

A Work of Life:  
Lynn Hershman Leeson and the Multimedia Performing of the Life-like

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*Cette thèse est dédiée à ma mère, merci pour tout.*

*This thesis is dedicated to my mother, thank you for everything.*

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## **Abstract**

This thesis focuses on the work of American artist Lynn Hershman Leeson (1941- ) with the aim of historicising her contributions to the new media, performance and feminist art practices of her era. Drawing from J.L. Austin concept of Performativity and its uptake by philosophers Jacques Derrida and Karen Barad, and through comparisons with the work of feminist contemporaries Dara Birnbaum, Judy Chicago, and Martha Wilson, I argue that what sets Hershman Leeson's work apart from that of her feminist contemporaries is her thoroughly performative *modus operandi* rendered across various media. I introduce and define the notion of life-like, as distinct from the idea of likeness in representation and show how the rendering of the life-like through performative means is a defining feature of Hershman Leeson's work. Setting the latter against the backdrop of modernist criticism as instantiated by the influential work of critic Michael Fried, and the legacy of Kantian aesthetics, I argue there is structural homology between the Kantian notion of freedom as the creative modality of art (which Derrida speaks of as "mimesis") and performativity's freedom from the labour of accounting for a referent, a task central to representation. This, I argue is key to understanding the political potency of Hershman Leeson's work. Performativity understood as the mimesis of freedom or agency can be seen to allow the artist and their viewer to behold what greater agency might look and feel like. Using Karen Barad's notions of agential realism and onto-epistem-ology, I illustrate how this understanding of performativity is at work throughout Hershman Leeson's oeuvre and is defining feature of her contribution to the Western art of her era.

## Resumé

Cette thèse porte principalement sur l'œuvre de l'artiste Américaine Lynn Hershman Leeson (1941- ) avec comme objectif de mettre en lumière ses contributions à l'histoire des pratiques artistiques en nouveaux médias, performance et art féministe de son époque. En m'appuyant sur le concept de « performativity » ou performativité mis de l'avant par J.L. Austin, et adopté par les philosophes Jacques Derrida et Karen Barad, et par le biais d'une comparaison avec les œuvres des contemporaines féministes de Hershman Leeson Dara Birnbaum, Judy Chicago et Martha Wilson, je propose que ce qui distingue le travail de Hershman Leeson est un mode opératoire foncièrement performatif déployé à travers un large éventail de mediums. Je me de l'avant et défini la notion de « life-like » comme distincte de l'idée de ressemblance en représentation et démontre comment le rendu du « life-like » par un biais performatif est un trait caractéristique du travail de Hershman Leeson. Me penchant sur ce dernier dans le contexte de l'influent mouvement critique moderniste dont les écrits du critique Michael Fried sont emblématiques (et que je lie à l'héritage de l'esthétique Kantienne), je soutiens qu'il existe une homologie structurelle entre la notion Kantienne de liberté de l'acte créatif (que Derrida désigne comme « mimesis » dans sa critique de Kant), et la notion de performativité. En effet celle-ci se distingue de la représentation en demeurant libre des contraintes imposées à cette dernière de qui il est attendu qu'elle puisse rendre compte d'un référent. Je soutiens que cette homologie est un élément clef permettant de comprendre la résonance politique engagée de l'œuvre de Hershman Leeson. La performativité conçue comme la mimesis de la liberté d'agir permettrai aux artistes et à leur public d'entrevoir ce à quoi pourraient ressembler l'exercice d'une vie sans entraves. Je fais usage des notions de « agential realism » et d'« onto-epistem-ology » mises de l'avant par

Karen Barad pour illustrer comment cette vision de la performativité se déploie à travers l'œuvre de Hershman Leeson et caractérise la contribution faite par cette dernière à l'Art occidental de son époque.

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Lastly, I want to thank Lynn Hershman Leeson herself for kindly taking the time to meet with me and providing me with documents related to her work.

### **Note to Readers**

Images of the works discussed in this thesis can be found on artist Lynn Hershman Leeson's website at <https://www.lynnhershman.com/>

## **Introduction**

The late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries witnessed the expression of a belief and desire for greater dialogue amongst individuals and for intersubjective interactions. In Western Art, corollary to an array of emancipatory political movements and to advances in the technological means of communication, longings for meaningful social transformations and explorations of the construction of subjectivities, were articulated in a variety of new media, from video to laser disks, and in the substitution of traditional media for the body of the artist. Performance art, new media, and internet technologies have all captured the critical imagination of many as remedies for the solitudes and social ills of modern life, and as radical tools for political emancipation. Beginning in the 1960s, the career of multimedia American artist Lynn Hershman Leeson<sup>1</sup> has participated in the shaping of this moment in American and Western Art through both the pioneering the use of new media in art (such as laser disks and artificial intelligence), and through a years-long performance project. The appeal of performance and new media appears to have rested upon their apparent capacity to summon or present life and the life-like. This rendering of life (once thought of as a key mission of all arts), be it through the material fixing of the transient or in the consecration of the live event as a discrete work of art, has long elicited debates about the relationship events (or objects understood as art) have to their contexts and the persons and bodies who make and perform them. Moreover, the impact which the mediations and documentation of the live and life-like have on art's publics and on the ontology of the live event has itself been the subject of lively arguments amongst art historians and performance theorists.

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<sup>1</sup> In 1996, Lynn Hershman changed her name to Lynn Hershman Leeson.

The task of writing the history of performance art in Europe and North America has left in its trail a crystalized canon of artists and practices with names such as Chris Burden, Vito Acconci, Valie Export, and Marina Abramović achieving particular prominence. Born in 1941, Hershman Leeson is a contemporary of these artists and has produced works of performance, video art, electronic art and installation. She also produced a number of feature-length documentary and fiction films. She wrote and directed the film *Teknolust* (2002) and more recently, the 2010 documentary *Women Art Revolution*. Even though her work engages with many of the same questions as her American and European contemporaries and employs similar modes of performance and documentation, it does not feature as prominently in performance studies and art historical literature. Likewise, Hershman Leeson is not automatically associated with the canon of feminist art along with contemporaneous artists such as Martha Rosler, Judy Chicago, and Ana Mendieta. Working from California's bay area, the cradle of the Silicon Valley industries, and removed from the American artistic social circles of New York and Los Angeles, Hershman Leeson's social situation along with her gender may have contributed to her still relative obscurity; while this has been somewhat mitigated by recent solo exhibitions, such as *Agent Ruby Files* at the San Francisco Museum of Art (2013), *The Origins of Species—Part 2* at the Modern Art Oxford and the upcoming *Twisted* at the New Museum (2021), she is still rarely included in contemporary art or performance art surveys.

In this dissertation, I seek to remedy this gap in scholarship and historically contextualise the work of Hershman Leeson in relation to the history of feminist performance, new media art, and their theoretical discourses. In the chapters that follow, I show how Hershman Leeson, having been on the cutting edge of both new media and performance practices, exemplifies the

post-1960s moment in Western Art. This is in part because her work has put to the forefront discussions surrounding the ontology of media, the relationship of the artist to their body and public and what “presence” (either live or mediated) may mean.

As such, in this dissertation, I provide a set of arguments about the relationship among feminism, postmodernism or poststructuralist theories, new media strategies, and the interrogation of the sovereign individual or subject. Moreover, I assert that Hershman Leeson’s shuttling between representational and performative approaches, rendered through a pioneering use of a variety of media, is not only notable in setting her apart from her contemporaries, but also it foresaw later socially impactful uptakes of the notion of performativity. Judith Butler’s gender theory is one example. As I explicate in the following chapters, with regards to her American feminist contemporaries, Hershman Leeson took part in the denaturalisations of gender, of supposedly transcendent modernist aesthetics, and of notions of sovereign agency in a manner that was less concerned with the facets of representation than with a performative approach which entangled bodies and subjectivities to meaning and media. In other words, Hershman Leeson has engaged in the depiction, embodied performance, replication, and simulation of liveness through a pioneering use of new media. By mobilising her own body and various manifestations of the life-like she has participated in both in feminist critique and in the exploration of the relationship live bodies have to a variety of new technologies intended to replicate liveness and channel subjectivities. In the course of my discussion of Hershman Leeson’s work and its historical dimensions, I draw on theory and scholarship found both in the history of art and media and communications theory. I use the latter to renew the methods and language used in art history to understand new media and their aesthetic and social significance. Hershman Leeson has been engaging with many issues that have now become pervasive to the

discussion of the relationship between new media and the formation of subjectivity. To understand both the historical situatedness of Hershman Leeson's performance and the ways in which her new media work may be said to engage with its audience, I draw on debates about the concept of performativity as it has come to circulate in visual arts discourse that have emerged since the publication of J.L. Austin's concept of performativity, which he developed in his seminal 1950's lecture series on speech acts in *How to Do Things with Words* (1962). The history of performance and body art in the United States and Western Europe remains incomplete without further examination of Lynn Hershman Leeson's work, and discussions of new media in art history, which have tended solely to rely on formalist, social or iconographic methods, fail to fully engage with the novelty of the media and the effects—esthetic or otherwise—which they produce.

Years before concepts of performativity were formally theorized in the work of thinkers like Judith Butler or Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, the work of Hershman Leeson created relationships among bodies, matter, and everyday life that brought to life notions of situatedness and the inescapable contingencies informing the constitution and performance of subjectivity. I argue that Hershman Leeson's approach has been more performative than those of her feminist contemporaries. Indeed, throughout this thesis I argue that Hershman Leeson's work deploys performance and media less as tools of representation and more as parts of performative apparatuses unfolding in time and implicating their spectators. To this end, I draw on the work of Karen Barad and her notion of agential realism, an ontological stance that views the world as consisting of phenomena rather than subjects and objects. For Barad, agency emerges not through interactions between discretely formed subjects and objects; instead, it emerges within

phenomena that Barad calls intra-actions.<sup>2</sup> I propose that the political potency of many of Hershman Leeson's works can only be fully accounted for when considered as performative phenomena rather than as static representations. Agential realism allows me to consider these works not solely as discrete objects involved in a reflective or indexical relationship to a pre-existing referent/world, but also as performative work unfolding in time, across a wide variety of media and engaging contemporaneous and future spectators.

To this end, I begin by calling upon notions of performativity, first theorized by linguist J.L. Austin in the 1950s, but also its uptake by Jacques Derrida in the 1970s, Judith Butler in the 1980s, and ultimately Karen Barad and her onto-epistem-ological methodology which posits that "knowing is a material practice of engagement as part of the world in its differential becoming."<sup>3</sup> While I argue Hershman Leeson's performative approach is central to the majority of her works' modus operandi, I also argue a central preoccupation of her oeuvre is the manifestation across a multitude of media and consecutive decades of the *life-like*. I define the life-like as an attempt in any medium to convey the feeling that an object resembles or behaves as a living being would. This dynamic is different from mere attempts to render likeness in a portrait where the inertness of the medium is taken for granted and is expected to be mirroring a clearly identified referent or sitter. Hershman Leeson's life-like, I argue, is a different kind of illusionistic approach that performs the phenomenality of living bodies either by resembling them or producing avatars that appear to behave or "think" like them. With this in mind, throughout this thesis, I argue Hershman Leeson's participation in shaping the history of feminist and American art was carried out through comparatively more performative means when compared to her work of many of her

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<sup>2</sup> Karen Michelle Barad, *Meeting the Universe Halfway: Quantum Physics and the Entanglement of Matter and Meaning* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2007), 33.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid., 89.

contemporaries. This may explain the ways in which her work has been received and included or left out of the histories of performance and feminist art.

In Chapter One, “Setting the Stage,” I explore the relationship between performativity and materiality in Hershman Leeson’s practice by detailing critical debates surrounding the purported role of performance and live bodies in creating the effects of presence. After starting with Peggy Phelan’s ontology of performance, I then move to Philip Auslander’s work on the relationship of live art to its documentation and Amelia Jones’ critical work on the impossibility of presence. Before introducing Hershman Leeson’s four-years long *Roberta Breitmore* project (1973-1978), I discuss a work that has attracted a significant amount of critical attention, sparking debates about the nature of performance, performativity, and the ontology of performance documentation: *The Artist is Present* (2010), by Marina Abramović. I then introduce J.L. Austin’s seminal work defining performativity in *How to Do Things with Words* (based on his 1950s lectures and published posthumously in 1962) and its critical reverberation taken up by philosophers Jacques Derrida in the 1970s and 80s, Judith Butler in the 1980s and 1990s, and Karen Barad more recently.

After elaborating these different models of performativity, I compare Hershman Leeson’s installation *Self Portrait as Another Person* (1966-1968) to Judy Chicago’s iconic *Dinner Party* (1979), a work more widely acknowledged as a centrepiece of American feminist art. I contrast the two feminist artists’ approaches to rendering or referencing human subjects to outline the relationship Hershman Leeson stages between performativity and representation and the ways in which this sets her apart from some of her contemporaries. I then turn my attention to the material traces and manifestations of the *Robert Breitmore* project through an examination of performance documents from the archives of the Whitworth Gallery of Art at University of

Manchester, UK, to query the relationship between the lived experience of the embodied persona of Roberta Breitmore and documentary traces of her existence.

In Chapter Two, “Promises of Contact,” I begin by returning to a discussion of Hershman Leeson’s 1966-68 Installation *Self Portrait as Another Person* and the longing for communion it expresses when its audio recording of the artist’s voice tells its viewers “I want to know all about you.” I situate Hershman Leeson’s use of media in this work and in *Lorna* (1983-84) and of live performance in *Roberta Breitmore*, by discussing political dimensions surrounding the development of new media and discussions surrounding the development of media attempting to bridge temporal and physical gaps between individuals in the late twentieth century. I also complicate art criticism’s debates surrounding the aesthetic value of the live and interpersonal as proposed by critic Nicholas Bourriaud through his 1990s theory of relational aesthetics in which he proposes contemporary artists are engaging less in a symbolic representation and more in collaborations with their public, proposing that “art is an a state of encounter.”<sup>4</sup> I bring these discussions in dialogue with media theory texts by John Durham Peters on the history of the idea of communication, historic anxieties towards new media and longings for interpersonal connection, Claude E. Shannon & Warren Weaver’s influential mathematical theory of communication positing noise as an irreducible feature of communication channels, and Mary Ann Doane’s historicization of the relationship between capitalist industrialisation and changing notions of temporality. I also draw on and the much earlier work by philosophers Plato and his discussion of the value of live speech over writing in *Phaedrus* and Henri Bergson’s distinction between duration (*durée*) as a purely qualitative realm and the spatial features of time as measured by discrete units. Informed by these debates and historical developments I compare

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<sup>4</sup> Nicolas Bourriaud, *Relational aesthetics* (Dijon: Les Presses du réel, 2002), 18.

Hershman Leeson's *Lorna* to Dara Birnbaum's iconic *Technology/Transformation Wonder Woman* (1978-79), and Hershman Leeson's *Roberta Breitmore* project to Martha Wilson's *Portfolio of Models* (1974). Through this comparison of Hershman Leeson works to those of two of her feminist contemporaries, I illustrate how Hershman Leeson's approach, thoroughly performative and often embodied and interactive, differs from others concerned with critical examinations of the role and power of media (television, photography) in the politics of representation.

In Chapter Three, "How to Do Things with Life," I examine the technical manifestations of the life-like in Hershman Leeson's *The Dante Hotel* (1973), *Deep Contact* (1989), *Agent Ruby* (2002), *Olympia: Fictive Projections and the Myth of the Real Woman* (2008), and *The Difference Engine* (1995-1998). I show how the use of media in these works participates in an historically specific development of aesthetic strategies and debates. I explore the theoretical relationship between performativity and technology to elucidate how exactly Hershman Leeson's use of technology serves her work's feminist dimension which I show to be entangled to her rendering of the life-like in a variety of media. To this end, I examine the relationship between the materiality of Hershman Leeson's work by turning to scholarship on the relationship between technics, media, and the lived experience as found in the work of Plato, Henri Bergson, John Durham Peters, and information theorist Luciano Floridi. This leads me to argue a structural homology between the freedom found in the act of mimesis according to Kant and performativity's freedom from representation. With this in mind, I assert that the political potential of Hershman Leeson's performative approach, rendered across a wide array of media, rather than solely nested in its feminist content or representations, finds part of its potency in performativity as a mimesis of agency. This does not confer upon the performer and their public

freedom from the contingencies shaping their subjectivity and circumstances; it allows them—and people experiencing their work—to behold what agency might look and feel like.

In Chapter Four, “The Agency of a Single Voice,” I move from theorising the role of performativity and its political dimensions in Hershman Leeson’s work to examine *First Person Plural: Lynn Hershman’s Electronic Diaries* (1984-1996), a film chronicling various aspects of the artist’s life, and the impact of war and the holocaust and child abuse on her life and the lives of other people she interviews. While this film appears at first sight to resemble a banal diary functioning as direct testimony, I argue that far from being any kind of autobiographical documentary, the *Diaries* shy away from acting as straightforward testimony and represent an instance in which video is used to convey a performance of self and confluence of narratives which is deeply performative in its weaving of meaning. Key to my argument is Karen Barad’s contention that “knowing is a material practice of engagement as part of the world in its differential becoming.”<sup>5</sup> Rather than being revealed or mirrored by representation, meaning and subjectivities are the result of inherently performative events Barad calls intra-actions. With its multitude of voices and overlapping narratives, the *Electronic Diaries* are the form taken by intersecting testimonies and recollections of struggles—be it the artist’s struggle to lose weight, make sense of the breakup of her marriage, open up about the child abuse she suffered, or describe her desire to document the struggle of others.

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<sup>5</sup> Barad, *Meeting the Universe Halfway*, 89.

## Chapter One

### Setting the Stage: Lynn Hershman Leeson, Performativity and Materiality

The rise of performance art practices in the 1960s paralleled an acceleration in the development of new media and communication technologies, from satellites to video recording and later, the world wide web. As both live art practices and novel communication technologies continued to become increasingly pervasive, the stage was set for lively debates about the ontology of live performance and “presence” in art criticism and performance studies. In 1993, for example, Peggy Phelan set out to examine what sets performance apart from other art practices. Her account is grounded in a critique of representation as never being able to fully account for the object or event it is said to represent. She argues that live performance offers a way out of these limitations of representation. For Phelan, the very nature of performance explains its appeal and transformative potential as an art form. Its defining feature is that it “becomes itself through disappearance.”<sup>6</sup> It cannot enter the circuit of art commodification through reproduction of a discrete object. This feature of performance is for Phelan the evidence of its potential to disrupt power structure and thus to exist as a political gesture.<sup>7</sup> Furthermore, for Phelan, the ontology of performance is best understood when contrasted with the features and social role of representation. Employing the concept of marked and unmarked as binaries of Western metaphysics, she postulates that the female subject is marked with difference as an aberration outside the transcendent and unmarked male. Building on Lacan’s writing about the signifier and the sexual relation, Phelan argues that representation or writing palliates the

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<sup>6</sup> Peggy Phelan, *Unmarked: The Politics of Performance* (London; New York: Routledge, 1993), 10.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid.

impossibility for any media to represent the real fully. Within this regime, women as images and palliating fetishes remain marginalised while also being pervasive in representation. On this topic she observes that: “If representational visibility equals power, then almost-naked young white women should be running Western culture.”<sup>8</sup> In Phelan’s account of the ontology of performance, that latter’s transience and immateriality are key to its political potency.

In her discussion of Marina Abramović’s 2010 retrospective exhibition and performance *The Artist is Present*, Amelia Jones gives a different assessment of supposed transformational potential of performance and “presence.” *The Artist is Present* was the name of the retrospective and a performance in which Abramović sat on a chair opposite another chair on which visitors would take turns sitting after waiting in line for hours. Once seated, the visitor would be face to face with the artist, who would silently stare at them. The exhibition also featured objects used in the artist’s previous performances, photographs, videos, live re-enactments and some relics. Most importantly, it acted as a retrospective through which the past was claimed to have been summoned back through the material and temporal presence of re-enactments of the artist’s most iconic performances from her four decades long career. *The Artist is Present* promised two kinds of presence: the presence of the artist, and the presence of past performances re-enacted in the present, neither of which, Jones argues, it can deliver:

Abramović’s recent practice, in its desire to manifest presence, points to the very fact that the live act itself *destroys presence* (or makes the impossibility of its being secured evident). [...] “Presence” as commonly understood is a state that entails the unmediated co-extensivity in time and place of what I perceive and myself; it promises a transparency to an observer of what “is” at the very

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<sup>8</sup> Ibid.

moment at which it takes place. But the event, the performance, by combining materiality and durationality (its enacting of the body as always already escaping into the past) points to the fact that there is no “presence” as such.<sup>9</sup>

*The Artist is Present* thus fails to adhere to Phelan definition of performance as something that “becomes itself through disappearance”<sup>10</sup> by claiming to be both a medium that delivers present and past presences and an unmediated transference of meaning through manifest presence. Reenactments of performances, if they are understood in the way they are presented to the public, do not become themselves through disappearance any more than a film becomes itself only after being viewed.

