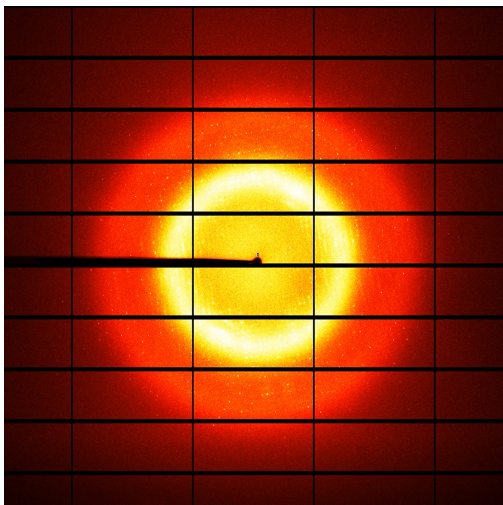


ARTICLES

Lynn Hershman Leeson's Art Opens the Doors to Mysterious Laboratories

“I don't know anybody else in the art world who has the capability of pushing scientific research in this way,” Leeson observes of her own work.

Tara Wanda Merrigan 2 days ago



X-ray diffraction pattern of a protein crystal used to determine the protein structure. From *Lynh Heřřhman Leeřřh Añti-Bödieř*, exhibition at HeK (House of Electronic Arts Basel) from May 3 to August 5, 2018. (image courtesy Novartis)

In April, the artist [Lynn Hershman Leeson](#) and I spent nearly an hour at a peaceful tea house in midtown Manhattan talking about technological nightmares. “I think people need to be aware that there are ways of tracking people that come from the inside out,” Leeson tells me of biosurveillance, which features in her recently opened exhibition in Berlin. Taking a different angle on possible biotechnological catastrophes, the artist talks about gene editing and how those technologies are being developed by companies motivated mostly by profit. As far as I can gather, it seems like Leeson has spent the past few years talking to leading scientists and asking them what dangers

technologies under development pose.

I ask Leeson how she deals with the weight of her subject. I ask her why she bothers to bring these technologies to the attention of the public — why isn't she, for example, hunkered down in a bunker somewhere in Wyoming?

“Basically, because I can,” Leeson says with a laugh. “I don’t know anybody else in the art world who has the capability of pushing scientific research in this way.”

Science and technology have long been at the heart of Leeson’s artistic explorations of identity (the artist studied biology in college), but the ability to show her work in prominent venues is a recent development in the 77-year-old artist’s career. Leeson says she became a well-known entity in the art world only a few years ago after her first major museum show, a retrospective at the ZKM Center for Art and Media in Karlsruhe, Germany. That show, titled *Civic Radar*, was enthusiastically received in Germany when it opened in 2014. Finding a venue in the United States was harder than expected, according to Leeson, but the book that accompanied the exhibition was named an “indispensable book” of 2016 by *New York Times* art critic Holland Cotter, and part of the show was hosted in at San Francisco’s Yerba Buena Center for the Arts in 2017.



Portrait of Lynn Hershman (image courtesy the artist)

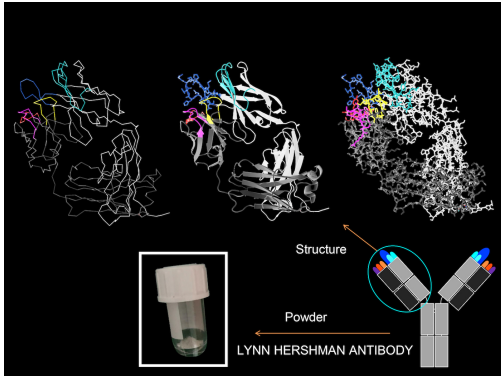
The artist says that recognition has been “absolutely amazing.” “I haven’t stopped in four years,” she says. “To be discovered at my age isn’t that unique for women,” says Leeson, whose early work explored gender politics. “I’m able to do my work now. For so long I couldn’t get a gallery. Now I’m at five galleries and selling work. I’m no longer in debt and I can pursue crazy ideas, whether or not I get grants. That has been tremendously liberating and satisfying.”

Leeson expands her exploration of identity and technology in her two new exhibitions that opened in Basel and Berlin last month. In *Anti-Bodies*, presented by Basel’s House of Electronic Arts (HeK), viewers are invited to don lab coats as they walk through the museum space, outfitted to feel like a laboratory: there are microscopes, file boxes, and scientists speaking about their work in video recording. A projector gives the illusion of a long, sterile hallway ending in a set of heavy, gray double doors. Another projector shows a giant image of two metal syringes about to touch tip-to-tip — Leeson’s play on Michelangelo’s Sistine Chapel fresco depicting Creation.

