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Filmmaker Laura Parnes discusses process and product with Lynn Hershman Leeson.

Laura Parnes: The *Roberta Breitmore* series (1974-78) exhibited in *WACK!* seems to contain many issues, including identity and invisibility, that are central to your work. Did these issues stem from your interest in feminism? How do they manifest themselves in your current work?

Lynn Hershman Leeson: When I first started thinking about this work in the late 1960s, the idea of feminism was underdeveloped. What was more pertinent was the feeling of invisibility, marginality, not having a voice, and not being allowed access and effect in the world. *Roberta* was a portrait of what it was like to live through those times—kind of a mirror for the society she reflected. The refraction was alienation and loneliness. In those days many women noticed, sadly for the first time, that there was no history for them, and in a way, this project was a way of affirming existence and creating a history, even a bleak one that could be accessed over time.

LP: Can *Roberta* ever be revived?

LHL: She was, in fact, two years ago. She went to a plastic surgeon to have her face drawn on, and it eerily looks a lot like the original construction chart. She surfaces when necessary.

LP: As your work progresses media and technology become more and more central. Can you talk about the transition from performance to media art and why?

LHL: Again, it has no history. I felt it was implicit in making this work to be able to not only create its history, but its future. Performance and installations of the 1970s were interactive; they were architecturally and philosophically related, and were about empowerment, visibility



Lynn Hershman Leeson. Courtesy the artist.

and access. Moving from performance to photography to media art evolved as I reached toward an expanded audience.

LP: At the same time that you began the *Roberta* performance, you did a series of commercials. Did that project develop around similar issues as *Roberta*?

LHL: Beginning in 1972, I made site-specific work; in fact before the name was coined I was using hotel rooms and casinos as places to stage performances and installations. There was no precedent through which to let people know these works existed, so in the early 1970s I did a series of commercials for public television, which in themselves were like thirty-second haiku videotapes. The commercials were pre-*Roberta*, pre-Chris Burden, and were a way of communicating projects to a broader public. I also did a commercial for myself, claiming my

own power for things the media left me out of. So it was wire against wire, so to speak, and that ignited a spark I'm still using.

LP: I can imagine that directing three feature films in ten years requires incredible tenacity on your part to navigate through such a commercial system. Has the context of mainstream narrative filmmaking changed the nature of the work?

LHL: No, I don't use commercial systems. I invent the system to do the work. I have never worked in mainstream narrative filmmaking, and I am sure that would change the nature of what I did. I make work that only I can make. As difficult as it is, it is also satisfying because if you are not controlling your work. There is no point doing it. I think the distribution of the work is quite challenging and also part of the work itself. Distribution systems are changing and more access is being gained.

LP: What are you working on now? Are you still working on *Women + Art = Revolution!*, the documentary on feminist artists?

LHL: Seven simultaneous exhibitions in nearly every museum in the bay area in a variety of media, a new interactive piece, *Global Mind Reader* that uses blog tags to track current thought, continuing the *Second Life* piece I made three years ago, a photo series and installation with specially made sex dolls, a vampire movie, a new commission for the Tate and hopefully a film on Tina Modotti. And yes, we hope to have the documentary finished by December. We have 250 hours and are still shooting.

Editors' Note: In 1976 Lynn Hershman Leeson exhibited two shows that were organized by P.S.1 Director Alanna Heiss, *25 Windows: A Portrait of Bonwit Teller* and *Selected Past Projects* at The Clocktower Galleries. The artist offered these thoughts on that experience.

"It was Alanna Heiss and The Clocktower that first shared my vision of creating an art work within the 25 windows of the Bonwit Teller Department store, using mannequins, real and virtual projections, and public interventions to tell the story of life in New York City. Simultaneously, they were the first to show the Roberta Breitmore project. I remain grateful for P.S.1's trust, support, and collective grace. How fitting to now be showing that project where it first began."