Writing in a book published by The Museum of Modern Art to coincide with the exhibition, Chrissie Iles, recalling Abramović’s 2005 re-enactment of her 1975 *Lips of Saint Thomas* performance, noted enthusiastically:

Abramović’s re-presentation of the historic performance at the Guggenheim Museum in 2005, [became] an extended erotic dialogue with her unseen viewers [...] This recuperative impulse recurs in the new performance for MoMA, whose primary focus is the potential transformation of the audience through an even more direct encounter with the artist.<sup>11</sup>

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<sup>9</sup> Amelia Jones, “‘The Artist Is Present’: Artistic Re-Enactments and the Impossibility of Presence,” *TDR: The Drama Review* 55, no. 1 (2011): 18.

<sup>10</sup> Phelan, *Unmarked*, 146.

<sup>11</sup> Marina Abramović, Klaus Biesenbach, and Museum of Modern Art, *Marina Abramović: The Artist Is Present* (New York: Museum of Modern Art, 2010), 18.

How this transformation might occur and at what level remains unclear, but Iles's comment suggests that *The Artist is Present* rests on the assumption that meaning is revealed by the work to its public rather than performed *with* the audience. In the film accompanying the exhibition, an assistant to the artist speaks of the artist's mind as a magnet, emitting waves and resting itself every time a new person sat in front of her. Referring to the artist's gesture of lowering her head after a member of the public leaves and then raising it again when another one appears in front of her, Abramović's assistant notes, "she's like cleaning the thing, and then boom! It's like boom! It reconnects and it's only for you. So each and every one has like a clean unique and personal contact with Marina. Boom! like a magnet!"<sup>12</sup>

Something akin to an unmediated direct revelation of meaning through presence without representation is presumed to be operating, something made possible by physical proximity but that is not physical proximity itself. The impossible presence associated with this piece is but the setting of a form of interaction that is beyond both the material mediation of matter and the immateriality of the voice, or language. Instead of intersubjective performativity, what seems to be operating is a relationship to the audience constructed as akin to that of divine revelation. Abramović is said to commune with her audience, like angels speak to mortals. Writing about revelation through angels Saint Thomas Aquinas wrote:

A man's inner thoughts are doubly barricaded off from others:  
by his own will to keep the thought in rather than make it public,  
and by his body's opaqueness which requires him to use

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<sup>12</sup> Marina Abramović et al., *Marina Abramović the Artist Is Present* (Chicago, Ill.: Music Box Films, 2012).

outwardly perceptible signs [...] But angels have only the first  
barricade.<sup>13</sup>

As postulated by her assistant, Abramović doesn't need to employ what Aquinas called "outwardly perceptible signs;"<sup>14</sup> her mind supposedly operates on the viewer like a magnet. *The Artist is Present* displays the body as representation of the artist herself. It is not a work that, in Phelan's terms, becomes "itself through disappearance."<sup>15</sup> This is especially explicit in the case of the re-enactments of past performance which were part of *The Artist is Present* and where performance re-enactments happen alongside performance documents and artefacts. The issues raised by *The Artist is Present* highlight the continued debates over the nature of performance and its phenomenality, its relationship both to the material of the artist's body and to its audience. Discussions surrounding the ontology of performance are thus inextricably bound up with the material context and temporal unfolding of the live event and its intentional or unintended material traces and documents.

Philip Auslander examines this relationship of the performance document to the live event and its effect on the latter's meaning. In "The Performativity of Performance Documentation," Philip Auslander distinguishes between two type of performance documents: the first is defined as documentary, the second as theatrical. The latter documents are ones that constitute the purpose of the performance (Cindy Sherman's photographs are one example of this kind of documentation). On the other hand, the documentary type of performance traces functions as proof that the performance took place, usually for a live audience—i.e., in this case

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<sup>13</sup> Aquinas Saint Thomas, *Summa Theologiae: A Concise Translation* (Notre Dame, IN: Christian Classics, 1989), 157.

<sup>14</sup> Ibid.

<sup>15</sup> Phelan, *Unmarked*, 146.

the documents were made to “document” and the event itself was considered primary. Auslander points out, however, that these documents’ supposed reliability as indexical tools permitting direct access to the ontology of the event represented is linked to beliefs in the photographic medium’s indexical capacities in emitting what Roland Barthes calls a “message without a code.”<sup>16</sup> In attempting to nuance the two categories of performance documentation he proposes, Auslander cites the example of Vito Acconci’s 1969 *Photo-Piece*. In this performance, the artist set out to walk a stretch of Greenwich Street in New York City with the intent of not blinking and snapping a photograph every time he failed to not blink. According to Auslander, *Photo-Piece* blurs the boundaries between theatrical and documentary traces of performance. Auslander explains how the work’s spectators are necessarily those who witness its photographic document, while the bystander to the performance who witnessed it in flesh, did not witness the performance *per se* because it had not been framed as a such.<sup>17</sup>

Auslander’s examination of the role of performance documentation relies on the work of J.L. Austin and his speech-acts theory developed in *How to Do Things with Words*, in which he invented the term “performativity.” In this 1955 series of lectures, published posthumously in 1962 as a book, Austin offers a very thorough and rigorous exploration of the ways in which some statements may be said to do something in the process of being uttered, more particularly to do what they say they are doing; for example: “I now pronounce you man and wife.” His theory is a seminal work for the study of performance and performativity. Austin names statements, such as these “performatives” which he provisionally distinguishes from “constatives,” the latter being previously understood as statements. Moreover, for a performative

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<sup>16</sup> Philip Auslander, "The Performativity of Performance Documentation," *PAJ: A Journal of Performance and Art* 28, no. 3 (2006): 2–3.

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*, 2–6, 4.

to be successful or “happy,” Austin tells us that it must occur within accepted convention by qualified individuals and executed correctly.<sup>18</sup> Austin’s speech-act theory became seminal to all critical and philosophical discussions of performativity not only within the field of linguistic, but also in poststructuralist philosophy and in humanities fields, such as performance studies and art history.

Among the most notable uptakes of his theory is Jacques Derrida’s “Signature, Event, Context” (first given as a lecture in French in 1971 and published in English in 1988), which itself became an influential text.<sup>19</sup> His critique of Austin centers around the latter’s distinction between “happy” and failed performatives. Derrida argues that every utterance whether spoken or written is always already uprooted from its context and susceptible of being performed again in infinite other contexts. This is the quality he terms iterability. Derrida also seeks to demonstrate that contexts are impossible to fully determine and that the effects of semantic communication are always contingent upon context.<sup>20</sup> Derrida argues that both writing, and speech exhibit the characteristic of always already breaking with their context and can be repeated in various contexts or “iterated.” Derrida argues that this iterability renders moot Austin’s assertion that performative utterances require a proper and determinable context to be fortuitous.<sup>21</sup>

Derrida’s uptake of Austin has had itself a significant impact in philosophy and gender studies, most notably in Judith Butler’s theory of gender as a performative act, first articulated in

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<sup>18</sup> J Austin, *How to Do Things with Words* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1962), 14.

<sup>19</sup> Jacques Derrida "Signature Event Context" in Jacques Derrida, *Limited Inc* (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 1988), 1.

<sup>20</sup> Jacques Derrida, "Signature Event Context," *ibid.*, 3.

<sup>21</sup> *ibid.*, 8.

her 1988 essay “Performative Acts and Gender Constitution: An Essay in Phenomenology and Feminist Theory,” in which she contends that:

gender is in no way a stable identity or locus of agency from which various acts proceed; rather, it is an identity tenuously constituted in time—an identity instituted through a *stylized repetition of acts*. Further, gender is instituted through the stylization of the body and, hence, must be understood as the mundane way in which bodily gestures, movements, and enactments of various kinds constitute the illusion of an abiding gendered self. This formulation moves the conception of gender off the ground of a substantial model of identity to one that requires a conception of a constituted *social temporality*. Significantly, if gender is instituted through acts which are internally discontinuous, then the *appearance of substance* is precisely that, a constructed identity, a performative accomplishment which the mundane social audience, including the actors themselves, come to believe and to perform in the mode of belief.<sup>22</sup>

Drawing on Derrida’s and Butler’s insights, I later show how Hershman Leeson’s work in the 1970s instantiated this performative “*stylized repetition of acts*” more than a decade before Butler articulated her theory of gender performativity. I argue that Hershman Leeson’s work is a historically significant instance of theorizing by enacting complex notions, such as performativity, in the same way as some of her feminist contemporaries, (e.g.: Judy Chicago,

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<sup>22</sup> Judith Butler, “Performative Acts and Gender Constitution: An Essay in Phenomenology and Feminist Theory,” *Theatre Journal* 40, no. 4 (1988): 519–20.

Barbara Kruger), engaged in the critique of representation and representational politics. Rather than proposing that the work of philosophers has influenced art practice or vice versa, I analyze both as participants in a historically specific set of explorations in late-twentieth-century Western countries.

In her essay “Posthumanist Peformativity,” feminist philosopher and physicist Karen Barad proposes a posthumanist relational ontology using the notion of performativity and the work of physicist Neil Bohr.<sup>23</sup> I argue that Barad’s work is important to understand the relationships between matter and meaning found throughout Hershman Leeson’s work.

For Barad, language and representation have been granted too much importance and scrutiny by scholars, whereas matter has been wrongfully treated as always already there, immutable and impotent, waiting to be given signification by culture. Instead of this, she proposes an “agential realism,” a notion that is posthuman because it refuses the distinction between human and non-human, and all its corollary oppositions such as subject and object. Barad’s agential realism is one in which the primary ontological unit is not objects or atoms but phenomena. Building on empirical findings by Bohr in the field of quantum physics Barad thus makes the case for a relational ontology. This means that instead of interactions, there are intra-actions within phenomena. In other words, Barad proposes agencies do not precede their interactions with one another but rather are constituted relationally through intra-actions.<sup>24</sup> The appearance of exteriorities of agents or “agential separability” is enacted by an “agential cut” and

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<sup>23</sup> Building on the way performativity has been used or discussed by Judith Butler, Joseph Rouse, and Donna Haraway. Karen Barad, "Posthumanist Performativity: Toward an Understanding of How Matter Comes to Matter," *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society* 28, no. 3 (2003): 801–31.

<sup>24</sup> Barad, *Meeting the Universe Halfway*, 33.

not by causality inflicted by one discrete entity upon another.<sup>25</sup> In this performative ontology, Barad suggests discursivity should not be tethered to the human. She also highlights the web of co-determination between the material and the sentient in performing discourse.<sup>26</sup> In this account of discursivity, humans are neither causes nor effects of discourse; they are intrinsic to it together with the “nonhuman.”<sup>27</sup>

### **Silent Porcelain Guests and a Speaking Wax Portrait: Comparing Performativity to Representation in Hershman Leeson and Judy Chicago**

With these theories of performativity in mind, I compare Hershman Leeson’s *Self Portrait as Another Person* (1966-68) to *Dinner Party* (1979), by American feminist artist Judy Chicago whose work I argue exemplifies representationalist artistic strategies expressing concerns about representation through the representation and depictions of lives lacking visibility. I propose that, in contrast, Hershman Leeson’s practice, through a variety of media stages performative relationships of meaning to matter later theorised by philosophers like Barad. Comparing Hershman Leeson’s work to that of Chicago, which continues to occupy a totemic place in the history of feminist and American art illustrates how her methodology was once on the margin of the art movements she participated in, namely American and Feminist.

The *Dinner Party* is a massive installation of a table arranged in a triangle. Thirteen women or dinner party “guests” are depicted on each side of the table. Each side covers an historical period: from prehistory to Rome, from the beginnings of Christianity to the

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<sup>25</sup> Barad’s alternative to the Cartesian cut. Barad, "Posthumanist Performativity," 2003, 825.

<sup>26</sup> Ibid., 802.

<sup>27</sup> Ibid., 810.

Reformation, and from the American Revolution to the Women's Revolution.<sup>28</sup> Each woman, rather than having her likeness rendered, is depicted as a glazed porcelain or glass plate, most of them decorated with a porcelain vulva or butterfly-like forms; each plate is set on top of a runner with decorative motifs in period-specific embroidery; tableware completes each setting. On women's rights activist Susan Anthony's plate, for example, a sleek, gleaming and bulbous mass surrounds a labia-like butterfly of iridescent stretched flesh swirling upwards. It boldly protrudes toward the viewer as a truly three-dimensional object. This piece then appears to evoke Anthony's audacious activist work as an abolitionist and member of the women's suffrage movement. In contrast, the Emily Dickinson plate features a discreet vulva enclosed in delicate lace undulating outwards like light rays from a solar disk. The depiction of individual women serves the work's aim to promote the advancement of women in society and their visibility as historically important figures. Indeed, as noted by Jane F. Gerhard:

*The Dinner Party* offers a unique case study of U.S. feminism as a cultural force, one that challenged the definition of art and history—the distinction between fine arts and craft, women's "questionable" status as art makers, and the terms by which museum directors and boards of directors established value. It raised questions about what constituted "greatness"—how narratives of the past neglected entire groups, how history shaped ideas of womanhood as well as how actual women lived their lives.<sup>29</sup>

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<sup>28</sup> Jane F Gerhard, *The Dinner Party: Judy Chicago and the Power of Popular Feminism, 1970-2007* (Athens, GA: The University of Georgia Press, 2013), 2.

<sup>29</sup> *Ibid.*, 4.

*The Dinner Party* thus was in every sense of the word—quite literally— about representation, both as presenting allegorical depictions of specific women in history and as a manifesto for their political and social visibility and advancement of all women.

Also, an installation, Hershman's *Self-Portrait as Another Person* (1966-68) nonetheless entertains a different approach in rendering its subject. The work features a wax mould of the artist's face with a considerably darker skin tone. Eyes closed, lips sealed, the face is enveloped in a wig of long wavy hair. The mould appears to capture the process of holding still for a wax portrait as much as the subject's likeness. This is a disembodied face or self; indeed, the rest of the body is not rendered. Instead, positioned below the mould is an audio cassette player playing a recording of the artist's voice and heavy breathing. To those, like myself, who have met the artist, it is unmistakably her voice: "Oh there you are, I've been waiting for you all day. I'm so glad that you've come to see me. What's your name? I didn't hear you. What's your name? Tell me your deepest thoughts. I want to know all about you. What else did you do today?" She breathes heavily between sentences, manifesting the embodied and visceral nature of the voice; every breath reminds us there was once a living body uttering these words.

The idea of a self-portrait *as somebody else* here pits the indexical trace of the wax mould against the doubts cast upon the identity of the face by the work's title and the dark skin rendition. Wax moulds were a technique once used via the death mask to capture the appearance of the recently deceased for posterity and here used to portray the face of a living woman whose identity is purposefully blurred. Hershman has acknowledged that the figure's dark skin cannot be viewed outside the context of the Civil Rights Movement, during which it was made.<sup>30</sup> But

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<sup>30</sup> Lynn Hershman Leeson, "Digital Liveness and the Terror of Immortality," talk given at the Live Artists Live event, University of Southern California, January 26, 2016. As noted.

*Self Portrait as Another Person* is more than a straightforward political commentary in which the artist, a white woman, is depicted with darker skin, presumably in a gesture of solidarity with Black Americans and in support of the anti-racist movement and struggle for civil rights in the United States. The colour of material chosen for this portrait can also be viewed as a problematic and awkward appropriation of blackness in a gesture akin to wearing blackface.

Whereas the formal qualities in the various depictions of women's lives in *The Dinner Party* often appear to metaphorically mirror their character and qualities, as interpreted by the artist who designed each place-setting, in *Self Portrait as Another Person* the link between the installation and its referent is muddled. The medium of the wax mould becomes noisy. The recorded voice, that of the artist, appears to securely link the work with its author—as does the wax mould of her face—and both might seem to secure the installation's role as a self-portrait, yet not every viewer knows the artist's voice nor her facial appearance. What makes this work astounding is how it breaks down the presumed homology between a wax mould of a person's face and who that person is. Hershman Leeson's mixed media use of sound and three-dimensional objects creates a work that is performative in its unfolding in time and in its reliance on the body of the viewer, implicating their time in the future.<sup>31</sup>

But the voice of the artist is more than a temporal element in this piece; like the signature of the artist in some paintings and sculptures, it plays a crucial role in identifying the work. In his critique of logocentrism elaborated at the same time as Hershman Leeson was working on *Self Portrait as Another Person*, Jacques Derrida notes that the voice in Western metaphysics has

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<sup>31</sup> This is precisely the kind of art which modernist critics such as Michael Fried disapproved of. In his 1967 article "Art and Objecthood," Fried argues a work of art must make itself wholly manifest at once. Time based art was a contamination of art by theater. Michael Fried 'Art and Objecthood' in Charles Harrison and Paul Wood, *Art in Theory, 1900-1990: An Anthology of Changing Ideas* (Oxford, UK; Cambridge, Mass., USA: Blackwell, 1996), 832.

been perceived as the privileged medium for meaning and the manifestation of presence. While arguing for the impossibility of presence, Derrida shows the transparency of voice to only be the result of its phenomenality. It is indeed self-effacing; in its absolute proximity to the body of the speaking subject, its performance exposes the illusion of a transparency which explains why the *phoneme* has often been viewed as the privileged vehicle for the plenitude of meaning. Like a magic trick, the phenomenality of the recorded voice in *Self Portrait as Another Person* performs an illusion of presence and embodied personhood.

In *Self Portrait as Another Person*, the voice is disembodied, untethered from the coextensive living body. Indeed, a recorded voice can well be the voice of a body no longer alive. The wig and the wax mask together with the recorded voice summon a body that remains absent. The oxymoronic title of *Self Portrait as Another Person* is not that of a self-portrait of the artist as another person because it is representing the wrong person, but rather because it points to the idea that there can be no self-portrait that can escape the fate of being a portrait of the self as other. As noted by Amelia Jones in relation to photographic self-portraiture, “[t]he performative posing of the self, whether photographically documented or ‘live,’ is always already a performance of the other.”<sup>32</sup> The multimedia nature of the portrait installation is an invitation for the viewer to participate in the performing of the piece.

With their indexical capacity to replicate the appearance of the once present, the media used in this work, together with the viewer, engender and perform their referent. As Herschman Leeson herself noted in an early essay: “The manner of portraiture depends upon responses to the

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<sup>32</sup> Amelia Jones, *Self/Image: Technology, Representation, and the Contemporary Subject* (London; New York: Routledge, 2006), 56.

media of time. The media of now is TIME.”<sup>33</sup> And there is no performativity without time and coextensively.<sup>34</sup> Performativity’s production of meaning in time is perhaps best understood when compared to the idea of representation. In her critique of representationalism and Cartesianism Karen Barad notes:

The idea that beings exist as individuals with inherent attributes, anterior to their representation, is a metaphysical presupposition that underlies the belief in political, linguistic, and epistemological forms of representationalism. Or, to put the point the other way around, representationalism is the belief in the ontological distinction between representations and that which they purport to represent; in particular, that which is represented is held to be independent of all practices of representing. That is, there are assumed to be two distinct and independent kinds of entities—representations and entities to be represented. The system of representation is sometimes explicitly theorized in terms of a tripartite arrangement. For example, in addition to knowledge (i.e., representations), on the one hand, and the known (i.e., that which is purportedly represented), on the other, the existence of a knower (i.e., someone who does the representing) is sometimes made explicit. When this happens, it becomes clear that representations serve a mediating function between independently

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<sup>33</sup> Lynn Hershman-Leeson, *Lynn Hershman Is Not Roberta Breitmore / Preface, Arturo Schwarz ; Postface, Kristine Stiles ; Interface, Sandy Ballatore ; about Face, Jack Burnham*. (San Francisco: MH de Young Memorial Museum, 1978), 11.

