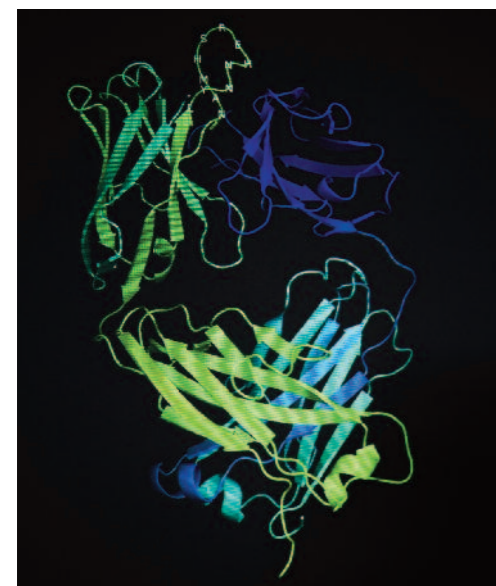


# Anti-Bodies

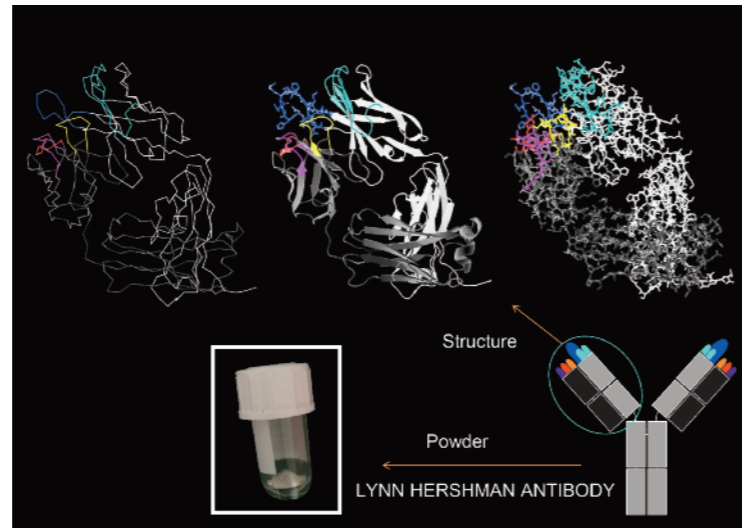
Lynn Hershman Leeson in conversation with Olivia Aherne

Lynn Hershman Leeson is one of today's leading and influential digital artists. Her oeuvre spans photography, video, film, installation, and performance. As one of the first few practitioners to work creatively with emerging technologies, such as social media, artificial intelligence, and genetic modification, Hershman Leeson has continued to create ambitious thought-provoking work, blurring the boundaries between art, science, and technology. Her practice deals with many urgent issues—issues that remain as relevant today as they did fifty years ago—the biological and superficial manifestations of identity; the evolution of art, technology and its impact on the human body; privacy, surveillance, and censorship; and more recently, biotechnologies and genetic engineering.

Hershman Leeson had her first retrospective, *Civic Radar*, at ZKM Centre for Art and Media in Germany in 2014, which included over 700 artworks. Her early work in the 1970s, significantly developing and adopting the alter ego Roberta Breitmore, is now viewed as one of the most incisive and critical feminist artworks of the period. The work continues to inspire a flurry of younger contemporary artists



3D visualization of the Lynn Hershman antibody, 2018, courtesy Novartis, photo by Novartis / Laurids Jensen



"Antibodies are highly specialized proteins of our immune system, made up by amino acids. A key determinant of the antibody characteristics is the antigen binding site, represented by 'fingers' on the tip of the sketch. We selected a natural occurring antibody framework and introduced a novel binding loop that carries the amino acid sequence LYNNHERSHMAN. Using biotechnological processes, we have generated the Lynn Hershman antibody and analyzed its unique biophysical and functional properties. The Lynn Hershman antibody is shown as powder in a glass vial. The structure of the Lynn Hershman antibody was visualized using PyMOL."

Structure of the Lynn Hershman antibody visualised using PyMOL and presented as powder in a glass vial. From Lynn Hershman Leeson: *Anti-Bodies*, exhibition at HeK (House of Electronic Arts Basel) from May 3 to August 5, 2018. Image courtesy of Novartis.

interested in the construction of fictional identities both on and offline. In the *Dante Hotel* (1973–74), a nine-month project created with fellow artist Eleanor Coppola, Hershman Leeson invited the public to encounter Roberta Breitmore as a site-specific installation. Situated in a run down hotel room, visitors could enter 24 hours a day to view Breitmore's life exposed. Personal and day-to-day objects left in situ blurred the real and the fictional, and asked audiences to consider issues around identity and representation. In June 2018, KW Institute for Contemporary Art in Berlin invited Leeson to revisit this pioneering work, resulting in a re-staging at Berlin's Novalis Hotel. As in the 1970s, the set up included belongings and personal



Lynn Hershman Leeson, *DNA and Antibody*, photo by Franz Wamhof

objects (now including iPhones and Macbooks), and audience DNA was collected from visitors' used paper cups to form a demographic display, which was presented at the end of the exhibition.

