannenberg all wore the same wig and identical costumes as Hershman Leeson, and each of them had two different home address and two jobs; one for Roberta and one for their self. These multiples embodied and enacted Roberta just as Hershman Leeson did, with their actions and encounters with people recorded in photographs and audiotapes (Held, 2005: xiii). After one more year of cumulated (negative) experiences from all the multiples, the performance ended with Roberta being exorcised in Lucrezia Borgia’s crypt, leaving behind sufficient credible proof of her factual existence.

Hershman Leeson conceived Roberta as a sociopsychological portrait of a woman of that time. Trying to create an archetype of a ste-

reotype, she found that her endeavor turned out to be a long work-in-progress. The performance started from the unfinished project in the Dante Hotel that was prematurely shut down, but was already part of a long research and rehearsal period in which the artist was trying to determine Roberta's trademarks such as her clothing style, her hair, make-up, hand writing, body posture, etc. Once Roberta's outline came to life, Hershman Leeson started going out in the real world dressed as this character. As Roberta started interacting with the world around her, the artist soon realized that the portrait wasn't finished, as Roberta's character continued to be shaped by the experiences she had and the people she encountered. The initial stereotypical portrait created from given data turned into a living portrait: Roberta was continuously changing and adapting, becoming a portrait-in-progress. Not only was she shaped by the people she was encountering, but also by the cumulated experienced of the different people enacting her. Furthermore, this directly engaging direction in her work (though already begun in her *Breathing Machine* series) demonstrated "her sustained attention to the construction of a viewer who is an active participant in the work of art—engaging with and potentially altering it—rather than a passive voyeur" (Held, 2005: xvii).

While there have been other artists throughout the twentieth-century who fabricated fictional personas, no artist before established an independent, public, and institutionalized identity. The characters enacted by artists such as Marcel Duchamp, Eleanor Antin, Marta Wilson, and even Claude Cahun (whom Amelia Jones argues to have "heralded a shift to what we now think of as a 'postmodern' understanding of identity and representation, as simulacral and without an 'essential' core") were mostly theatrical, always at a safe distance from the viewers (Jones, 2005: 107). It was only Hershman Leeson's performance that brought performance to the 'real world' with no script and safety measures. Becoming and performing Roberta' surpassed any other similar performance which maintained a safe distance between artist and image, but also between artist and the public. Jones explains that this performance went beyond Warhol and Kusama's efforts to prove "the extent to which the art world was inextricably bound to the mass-media cult of celebrity and the impossibility of separating the artwork from the increasingly visible subject who had produced it" (Jones, 2005: 107). Hershman Leeson's becoming Roberta then, argues Jones, "opened the door to a quieter but potentially

more profound interrogation of the limits of personal and public identity in relation to artistic subjectivity” (Jones, 2005: 107).

In Hershman Leeson’s case, the radical unruliness of the performance blurred the lines between fiction and reality, again, on three distinct levels. First, between fictional persona and creator, as the artist herself stated that at times it became difficult to distinguish between reality and fiction. As she notes, “although I denied it at the time and insisted that she was ‘her own woman’ with defined needs, ambitions and instincts, in retrospect we were linked. Roberta represented part of me as surely as we all have within us an underside...” (Hershman Leeson qtd. Maloney, 2011). Second, she blurred the same line for all of those who met Roberta, as frequently those who encountered the artist as Breitmore did not realize it was a performance, so wholly did she embody this character (Maloney, 2011). Third, this performance eventually blurred the lines between fiction and reality for the multiples performing Roberta as well, as not only were they shaping this character in different ways, but eventually they also could not distinguish Roberta from their own self.¹

In her article discussing the Roberta Breitmore performance series, Peggy Phelan argues that it was through this blurring between the real and fictional in this performance that enabled the artist to become the person we know today, namely Lynn Hershman Leeson. At the time that this performance came to existence, the artist was known as Lynn Hershman only. Phelan argues that the performance itself produced the possibility of the emergence of Lynn Hershman Leeson as we know her today. She therefore explains that Breitmore can be best understood as a performance of co-identity, where the interaction between creator and character forged a third identity (Phelan, 2016: 101). In my opinion, this process was started long before this specific performance began, maybe even before the artist started making art. This type of understanding subjectivity as a relation to oneself and the other (and as argued by Nancy) was familiar to her since childhood, prompting Hershman Leeson to embody these different subjectivities in her works. However, this performance stands out from the previous works as it took survival – literal and metaphorical – to a new level in portraiture and art history.

¹ In a personal talk with the artist, she revealed to the author that years later one of the initial multiples believed to have been the “true” Roberta Breitmore.