<sup>34</sup> I later elaborate on how Hershman’s time-based practices challenged the ambient modernist ethos of their time.

existing entities. This taken-for-granted ontological gap generates questions of the accuracy of representations.<sup>35</sup>

In much of Hershman's work, as with *Self Portrait as Somebody Else*, this ontological gap Barad describes can be viewed as having been forcefully widened, or as I will argue later, as simply rendered irrelevant by a performative approach. I also argue later that this performative gesture proposes new understandings of the relationship of matter to meaning and contributes to setting Hershman Leeson apart from her contemporaries.

### ***Roberta Breitmore's Many Lives: The Multitude of Manifestations of a Years-Long Project***

Another work that exemplifies this widened ontological gap and performative approach is Hershman Leeson's years-long *Roberta Breitmore* project. This project took place in three consecutive stages or places. The first was from 1974 to 1978, during which time Lynn Hershman changed her name, moved to San Francisco and became Roberta Breitmore. Breitmore had her own bank account, a distinct wardrobe and handwriting, and official papers attesting to her identity. Hershman thus proceeded to perform herself as Roberta Breitmore and confided her struggles to a therapist. There was also a total of four "Roberta multiples," people who would dress and act like Roberta and appear in her guise and strictly follow the Roberta Breitmore personality blueprint. In 1978, the de Young Museum organised a Roberta lookalike contest to coincide with an exhibition of Hershman Leeson's work. Roberta multiples were eventually brought together in 1978 during an exorcism ceremony at the Palazzo dei Diamanti

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<sup>35</sup> Karen Barad, "Posthumanist Performativity: Toward an Understanding of How Matter Comes to Matter," *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society* 28, no. 3 (2003): 804.

which ended Roberta Breitmore's existence in fleshed form.<sup>36</sup> The *Roberta Breitmore* project now continues to exist in the form artefacts and archived material.

In an age during which coalitional political activism in society and in art revolved around the affirmation of the individual, the sexed body, and this individual's political and social circumstances, Lynn Hershman Leeson was actively performing being someone else. Amid critiques of the sovereign subject, artistic agency has also meant an emboldened affirmation of sovereignty over meaning and the signified, over the identity of bodies. In *Roberta Breitmore* (1973-75) the body and psyche of Hershman Leeson was Roberta Breitmore simply because she said so. Whereas self-portraiture as another person or fictional persona preceded the work of Hershman in notorious works, such as Marcel Duchamp's *Rrose Selavy* (c. 1921) and the self-portraits of Claude Cahun, Hershman became someone else in an unprecedentedly intimate and embodied fashion. In addition to deciding to be Roberta Breitmore, in order to attest to and activate this new identity, Hershman Leeson/Breitmore mobilised bureaucratic measures, such as opening a bank account, obtaining a driver's license, renting an apartment in the Dante Hotel in San Francisco, as well as adopting a distinctive set of bodily gestures and clothing style and narrating her neuroses to a therapist. While having her excursions documented by a private eye following her, Roberta met with prospective roommates after posting a classified ad. One of the encounters I detail in Chapter three resembled awkward dates and others turned out to be dangerous, like when Roberta was approached by pimps trying to coerce her into sex work, she shed her Roberta attire in a public bathroom and escaped unnoticed as Lynn.<sup>37</sup>

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<sup>36</sup> Lynn Hershman "Private I: An Investigator's Timeline" in Lynn Hershman-Leeson and Robin Held, *The Art and Films of Lynn Hershman Leeson Secret Agents, Private I*, ed. Meredith Tromble (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2005), 30.

<sup>37</sup> Lynn Hershman "Private Eye: An Investigator's Timeline" *ibid.*, 26.

While performed by Hershman Leeson and the various Roberta multiples, the process of becoming someone else rubbed against the inescapability of the individual body and its finitude, the social constraints attached to its gender, race, and social class, and the limitations inherent to representation and indexical technological devices of representation. These constraints result from the imperative of embodying a socially recognised form of subjectivity, as noted by Judith Butler:

individuals come to occupy the site of the subject (the subject simultaneously emerges as a “site”), and they enjoy intelligibility only to the extent that they are, as it were, first established in language. The subject is the linguistic occasion for the individual to achieve and reproduce intelligibility, the linguistic of its existence and agency [...]

The term “subject” then designates a paradoxical grammatical situation where one tries to put into language the story of the emergence of something which, as yet does not exist in language. In this sense, the subject is talked about prior to its emergence as a not-yet, or never fully attainable or defined ideal.<sup>38</sup>

Butler is thus describing the subject as a perpetual yet to be, as a moment rather than a discrete and strictly defined site. In a similar way, *Roberta Breitmore* performs, and materialises, the subject’s meandering journey to intelligibility, in her case as a single young woman living in San Francisco. It is also worth noting that Hershman’s performative approach, where the

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<sup>38</sup> Judith Butler, *The Psychic Life of Power: Theories in Subjection* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1997), 10–11.

denaturalising understandings of media and representation go hand and hand with a denaturalising of both the subject of the artist and this subject's manifestations/mediations, occurred over a decade before the publication and wide dissemination of a gender theory influenced form of feminism sparked in part by Judith Butler's "Performative Acts and Gender Constitution: An Essay in Phenomenology and Feminist Theory" in 1988 and the early 1990s work on gender performativity by Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick.

Despite the fact that the original phase of this pioneering performance series ended, *Roberta Breitmore* endures as several scattered archives. For example, in 2007, Hershman Leeson used the online virtual world Second Life to house and display the *Roberta Breitmore* archive. Known as *Life Squared*, this virtual repository of artefacts complicates the traditional notion of archives as secure indexical links to past events. Through this multiplication of archival documents housed at different physical and virtual locations, the distance created by material mediation is highlighted. The archive and its viewing itself become events, performing the work in the present.

The ways in which the *Roberta Breitmore* project have been disseminated and continue to exist virtually keep Roberta Breitmore the persona alive. Beyond the Second Life example, in 1995, Hershman Leeson produced CyberRoberta along with Tillie, as part of a series called *Dollie Clones*. These are two robotic dolls, one of which is dressed in typical *Roberta Breitmore* attire: a polka dot dress, a red cardigan and sweater, sunglasses and a conspicuous bright blond wig. Not only are the two dolls programmed to hack into each other's codes and steal each other's identities, but also the viewer can see through their camera eyes. A monitor displays what they see and streams it to the Internet. And during the same period Hershman Leeson produced other interactive works such as *Agent Ruby* (1999-2002), an artificial intelligence world wide

web-connected programme in which users can ask questions to the software anthropomorphised through the persona of Agent Ruby. The programme is made to learn from the conversations and adapt accordingly by accumulating knowledge of situations and behaviours. Her “moods” are said to be altered by her interactions with individual users.<sup>39</sup>

To better understand the ways in which works like these function as dispersed in time, space, and across media I would like to briefly return to Derrida’s idea of *iterability*. In his analysis of Austin’s speech-act theory—and part of his direct deconstruction of the mythical belief in speech as privileging presence—Derrida argues that every utterance, whether spoken or written, is structurally homologous to the grapheme (the smallest unit in a writing system) in that to exist it is always necessarily untethered from its context and infinitely citable.<sup>40</sup> This, again, is the process of *iterability*, which forecloses the possibility of a graphematic mark, material or not, of becoming static as a fixed signifier or trace of originary meaning. As he notes in *Of Grammatology*:

The trace is not only the disappearance of origin—within the discourse that we sustain and according to the path that we follow—it means that the origin did not even disappear, that it was never constituted except reciprocally by a nonorigin, the trace, which thus becomes the origin of the origin. From then on, to wrench the concept of the trace from the classical scheme, which would derive it from a presence or from an

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<sup>39</sup> Lynn Hershman "Private I: An investigator’s Timeline" in Hershman-Leeson and Held, *The Art and Films of Lynn Hershman Leeson Secret Agents, Private I*, 94.

<sup>40</sup> Derrida, *Limited Inc*, 1988, 9.

originary nontrace and which would make of it an empirical mark, one must indeed speak of an originary trace or arche-trace.<sup>41</sup>

If the iterable graphematic mark does not mirror a stable signifier but rather only asserts the *appearance* of an empirical mark, then logography and other marks are not simply opaque but are inherently performative, since they do not refer to stable meaning but produce meaning through effects—just like speech.

As I noted earlier in relation to Auslander's work on the performativity of performance documentation, the topic of the nature performance traces was once the subject of sustained scrutiny. But, although useful, Auslander's typology does not account for the meaning effects created by the said documentation. Nor does it invite a close discussion of the technologies of representation beyond debates around the indexical or opaque nature of their productions. I am therefore not relying on Auslander's account when I suggest technology plays a performative role in Lynn Hershman Leeson's work. In *Roberta Breitmore*, a project which once partially existed in the flesh of Hershman Leeson and now is manifest across various media, documents and artefact do not refer to a stable signified, meaning is created through the interaction between the performance of Breitmore (whether live or in documentation) and the viewers. In *Agent Ruby*, a material computational and physical infrastructure permits an interaction with online users who communicate with *Agent Ruby* using text. Each interaction is unpredictable and so is the final result of this dialogical interaction between the hardware and software of *Agent Ruby* and the user. The work as such thus functions through the performative and co-dependant interaction of matter and discourse, as described by Karen Barad and discussed earlier.<sup>42</sup> As

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<sup>41</sup> Jacques Derrida, *Of Grammatology* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1976), 62.

<sup>42</sup> Barad, "Posthumanist Performativity," 2003, 823.

noted by Derrida regarding the *graphematic* character of communication, with the rapid proliferation of new media:

We are witnessing not an end to writing that would restore, in accordance with [Marshall] McLuhan's ideological representation, a transparency or an immediacy to social relations; but rather the increasingly powerful historical expansion of a general writing, of which the system of speech, consciousness, meaning, presence, truth, etc., would be only an effect, and should be analysed as such.<sup>43</sup>

All these phenomena have in common for Derrida the feature of iterability, their ability to be untethered from their originary context and infinitely citable, making them structurally homologous to the *grapheme* and foreclosing the possibility that these graphematic phenomena could act as signifiers to, or be traces of, original meaning or presence.<sup>44</sup> Similarly, I argue, what Hershman Leeson makes clear in her electronic works is that, contrary to popular belief, electronic media do not provide transparency or immediacy, nor do they “represent” a stable pre-existing real. Instead, Hershman Leeson proposes a performative or practice-based process of meaning making, one that is heavily reliant on material and electronic inscription. The “subject” (both Hershman Leeson as well as “Roberta Breitmore”) does not pre-exist the technological mediation or representation.

The Whitworth Gallery of Art at the University of Manchester is one of the physical repositories for the *Roberta Breitmore* archive, holding 143 items. The collection includes photographs, documents, and identity items that belonged to the persona; they have been

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<sup>43</sup> Derrida, *Limited Inc*, 1988, 20.

<sup>44</sup> *Ibid.*, 9.

organised by the artist into the five thematically distinct groups: External Transformations, Internal Transformations, Anonymous Social Constructions, Articles of Identity, and Meet Mr. America. One of them is *Robota* (1976), a portrait of Lynn Hershman Leeson embodying *Roberta Breitmore*. Although it is a large (11 x 14") photograph, in its framing and composition, it resembles a passport photograph or other photograph produced to ascertain identity. The face appears off-centre, we can see Hershman Leeson's real hair below her wig, her large aviator glasses are jarringly crooked. Moreover, her make-up is heavy, almost grotesque. The eyes hover midpoint between a vacant gaze and a knowing look.

In this manipulated photograph, which belongs to the External Transformations series, the use of props and of the photographic medium itself conspire to expose the complex palimpsest of personal identity. Here, the face is literally and figuratively constructed and annotated beyond legibility. The face ceases to function as straightforward signifier of identity as its constructedness is exposed. A similar phenomenon is at work in theorist Bill Brown "thing theory" when he notes that: "We begin to confront the thingness of objects when they stop working for us: when the drill breaks, when the car stalls, when the windows get filthy, when their flow within the circuits of production and distribution, consumption and exhibition, has been arrested, however momentarily."<sup>45</sup> With its ornamental, crooked glasses and thick made-up façade, *Robota*, much like *Self-Portrait as Another Person*, is a failed portrait in the traditional sense; it appears to have no referent other than its own plasticity. The title of the work, which appears to be a pun of the word "robot" and Roberta, further discounts any claim that this is a photograph whose referent is a clearly defined, preexisting human subject. This subversion of the

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<sup>45</sup> Bill Brown, "Thing Theory," *Critical Inquiry* 28, no. 1 (2001): 4.

genre of photographic portrait parallels other practices of repurposing of media in Hershman Leeson's multi-media practice.

### **From Markets Data to Aesthetic Experience: *Synthia Stock Ticker* and the Opacity of Media**

An example of this is *Synthia Stock Ticker* (2000-02). The work consists of a reinvented stock ticker. In the late nineteenth century, stock tickers were machines that printed out market information received by telegram. They sat under a glass dome and printed out the data they received on a narrow paper tape. In *Synthia Stock Ticker*, however, there is no paper or telegram technology; instead it features a screen showing the ups and downs of the life of a character, Synthia. Rather than printing out stock market information, *Synthia Stock Ticker*, uses stock market information to determine the narrative of Synthia's life. Depending on the mood of the markets, the ticker's screen shows footage of Synthia either shopping at Christian Dior in euphoric periods or dreading having to shop at thrift stores during downturns.<sup>46</sup> This work fits in with Hershman Leeson's interest in utilizing technics commonly associated with a progressive and ever-growing loss of human agency, including computer technologies, cybernetics, and artificial intelligence. In a discussion of similar new media art work in *New Philosophy for New Media*, Mark Hansen notes in relation to many contemporary new media artists that "the installations, and environments they create function as laboratories for the conversion of information into corporeally apprehensible images."<sup>47</sup> What Hansen describes amounts to the

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<sup>46</sup> Lynn Hershman "Private I: An Investigator's Timeline" in Hershman-Leeson and Held, *The Art and Films of Lynn Hershman Leeson Secret Agents, Private I*, 92.

<sup>47</sup> Mark B. N Hansen, *New philosophy for new media* (Cambridge, Mass.; London: MIT, 2006), 11.

transduction of information as representation, a process by which there is no optical relationship between the signified and referent or the art object and the world, but simply a causal relationship of making visible information or data. The artist uses technology to become the author of computational rules governing the visual manifestation of information. The depth of the stock ticker as one of the first media of apparent immediacy is concealed by the aesthetic and narrative facture it is made to render (by depth I mean the great distance that this medium of the immediate makes apparent): from the raw data to computational interpretation, and the aesthetic and narrative rendition of Synthia's markets synched moods, information is muddled as it dissolves into a chain of a technically enabled chain of causation with shifting inputs. In this domino effect from data to aesthetic and narrative experience, it is as though the referent being communicated is not only absent—as in the case of any mediated representational form—but also has never finished its journey, becoming merely the trigger of an aesthetic and potentially political effect rather than a wholly signified referent. This work highlights the depth and opacity of all media.

This opacity, as I've argued in relation to *Agent Ruby* and *Roberta Breitmore*, is essential to Hershman Leeson's use of media and technology as performative rather than representational devices. This pattern is present, I argue, throughout Hershman Leeson's work. It is also, I would assert, historically and geographically specific, relating to her working in Northern California at a time of major technological developments emerging from Silicon Valley, and to Hershman Leeson's feminist strategies, developing in relation to the feminist art movement in California, strong from the 1970s onward. This arrangement instantiates a bent to affirm the primacy and political relevance of relations over objects and presumed originary meanings, a notion later reflected in Barad's agential realism where meaning emerges performatively within phenomena.

## Conclusion

In this chapter, I asserted that further examination of the work of Lynn Hershman Leeson and its feminist dimensions enrich our understanding of history of performance and body art in the United States and Western Europe. This is not only because of the diversity of media Hershman Leeson has used and their sophisticated performative methods, but also because of her participation in late-twentieth-century U.S. feminism and her role in exploring changing understandings of gender, subjectivity, and individuation. I've shown how Hershman Leeson's use of her own body via images, mediations, and fragments differs from representationslist strategies adopted by some of her contemporaries in that it embraces a performative approach to intersubjective meaning making. In comparing Hershman Leeson's *Self Portrait as Another Person* to Judy Chicago's *Dinner Party*, I illustrated that, while stylistic and iconographic choices in Chicago's iconic installation attempt to mirror (or "represent") the character of the women depicted, Hershman Leeson's portrait muddies that mirror that stands between person and their portrait. In the process, a work reliant on both time and interactions with viewers is performed. The *portrait*, rather than a cipher to an authentic referent, becomes a process that interrogates the possibility of a sovereign and wholly knowable subjectivity, and presence as the presumed ultimate referent of portraiture.

In this way, I argued that Hershman Leeson's practice is a rare example of performance art manifested across media by an artist with an ongoing practice in new media, bringing together practices that have closely associated with the possibility of intersubjective interactions and interactivity. In the following chapter, I return to the *Self Portrait as Another Person* and analyse Hershman Leeson's performative approach against the backdrop of twentieth-century

idealisations of the transformative nature of computer technologies, and skepticism of novel communication technologies in favour of idealised in person sociability articulated by Nicholas Bourriaud in his work on relational aesthetics.

## Chapter Two

### **Promises of Contact: *Self Portrait as Another Person*, Roberta Breitmore, Lorna and Twentieth-Century Longings for Communion.**

“Tell me your deepest thoughts,” says the recorded voice of Lynn Hershman Leeson in *Self Portrait as Another Person* (1966-68) . “I want to know all about you” she adds. I want to briefly return to this installation I discussed in the previous chapter. In this work consisting of a wax mould of the artist’s face, a wig and an audio cassette player, the recorded sound of the artist’s voice is perhaps the most illusionistic component of a multi-media portrait. Speaking about this work in 2016, Leeson proposed that “sound extending into time was a drawing.”<sup>48</sup> But there is more. Just like the mould mask was obtained by pressing matter directly upon the artist’s body to form an intimately indexical trace of her features, the recording of the artist’s voice captures her living and breathing body. Hershman Leeson’s voice is written onto the length of the audiotape in electromagnetic form. Meanwhile, the features of the face from which this voice once emerged were recorded without the stylistic interference or idealisations possible in a painted or even a photographic portrait. Instead, matter was forcibly handled around the surface and edges of the sitter’s face producing a mark that will produce the illusionistic effect of close likeness. This way of rendering the portrait’s subject matter also performs the task of any portrait in outliving both the moment it was conceived, and the artist’s and sitter’s lives. As Jacques Derrida once noted, “[t]o write is to produce a mark that will constitute a sort of machine which is productive in turn, and which my future disappearance will not, in principle, hinder in its functioning, offering things and itself to be read and to be rewritten.”<sup>49</sup> Again and again, as

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<sup>48</sup> Lynn Hershman Leeson, “Digital Liveness and the Terror of Immortality,” talk given at the Live Artists Live event, University of Southern California, January 26, 2016. As noted.

<sup>49</sup> Jacques Derrida, *Limited Inc* (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 1988), 8.

visitors come into contact with this work, each beginning their encounter during different segments of the audio recording, they witness a portrait not only confined to the depiction of facial features, but it is also deployed in space through sound, one that is also durational in its totality. A single glimpse of the work does not allow us to grasp its entirety. Moreover, the references to the body of the artist together with the fragmented, multimedia installation of the *portrait*, together perform the impossibility of full presence of the piece's referent (Lynn Hershman Leeson herself). The portrait stages the impossibility of dialogical communion, the work cannot know all about us and the viewer cannot know all about the person depicted in the portrait. "I want to know all about you" thus remains a longing.

In the previous chapter, I explored the debates surrounding the relationship of the live event to its documentation. I also analysed Hershman Leeson's performative manifestation of feminism in her work by comparing *Self Portrait as Another Person* to Judy Chicago's *Dinner Party*, and I showed the ways in which the artist has used technology to produce multiple iterations of *Roberta Breitmore* long after she ceased to perform that persona live. This allowed me to sketch out how Hershman Leeson created performative circuits composed of viewers, information, and interactive interfaces, strategies she developed further through digital and web-based projects such as *Lorna* and *Synthia Stock Ticker*. In this chapter, taking as a starting point the longing to commune expressed by the "voice" of *Self Portrait as Another Person*'s, I explore this longing for dialogue and how it interfaces with development of communication technologies. I will show how this yearning has been a pervasive motivation in both twentieth-century performance art, and in the development of media and communications technologies premised on bridging temporal and spatial gaps between individuals. As I demonstrate in this chapter and the following, Hershman Leeson's work, in line with this historical development in

media, features a great variety of technical means to simulate the effects of presence and stage situations which encourage dialogue.