As Hershman Leeson's practice has developed, so has her interest in burgeoning technologies. In 1984 she created *Lorna*, the first interactive video art disc, which then migrated to DVD in 2004, allowing the work to live on in a continually accelerating context. For her most recent solo show *Anti-Bodies* at Haus der Elektronischen Künste in Basel (3 May—5 August 2018), Hershman Leeson turned to themes of biological progress, artificial intelligence, and anti-body research, raising questions around the ethics of technology, biology, and its impact on the human body and individuality. The exhibition includes her arguably most ambitious work to date: an eight-room installation titled *The Infinity Engine* (2014), a laboratory style set up complete with equipment, data files, and other scientific paraphernalia. The work invites viewers to throw on a lab coat and enter a world of antibodies, bioprinting, genetics, and DNA. I spoke to Hershman Leeson about our desire to push the boundaries of the human body, and the ethics that permeate these practices.

OA Your work has been important in terms of challenging how we think about the body, both in relation to technology, biology, and a wider social acceleration. What does it mean for you to use the body as your subject and how has this changed over the course of your practice, moving from performance to science, particularly as technology has advanced? Why do you think this desire to break out of our selves—out of our own bodies—might feel particularly urgent today?

LHL I think it has been a progressive development, from responding to the outside of the body, looking at the superficial shifts of appearance, to considering

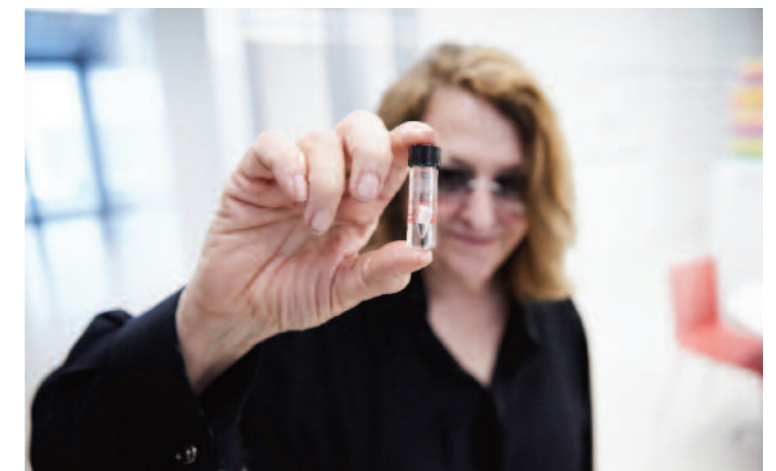
the internal direct workings of the body. From the make-up chart of Roberta, for instance, to the creation of a LynnHershman antibody, and the (Rob)Erta antibody. We are in an era of mutation and genetic revolution. For the first time, the genome has been programmed. That allows for, and in some cases encourages, gene editing, and I believe this is being done as a means of survival on a polluted planet. I think people have to honour their own instincts and awareness in order to survive. We all take journeys in life. I was integrating my experiences and traumas into science and technology. I was often inventing the technologies that I saw coming before they were widely available, like the remote, or HyperCard for a touch screen with *Lorna*, and A.I. in 1995 before AIML (Artificial Intelligence Markup Language), to name a few.

OA Thinking about *Lorna*, which was the first interactive video disc installation artwork, how did the work materialise and what inspired your move into this new medium?

LHL It came naturally after the 'Dante Hotel', which in a sense was the flow chart for 'Lorna'. I wanted to make a work that incorporated time, light, colour video, and interactivity, that could be accessible to people who could not visit the room. I read about videodisks in a consumer report journal, tracked down a videodisk publisher, and designed a program that was relatively easy. I shot *Lorna* in Texas while working on another project, working in the middle of the night at a TV studio in San Jose where I knew someone. No one funded it. No one understood it. It was not exhibited for about 20 years, except in a very few places early on. Most of my best works are rejected when I make them, but then end up surfacing decades later.

OA Identity has always played a huge part in your practice, with gene editing being the subject of your most recent work. Where do you think the potential lies for new hybrid bodily forms and identities? And what do you think we need to be aware of as we continue to recreate and redefine a more cyborgian self?

Lynn Hershman Leeson with the Lynn Hershman antibody, photo by Novartis / Laurids Jensen





LHL I do think the question of ethics are important, and understanding why we are re-defining ourselves with the inclusion of biological or Artificial Intelligent elements. There is now a problem of losing the original identity of life forms. The phantom life we displace and how it will be remembered is an important element to consider in genetic and molecular engineering. We need to invest in integrity, understand the long-term consequences of our actions, and honour and help other people and their work.

OA Can you give an example of this in your recent work?

LHL *The Infinity Engine* (2014), for instance, can infer the unintended consequences of gene editing, or the ethical and legal elements of how we use genetic engineering. But everything I do really speaks about how we will care for and cure the pollution of our lives.