Survival has traditionally been a key function of portraiture, but served mostly for the commemoration of the portrayed person, who was not present anymore. In Hershman Leeson's case however, commemoration is taken a step further to an active performance of survival. While her wax portraits and self-portraits were on the threshold between life and death, these eventually come to life in and through Roberta, who became a living portrait. Not only because she 'lived' in the real world, but because she continues to live on through her construction chart and her subsequent transformations. Her portrait therefore is not a passive rendition of a (once) stable subjectivity, but rather a call to action. As Phelan puts it, "Breitmore was a doer; she took action and prompted actions in others" (Phelan, 2016: 107).

Roberta lives on

Roberta's metaphorical death was, as well, yet another method of survival. When becoming and performing Roberta became unbearable, Hershman Leeson decided that she wasn't meant to die, but rather to be exorcised and leave the door open for an eventual come back. Officially, the performance ended in 1978 at Palazzo dei Diamanti in Ferrara, Italy, with an exorcism ritual that took place at the crypt of Lucrezia Borgia. Andreas Beitin has connected this exorcism to an act of suicide, as he argues, Hershman Leeson "killed" off a character whose identity she has adopted for several years (Beitin, 2016: 206). He further ties Roberta's death to one of the first possible endings to this performance, namely her jumping off the Golden Gate Bridge, as well as to a potential suicidal ending of the character in the interactive videodisk *Lorna* (1984), but also to the artist's personal suicide attempts. While these might have been possible alternatives ends considered at a moment in time, I argue that the need and desire for survival prevailed and transformed Hershman Leeson's performance (and several other works connected to this) into an epitome of survival.

When discussing Hershman Leeson's *Suicide Machines* (1963) – wax casts of her own face which destroy themselves by means of fire and water – Beitin also remarked on the ambivalence of the works which are on the threshold between life and death: on one hand memorializing the artist's state of aliveness, while on the other hand, repeatedly "killing" her representations. I contend that even though these works ended up

destroying themselves, they still enacted survival, as the wax casts of the artist's face continuously reappear in her works after. Specifically, the *Breathing Machines* series reenacts the artist's own survival (as it happened during her hospital stay) and that of her works by bringing new wax casts into existence, which will go on to 'survive' in the Dante Hotel and then in real life, as enacted by Roberta Breitmore. (Beiting also argues that Roberta's performance can be seen as an extension of a mask, directly linking her character to the wax casts, Beiting, 2016).

During her exorcism ritual, Breitmore was transformed through the elements of fire, water, air, and earth, where her transmuted and evaporated self best became visible in the *Water Women* series. According to the artist, this series investigates bodies of water that reflect invisibility, evaporation, and survival, and were conceived as metaphors of Roberta's presence (Hershman Leeson, 2005: 59). For more than thirty years, this ongoing series of works made in various media ranging from vintage collages to digital prints, continues Hershman Leeson's investigation of survival through transformation and transcendence from a solid state to a liquid one and eventually back to solidity. This liquidity is reminiscent of Zygmunt Bauman's book *Liquid Modernity*, who considers that fluid identity is a direct consequence of contemporary society (which he names "liquid modernity"), thus attributing the idea of a fluid, constantly changing identity to contemporary times (Bauman, 2006). For Bauman, the consequences of this move to a liquid modernity can most easily be seen in contemporary approaches to self-identity, that is never a finished product, but rather constantly fluctuating and in change – just as Hershman Leeson's characters. Furthermore, besides their liquid nature, these water women are often also inverted or multiplied, just as they have been while still embodied by the artist and her multiples. Therefore, even when disembodied, these works still maintain the same understanding of subjectivity as pertaining at the same time to its current and former self.

While the *Water Women* are the ongoing symbols of Roberta Breitmore, there are several other works in Hershman Leeson's oeuvre that act as extensions of this character. In 1995/1996 Hershman Leeson created two telerobotic dolls which she named *The Dollie Clones*. One of them, *CybeRoberta*, is a visual replica of Roberta Breitmore in miniature, immediately recognizable by her platinum blond hair, accessories, red top, and polka-dotted skirt. Just as in the performance, these dolls also act in real-time. With video cameras installed in their eyes, they re-

cord what they see in the room where they are placed. When their heads are turned to the left side by the users operating them, they surveil the space, and when their heads are turned to the right, they upload the images they see. Just as in the real-life performance, when the dolls are exhibited together, they pirate each other's information making it impossible to tell which image comes from each of the dolls. What they see – and implicitly what the viewers manipulating them also see – is then not factual reality: the onlookers can never be certain that the images shown through the doll's camera eyes are seen by the doll they are manipulating or her sister doll. Just as Roberta and her multiples, the continuous information exchange between the different selves makes their perceived reality an ongoing process, placed between fiction and reality.