To better situate the relationship Leeson creates between her work and its audience, I discuss the history of both the relationships media have to their depictions and to those who encounter them. Discussions in art criticism and art history of the choice of media used by twentieth-century artists have often been developed in the context of critical literature envisaging the nature of the particular medium within a modernist and formalist discourse. This critical current contends that true artists' work builds on the unique properties of the medium they work in. Hence, formalist art critic Clement Greenberg argued in 1939 that: "Picasso, Braque, Mondrian, Miro, Kandinsky, Brancusi, even Klee, Matisse and Cezanne derive their chief inspiration from the medium they work in. The excitement of their art seems to lie most of all in its pure preoccupation with the invention and arrangement of spaces, surfaces, shapes, colors, etc., to the exclusion of whatever is not necessarily implicated in these factors."<sup>50</sup> Similarly, in the late 1960s formalist critic and historian of art Michael Fried argued art degenerates once it adopts the time-bound features of theater (which would include most if not all performance and time-based works) and that it is "by virtue of their presentness and instantaneousness that modernist painting and sculpture defeat theatre."<sup>51</sup> According to the formalist art critic, the work of art must then convincingly transcend context, circumstances and time itself by making itself whole apprehensible in the present.

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<sup>50</sup> Clement Greenberg, *Art and Culture: Critical Essays* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1965), 7.

<sup>51</sup> Michael Fried, *Art and Objecthood: Essays and Reviews* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1998), 9.

While these discussions have been influential and could be seen as ingenious—albeit partial—approaches to dealing with the multiplication of media in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, a strategy of looking further back in Western thinking about material mediation, as well as exploring laterally, from the methods of art history to those of communication theory, together provide new ways to better understand the historical significance of Leeson’s use of media. After all, much of Leeson’s early career occurred while the developed world placed high expectations on the transformative potential of technology in bringing the world together. For example, simultaneous to *Self Portrait as Another Person*, and in the midst of the American Civil Rights movement, the first ever planetary live television broadcast “Our World” (1967) aired, reporting live from a dozen countries including Tunisia, Japan, the United States, and Mexico. As Lisa Parks, drawing on the work of Peter Sconce notes, the discourse surrounding this planetary satellite broadcast echoed a Western fantasy of “global presence” to which terms like “liveness” and “presence” were closely associated. Parks proposes that during the 1960s, “meanings of ‘liveness’ and ‘presence’ were indistinguishable from Western discourses of modernization, which classified societies as traditional or modern, called for urbanization and literacy in the developing world, and envisioned mass media as agents of social control and economic liberalization.”<sup>52</sup> Hence, in paying closer attention to media, I do not want to treat them as inert historical objects but rather as, inherently context-bound, relational, and objects that produce effects. Lisa Gitleman’s insights on the nature of media as an historical object guides my approach. Gitleman astutely notes that:

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<sup>52</sup> Lisa Parks, *Cultures in Orbit: Satellites and the Televisual* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2005), 23.

All historical subjects are certainly not alike. The histories of science and art, for instance, differ considerably in the construction of their respective subjects. The art historical object from long ago—a vase, painting, or sculpture—is still art today, however much tastes may have changed. But the scientific object from long ago—curing by leeches, the ether, a geocentric solar system, and so on—isn’t science at all. [...] Which kind of historical subject are media? Are they more like nonscientific or scientific objects? [...] Media muddy the map. Like old art, old media remain meaningful. Think of medieval manuscript, eight-track tapes, and rotary phones, or semaphores, stereoscopes and punch-card programming: only antiquarians use them, but they are all recognizable as media. Yet like old science, old media also seem unacceptably unreal. Neither silent film nor black-and-white television seems right anymore, except as a throwback. Like acoustic (nonelectronic) analog recordings, they just don’t do the job. The “job” in question is largely though not exclusively one of representation, and a lot of muddiness of media as historical subjects arises from their entanglement with this swing term. Media are so integral to a sense of what representation itself *is*, and what counts as adequate—and thereby commodifiable—representation, that they share some of the conventional attributes of both art historical objects and scientific ones.<sup>53</sup>

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<sup>53</sup> Lisa Gitelman, *Always Already New: Media, History and the Data of Culture* (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 2006), 3–4.

While I am not suggesting that Leeson's body of work will cease to be art because the media it uses will no longer "do the job," it is worth keeping in mind that its illusionistic effects might be viewed historically as having been more powerful at time when the medium used was more widely used. In other words, *Self Portrait as Another Person*'s use of recorded sound along with the wax mould will not have the same immersive effect today, in 2017, as they no doubt would have had in the late 1960s, nor to contemporary viewers would they have the same effect today as would a virtual reality experience.

My aim in this chapter is to situate Hershman's use of media and live performance within the discourses surrounding the political dimensions of media and technology, as well as within debates in art criticism surrounding the political value or potential of live and "relational" artistic practices. I also discuss the ways in which the use of media in Hershman's work and contrast it with the use of the same media by her contemporaries. By bringing in key texts of communication and media theory, I seek to complicate the way in which new media, as well as the medium, is discussed in art criticism in relation to work such as Hershman's. I begin by exploring the artistic and discursive context in which Hershman Leeson has worked in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries. Specifically, I am interested in the debates around the values of mediation versus "presence," performativity or representation, and the aesthetic beliefs and philosophical inclinations attached to these concepts. These debates occurred in a Western twentieth-century context that witnessed keen interest in the promises of contact represented by both the innovations of communication technology and their promises of self-effacing mediation, simulating co-extensive presence between individuals.

### Technology, “Presence” and “Relational Aesthetics”

In *Self-Portrait as Another Person* the recorded voice of the artist says: “I want to know all about you.” While portraits usually tell the viewer about the person depicted, here that person expresses the desire—through the portrait—to also know the viewer. The *portrait* is staged as a two-directional, intersubjective experience but of course it is unable to listen or truly dialogue with the viewer. Like the contemporaneous *Our World* broadcast it seems invested in the promise of dialogue mediated by then new technologies, recording even more of a live event and rendering a multi-sensory experience of simultaneous sound and image. This preoccupation with the ways in which recording, and communication technologies may accurately record events and the nature of obstacles to this accuracy had been documented a decade earlier in Claude Shannon and Warren Weaver’s 1951 seminal *Mathematical Theory of Communication* emerged. Although not dealing primarily with the fine arts or even with culture or society in general, this theory provides a convenient entry point into the pervasive debates surrounding the status of the mediated content in relation to liveness. The book is symptomatic of a twentieth-century technological drive to make knowable the distant, and to make seemingly present what would otherwise be absent. Shannon and Weaver’s theory reveals a set of expectations and problems surrounding mediated communication and as such finds itself to be relevant to many interrogations in the humanities surrounding the hermeneutic significance of material traces and their relationship to liveness.

Indeed, Shannon and Weaver identified three problems of communication: accuracy (the technical problem), precision (the semantic problem), and effectivity.<sup>54</sup> These are perhaps best

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<sup>54</sup> Claude Elwood Shannon and Warren Weaver, *The Mathematical Theory of Communication* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1964), 4.

summed up in diagram Shannon uses to describe noise, or the constitutive feature of all material mediation. While Shannon and Weaver's preoccupations were specific to a period of the twentieth century during which means of communications such as radio and the telephone rapidly evolved, they reflect concerns surrounding the role and ontology of media more broadly. Shannon's finding that noise was part and parcel of a medium finds an echo in critiques of material mediation dating back to antiquity. Indeed, Shannon's problems of communication repeat in a different form from those expressed in classical philosophy, for example most famously by Plato.

In *Phaedrus*, Socrates ponders the merits of living speech over writing. He recounts the invention of writing by the Egyptian god Thot and the invention's mixed reception by Thamus, the king of Egypt. Speaking of writing, Thot told the king: "Here is an accomplishment, my lord the king, which will improve both the wisdom and memory of the Egyptian. I have discovered a sure receipt for memory and wisdom."<sup>55</sup> To which the king replied:

You, who are the father of writing, have out of fondness for your offspring attributed to it quite the opposite of its real function. Those who acquire it will cease to exercise their memory and become forgetful; they will rely on writing to bring things to their remembrance by *external signs* instead of their own internal resources.<sup>56</sup> [My italics]

Writing is here seen as a *Pharmakon*, something which is at once a poison and a cure; it supplements memory by supplanting it. Most importantly, while it promises to bring the origin of

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<sup>55</sup> Plato, *Phaedrus and Letters VII-VIII* (New York: Penguin, 1973), 92.

<sup>56</sup> Ibid.

the writing to life, it can never account for the full presence of the writer, as Socrates explained, using the analogy of painting:

You know, Phaedrus, writing shares features with painting. The offspring of painting stands there as if they were alive, but if anyone asks them anything, they remain most solemnly silent. The same is true of written words. You'd think they were speaking as if they had some understanding, but if you question anything that has been said because you want to learn more, it continues to signify that very same thing forever."<sup>57</sup>

This insight tells us that the original context of the mediated content is incommensurably large and inherently contextual and can never be fully and comprehensively rendered by media. The medium is inherently opaque; it is forgetful. This limitation is the condition of possibility of material mediation. Socrates's idea about mediation is similar to Shannon & Weaver's theorisation of the constitutive nature of noise (or interference) in media, when he notes:

How does noise affect information? Information is, we must steadily remember, a measure of one's freedom of choice in selecting a message. The greater the freedom of choice, and hence the greater the information, the greater is the uncertainty that the message actually selected is some particular one. Thus greater freedom of choice, greater uncertainty, greater information go hand in hand. If noise is introduced, then the received message contains certain distortions, certain errors, certain extraneous material, that would

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<sup>57</sup> Plato's Socrates in John Durham Peters, *Speaking into the Air: A History of the Idea of Communication* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1999), 47.

certainly lead one to say that the received message exhibits, because of the effect of the noise, an increased uncertainty.<sup>58</sup>

As I later detail, this argument by Shannon, whose object of study was the concrete and tangible infrastructures of communication newly made widespread in his time, bears, in some respects, an unmistakable homology with aspects of J.L. Austin's speech act theory in the 1962 book *How To Do Things With Words*, and to the influential uptake and critique of Austin's theory by Jacques Derrida, which I noted in the previous chapter, were both highly influential in performance studies. The result of both Austin's notion of performativity and its uptake in the humanities became influential partly because they illuminated mechanisms of meaning making and the performance of subjectivity that enhanced analyses of representation by looking into instances in which meaning is the result of acts rather than pre-existing nature or original meaning. More importantly performativity informed the breakthrough in the understanding of gender most potently articulated in the work of Judith Butler who has defined gender as something other than an immutable biologically determinate fact arguing that "Gender reality is performative which means, quite simply, that it is real only to the extent that it is performed."<sup>59</sup>

Austin's theory of the performative focused on instances of spoken language which performed acts simply by being spoken, for example: "I do," in the context of a marriage ceremony.<sup>60</sup> Austin names statements such as these "performatives" and provisionally distinguishes them from "constatives utterance," which are statements that simply state a fact. He proposes that for a performative to be successful or "happy" it must occur within accepted

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<sup>58</sup> Shannon and Weaver, *The Mathematical Theory of Communication*, 18.

<sup>59</sup> Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble : Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* (New York: Routledge, 1990), 278–79.

<sup>60</sup> Austin, *How to Do Things with Words*, 8.

convention by qualified individuals and executed correctly. Moreover, the speaker must and must act accordingly.<sup>61</sup> From these rules, Austin draws a complex taxonomy of “infelicities” or ways in which a performative can fail.<sup>62</sup> He acknowledges ambiguities in his distinction between constatives and performatives, between true and false value and between happy and unfelicitous. If the performative “I apologize” is happy, he argues, it is then also true.<sup>63</sup> In other words, Austin shows us that by doing something with words we also make something true, shattering the distinction between performative and constative, even as he seeks to differentiate them.

Austin’s quest for an absolute criterion for the proper performative, such as the use of active first-person present tense sentences, brings him to distinguish three different acts accomplished by speech: the locutionary act, which is to utter meaning, the illocutionary act, which has a conventional force of warning or undertaking, and the perlocutionary act, which produces repercussions, for example, utterances meant to convince or dissuade.<sup>64</sup> These distinctions add precision to the ways in which most constatives also perform something and bring Austin to conclude that the theory distinguishing performatives from constatives can only be particular and not general, performatives only being successful with a particular context governed by convention.<sup>65</sup>

I want to further build on Derrida’s 1977 article “Signature Event Context” (which I introduced in the previous chapter). In it, Derrida proposes that Austin’s attempt to circumscribe a proper context for the felicitous performative is flawed. He starts from this discussion of the

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<sup>61</sup> Ibid., 9.

<sup>62</sup> Ibid., 14.

<sup>63</sup> Ibid., 45–46.

<sup>64</sup> Ibid., 94–99.

<sup>65</sup> Ibid., 14, 27.

context of the speech act to argue that every utterance, whether spoken or written, is always already uprooted from its context and susceptible of being performed again in infinite other contexts. This quality of language is what he terms “iterability.” Derrida begins by stating that semantic, conceptual, symbolic, and linguistic communication is not akin to physical communication in the form of transport, or motion by physical causality. He uses this semantic discussion of the word “communication” to untether acts of signification (spoken or written) from solidarity to their originating context and signified. Utterances are always already untethered from their context.

Derrida also strives to demonstrate that contexts are impossible to determine fully and that semantic communication creates context-contingent effects. Thus, as I previously noted, Derrida argues that both writing and speech exhibit the characteristic of always already breaking with their context and are able to be repeated in various contexts. This is what he terms “iterability.” He argues that iterability renders moot Austin’s assertion that performative utterances require a proper and determinable context to be fortuitous. Derrida proposes that

the structural possibility of being weaned from the referent or from the signified (hence from communication and from its context) seems to me to make every mark, including those which are oral, a grapheme in general; which is to say, as we have seen, the nonpresent *remainder* [restance] of a differential mark cut off from its putative “production” or origin. And I shall even extend this law to all “experience” in general if it is conceded that there is no experience consisting of *pure* presence but only chains of differential marks.<sup>66</sup>

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<sup>66</sup> Derrida, *Limited Inc*, 1988, 10.

If as Derrida contends, the graphematic features of writing can extend to all experience and there is no possibility of pure presence but only “chains of differential mark,” then these marks exist not only in speech and writing but inscribe themselves across a variety of other material and embodied means. Meanwhile Shannon and Weaver’s theory, by investigating the ways in which channels of communication are invariably subject to noise and distortion standing in the way of an idealised transparent and accurate medium, documents an historical drive to understand and perfect newfound communication technics aimed at replicating the effects of presence. Indeed, at the heart of Shannon’s theory is the question of the transparency or opacity of mediation and the material determinants of those qualities in media. Just as in Austin’s work, there is an attempt to define obstacles to an ideal or successful communicative action: for Shannon through telephony and for Austin through the case of infelicitous performatives. How accurately can the live event be transmitted, re-produced, conveyed to a distant correspondent? This preoccupation with efficacy in the face of all media’s fundamental shortcomings as forgetful tertiary repositories of content is precisely what worried Socrates, according to John Durham Peters, who notes:

Socrates provides a checklist of enduring anxieties that arise in response to transformations in the means of communication. Writing parodies live presence, it is inhumane, lacks interiority, destroys authentic dialogue, is impersonal, and cannot acknowledge the individuality of its interlocutors; and it is promiscuous in distribution. Such things have been said of printing, photography, phonography, cinema, radio, television, and computers.<sup>67</sup>

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<sup>67</sup> Peters, *Speaking into the Air*, 46.

Durham Peter has shown that these platonic anxieties have historically accompanied the emergence of every new communication medium. Many of these media have also become common place artistic media, photography, cinema, video, and computing for example. While I do not want to delve into the history of new media in art and their progressive critical acceptance as art forms, I want to briefly survey some of the critical reactions to the multiplication of new media in the late twentieth century. One such reaction to the emergence of digital media is exemplified in Nicolas Bourriaud's *Relational Aesthetics*, which advocates a rejection of mediated sociability and the practice of in-person social interactions:

These days, communications are plunging human contacts into monitored areas that divide the social bond up into (quite) different products. [...] We feel meagre and helpless when faced with the electronic media, theme parks, user-friendly places, and the spread of compatible forms of sociability, like the laboratory rat doomed to an inexorable itinerary in its cage, littered with chunks of cheese.<sup>68</sup>

In her 2004 critique of Bourriaud, Claire Bishop in "Antagonism and Relational Aesthetics" proposes that:

It is important to emphasize, however, that Bourriaud does not regard relational aesthetics to be simply a theory of interactive art. He considers it to be a means of locating contemporary practice within the culture at large: relational art is seen as a direct response to the shift from a goods to a service-based economy. It is also seen as a response to the virtual relationships of the Internet and globalization,

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<sup>68</sup> Bourriaud, *Relational aesthetics*, 8.

which on the one hand have prompted a desire for more physical and face-to-face interaction between people.<sup>69</sup>

There appears to be at the root of Bourriaud's relational incline more than an aesthetic preference for the phenomenality of in person interaction; as well, there is a genuine belief in presence and its transformative potential. Indeed, for Bourriaud, any art practice involving the art gallery as a gathering space is conducive to social dialogue arguing that:

art has always been relational in varying degrees, i.e. a factor of sociability and a founding principle of *dialogue* [my italics], Art (practices stemming from painting and sculpture which come across in the form of an exhibition) turn out to be particularly suitable when it comes to expressing this hands-on civilisation, because it *tightens the space of relations*, unlike TV and literature which refer each individual to his or her space of private consumption.<sup>70</sup>

This favouring of in person dialogue and communal experience of aesthetic experience is, I argue, in line with a historical longing for more primordial and seemingly unmediated contact that Durham Peters has, in Western thought, chronicled and traced to Plato (and that art discourse continually replicates):

Facing the new medium of writing, Plato was haunted by multiplication, a term that ought to be taken in its double sense of simple copying and sexual reproduction. Whereas oral speech almost invariably occurs as a singular event shared uniquely by the parties privy to the discussion, writing allows all manner of strange couplings: the distant influence the near, the dead speak to

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<sup>69</sup> Claire Bishop, "Antagonism and Relational Aesthetics," *October*, 110 (2004): 54.

<sup>70</sup> Bourriaud, *Relational aesthetics*, 15–16.

the living, and the many read what was intended for the few. Socrates' interpretation of the cultural and human significance of the new medium of writing is governed by worries about erotic perversion; writing disembodies thought, thus forging ghostly sorts of amatory and intellectual linkage. His sense that new media affect not only the channels of information exchange but the very embodiment of the human foreshadows similar anxieties in the nineteenth century, when the concept of "communication" first took its current shape.<sup>71</sup>

Extending Peters' argument further backward, Bourriaud's specific anxieties towards digital technologies and his manifesto for repairing the social bond through what we could see as a collective intimacy of people brought together in a gallery echoes the platonic distaste for the promiscuity, anonymity, and dislocations produced by material mediation, the latter seen as a poor and lacking simulacrum of togetherness and communion.

These longings for interpersonal and seemingly immediate (unmediated) contact where the "presence" of the speaker/writer/maker is guaranteed are historically set against the background of the emergence of a variety technical means, from radio to television, video and sound recording, internet enabled telepresence, and recently virtual reality, which have, since the early twentieth century, increasingly facilitated what Bernard Stiegler calls "the spatialisation of temporal experience," as well as the illusionistic sensory replication of co-presence. As noted by Stiegler, "*pharmakon* is tertiary retention and any tertiary retention whatever it may be is always a spatialisation of temporal experience."<sup>72</sup> This insight by Stiegler in some ways parallels

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<sup>71</sup> Peters, *Speaking into the Air*, 37.