“Lynn wants to open a door that is usually closed: the lab door,” says Sabine Himmelsbach, director of HeK. Using art, Himmelsbach says, Leeson aims to “make this research available to a wider public because we need to understand



Lynn Hershman Leeson, "Double syringe Michelangelo," detail from *The Infinity Engine* (2012)



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

what happens behind these close doors because it's so important to our future."

The exhibition's two centerpieces, the products of actual laboratory work, consider how revolutions in biotechnology are changing personal identity and also how the exploration of individual identity can be furthered via biotechnology.

A specially designed antibody was developed for the show by researchers at the pharmaceutical giant Novartis so it contains amino acids spelling "LYNN HERSHMAN." According to Novartis research scientist Dr. Thomas Huber, the process of building a custom antibody was unusual (typically scientists work with existing antibody structures) and refreshing, but Novartis has decided to allow the LYNN HERSHMAN antibody to remain as an art piece. "Some companies are starting to make predictions of what an antibody should look like, but that is a little

bit science fiction still," Dr. Huber says.

Leeson is not only interested in how technology can change human identity *Gattaca*-style, but also in how humans can use biotechnology for their own purposes. Thus, the second major element of Leeson's *Anti-Bodies* exhibition is a strand of DNA containing an archive of the artist's video series "[The Electronic Diaries](#)," produced between 1986 and 1994. By storing her work on a strand of DNA, Leeson widens the functional role of DNA and our relationship to it. "I think also having control over what the memory is and what the history is and the artifacts we chose to be represented by is a way of ensuring how we're viewed in history," the artist said. "Biological computing tells us who we are culturally as well as individually, but I view it as something we can also have control over."

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Lynn Hershman Leeson, "Hotel bill from The Dante Hotel," site-specific installation in a room of the Dante Hotel, San Francisco (image courtesy the artist and Bridget Donahue Gallery)

DNA is also at the heart of Leeson's exhibition at the KW Institute for Contemporary Art in Berlin. As part of a larger exhibition of the artist's work called *First Person Plural*, KW's curators (Anna Gritz and assistant curator Cathrin Mayer) asked Leeson to restage her pioneering 1970's work "The Dante Hotel," a year-long work that invited viewers to enter a hotel room and view the detritus of a person's stay. This re-staging at Berlin's Novalis Hotel is similar, in that it features the belongings of an imagined person, with those belongings (including an iPhone and Mac laptop) being much more 2018 than 1972. This time, however, Leeson has added a new element that may trouble some visitors: before being handed the keys to the hotel room, viewers are asked to take a sip of water from a paper cup that will then be sent to a forensic lab for DNA testing. High-level demographic information obtained from the DNA analysis will be shared at the end of the show.

While Leeson and KW won't be storing the DNA information or revealing anything about particular individuals, Leeson wants would-be voyeurs to know that technology has made voyeurism a two-way exchange. "It's not a complete work, it's a gesture," Leeson says of the "Dante Hotel" reimagining. Nonetheless, the artist says the exhibit has an important lesson for the public. "This is a type of surveillance that we leave without realizing," says Leeson. "Anything we do will have ramifications in the future because people can be tracked."



Installation view of the exhibition *Lýňň Heřšhřmãñ Leešöñ› Fřřřř Peřšöñ Píůřaí*, KW Institute for Contemporary Art, Berlin, 2018 (photo by Frank Sperling)

Surveillance has long been a prominent theme in Leeson’s work — the artist did a series of phantom limb photographs in the 1980s to “make people aware of the [photographic] capture systems that were so prevalent” — but she sees the “Novalis Hotel” work as representing her maturation as an artist. “I think my work is more subtle now,” reflects Leeson, who says her early work “[Self Portrait as Another Person](#)” was asked to leave a museum because it used

“too much sound.” “I think that my past 50 years have been well spent, and I was relatively unknown, but I can now let people know that I have had consistent concerns and dealt with them in innovative ways.”

[Lynn Hershman Leeson: First Person Plural](#) continues at the *KW Institute for Contemporary Art* (Auguststr. 69, 10117 Berlin) through July 15. [Lynn Hershman Leeson: Anti-Bodies](#) continues at *HeK (House of Electronic Arts Basel)* (Freilager-Platz 9, 4142 Münchenstein, Basel) through August 5.

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