Roberta's virtual multiplication developed also in Hershman Leeson's feature-length film *Teknolust* (2002). The movie shows geneticist Rosetta Stone successfully downloading her DNA into a computer system in order to create three clones – just as was the case of Roberta Breitmore and her three multiples. In a similar fashion to Hershman Leeson's real-life performance, the clones go out in the real world and pursue their own adventures. Not quite human, but neither machine, they are also similar to the artist's earlier cyborg drawings and breathing machines.

Roberta's virtual self developed even further through the online environment *Second Life*. Together with Stanford University scholars and librarians, Hershman Leeson created an online avatar and archive for Roberta Breimore's life. The visitor's guide on this online platform is a female character called Roberta Ware, a blond dressed in the iconic red two-piece set. The host guides the visitors through images of Roberta and the documentation of her life. Roberta Mock has accurately connected the online and offline archive of Roberta's existence to Jacques Derrida's observation on the process or archiving. Derrida argues that archivization produces, as much as it records, the event itself (Derrida, 1995: 17). According to Mock, this resonates closely with Hershman's intentions, who explains that 'by putting the archive of my work in *Second Life*, I was able to transcend the original essence of the piece into a new, hybrid interactive and participatory structure' (Hershman qtd. in Linden, 2009). Archiving Roberta Breitmore's existence is therefore as much a live event as was her performance: in continuous movement, this also becomes a work-in-progress. When the Whitworth Art Gallery in Manchester in-

cluded in their collection “The Complete Roberta Breitmore Series.” The artist responded by commenting on the nature of this archive, which was neither complete or finished. “Roberta transforms and mutates through processes of improvisation and documentation. All of the people who engage with Roberta continue to embody her.” (Hershman Leeson qtd in Mock, 131). Roberta Breitmore’s survival is therefore strengthened at yet another level: from a physical embodiment, to a virtual self.

The epitome of survival

Besides the artist’s personal survival and the survival of her artworks, her pieces also enact a third level of survival, namely of that which they represent. The works discussed in this paper – the drawings, paintings, wax casts, and the iconic performance of becoming Roberta Breitmore – are also part of a discourse on feminist survival. Hershman Leeson explained she sensed that “women didn’t have any history; that they were just becoming aware that they weren’t in any books, that they had never been taken seriously. A lot of the work produced at this time was to create a history, a context of who they were and how they fit into the world” (Hershman Leeson qtd. Maloney, 2011). Therefore, Hershman Leeson’s works deal equally much with the survival of their protagonists, in this case, with the survival of women. Linked by their scars, Roberta Breitmore’s multiples and all those who interacted with her, survive through the deep traces left and those that are still in the making. As remarked by Kristine Stiles, Roberta’s first multiple, Hershman Leeson has accomplished much more than “mere” survival, as “her life is a model of survival, of character with ethical force and of a comprehensive and consistent corpus of work” (Stiles, 2016: 139).

Defying the doctors who diagnosed her as dying from cardiomyopathy, Hershman Leeson painted, drew, constructed, and enacted survival through her drawings, breathing machines, life-like wax casts, Roberta Breitmore and her clones, the evaporations, and eventually through the transmutation to a virtual self. Hershman Leeson’s most iconic character, Roberta Breitmore, lives on through the artist, her multiples, the people she interacted with, the photographic documentation, her official records, but also through her construction charts which enable anyone at any point and time in history to become a Roberta multiple again. With a potentially endless multiplication process, this character brings a new

dimension to portraiture, which is not a static product anymore recording a fixed identity, but rather an ongoing process with a continuously changing subjectivity.

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Lynn Hershman Leeson. *Conversation*, 1966 (reconstructed in 2014). Plexiglas, acrylic, wax, nails, thread, glass 11.4 x 24 x 11.4 cm. Courtesy of the artist. © Lynn Hershman Leeson



Lynn Hershman Leeson. *Dante Hotel*, 1973 (printed 2015). Inkjet print. 20.32 x 25.4 cm. Collection SFMOMA. Courtesy of the artist. © Lynn Hershman Leeson



Lynn Hershman Leeson. *CybeRoberta*, 1996. Custom-made doll, clothing, glasses, webcam, surveillance camera, mirror, original programming, and telerobotic head-rotating system. Approx. 45 x 20 cm. Courtesy of the artist. © Lynn Hershman Leeson



Lynn Hershman Leeson. *X-Ray Woman*, 1966. Pencil, acrylic, pen on canvas, 93 x 48.7 cm. Private Collection, The Netherlands. Courtesy of the artist. © Lynn Hershman Leeson



Lynn Hershman Leeson. *Roberta's Construction Chart #1*, 1975. Archival digital print and dye transfer. 90.5 x 60 cm. Collection SFMOMA. Courtesy of the artist. © Lynn Hershman Leeson



Lynn Hershman Leeson. *Multiple Becoming Multiple, No.3:A*, 1977. Chromogenic print. 17.8 x 11.4 cm. Courtesy of the artist. © Lynn Hershman Leeson