<sup>72</sup> Bernard Stiegler, "The Participatory Condition Closing Keynote" delivered at The Participatory Condition conference, Montreal, 16 November 2013. As noted.

previous philosophical observations. At least since Henri Bergson observed the human tendency to conceptualize time as space through its subdivision into discrete units, there has been a multiplication of technical means exacerbating the spatialization of what the philosopher called *duration*, which he defines as

the form which the succession of our conscious states assumes when our ego lets itself *live*, when it refrains from separating its present state from its former states. For this purpose, it need not be entirely absorbed in the passing sensation or idea; for then, on the contrary it would no longer *endure*. Nor need it forget its former states: it is enough that, in recalling these states, it does not set them alongside its actual state as one point alongside another, but forms both the past and the present states into an organic whole, as happens when we recall the notes of a tune, melting, so to speak, into one another<sup>73</sup>

In one of the most compelling historicizations of the linking of time and space in technological development, Mary Ann Doane argues that “the rationalization of time characterizing industrialization and the expansion of capitalism was accompanied by a structuring of contingency and temporality through emerging technologies of representation—a structuring that attempted to ensure their residence outside structure, to make tolerable an incessant rationalization.”<sup>74</sup> This account of the impact the imperatives of capitalism have had on the acceleration of rationalization of temporality owes much to Bergson’s contention that humans have a tendency to spatialize psychic states which occur in discrete units as various magnitudes

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<sup>73</sup> Henri Bergson, *Time and Free Will: An Essay on the Immediate Data of Consciousness* (London: G. Allen & Co., 1950), 100.

<sup>74</sup> Mary Ann Doane, *The Emergence of Cinematic Time: Modernity, Contingency, the Archive* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2002), 11.

rather than apprehending them as fluctuations of intensity in an infinitely heterogeneous and qualitative duration because the mind delights thinking in terms of “clean cut distinctions, which are easily expressed in words”<sup>75</sup> Moreover, according to Bergson, Art, unlike nature, impresses or suggests feelings on us rather than expresses them.<sup>76</sup> The plastic arts suggest by the means of a the “physical contagion” of a complex and incommensurable feeling which, unlike mere sensations communicates more than the sensation itself.<sup>77</sup>

Feelings meant to be communicated run rife with innumerable other feelings and sensations and therefore, cannot be transmitted unmediated and in their fullness to the spectator. Moreover, this transmission is an embodied experience, a contagion, in which the viewer is attentive to bodily expressions, which he/she is likely to imitate, and by doing so breaks the barriers of time and space which separates her/him/them from accessing the intelligible emotions that the artist suggests.<sup>78</sup> In this Bergsonian model, the body is the medium, and just like in Shannon’s model, it can never fully account for the incommensurable context it is apprehending. With this in mind it is no surprise that in the late twentieth century some have attempted to sidestep this conundrum and posit that meaning is to be found literally in the social interaction between subjects. This is what Nicolas Bourriaud argues in *Relational Aesthetics*, a work that arguably emerged as a reaction to ubiquitous technological mediation. In proposing a “relational aesthetics” Bourriaud sought to licence a *pharmakon* (as both remedy and poison) to the ills of the social dislocation and technological alienation allegedly brought about by emerging means of communication. Bourriaud however seems more concerned about the social effects of this

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<sup>75</sup> Bergson, *Time and Free Will*, 9.

<sup>76</sup> Ibid., 15–17.

<sup>77</sup> Ibid., 15.

<sup>78</sup> Ibid., 17,18.

*pharmakon* of live art than in the modalities of meaning making it may involve, which I argue can be interrogated through the concept of performativity. I want to assert that the appeal of performativity as a concept cannot be historically understood outside prevalent platonic inclinations, including what Derrida termed the *metaphysics of presence*, which tend toward the idea of technologies of communications as undermining the social significance of in-person sociability as an indispensable setting for interpersonal exchange and social dialogue. By failing to trade in the optics of representation and debates surrounding its accuracy vis-à-vis its referents, performativity appears to short-circuit the conundrum of forgetful representation that Plato lamented with regards to writing; this led Roland Barthes to view photography as a “message without a code,” Shannon and Weaver to investigate the noise hindering the communication of signals, and Bourriaud to decry mediation by electronic media.<sup>79</sup>

Performativity does not short-circuit not because it allows for full presence as idealised by Plato and Bourriaud. Rather, it short-circuits because it is not beholden to representation’s task and aim of rendering a referent to which it indebted with great fidelity as a little noise as physically possible in a given medium. The difference between performativity and representation is the difference between things that happen and things that depict, things that do and things that mirror. In the following section, by comparing a work by Hershman Leeson to that of Dara Birnbaum, a contemporaneous feminist artist, I illustrate the ways in which Hershman Leeson’s use of a variety of media may be said to complicate this difference between the representationalist and performative *modus operandi*. Hershman Leeson’s body of work as a whole, I argue, confounds boundaries between liveness and mediation, performativity and representation.

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<sup>79</sup> Roland Barthes and Stephen Heath, *Image, music, text* (London: Fontana/Collins, 1977), 17.

### ***Lorna, Wonder Woman***

While trying to elucidate the ways in which Hershman Leeson creates and conveys meaning in her work, I want to focus on feminism, a motivating politics central to her practice and that I have already explored earlier when comparing her work to Judy Chicago's. Here I want to focus on Hershman Leeson's 1983-84 interactive installation *Lorna*, a work that stands at the intersection of Hershman Leeson's pioneering use of technologies and her articulation of a feminist narrative. I compare it to Birnbaum's use of video in her 1978-79

*Technology/Transformation Wonder Woman*.

Whereas *Lorna* was the first interactive artwork made as a video laser disc, Birnbaum's *Wonder Woman* video is a well-known critique of the representation of women in television and film. Birnbaum uses video to critique both the social role of television and its ideologically determined content. Her critique is rendered through subversion of the powerful effects of televisual grammar and the conventions of representation achieved through sampling, editing, repetition, and re-contextualisation. As T.J. Demos noted, since the 1970s, Birnbaum approached television with the same critical scrutiny that to cinema: "Birnbaum's frustration with prominent film criticism journal *Screen*'s inattention to television—and with Nauman's, Acconci's and Jonas's discounting of television's content—coupled with her growing awareness of semiological analysis of cinematic language led her to make a series of works between 1977 and 1986 that systematically investigated television's conventions."<sup>80</sup>

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<sup>80</sup> T. J. Demos, *Dara Birnbaum: Technology/Transformation: Wonder Woman* (London; Cambridge, Mass.: Afterall, 2010), 12.

In *Technology/Transformation Wonder Woman*, Birnbaum samples and edits key moments of a *Wonder Woman* television episode using rhythmic repetition to pull apart and critique stereotypical constructions of femininity. At the same time, Demos argues, Birnbaum's deconstruction of televisual content can be said to bear an allegiance to a Greenbergian belief in medium specificity: "Birnbaum would continue a certain Greenbergian modernist tendency, which entailed self-reflexively employing video to bring forth its essential and singular qualities as a medium—even, that is, if that involved challenging video's claim to being a medium, and instead considering it as a heterogenous assemblage of practices, institutions and conventions."<sup>81</sup> For critic Craig Owens, Birnbaum's video participated in "the long-overdue process of deconstructing femininity," according to which figures such as Wonder Woman were shown to correspond to "the Freudian trope of the narcissistic woman, or the Lacanian 'theme' of femininity as contained spectacle, which exists only as a representation of masculine desire."<sup>82</sup> In using video in the modernist self-reflexive way described by Demos, Birnbaum's critique is ultimately centered on the politics of representation and asks: who get to represent women, how, and in service of which political project? Birnbaum's *Wonder Woman* essentially seizes the means of representation, making the viewer aware of video and televisual grammar and their power.

A few years after Birnbaum produced this now iconic piece, Hershman Leeson produced *Lorna*, an interactive video work that required active participation from the viewer. Rather than astutely deconstruct and critique representational practices, as Birnbaum's piece does, *Lorna* is the result of another approach, one that invites the viewer to *perform* the relationship between the

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<sup>81</sup> Ibid., 15.

<sup>82</sup> Craig Owens in *ibid.*, 3.

medium, its depicted human subject, and the artist. A first of its kind, this installation was produced with the help of computer programmer Ann Marie Garti. The protagonist of this work is a woman named Lorna; she is agoraphobic, and prone to being indecisive. The viewer approaches her through a television monitor which is installed in a room resembling Lorna's own apartment as depicted in the television. By using the remote and interacting with the video, the viewer can see that every object in Lorna's apartment is numbered and every time the user selects one of these objects using a remote control, new information about Lorna's psyche is revealed. Lorna is a subject entirely beholden to the power of the medium she inhabits to determine her actions. Both Lorna's actions and the user's experience of them is determined by the user within the finite set of possibilities determined by the limits of the medium deployed. There is also a voyeuristic element since by using the remote control the viewer is able to view various perspectives on Lorna's past and future life.<sup>83</sup> Although interacting with Lorna can produce multiple life trajectories determined by choices made by the viewer, the narrative culminates in three possible endings: Lorna either moves to Los Angeles, shouts at the television, or commits suicide.

The comparison of *Lorna* and Birnbaum's *Wonder Woman* reveals a fundamental difference in the use of media by the two artists. While Hershman Leeson's work uses media in a way that demands that it is performed by the spectator (who thus cannot remain uninvolved), *Wonder Woman* is a video-based critique of the politically pacifying effects of representation for a passive audience. *Wonder Woman* is thus what Birnbaum called "television on television."<sup>84</sup> By contrast, *Lorna* can only be understood through user-generated actions, actions which

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<sup>83</sup> Lynn Hershman "Private I: An Investigator's Timeline" Hershman-Leeson and Held, *The Art and Films of Lynn Hershman Leeson Secret Agents, Private I*, 77.

<sup>84</sup> Dara Birnbaum in Demos, *Dara Birnbaum*, 15.

produce different effects on the viewer. The interplay of the diegetic actions of Lorna (the fictional character) and the inclinations of the viewer together intra-act to perform meaning.

This comparison elucidates the difference between media as content/representation and media as the instrument of a performative practice, between approaching media through representationalism and approaching it through performativity. When Dara Birnbaum made *Technology/Transformation Wonder Woman*, the medium of television was at the zenith of its power over culture and the time of viewers. Whereas Birnbaum's work may be said to sample moments of television content in a way as to make us aware of the medium itself, and to allow a critical examination of it, it also aestheticizes the facture of television's rendition of liveness. It is consistent with contemporaneous criticism of unidirectional mass media and their impact on its viewers. As Birnbaum herself noted:

When I started with *Technology/ Transformation: Wonder Woman* in '78, the average American family was watching television some seven hours and twenty minutes a day, according to the Nielsen Ratings. Imagery was constantly coming at us, but it was hard to take hold of it. Early works were, as people referred to them, appropriations and deconstructions—attempts to grab at relatively inaccessible imagery to 'talk back to the media.'<sup>85</sup>

As I noted earlier, in *Lorna*, Leeson engages with television in a different way, a way in which everyone—maker, person within the image, viewer/user— is implicated. Lorna's diegetic relationship to the television is replicated by the viewer's relationship to the television in

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<sup>85</sup> Lauren Cornell, "IN THE STUDIO: DARA BIRNBAUM," *Art in America* 104, no. 5 (2016): 142.

the installation. Lorna, the character and her television resemble a *mise-en-abyme* in the installation, the only difference being that Lorna is subject to the will of viewer. She is placed in circuit both with the medium containing her and the body of the viewer.

The constraints put upon Lorna and staged in this work echo societal expectations placed upon women of that period. In 1851, Daniel Wise codified patriarchal social expectations of women in a treatise titled “Home is a Woman’s World, as well as her Empire. Man lives more in society. The busy marts of trade, the bustling exchange, the activities of artisan life, are his spheres.”<sup>86</sup> More than a century later, in the 1990s, the social norms crystallised by Wise still lingered. For example, a study concluded more than a decade after the making of *Lorna* found that 70% of white college-educated men strongly believed “that mothers should be in the home and not have a choice regarding infant care.”<sup>87</sup> Lorna is confined in a domestic realm, traditionally the space women were expected to devote themselves to while men went out into the world of salaried work.

### ***Roberta Breitmore: A Work of Life***

Much like the impact these patriarchal forces have had on generations of women, Lorna’s destiny is controlled by outside forces constitutive to her relationship to the outside world. She lacks agency and is the subject of a voyeuristic gaze. Rather than depict this predicament simply in a fictional narrative, it is conveyed through the actions of viewers who become the active agents of the piece. The constraints placed upon the character of Lorna echo those represented by

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<sup>86</sup> Daniel Wise in Lesley Lazin Novack and David R Novack, "Being Female in the Eighties and Nineties: Conflicts between New Opportunities and Traditional Expectations among White, Middle Class, Heterosexual College Women," *Sex Roles Sex Roles : A Journal of Research* 35, no. 1–2 (1996): 57.

<sup>87</sup> Ibid., 67.

Martha Wilson in the contemporaneous work, the 1974 *Portfolio of Models*, a series of photographs of the artist dressed and performing six social archetypes of Western womanhood: the goddess, the housewife, the working girl, the earth-mother, and the lesbian. Each photograph is accompanied by a text describing the lifestyle and social position of the type depicted. As a prologue to the series of photographs, Wilson provides a rationale for the work and her artistic practice: "These are the models society holds out to me: Goddess, Housewife, Working Girl, Professional, Earth-Mother, Lesbian. At one time or another, I have tried them all on for size, and none has fit. All that's left to do is be an artist and point the finger at my own predicament. The artist operated out of the vacuum left when all other values are rejected."<sup>88</sup> Wilson's approach of performing archetypes of contemporary womanhood through photographic media and text differs significantly from what Hershman was doing at the same time in projects such as *Roberta Breitmore*. Whereas Wilson systematically documents the various stereotypes she depicts, the latter only exists for the duration of the photo shoot and were meant not as documents of liveness but props for a final photographic project. In contrast, photography is incidental to Hershman's project which consisted of the artist taking on the identity of her invented persona.

If we are to follow Philip Auslander typology of performance documentation I cited in the previous chapter, Wilson's photograph would fall under his category of theatrical documentation.<sup>89</sup> Meanwhile, *Roberta Breitmore*—the years-long performance by Hershman Leeson I discussed in Chapter One—rather than simply being a staged representation of

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<sup>88</sup> Martha Wilson and Independent Curators International., *Martha Wilson Sourcebook : 40 Years of Reconsidering Performance, Feminism, Alternative Spaces* (New York: Independent Curators International, 2011), 40.

<sup>89</sup> Auslander, "The Performativity of Performance Documentation," 1–10.

femininity or womanhood consisted in the artist living as a young, single woman in 1970s San Francisco. Again, following Auslander's model, Wilson's *Portfolio of Models* would belong, in contrast, to the theatrical type of documentation, where the document is not simply a by-product of the work but the work itself. Hershman's life as Roberta Breitmore resulted in the production of a wide variety of documents including a driver's license and chequebook and photographs of her attending dates or simply waiting for the bus. Among these documents of Hershman's life as Roberta Breitmore is a newspapers' classifieds ad Roberta put out in 1975 reading: "WOMAN, Cauc. seeks bright companion to share rent & interests..." The encounters with the men who replied to Breitmore's ad were documented, unbeknown to them, both by an audio recording of their meetings and by photographs of the two meeting in public spaces. The correspondence between Breitmore and these men was also kept. Moreover, Breitmore's correspondence with a psychiatrist and the report from his evaluation record Hershman's existence as Roberta Breitmore. Rather than the tongue-in-cheek typology of femininity of Wilson's *Portfolio of Models*, *Roberta Breitmore* as a work of life itself and exists today through a variety of documents produced with different media, from different vantage points. Whereas the *Portfolio of Models* uses photography—a medium prized for its accuracy—to create iconic types, whose rigidity as social categories are echoed in photography's apparent freezing of time into discrete material units, the documents resulting from *Roberta Breitmore* tell a different story. The *Portfolio of Models* is the result of a vertically integrated production chain beginning with a list of models, a staged scene, a directorial choice of composition, the capturing of a photograph and the printing and viewing of a single definitive photograph for each archetype represented. In its format, the portfolio seems to be borrowing the format of the encyclopedic entry of medieval bestiary of mythical creatures. It parodies the rampant social labelling of women and the

stereotypes associated with them. For example, the entry for the Goddess reads: “Her presence is felt by both men and women, and every member of society past the age of five is aware of her. She is the fashion-model archetype, and implicit image of reference. She always looks perfect. She also smells wonderful at all times. She has ‘sex-appeal.’ However, she is asexual. We look but don’t imagine. Whether she is intelligent is irrelevant.”

Wilson’s portfolio foretells the emergence in the 1980s of explicitly feminist, image and text-based interventions, such as the Guerrilla Girls’ various campaigns. For example, in their 1989 advert style poster they stated: “Do women have to get naked to get into the Met. Museum? Less than 5% of the artists in the Modern Art Sections are women, but 85% of the nudes are female.” This exposed the fact the art favoured by museums and the art market still catered to the male gaze, and provided very little space for female artists to participate in the art world and control their own narrative. This poster aimed to make visible facts about the invisibility of women artists in art institutions and the art market. As a campaign, the work of the Guerrilla Girls is preoccupied with Shannon’s third problem of communication, its effectivity: “How effectively does the received meaning affect conduct in the desired way?”<sup>90</sup> The articulation of feminism in Hershman Leeson’s work stands in contrast to both Wilson’s playful taxonomy and the Guerilla Girls’ explicit demands for representation and discourse mobilising a variety of facts about inequities in the art world. In *Roberta Breitmore*, Hershman carefully crafted a persona and lived her life. The documents resulting are eminently random despite careful planning. Attention to composition or aesthetic effects are not relevant. This is the case of photographs taken of Roberta’s dates by a private eye she hired. The variety of media used to document Roberta’s life and the numerous artifacts remaining—Roberta’s wig and jacket are preserved at

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<sup>90</sup> Shannon and Weaver, *The Mathematical Theory of Communication*, 11.

the Whitworth Gallery of Art—produces a palimpsest in which Roberta might be said to exist and endure. The comprehensive distribution of Roberta documents across this vast field of media matches the all-encompassing aspects of crafting the life of Roberta. Among these documents are the purported blood and urine samples of Roberta. They are kept in a temperature-controlled part of the Whitworth Gallery of Art's archive at the University of Manchester alongside Roberta's glasses, an audio cassette of Roberta's voice, two badges which read "ROBERTA LIVES (inside me)," These four objects kept together point to the eyes, the body, the voice and the "soul" of Roberta. The exact nature of the samples is unclear. Archives staff confirmed to me the blood and urine samples which at first appear to be genuine are simulated. Nothing of these traces of Roberta contains even a trace of Roberta Breitmore. They are, to borrow Derrida's language, weaned from an original context that we know to be unascertainable. As they perform this unknowability, they cannot help but produce the effect of feeling as though they could allow for coming into contact with something absent, transcending both absence and time. In this dramatic fashion, they perform and highlight the properties of all forms of writing and the hopes associated with them.

## **Conclusion**

Hershman's use of media and live performance stand out from the work of her contemporaries through its performative rather than simply representationalist approach. Hershman's use of multi-media in *Self Portrait as Another Person* reveals longings that representation alone cannot deliver. I have situated this approach historically in relation to other prominent American feminist artists and pervasive twentieth-century expectations about the role of media as politically transformative technologies connecting individuals. I have also showed

how, by going beyond art historical and modernist conceptualisations of media, and by considering the long history and theories surrounding the effects and ontology of material mediation, Hershman's performance *Roberta Breitmore* and performative uses of communication technology differ from the strategies touted in Bourriaud's account of relational aesthetics and the negative view of mediation that Bourriaud expressed therein.

*Roberta Breitmore*, as a work of life of which a palimpsest of "documents" remains, with different relations to the context of they purport to conserve, from audio recordings to simulated bodily fluids, short-circuits both the paradigms of representation as documentation and breaks with the paradigm of visibility politics espoused by her contemporaries such as Martha Wilson. While *Roberta Breitmore* and *Self Portrait as an Another Person* rely on performativity and the impossibility for material traces or media to compel full presence, they nonetheless foreground the body of the artist through the manifestations of the affective qualities of the voice. As I discuss in the following chapter, the inflection of "Roberta"'s voice in audio recordings of her encounters with men participate in the portrayal of her subjectivity.