OA Can you explain the significance of this term 'anti-body', which you've used throughout your practice to refer to your research, work, and as the title for your recent exhibition in Basel?

LHL I used the term in earlier works, like the anti-body photographs I made in the 1980s, or the article *Romancing the Anti-body* that I wrote

in 1984. The article was about bodies outside and inside bodies, the alien body being like the anti-hero, a virtual body, and how we need to take care of it as well as our physical one. I think antibodies identify toxicities in culture and art does the same thing. It can neutralize or point out toxicities and help to breed a healthier environment.

OA So they refer to a form of critique, something viral or infectious, which enter spaces of technological, economical, or social acceleration to critique and break down their structures?

LHL Yes, that is exactly why I did *Anti-Bodies* in Basel, and needed to work with a pharmaceutical company.

OA And what toxicities did you feel required neutralising?

LHL Anger and greed, particularly in relation to the pharmaceutical opioid epidemic.

OA Collaboration plays a big part in your work. It's fascinating that you collaborated with the Swiss multinational pharmaceutical company Novartis to produce the 'Lynn Hershman Antibody'. You have previously worked with many different world-renowned biologists, including Elizabeth Blackburn, who won the Nobel Prize for developing the telomere in 2009. Why is it important for you to

Opposite page

Lynn Hershman Leeson, *Lorna* (video still), 1979-1984, installation including earliest interactive Laser Disc, photo copyright Lynn Hershman Leeson, courtesy the artist and Bridget Donahue, NYC

Lynn Hershman Leeson, *Roberta Construction Chart #2*, 1975, painted C-print, 50.80 x 63.50 cm, photo copyright Lynn Hershman Leeson, courtesy of the artist and Bridget Donahue, NYC





A requirement of being truly plugged in or grounded in cyberspace is to create a personal mask. It becomes a signature, a thumbprint, a shadow, and a means of recognition. The justification for this is similar to the one used to describe why primitive tribes also use coverings. Masks camouflage the body and in doing so liberate and give voice to virtual selves. As personal truth is released, the fragile and tenuous face of vulnerability is protected.

One of the more diabolical elements of entering CMC or Virtual Reality is that people can only recognize each other when they are electronically disguised. Truth is precisely based on the inauthentic!

Masks and self-disclosures are part of the grammar of cyberspace. It is the syntax of the culture of computer mediated identity which, by the way, can include simultaneous multiple identities, or identities that abridge and dislocate gender and age.

Identity is the first thing you create when you log on to a computer service. By defining yourself in some way, whether it is through your name, a personal profile, an icon or mask, you also define your audience, space and territory. In the architecture of networks, geography shifts as readily as time. Communities are defined by software and hardware access. Anatomy can be readily reconstituted.

Masking through computer mediated communication is read differently than in real life. You can be anything you can imagine, instantly, with very few props or prompts. Self-created alternate identities become guides with which to navigate deeper access of internetting. You do not need a body to do this.

Not only do you not need a body, but entering cyber space encourages a disembodied body language. Posing and emoting are some of the terms for phantom gestures that can be read through words, or seen in special video programs through simple movements such as waves. Codes of gestures can be read by attachments on the computer that articulate hidden meanings of voiceless and mute speech.

Actions are constantly under surveillance, tracked, traced, digitized and stored. Icons as masks are of particular importance because the disguises used today may determine an archetype of the present that will eventually reflect the ephemeral nature of a society geared towards image manipulation and self recreation.

Text from *Romancing the Anti-body: Lust and Longing in (Cyber)space*, Lynn Hershman Leeson, 1984

create networks of thinkers and bodies beyond your own, and how do they inform your practice?

LHL I think collaborating with people whose knowledge is outside of ones sphere gives a depth and resonance that would be otherwise unavailable. These works are global and expansive and it takes a range of people and ideas to make them rich and vital. I think an environment of creative critical thinkers is essential to understanding the issues of this point in time. I have worked with about 18 scientists, including Dr Caleb Webber who was the Professor of Bioinformatics at Oxford University and supported *The Infinity Engine*, Dr George Church who is considered the father of synthetic biology and has a lab at Harvard and may have been the first Crispr designer, and many others, all of whom worked with me in trying to understand genetic engineering and the changes to identity of all living

things and the planet itself. There is vast and creative research being done in the field and I'm grateful to them for their conversations.

OA Your work is somewhat self-reflexive. Often your more contemporary work looks back or references previous projects, creating a kind of lineage. Do you view your practice as one body, and if so, how will you continue to regenerate and reinvent this body, one that is so inextricably linked to a speculative future?

LHL It is a bit like DNA, which is a perfect archive, and contains all of our history, the history of all living forms. Speculative futures are often enacted using grounding of the past to leap into the present. We inch forward using our histories and limitations but strive none the less to put a foot forward, like an amoeba, charting new ground.

Lynn Hershman Leeson, *Large Pixel Antibody*, 1987-94, archival digital print, photo copyright Lynn Hershman Leeson, courtesy the artist and Bridget Donahue, NYC