## Chapter Three

### How to Do Things with Life: The Life-like and Performativity as the Mimesis of Grace as Agency

“With an anxiety that almost amounted to agony, I collected the instruments of life around me, that I might infuse a spark of being into the lifeless thing that lay at my feet. It was already one in the morning; the rain pattered dismally against the panes, and my candle was nearly burnt out, when, by the glimmer of the half-extinguished light, I saw the dull yellow eye of the creature open; it breathed hard, and a convulsive motion agitated its limbs.”<sup>91</sup>

Mary Shelley, *Frankenstein*, 1823.

This chapter investigates the aesthetic appeal of the life-like and its political dimensions through an analysis of Hershman Leeson’s engagement with live performance, artificial intelligence and genetic manipulations throughout her career. The works discussed coincide with a historical period marked by the development of new communication technologies, such as the internet, as well as video (analogue then digital), and the pre-eminence of television and its content. All these media are united by their perceived ability to re-create the effects of the life-like, to resemble the live, and to portray the likeness of living bodies with ever greater image resolution, e.g., with each generation of television sets. By life-like, I mean attempts in any medium to convey the feeling that an object resembles or behaves as living being would. This is different from mere attempts to render likeness in a portrait where the inertness of the medium is taken for granted and is expected to be mirroring a clearly identified referent or sitter. The life-like is a different kind of illusionistic approach that performs the phenomenality of living bodies

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<sup>91</sup> Mary Shelley in Graham Allen, *Shelley’s Frankenstein* (London, United Kingdom: Bloomsbury Publishing, 2008), 59.

either by resembling them or appearing to behave or “think” like them. Hershman Leeson employs this strategy in several works. These works are not static; they unfold in time, which is how they effectively capture the life-like. I frame my discussion of the Hershman Leeson’s performative use of various media in an analysis of contemporaneous debates in aesthetics. In the previous chapter, I discussed the ways in which the pioneering use of recording and communication technologies relates to the historical development of technical tools meant to replicate the fullness of the live interpersonal experience. In this chapter, I focus on how impressions of the life-like are performed in Hershman Leeson’s work and their relationship to contemporaneous aesthetic debates. I draw on the philosophy of information, aesthetics, and the notion of performativity to demonstrate how the use of material media can be said to be participating in a historically specific development of aesthetic strategies. I trace the manifestations of the life-like in Hershman’s work and the technical means used to achieve it in *Deep Contact* (1989), *Olympia: Fictive Projections and the Myth of the Real Woman* (2008), *The Difference Engine* (1995-1998), *Agent Ruby* (2002), and *The Dante Hotel* (1973). Meanwhile, I draw on the work of Bergson, Derrida, Kant, Michael Fried, and Luciano Floridi to explore the relationships among mimesis, performativity, and technology to better understand how Hershman Leeson’s use of technology can be viewed as performative. I then focus on an aspect of the artist’s *Roberta Breitmore* project—the recording of a telephone conversation made by Roberta—to show how the human voice and recording technologies come together not only to communicate symbolic, or semantic content, but also to perform meaning. As with many works relying on media invented in the twentieth century (video, videogames), Hershman Leeson’s make no explicit aesthetic claims and are not usually viewed as soliciting a Kantian aesthetic judgement centered upon the idea of the beautiful. It is by putting into contact aesthetics with the

philosophy of information—whose object of study are many technologies used by Hershman Leeson (artificial intelligence, cybernetics, genetics)—that I historically situate the artist's approach relative to contemporaneous technological developments and the work of her peers.

This framework is key to demonstrating the performative *modus operandi* of her work and to making a more rigorous argument about the ways in which technology may be said to be performative in many of the artist's pieces. The distinction made by theorist Karen Barad between performativity and representationalism, discussed in Chapter One, allows me to present the two as different strategies of performing the life-like. Barad proposed that “performativity is most properly understood as a contestation of the unexamined habits of mind that grant language and other forms of representation more power in determining our ontologies than they deserve.”<sup>92</sup> It is based on that distinction that I investigate Hershman's reliance on performativity in her use of bodies, new media, as well as the tension between both approaches in Hershman's films.

Reclining on a chaise longue draped with a white sheet, a sex doll in the image of a female human, wearing nothing but silver high heels shoes, a choker necklace, and a flower in her hair, looks out toward a projector placed in front of her. The image projected on her silicone body is that of the representation of Victorine Meurent as Olympia depicted in oil paint in 1863 by Edouard Manet in *Olympia*. The historical context in which Olympia/Meurent emerged, although different from that of the sex doll, is nevertheless similarly steeped in the commodification of women's bodies. The image of the nineteenth-century Parisian female prostitute is superimposed onto the pale silicon skin of the California-made sex doll. This is Lynn Hershman's 2008 *Olympia: Fictive Projections and the Myth of the Real Woman*, a

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<sup>92</sup> Barad, *Meeting the Universe Halfway*, 133.

multimedia installation consisting of a 35mm slide of Manet's painting, a slide projector, a RealDoll silicone doll and various fabrics.

### **Hershman Leeson's *Olympia*, *Teknolust*, *Agent Ruby* and *Dante Hotel***

Manet's *Olympia* visualises two ways the female body is objectified and the power structures that enable objectification: first, it is a female nude made for the consumption of the male viewer, and second, it refers to the high number of women who found employment as sex workers in nineteenth-century Paris. Of course, these two forms commodification of the female body and its image persist today. The sex doll used in Hershman Leeson's *Olympia* is the latest iteration of the commodification of the female body and its image. The aim of the doll, according to its maker is not only to provide clients with a realistic representation of a sexualized, conventionally attractive, female body, but also to fashion a doll—lacking both personhood and agency—that behaves sexually in a way that mirrors, as accurately as possible, the experience of sexual activity with a real, live woman. Speaking to George Gurley of *Vanity Fair* about sex dolls, Matt McMullan, the founder of the RealDoll company explained “Well, the idea, the goal, the fantasy there, is to bring her to life, ultimately.”<sup>93</sup>

Deployed in Hershman's work, the silicone doll (one of many, widely distributed, such dolls) only resembles the living through its three-dimensional presence and the space it occupies. It does not appear more alive than a sculpture of the human figure. Indeed, it is not capable of autonomous motion, and while stationary it appears more rigid than a living body would at rest. Unlike a classical bronze sculpture, however, it can be bent and moved easily and its silicone

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<sup>93</sup> Matt McMullan in George Gurley, "Is This the Dawn of the Sexbots? (NSFW)," *Vanity Fair*, accessed 9 December 2019, <https://www.vanityfair.com/culture/2015/04/sexbots-realdoll-sex-toys>.

material, while attempting to replicate the texture of skin, also bares resemblance to skin complexion, in this case, that of a white woman. The doll is not unique. It is one of many identical iterations sold around the world for the purpose of sex, marching towards the ultimate horizon of life-like female body evoked by their creator. No longer simply an allusion to a sexually available female body, the sex doll's rendition of the life-like would be physically implicated in sex acts between a live person and an inanimate human-resembling object (what could be more life-like than sex?).

Hershman Leeson's installation, rather than depicting a person, is augmenting a painting to which it pays homage by rendering the latter's fictional character for which Manet's favourite muse Victorine Meurent posed.<sup>94</sup> *Olympia: Fictive Projections and the Myth of the Real Woman* chases its ultimate referent across multiple layers of media. Nevertheless, Hershman Leeson's *Olympia* in this three-dimensional form appears rigid, as if holding a pose, as if forever caught in the act of embodying Manet's *Olympia* in the form of a silicone effigy of a French art icon. Lynn Hershman Leeson's work as a whole takes place in this liminal space between representing and performing, as I expand upon below. A few years before she pursued the subject of *Olympia*, the replication of life and the life-like was a leitmotiv in Hershman Leeson's work. For example, the ability to seize the means of life-making is featured in the artist's 2002 science fiction film *Teknolust*. In what has been described as a "digital-age Frankenstein tale,"<sup>95</sup> the film features the British actress Tilda Swinton, who plays a geneticist named Rosetta Stone who has cloned herself. Her three clones live in isolation and are named after the three colours used to render

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<sup>94</sup> Eunice. Lipton, *Alias Olympia: A Woman's Search for Manet's Notorious Model & Her Own Desire* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1992), 3.

<sup>95</sup> Robin Held, "Forward: Hershmanlandia," in *The Art and Films of Lynn Hershman Leeson: Secret Agents, Private I*, ed. Meredith Tromble (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2005), xv.

images on a computer screen: Ruby (red), Marine (blue), and Olive (green). Of the three clones, Ruby is the one who interacts most with the outside world. She also manifests herself on the Internet in the form of Agent Ruby on the “E-Dream portal” saying phrases such as: “I can teach you to dream, click my icons, emote from your remote. Evolve with me, let’s e-dream together.” Since the clones lack a Y chromosome, Ruby seduces men whose semen she extracts, the fluid apparently being vital to the survival of the clones. Ruby’s interactions with those men leaves them impotent, with a barcode scar on their forehead while their personal computers’ hard drives fail.<sup>96</sup>

This plot conflates computers (machines) with bodies; human bodies are scarred by their intercourse with machine generated bodies (Ruby, Marine, and Olive) who awkwardly attempt to shed their machine-like behavior and adopt the traits of their organically generated human peers. The production and reproduction of life itself across various biological and technological spheres is the crux of *Teknolust*. As noted by critic Robin Held:

*Teknolust* deals provocatively with contemporary issues of fragmented identity in cyberspace, cloning, the future of artificial life, our shifting notion of the real and the virtual, and the changing relationship between and machines. But ultimately it tells an individual story of love and reproduction: Ruby falls in love with Sandy, an incompetent print-shop employee. She is a copy; he makes copy, however ineptly. By the movie’s end, Rudy and Sandy are happily anticipating the birth of their first child.<sup>97</sup>

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<sup>96</sup> Ibid., xiv.

<sup>97</sup> Ibid., xv.

Beyond its depiction of assertive and empowered female characters, *Teknolust*, with its promethean undertones and its foregrounding of computing, is woven into a feminist genealogy that includes Mary Shelley and Ada Byron. Hershman Leeson directed *Conceiving Ada* (1999) to explore the latter innovator of computer logic. In this film, technology built by women allows one ground-breaking female scientist—the main protagonist Emmy—to communicate through time with another, Ada Byron, Countess of Lovelace, who collaborated with Charles Babbage on the first computer and is said to have written the first computer program.<sup>98</sup>

As noted by Marsha Kinder, the countess may be thought of as the “first fusion in history between feminism and computer programming.”<sup>99</sup> In *Conceiving Ada*, armed with a sample of the Countess’ DNA, Emmy works to compel her back to life, to live inside the computer. In this film, as in *Teknolust* or the *Olympia* installation, a feminist performativity is at work that, as in Shelley’s *Frankenstein*, asserts agency over bodies, through the manipulation of biology. *Teknolust* and *Conceiving Ada* are part of a body of work concerned with the life-like and rendered in a wide variety of media. Hershman Leeson’s innovations in making use of unconventional media for art making began in the 1970s. For example, with *Lorna* (1983-84) the artist produced the first interactive videodisc (an ancestor of the DVD), discussed in Chapter One, and *Deep Contact* (1989) features a touch screen—decades before the widespread use of touch screens on smart phones and computers—through which the audience interacted with the work.

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<sup>98</sup> Sharon Lin Tay, "Conceiving Ada, Conceiving Feminist Possibilities in the New Mediascape," *Women: A Cultural Review* 18, no. 2 (1 August 2007): 1.

<sup>99</sup> Marsha Kinder, "A Cinema of Intelligent Agents: Conceiving Ada and Teknolust," in *The Art and Films of Lynn Hershman Leeson: Secret Agents, Private I*, ed. Meredith Tromble (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2005), 173.

In *Deep Contact*, drawing on the potential of reproductive technologies, viewers are invited to enter a form of tactile intimacy with the work's virtual protagonist named Marion.<sup>100</sup> From 1995 to 1998 Hershman Leeson worked on *The Difference Engine #3*, an installation of networked robots. The work's title echoes the work of nineteenth-century mathematician Charles Babbage's difference engine, the blueprints for the world's first computer.<sup>101</sup> The blueprint took the form of a model engine, displayed in 1833 after ten years of work and treated as a curiosity, as noted by Martin Campbell-Kelly and William Asprey:

Babbage displayed this model in the drawing room of his London home, where he liked to use it as a conversation piece for his fashionable soirees. The great majority of visitors were incapable of understanding what the machine could do; but one exception was Ada Byron, daughter of the poet. A young gentlewoman aged about eighteen, Ada had developed an interest in mathematics when such a calling was very unusual in a woman.<sup>102</sup>

Hershman Leeson's *Difference Engine #3* (1995-1998), commissioned by the Zentrum für Kunst und Medientechnologie Museum in Karlsruhe, Germany, is built upon a Virtual Reality Modeling Language (VRML) rendering of the museum: "Rather than functioning simply as a *representation* of the physical museum, however, it is a space animated by its visitors" (italics

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<sup>100</sup> Ibid.

<sup>101</sup> Steve Dietz, "Animating the Network," in *The Art and Films of Lynn Hershman Leeson: Secret Agents, Private I*, ed. Meredith Tromble (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2005), 193.

<sup>102</sup> Martin Campbell-Kelly, *Computer: A History of the Information Machine* (Boulder, Colorado: Westview Press, a member of the Perseus Books Group, 2014). Note is not consistent with mention of Asprey in text

added).<sup>103</sup> While webcams made the visitors' images and motions available on the internet, where users were able to journey virtually through the museum, *The Difference Engine #3*, stood as a gateway bringing together the actions of viewers/bodies dispersed in space. On-site cameras would identify assign each visitor an avatar based on their visual characteristics and track the visitor's/avatar's trajectory through the physical space of the exhibition; meanwhile online users could create an avatar to explore the virtual space of the exhibition and make its trajectory match that of avatars/viewers present in the physical gallery space.<sup>104</sup>

This kind of intertwining of virtual and physical presence presaged the ways in which individuals following this work in the coming decades would come into contact with one another through the internet. The work is consistent with the possibilities of disembodied communication as a trope that accompanied the development of the internet and expanded with the innovations of email and social media. While working at the European Centre for Nuclear Research (CERN) Tim Berners-Lee, began publicising it in the early 1990s with CERN making the codes for the World Wide Web royalty free, in the San Francisco Bay Area, computer industry professionals used modems to participate in the Whole Earth 'Letronic Link (WELL) Bulletin Board System, imagined as an utopic virtual community that facilitated professional networking.<sup>105</sup> Among these users was journalist Howard Rheingold who also imagined a utopic potential for the WELL that would strengthen democracy and improve dialogue between individuals. These ideals, Michael Stevenson notes, have been invoked more than a decade later by social media giant

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<sup>103</sup> Dietz, "Animating the Network," 193.

<sup>104</sup> Lynn Hershman, "Difference Engine #3," *Leonardo* 32, no. 4 (1999): 269–70.

<sup>105</sup> Michael Stevenson, "From Hypertext to Hype and Back Again: Exploring the Roots of Social Media in Early Web Culture," in *SAGE Handbook of Social Media* (London: Sage Publications Ltd, 2017), 5, [https://sk.sagepub.com/reference/the-sage-handbook-of-social-media?utm\\_source=ss360&utm\\_medium=discovery-provider](https://sk.sagepub.com/reference/the-sage-handbook-of-social-media?utm_source=ss360&utm_medium=discovery-provider).

Facebook during its emergence.<sup>106</sup> Writing in 2000 about the experience of interacting with others on WELL, Rheingold insisted: “people in virtual communities do just about everything people do in real life, but we *leave our bodies behind* [my italics].”<sup>107</sup> Hershman Leeson’s *Difference Engine #3*, while emerging from the same context of cybernetic technological development, does not leave the body behind, to the contrary. This interactive computer-based installation unfolding by taking its cues from the visual characteristics and motions of bodies, and proposes an alternative utopia, weaving bodies to electronic hardware and promising a “digital absorption and spiritual transformation of the body.”<sup>108</sup> Both Rheingold and Hershman Leeson’s vision of the transformative potential of then emerging communication technologies belong to a late-twentieth-century historical phenomenon that sought to expand the horizon of possibilities for these technologies. Indeed, in *Speaking Into the Air: A History of the Idea of Communication*, John Durham Peters argues that every development in communication technologies has been met by both suspicion and utopic longing for the expansion of the concept of communication itself:

A concept arising from settings in which the human presence was shielded or mediated, “communication” has invited novel adventures of contact with particularly enigmatic others—animals, extraterrestrials, machines, texts, God—in short, any “being” that gives signs of, or simulate intelligence. As the presence of the human body became increasingly irrelevant for “communication,” new and alien candidates to communicate with have offered

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<sup>106</sup> Ibid., 6.

<sup>107</sup> Howard Rheingold in *ibid.*, 5.

<sup>108</sup> “Digital Art Archive,” n.d., <https://www.digitalartarchive.at/database/general/work/difference-engine-3.html>.

themselves to our fellowship, since the Second World War. Communication is perhaps the ultimate border concept, traversing the bounds of species, machines, even divinity.<sup>109</sup>

This idea of expanding the means of communication between individuals and between individuals and the non-human (e.g., computers), which Durham Peters evokes, resonates in Hershman Leeson's preoccupation with life and its manifestations, from the illusion of the evocation of the life-like female body in *Olympia: Fictive Projections and the Myth of the Real Woman* to the life of the artist as Roberta Breitmore discussed in Chapter Two, and the genetic manipulation in the storyline of *Teknolust*. It is not only that many works such as the *Difference Engine #3* and *Lorna* are interactive or necessitate actions from their viewers, but also it is that they perform the transgressive introduction of the life-like into new material and media realms in much the same way Ruby's character engages in genetics and cloning and the protagonist of Shelley's *Frankenstein* ruptures the finitude of life by reimagining what a live body may be like. They also contribute to putting to rest any notion of discreteness of subjectivities, through performances in which every agency is always already enmeshed in determining circumstances, a topic that I explore more fully in Chapter Four in relation to Hershman Leeson's *First Person Plural* film and Karen Barad's notion of agential realism. Durham Peters historization of the communication as "the ultimate border concept, traversing the bounds of species, machines"<sup>110</sup> finds an illustration in an interactive work by Hershman Leeson, in which viewers communicate with life-like computer agents. This is the case in *Agent Ruby* (2002-) in which the artist exploited the potential of the internet to work with simulated liveness through artificial

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<sup>109</sup> Peters, *Speaking into the Air*, 228.

<sup>110</sup> Ibid.

intelligence. The work suggested and illustrated a new frontier of potential communication. It is in line with the post-World War II drive to expand the reach of communication to a variety of spheres which Durham Peters documented.<sup>111</sup> At the same time, it is pioneering in its use of technology, employing artificial intelligence years before it became pervasive in our everyday life. *Agent Ruby* is the online manifestation of Ruby, the character from *Teknolust*. The website on which she still resides to this day is a bridge between the diegetic world of the fictional character and the realm inhabited by its viewer.<sup>112</sup> More importantly, developed with software engineers, Hershman Leeson asserts that *Agent Ruby* is an early example of “self-breeding autonomous artificial intelligence Web agent shaped by encounters with users.”<sup>113</sup> This description encapsulates both the promethean leitmotif of Hershman Leeson’s practice and the relational or performative enfolding of many of her pieces.

In designing Ruby, Hershman Leeson notes that she intended the avatar to learn from the accumulation of data resulting from interactions with users while being aware of current events simultaneous to those interactions, hence replicating a defining feature of human intelligence, namely the ability to learn from others and from situations.<sup>114</sup> Accessing the interface today, it is apparent that *Agent Ruby* encapsulates the era in which she was conceived; for example, when asked who the president of the United States is, in 2019, she replies: “George W. Bush is the president, I think.”

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<sup>111</sup> Ibid.

<sup>112</sup> *Agent Ruby* can be accessed at the San Francisco Museum of Art website at this URL: <http://agentruby.sfmoma.org/>

<sup>113</sup> Lynn Hershman Leeson, "Private I: An Investigator's Timeline," in *The Art and Films of Lynn Hershman Leeson: Secret Agents, Private I*, ed. Meredith Tromble (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2005), 92.

<sup>114</sup> Ibid., 94.

*Agent Ruby* can be viewed as a digital creature of Frankenstein<sup>115</sup>, a pioneering work that is symptomatic of a late-twentieth-century belief that increased machine intelligence would one day mean machine consciousness. As noted by neuroscientist Christof Koch in *The Feeling of Life Itself: Why Consciousness Cannot Be Computed*: “The basic tenet of today’s dominant faith, its zeitgeist, is that digital, programmable computers can, in the fullness of time, simulate anything, including human-level intelligence and consciousness.”<sup>116</sup> Koch argues in contrast that, while intelligence and consciousness are often equated as one and the same, they are two different things. Consciousness is about experience and being and intelligence are about doing.<sup>117</sup> In this way, as much as *Ruby* can simulate the effects of a conversation and display a level of intelligence, the avatar itself is not conscious and exists as an image of life rather than life itself. While *Agent Ruby* can at first glance be seen as an agent itself and hence capable of performing meaning, it remains a representation, a simulation of agency in computational mode. This is in keeping with Hershman Leeson’s intertwining of performativity and representationalism in evoking liveness throughout her work. In *Agent Ruby*, an image of liveness is performed through the persona of Ruby and importantly, the thoughts of the living subjects interacting with the piece are turned into the discrete semantic units, first of words and then of computer code. Information gathered or surrendered by these subjects powers the performance of the life-like that is *Agent Ruby*; as I noted earlier the piece’s artificial intelligence algorithm, learns from its interactions with users. Through this structure enabling performative actions, every interaction influences future ones.

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<sup>115</sup> From Mary Shelley’s famous 1818 novel *Frankenstein; or, The Modern Prometheus*.

<sup>116</sup> Christof Koch, *The Feeling of Life Itself: Why Consciousness Is Widespread but Can’t Be Computed* (Cambridge, Mass.: The MIT Press, 2019), xiii.

<sup>117</sup> *Ibid.*, 141.

Computer technologies are not the only means through which Hershman Leeson has played with the life-like. *Dante Hotel* (1974), for example, was a nine-month-long installation that took place in a run-down San Francisco hotel, and was a collaboration between Hershman Leeson and feminist filmmaker Eleanor Coppola. For this piece, the artist rented a hotel room and fitted it with all the clues that would lead a visitor to believe it was inhabited. Two dummy wax figures “slept” in the bed, locked in an embrace; speakers under the bed played recordings of breathing; items such as cosmetics, eyeglasses were scattered about. The room was open 24/7 to visitors. The illusion of life ended when a man mistook a wax figure for a dead body and alerted the authorities.<sup>118</sup> The illusion of living, breathing bodies briefly turned into the illusion of lifeless bodies, before finally being revealed as no bodies at all.

The 24-hour public access to this work and the intimate mise-en-scène of seemingly living bodies involved the viewer in a trespassing scenario, witnessing an intimate space usually protected by “do not disturb” door handle signs. Unlike the voyeuristic spectatorship elicited by the viewing of two-dimensional images recorded in the past, those who stepped into the *Dante Hotel* were liable to being found out by the subjects they thought they were observing, and the events happening in the room were coextensive with the viewers’ present experience. While the viewers’ trespassing might elicit a feeling of power over the subjects observed, it also made them vulnerable to the possibility that the bodies presumed to be sleeping might return the gaze and trigger and awkward or confrontational chain of events. As a whole, the installation creates the illusion of human subjects themselves subjected to the threat of constant scrutiny by anonymous

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<sup>118</sup> Hershman Leeson, “Private I: An Investigator’s Timeline,” 20.

third parties while also creating the fiction of a two-directional gaze and the possibility that the observed might become the observer.

To understand better how works such as the *Dante Hotel* and the *Difference Engine*, *Agent Ruby* and *Teknolust* make use of the life-like, I want to contextualise Hershman Leeson's approach historically against the backdrop of Western aesthetic debates surrounding both performativity and twentieth-century modernist criticism, more specifically, the work of Michael Fried and its relationship to Kantian aesthetics.

As Derrida notes in his writing about Immanuel Kant's 1790 *Critique of Judgement*, according to Kantian aesthetics, true art must be the product of purposeless work whose gesture and action must qualitatively mirror the workings of nature itself. It must be the result of work which, like nature itself, is free of purpose, of constraints, of motive, absolutely sovereign since extrinsic to any form of economy.<sup>119</sup> Derrida adds that

pure and free productivity must resemble that of nature. And it does so precisely because, free and pure, it does not depend on natural laws. The less it depends on nature, the more it resembles nature. Mimesis here is not the representation of one thing by another, the relation of resemblance or of identification between two beings, the reproduction of a product of nature by a product of art. It is not the relation of two products but of two productions. And of two freedoms. The artist does not imitate things in nature, or, if you will, in *natura naturata*, but the acts of *natura naturans*, the operations of the *physis*.<sup>120</sup>

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<sup>119</sup> Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Judgement* (Mineola, New York: Dover, 2005), § 1-4.

<sup>120</sup> Jacques Derrida, "Economimesis," *Diacritics* 11, no. 2 (1981): 9.

Derrida further argues that the parallel set up between the actions of these two freedoms leads Kant to posit that a proper judgment of taste is also transcendent, universal, yet free. Hence subjects performing an aesthetic judgment are able to discern that:

Art is beautiful to the degree that it is productive like productive nature, that it reproduces the production and not the product of nature, to the degree that nature may once have been (was), before the critical disassociation and before a still to be determined forgetfulness, beautiful [...] The beautiful brings productive nature back to itself, it qualifies a spectacle that artist-nature has given itself. God has given himself to be seen in a spectacle.<sup>121</sup>

The enduring trope that Kantian aesthetics helped crystalize, that the gesture of art making mirrors the workings of nature, finds an echo in Hershman Leeson's multimedia renditions and attempts at replicating the life-like, and life itself—from the *Dante Hotel* (1974) and its multimedia simulation of the sonic and visual illusion of three dimensional breathing bodies, to the life-like yet clearly fake sex doll of *Olympia*, to the genetic manipulations of the *Infinity Engine* (2018), discussed below, where the artist created an antibody if not in her own image, in her own name.

### **Performativity and Grace**

In the previous chapters I argued that Hershman Leeson's approach was in essence performative. I contrasted performativity with representation and have discussed the latter's relationship to material mediation by turning to Shannon and Weaver's *Mathematical Theory of*

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<sup>121</sup> Ibid., 10.

*Communication* (MTC) as an example of the theorization of the opacity of material mediation and what Plato called *pharmakon*. I contrasted material media's transmission of meaning with performative, immaterial approaches to meaning making. About MTC, information theorist Luciano Floridi notes that:

MTC deals with messages comprising uninterpreted symbols encoded in well-formed strings of signals. These are mere data that constitute, but are not yet, sematic information. So MTC is commonly described as a study of information at the *syntactic* level [...] MTC is not interested in the meaning, reference, relevance, reliability, usefulness, or interpretation of the information exchanged, but only in the level of detail and frequency in the uninterpreted data that constitute it. Thus, the difference between information in Shannon's sense and sematic information is comparable to the difference between a Newtonian description of the physical laws describing the dynamics of a tennis game and the description of the same game as a Wimbledon final by a commentator.<sup>122</sup>

MTC thus theorizes the pre-signifying machines of material communication. But Floridi's tennis match example sets up a comparison that is reminiscent of Kant's distinction between art and craft.<sup>123</sup> The difference between the freedom of artistic creation and the pure disinterested aesthetic appreciation of its product, versus the purposeful, descriptive, salaried, mimetic, and symbolically laden crafts and tennis *commentary*.

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<sup>122</sup> Luciano Floridi, *The Philosophy of Information* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011), 45, 48.

<sup>123</sup> For Kant, true art is the product of freedom and is unhindered in its process whereas handicraft or remunerative art has pay as its only purpose and is accomplished through the drudgery of salaried work. Kant, *Critique of Judgment*, 109 (§ 43).

The Newtonian description of a tennis match would describe apparently purposeless, meaningless motion obeying the laws of physics, while the commentary of the match would describe these motions to give them meaning and within a context (the rules of tennis) that is other than the purely physical. This difference is akin to the phenomenon Alva Noë termed “experiential blindness” that occurs when subjects born blind are given the ability to see for the first time. Noë explains that:

these patients suffer from experiential blindness, or so I propose. Their visual sensitivity is restored, to be sure. Each of them undergoes dramatic and robust visual impressions in the immediate aftermath of the surgery. But none of them, in having these sensations, has acquired the ability to see, at least not in anything like the normal sense. The visual impressions they now receive remain confusing and uninformative to them, like utterances in a foreign language. They have sensations, but the sensations don’t add up to experiences with representational content.<sup>124</sup>

Experiential blindness, like the Newtonian description of a tennis match, differs from the common description of visual perception or the understanding of a tennis match by an informed spectator. As I later argue, this difference is structurally homologous to the difference between performative acts’ freedom from the labour of representing or accounting for a referent and the task of representation and its indexical shortcomings.

While performativity is in theory free from the expectations placed upon representation to act as medium to a referent, so is true art for Kant free from the purposeful labour or

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<sup>124</sup> Alva Noë, *Action in Perception* (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 2004), 5.

representing: “In a product of beautiful art we must become conscious that it is Art and not Nature; but yet the purposiveness in its form must seem to be as free from all constraint of arbitrary rules as if it were a product of mere nature.”<sup>125</sup> This perception of the beautiful in art’s mimesis of nature, I argue, may be seen as partially related to the feeling of grace in movement. On this topic, Henri Bergson proposed:

Let us consider [...] the feeling of grace. At first it is only the perception of a certain ease, a certain facility in the outward movements. And as those movements are easy which prepare the way for others, we are led to find a superior ease in the movements which can be foreseen, in the present attitudes in which future attitudes are pointed out and, as it were, prefigured. If jerky movements are wanting in grace, the reason is that each of them is self-sufficient and does not announce those which are to follow. If curves are more graceful than broken lines, the reason is that, while a curved line changes its direction at every moment, every new direction is indicated in the preceding one. Thus the perception of ease in motion passes over into the pleasure of mastering the flow of time and of holding the future in the present. A third element comes in when the graceful movements submit to a rhythm and are accompanied by music. For the rhythm and measure, by allowing us to foresee to a still greater extent the movements of the dancer, make us believe that we now control them. As we guess almost the exact attitude which the dancer is going to take, he seems to obey us

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<sup>125</sup> Kant, *Critique of Judgment*, 111.

when he really takes it: the regularity of the rhythm establishes a kind of communication between him and us...<sup>126</sup>

Bergson's grace thus occurs when every "every new direction is indicated in the preceding one" and thus shares the same structural qualities as what Bergson called duration which he opposed to spatial time made of discrete units. In *Time and Free Will*, Henri Bergson makes a distinction between duration and the infinitely heterogeneous qualities of psychic states and conceptualization of time as composed of discrete quantifiable units. This is not unlike the distinction between anamnestic presence and the hypomnesic *pharmakon*, which I discussed in previous chapters.<sup>127</sup>

Bergson noted:

We are compelled to borrow from space the images by which we describe what the reflective consciousness feels about time and even about succession [...]. What we must say is that we have to do with two different kinds of reality, the one heterogeneous, that of sensible qualities, the other homogeneous, namely space. The latter, clearly conceived by the human intellect, enables us to use clean-cut distinctions, to count, to abstract, and perhaps also to speak<sup>128</sup>

For Bergson, duration and the experience of psychic states are inherently qualitative, consisting in a fluctuation of intensities rather than quantities. This qualitative experience features indistinct multiplicity and pure difference. This is different from segmented spatialized time (that of clocks for example), from schedules, and from all treatment of time as quantity that retroactively

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<sup>126</sup> Bergson, *Time and Free Will*, 12.

<sup>127</sup> For Plato, writing offers a remedy (*pharmakon*) to forgetfulness but is also a poison (*pharmakon*) that makes forgetfulness more likely to occur. Moreover this *pharmakon* is itself forgetful in the sense that it cannot convey the fullness of the speech and context that it attempts to record. Plato, *Phaedrus and Letters VII-VIII*, 83.

<sup>128</sup> Bergson, *Time and Free Will*, 91–97.

contaminates the experience of duration as an experience of a distinct multiplicity of psychic states.<sup>129</sup> Bergson's intuition about the absolutely qualitative, indivisible continuum of grace and duration is in turn echoed in Floridi's assertion that:

our understanding of the universe is firmly based not only on digital, discrete, or grainy ideas—the natural numbers, the heads or tails of a coin, the days of the week, the goals scored by a football team, and so forth—but also on many analogue, continuous, or smooth ideas—the intensity of a pain or pleasure, the real numbers, continuous functions, differential equations, waves, force fields, the continuum of time.<sup>130</sup>

Bergson's grace, just like his concept of duration, does not accommodate discrete ruptures. In Bergson's fundamentally experiential insights, duration is not divisible into seconds just as a graceful motion cannot be broken down in moments that at once naturally appear to flow from the preceding one while announcing the next.

While Bergson's phenomenology of the absolutely qualitative has in appearance little to do with Platonic anxieties about writing, both philosophers do share the belief in the impossibility of materially accounting for the absolutely qualitative unfolding of liveness. Bergson's distaste for spatial time finds an echo in Plato's skepticism towards writing. This outlook is also found in the work of Edmund Husserl when he decries the arithmetisation of geometry where spatial idealities move from being apprehended by intuition to becoming accessible through the grid of a symbolic language. This process:

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<sup>129</sup> Ibid., 90–97.

<sup>130</sup> Floridi, *The Philosophy of Information*, 25.

leads almost automatically to the emptying of its [geometry's] meaning.

The actually spatio-temporal idealities, as they are presented firsthand in geometrical thinking under the common rubric of “pure intuitions,” are transformed, so to speak, into pure numerical configurations, into algebraic structures.<sup>131</sup>

Just like Bergson, Husserl approached this problem at a time of rapid industrial transformation. This tension between liveness and its reproduction in a variety of media that rely on discrete units of information resonates with the manifestation of liveness across a great variety of media in Hershan Leeson's work I discuss in this chapter.

Hence, while the technologies used by Hershan Leeson have often been pioneering, the anxieties around the liveness and its manifestations which her works evoke are longstanding. Plato, Bergson, and Husserl all seem to lament the eclipsing of infinitely heterogenous qualitative realm of experience by the forces of rationalization, segmentation, and what Bergson termed spatialized time. All three philosophers imply that accounting for an infinitely qualitative experience through media and habits of mind that segment the experience of consciousness, produces an inevitable loss. What is lost in this passage from the qualitative to the quantifiable is the possibility of experiencing consciousness as always already in flux and by definition never arrestable into a single discrete segment or “representation.” And this loss is not one that can itself be quantified; rather it is a failure to account for the qualitative fullness of experience. In Chapter One, I explored another loss, that which Plato associates with writing and with material representation in general. In *Phaedrus*, Plato's Socrates notes in dialogue with Phaedrus: “Indeed

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<sup>131</sup> Edmund Husserl, *The Crisis of European Sciences and Transcendental Phenomenology: An Introduction to Phenomenological Philosophy*; Translated, with an Introduction, by David Carr. (Evanston, Ill.: Northwestern University Press, 1970), 41.

writing, Phaedrus, doubtless has this feature that is terribly clever, and truly resembles painting. For the offspring of that art stands there as living beings, but if you ask them about something, they altogether keep a solemn silence.”<sup>132</sup> For Plato, something is lost through writing that cannot be retrieved, just as, for Bergson, segmentation renders duration impossible to experience. Bernard Stiegler sums up Plato’s and Husserl’s views by proposing that:

Technicization is what produces loss of memory, as was already the case in Plato’s *Phaedrus*. With the advent of calculation, which will come to determine the essence of modernity, the memory of originary eidetic intuition, upon which all apodictic processes and meanings are founded, is lost [....] Numeration is a loss of originary meaning and *sight*, a loss of the eidetic intentionality that underlies scientificity as such.<sup>133</sup>

Stiegler argues this in light of Derrida’s critique of the metaphysics of presence articulated in *Of Grammatology* (1967) and *Speech and Phenomena* (1967). Derrida proposes that Husserl’s phenomenology, despite its claims to stray away from metaphysics, is in fact built on Western metaphysics’ assumptions regarding presence, language, and writing. The transcendence of the voice as transparent medium for the eidetic is, for Derrida, the solidifying of ideal essence only in appearance. This appearance is created by the phenomenological experience of the voice which performs simultaneously the *noema* in intuition and the signified in the empirical world. The medium of the voice, Derrida adds, is self-effacing; in its absolute proximity to the body of

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<sup>132</sup> Ibid.

<sup>133</sup> Bernard Stiegler, *Technics and Time* (Stanford, Calif.: Stanford University Press, 1998), 6.

the speaking subject, its phenomenon performs the appearance of a transparency which make the *phoneme* the privileged vehicle for the plenitude of meaning.<sup>134</sup>

Derrida's unpacking of the phenomenology of the voice shows that, for Husserl, as for Plato, live speech is the ultimate origin of meaning and the only mode of expression that renders authentic presence, one which no material medium can ever fully convey in its plenitude and essence. In the field of the phenomenology of aesthetic perception, Bergson grounds experience as fundamentally un-segmentable and as consisting of a fluid continuum of pure heterogeneity that cannot be captured by media that record experience by segmenting it into discrete units of information.

Bergson's concept of grace together with the pervasiveness of platonic inclinations in Western thinking documented in Derrida's work both provide a means to understand the backdrop against which Hershman Leeson utilizes liveness (e.g., *Roberta Breitmore*), fake bodies (e.g., *Olympia*), representations of bodies (e.g., *Self Portrait as Another Person*), informatic simulations of personhood built upon bits of information (e.g., *Agent Ruby*), narrativized manipulation of human life (e.g., *Teknolust*) and biological manipulations (e.g., *Infinity Engine*, to be discussed below).

### **Performativity, Grace, and Modernism**

Another part of the backdrop against which Hershman Leeson's work evolved was the legacy of modernism, specifically its critique and consecration in mainstream art criticism in the late 1960s by art critic Michael Fried. In Fried's famous essay "Art and Objecthood," which appeared in the Summer

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<sup>134</sup> Jacques Derrida, *La Voix et le phénomène, introduction au problème du signe dans la phénoménologie de Husserl*. (Paris: Presses universitaires de France, 1967), 90–95.

1967 issue of *Artforum*, a Christian notion of grace, very different from Bergson's embodied model, is invoked as providing legitimacy to a particular kind of modernism.<sup>135</sup> Fried was reacting to the Minimalist work of Tony Smith, Robert Morris, and Donald Judd, which Fried termed literalist, as well as to the writings on Minimalism by Morris and Judd. Fried's argument was that the work of these artists produced a contamination of true art by the theatre. He concurred with fellow modernist critic Clement Greenberg that literalist work had a kind of stage presence in the theatrical sense.<sup>136</sup>

Robert Morris and the other minimalists had already set the terms for this debate. In an article originally published in *Artforum* in 1966, Morris claimed that minimalist works are meant to provide a fundamentally context-bound experience unfolding in time, proposing that: "Only one aspect of the work is immediate: the apprehension of the gestalt. The experience of the work necessarily exists in *time* [...] Some of the new work has expanded the terms of sculpture by a more emphatic focusing the very conditions under which certain kinds of objects are seen. [my italics]"<sup>137</sup> In response to Morris' view, Fried argued the modernist works he views as true art are timeless and immediately apprehensible in their totality, a sentiment echoed in the quote from Theologian Jonathan Edwards with which Fried chose to open his essay: "it is certain with me that the world exists anew every moment; that the existence of things every moment ceases and is every moment renewed."<sup>138</sup> Comparing the work of modernist painters and sculptors to that of what he termed the "literalist" art of artists such as Smith, Morris, and Judd, Fried explained that the latter's works required time and motion, that their beholder needed to walk around them and that consequently apprehending such work required the passage of time and movement through

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<sup>135</sup> Fried, *Art and Objecthood*, 1998.

<sup>136</sup> *Ibid.*, 148.

<sup>137</sup> Robert Morris in Charles Harrison and Paul Wood, *Art in Theory, 1900-1990: An Anthology of Changing Ideas* (Oxford, UK; Cambridge, Mass., USA: Blackwell, 1996), 832.

<sup>138</sup> Jonathan Edwards in Fried, *Art and Objecthood*, 1998, 822.

space. Modernist painting on the contrary required no bodily motion or indeed awareness of the relationship of one's body to the work encountered:

It is as though one's experience of the latter [modernist painting and sculpture] has no duration— not because one in fact experiences a picture by [Kenneth] Noland or [Jules] Olitski or a sculpture by David Smith or [Anthony] Caro in no time at all, but because at every moment the work itself is wholly manifest. [...] It is this continuous and entire presentness, amounting, as it were, to the perpetual creation of itself, that one experiences as a kind of instantaneousness: as though if only one were infinitely more acute, a single infinitely brief instant would be long enough to see everything, to experience the work in all its depth and fullness, to be forever convinced by it.<sup>139</sup>

The invocation of grace links the work Fried holds as true art directly to a Kantian model and grace is not devoid of theological significance; art that engenders grace can only be that which attains the most proper mimesis of nature. As Derrida proposed in his reading of *The Critique of Judgment*:

We have recognized the fold of *mimesis* at the origin of pure productivity, a sort of gift for itself [*pour soi*] of God who makes a present of himself to himself, even prior to the re-productive or imitative structure (that is foreign and inferior to the Fine-Arts): genius imitates nothing, it identifies itself with the productive freedom of God who identifies himself in himself, at the origin of the origin, with the production of production. (*Economimesis* 13)

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<sup>139</sup> Fried, *Art and Objecthood*, 149.

Following this Derridean interpretation of Kant's *Critique of Judgement*, since the grace of god is absolutely free—indeed there is no greater theorized freedom than the absolute sovereignty of god—art that is graceful can then only be the product of freedom. As noted by theologian Adam S. Miller:

grace is a divine activity that exceeds our control. Humans suffer a *critical passivity* [my italics] in relation to it [...] described as a “salvation event,” grace is what interrupts human history and enables salvation. This interruption frees its recipient from the slavery of sin and endows them with gifts [...] Further, as a manifestation of divine favor, grace comes as a “free gift” that cannot be squared with the predictable quid pro quo of economic circularity.<sup>140</sup>

Grace, as a providential free gift extrinsic to any economy or exchange, interrupting the quotidian and the political events of the world in which needs are unlimited and resources limited (in short, the world of us mortals), appears to be exactly the kind of transcendent, seemingly apolitical, ahistorical, atemporal yet present event Fried calls presentness. It interrupts the vicissitudes of the political economy of subjectivities, judgements, tastes, social circumstances determined by identification and heralds a proposed universality of grace. The relationship of theological grace to the subject (or object) of its divine action is identical to that of which Fried speaks in relation to presentness. The “critical passivity” of the human subject, according to Miller and Bryant, is Fried's manifestation of grace through presentness.<sup>141</sup>

Therefore, Fried's universalizing claims surrounding the effects the phenomenon of presentness, conceive of the latter as outside the realm of logical and political argument,

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<sup>140</sup> Adam S. Miller and Levi R. Bryant, *Speculative Grace: Bruno Latour and Object-Oriented Theology* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2013), 6–7.

<sup>141</sup> Ibid.

unbound by circumstances be they temporal, political, or personal. Similarly, for Kant, the beautiful is determined by the judgement of taste and it is not a logical judgement (it cannot be an object of debate), therefore it cannot be political:

The judgement of taste is distinguished from a logical judgement in this, that the latter subsumes a representation under the concept of the Object, while the former does not subsume it under any concept; because otherwise the necessary universal agreement [in these judgements] would be capable of being enforced by proofs.<sup>142</sup>

The Kantian judgement of taste identifies the transcendent, the exceptional, unbound by the political contingencies of subjectivity. Fried echoes this formulation in his framing of “presentness”: “I want to call attention to the utter pervasiveness—the virtual universality—of the sensibility or mode of being that I have characterized as corrupted or perverted by theatre. We are all literalists most or all of our lives. Presentness is grace.”<sup>143</sup>

Fried’s aversion to what he sees as the pernicious influence of theater in the work he determines to be non-art is symptomatic of his distaste for contingency and temporality:

The literalist preoccupation with time—more precisely, with the duration of the experience—is, I suggest, paradigmatically theatrical[...]. This preoccupation marks a profound difference between literalist work and modernist painting and sculpture.<sup>144</sup>

Fried’s hostility to the idea that a work of art can require time and motion to be apprehended is a rejection of the circumstantial in favour of the transcendent. In this way, Fried joins Plato in

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<sup>142</sup> Kant, *Critique of Judgment*, 96.

<sup>143</sup> Fried, *Art and Objecthood*, 172.

<sup>144</sup> *Ibid.*, 150.

positing the primacy of the live and supposed immediate manifestation of meaning through presentness as Plato had with live speech, but parts ways with the Greek philosopher in his celebration of “presentness” as timeless and unbound to the circumstances that enable its emergence. Meanwhile, Plato’s celebration of live speech rested precisely on the notion that meaning is found in the circumstances of live speech that cannot be accounted for by material mediation (writing). Fittingly, in speaking of “presentness” Fried makes the universalizing claim that a true work of art is wholly manifest at once and to everyone regardless of circumstances (cultural or personal).

When Fried describes the work of David Smith as wholly manifest and as existing in a continuous presentness, perpetually creating itself, he is describing a work that exists with the same autonomy as nature and thus exists in the same way nature exists as the result of the work of an artist who presumably creates the way nature creates.<sup>145</sup> The ability to create art that, like nature—as produced by an assumed divine creator—transcends time, its spatial and political surroundings, and the contingencies of subjectivity, is the gift of true artists. A position which echoes Kant’s following proposition:

*§6 The Beautiful is that which apart from concepts is represented as the object  
of universal satisfaction*

This explanation of the beautiful can be derived from the preceding explanation of it as the object of an entirely disinterested satisfaction. For the fact of which everyone is conscious, that the satisfaction is for him quite disinterested, implies in the judgment a ground of satisfaction for everyone.

[...] Consequently he must believe that he has reason for attributing a similar

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<sup>145</sup> Ibid.

satisfaction to everyone. [...] Consequently, the judgment of taste, accompanied with the consciousness of separation from all interest, must claim validity for everyone, without this universality depending on Objects. That is, there must be bound up with it a title to subjective universality.<sup>146</sup>

Kant's proposition attempts to reconcile the idea that aesthetic judgement is made by an individual subject and that it is not a determination that rests on concepts or interest, with the assertion these individual judgments are universally valid. At the crux of this exercise of squaring this theoretical circle is the assertion that only judgment which is free of any subjective interest can be viewed as a proper aesthetic judgment. Kantian aesthetic judgment transcends interest and the circumstantial, including the political.

It is upon this conception of aesthetic judgment that Fried legitimizes his critical endeavor and holds aloft a body of modernist work at the detriment of other artistic practices deemed theatrical in a critical gesture which, far from being disinterested, is in fact eminently political in a way that is specific to Fried as a modernist critic at the time and place in which he was working. Fried's disdain for the theatrical parallels the Kantian hierarchy that places mimesis of nature above the crudeness of mere imitation. As noted by Amelia Jones, the mistrust of theatricality in Western culture and its homophobic dimensions have been well documented in Jonas Barish's 1981 *The Antitheatrical Prejudice* and repeated in more recent works such as Tracy Davis and Thomas Postlewait's 2005 *Theatricality*.<sup>147</sup> This prejudice views the perceived artifice of theatre and its occasional gender-bending as a perverting of essence. Drawing on the work of Davis and Postlewait, Jones explains:

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<sup>146</sup> Kant, *Critique of Judgment*, 33.

<sup>147</sup> Amelia Jones "Theatricality" in Amelia Jones, *In Between Subjects*. (New York N.Y.: Routledge, 2020).

Davis and Postlewait note that some of the negativity surrounding theatricality is related to deep fears about the existence of an essence or an authentic “real” that anchors human experience and is countered by the fake or theatrical. In describing a key example of unease around the role of the actor, they note: “Thus, a man impersonating a woman may persuasively signify femaleness, and though he will never become a female, in theatricalizing one he deceives as to the very nature of the absence.”<sup>148</sup>

Drawing on the work of W.D. King, Davis and Postlewait also note that:

According to Plato, mimesis attempts to evoke the factual or real world but cannot capture it because the Real is not located in the visual and tangible conditions of the material world. As a counterfit practice, twice-removed from the true or pure realm of the Real, theatre illusively (perhaps fraudulently) produces mimesis. For the perceiver, the mimetic product posits (and apparently presumes) an empirical link with what is being represented, but this relation is always simply a rhetorical feat of similarity, never sameness.<sup>149</sup>

The corruption of essence that theatre is said to inflict upon its participants is, according to Barish, buttressed by Platonic principles.<sup>150</sup> Platonic anxieties surrounding artifice appear consistent with the mistrust of writing and material mediation and idealisation of presence which, as I noted earlier, led Plato to view media as *pharmaka*. Painting, theatre, and writing all share the same fate in Platonic thought of being severed from their true referent, and allowing, to use

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<sup>148</sup> Ibid., 6.

<sup>149</sup> Tracy C. Davis and Thomas. Postlewait, *Theatricality*, Theatre and Performance Theory (Cambridge ; Cambridge University Press, 2003), 4–5.

<sup>150</sup> Jonas A. Barish, *The Antitheatrical Prejudice* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1981), 21–22.

J.L.Austin's term, for an etiolation of meaning by occurring outside an originary and proper context.<sup>151</sup> Similarly, in *Phaedrus*, Plato's Socrates claims:

You know, Phaedrus, writing shares features with painting. The offspring of painting stands there as if they were alive, but if anyone asks them anything, they remain most solemnly silent. The same is true of written words. You'd think they were speaking as if they had some understanding, but if you question anything that has been said because you want to learn more, it continues to signify that very same thing forever.<sup>152</sup>

Platonic anxieties around the inadequacies of fake liveness are also the anxieties surrounding the fake body. The idea that human subjects can rise above their mere mortal status to share in the crafting of human life is of course the drive behind the work of Dr. Frankenstein, the scientist in Mary Shelley's famous novel. However, the creature created by Frankenstein never equaled the creatures of nature, those produced by God. The anxiety that haunts the novel's characters is motivated by the same fear of seeing life corrupted in an artificial form. Similarly, unconventional interventions on human bodies abound in *Teknolust*, in which Ruby, herself a clone, takes matters into her own hands when it comes to insuring the survival of her siblings. She injects into her fellow clones' bloodstream the semen as a life sustaining infusion of Y chromosomes. The genetic manipulations of life, imitated in the form of clones are narrativized in the medium of film, one that Jackie Stacey argues is itself imitative by nature:

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<sup>151</sup> As I detailed in Chapter One, for Austin in order for a performative to be successful (or felicitous) it must occur within a certain context. As Austin noted: "a performative utterance will, [...] be hollow or void if said by an actor on the stage, or if introduced in a poem or spoken in a soliloquy. [...] Language in such circumstances is in special ways—intelligibility—used not seriously, but in ways parasitic upon its normal use—ways which fall under the doctrine of etiolations of language." Austin, *How to Do Things with Words*, 22.

<sup>152</sup> Plato's Socrates in Peters, *Speaking into the Air*, 47.

Insofar as they both seek to imitate life, the cinema and genetic engineering are both technologies of imitation: the first a cultural technology, the second a biological one [...] Each displays a fascination with the boundary between life and death, and with the technical possibilities of animating the human body [...] Unlike other medium or practice, the cinema shares with genetic engineering an imitative but elusive intent that invites formal interrogation: it brings to life still images, and disguising its own artifice, invests them with a believable presence on the screen.<sup>153</sup>

In Stacey's argument, *Teknolust* thus stands as a *mise-en-abyme* of imitations in which the diegetic imitation and duplication of human bodies are contained in a medium itself seen as imitating life and able to exist in an unlimited number of copies. But nearly two decades after *Teknolust* was made, the far-fetched genetic science of the film moves us from the diegetic plot device of replicating humans to the raw material of Hershman Leeson's 2018 work *Infinity Engine* and demonstrates the artist's enduring preoccupation with the replication of life and the life-like. This piece, first shown at the House of Electronic Arts in Basel, featured a new antibody named after the artist in collaboration with Dr. Thomas Huber from the pharmaceutical company Novartis and biologist Josiah Zainer.

*The Infinity Engine* consisted of an installation deployed in eight different rooms outfitted like genetics laboratories. The visitors were invited to wear a lab coat while exploring this environment. Some of the walls served as projection screens for images of footage of scientists pushing trays of samples through the clinical corridors of scientific labs resembling hospital

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<sup>153</sup> Jackie Stacey, *The Cinematic Life of the Gene* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2010), 6.

corridors. Another wall showed a detail of Michelangelo's Sistine chapel fresco, *The Creation of Adam* (1508-12), modified by Hershman Leeson and showing the two figures holding syringes—hence placing *The Infinity Engine*'s preoccupation with genetic modification in the context of the theme of life and divine life giving found in Michelangelo's fresco. It replaced religious explanations to the origins of life with the clinical tools of genetic engineering.

Amongst the scientific objects displayed in the laboratory is a small vial containing the Lynn Hershman antibody. Antibodies are produced by the body itself and are essential to its defence against pathogens. As Paul Klenerman explains in *The Immune System: A Very Short Introduction*: “Antibodies are highly specialized proteins that are able to bind to a particular target (e.g., the outer coat of a bacterium or virus), known as an *antigen* or *epitope*.”<sup>154</sup> The scientists who collaborated with Hershman Leeson used a stable antibody template and replaced its amino acids whose code letter spell out the artists name: Leucine (L), Tyrosine (Y), Asparagine (N), Histidine (N), Glutamate (H), Arginine (E), Serine (S), Histidine(H), Methionine (M), Alanine (A), and again Asparagine (N).

In both *Teknolust* and *The Infinity Engine* genetic material is depicted doing rather than depicting. While often imagined as vessels for information, genes are essentially performative, as Floridi notes:

DNA does contain genetic information, like a CD may contain some software.

But the genetic code, or better, the genes are the information itself. Genes do not *send* information in the sense in which a radio sends a signal. They work more or less successfully and, like a recipe for a cake, may only partly

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<sup>154</sup> Paul Klenerman, *The Immune System: A Very Short Introduction* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017), 30.

guarantee the end result, since the environment plays a crucial role. Genes do not *contain* information, like envelopes or emails do, nor do they *describe* it, like a blueprint; they are more like *performatives*: “I promise to come at 8pm” does not describe or contain a promise, it does something, namely it effects the promise itself through the uttered words. Genes do not carry information as pigeons carry a message, no more than a key carries the information to open the door. They do not encode instructions, as a string of lines and dots may encode a message in Morse alphabet.<sup>155</sup>

While DNA may be said to be itself performative rather than a medium containing information, *The Infinity Engine* adds another level of performativity in assembling an antibody according to the spelling of Hershman Leeson’s name. This performs at a microscopic level the act by which life in its most fundamental biological component is symbolically coded, a microcosm of the way in which human bodies perform or are labelled with identities.

There is nothing essentially Lynn Hershman about the Lynn Hershman antibody engineered in *The Infinity Engine*. The design of the antibody according to the spelling of the artist’s name shows the arbitrariness of symbolic language; the lifeform of the antibody could be named anything. This chiasm between life and its symbolic representation and the latter’s corollary political implications illustrates or analogizes at a microscopic level the politics of symbolic representation of bodies in society which I discussed earlier in relation to the *Roberta Breitmore* project and Judith Butler’s theory of gender performativity; it also parallels the discussion above of the gap between representation and “real” over which so much of Western philosophy has agonized.

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<sup>155</sup> Floridi, *The Philosophy of Information*, 79.

I argue that just as genes perform the manifestation and sustaining of life or nature itself, performativity itself—as the non-representational act par excellence—may be understood as the mimesis of grace as agency. As I argue later, this does not mean performativity is necessarily an empowering act allowing the performer to transcend their circumstances. Considered abstractly, as a non-representationalist meaning-making phenomenon, performativity could, *in appearance*, be seen to unfold as an attempt to actualise freedom by being untethered from any kind of referent which ties down products of representation. Performativity as the mimesis of grace as agency is at work in Hershman Leeson's *Infinity Engine* (2018), a potent example of the artist's performative use of technology, and in its Promethean undertones. This understanding of the relationship between performativity and mimesis may be the missing link needed to explore the bond between technology and performativity. It also helps us understand the political nature of the rest of Hershman Leeson's work where I argue performativity can be viewed as a mimesis of the exercise of agency.

I am not arguing that subjects have full control over their performative acts, or that performativity means the exercise of a sovereign agency. Rather, what I am proposing is that performativity, as illustrated in works such as those of the *Roberta Breitmore* series, *Tekolust*, and *The Infinity Engine*, functions not through representing what it is like to have agency over one's own life and over life itself in the case of the *Infinity Engine*, but as a *mimesis of agency*. This model invites the viewer to contemplate the possibility of agency, to behold the promises of personal and civic emancipation, while not assuming them to be achieved. Such a model explains the political crux of Hershman Leeson's work. This aesthetics of empowerment runs through the artist's work and binds it to the emancipatory political projects of the second half of the twentieth

century in the United States, from the civil rights movement to the women's rights movement, as I discuss in chapters two and four.

An example of how performativity mimes agency can be found in a key example beyond Hershman's practice—that of Jeannie Livingston's 1990 documentary *Paris is Burning*, which documents the lives and performances of mainly black and minority drag queens and ball culture. Balls were competitions during which each drag queen would perform and be judged on their performance by their peers. The performers interviewed in *Paris is Burning* speak of their social marginalization, their artistic practices and their desires for social mobility. One of them, Dorian Corey, a transwoman drag queen describing a competition category called Executive Realness, explains:

In real life, you can't get a job as an executive unless you have the educational background, and the opportunity. Now the fact that you are not an executive is merely because of the social standing of life [...] people have a hard time getting anywhere and those that do are usually straight. In a ball room you can be anything you want. You're not *really* an executive but you're looking like an executive and therefore you're showing the straight world that I can be an executive. If I had the opportunity, I could be one, because I can look like one, and that is like a fulfilment.<sup>156</sup>

Realness doesn't make it true, and it does not bestow upon the performer the privileges that a straight white executive may enjoy, nor does it allow them to overcome their social circumstances and the powers that determine them. These performative acts allow the performer

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<sup>156</sup> Dorian Corey in Jeannie Livingston, *Paris Is Burning*, 1990.

and their public to behold what living in circumstances that afford greater agency might look like.

Similarly, just as I discussed in Chapter One, Lynn Hershman Leeson was Roberta Breitmore seemingly because she said so. While Lynn Hershman changing her name to Roberta Breitmore may appear to be a banal act to many people, to others who may have less agency in relation to their own person, this gesture might, I argue, be viewed as emancipatory. The apparent power the artist has in shaping the life of Roberta which she performatively embodies mimes the kind of agency over one's own life that been at the centre of numerous rights movements in the twentieth century (e.g., the women's rights and American civil rights movements). Roberta Breitmore's identity documents, clothing, and other personal items illustrate the struggle of securing agency in a given social context. The degree to which a viewer can view *Roberta Breitmore* as performing acts of agency in relation to the artist's person surely must be relative to the level of agency they are afforded in their own life.

### **Voicing *Roberta*: Sampling Lynn Hershman Leeson's real-life interactions as Roberta Breitmore**

The pieces and documents that resulted from the *Roberta Breitmore* project record Roberta's social interactions. For example, Hershman Leeson had placed classified ads as Roberta looking for roommates. This led to "Roberta" meeting prospective roommates who viewed their encounters as dates. Recorded phone conversations with the men as well as photographs of the dates documented these encounters. These recordings allow us to hear how Roberta was performed, how, beyond her simple words, a persona was constructed through the qualities of her voice and intonation. One of the recordings begins with the voice of Hershman

Leeson saying: “I’m going to call Irwin Steingold. It’s January 6, 1976. I’ll be phoning him as Roberta.” Roberta a woman, is calling a heterosexual man she met in December 1975 after posting a classified advertisement saying she was looking for a roommate. We hear the trilling of the phone ringing. A man answers the phone. Roberta, in a much more subdued much less confident voice asks to speak to Irwin Steingold.

What is striking in listening to this recording is Hershman Leeson’s voice itself. To those who have heard the confidence of Hershman Leeson’s voice in public venues or conversations, the recorded voice in her interactions with the stranger as “Roberta” sound vastly different—tentative, girlish, shy, performing a stereotypical femininity. As Adrianna Cavarero, speaking in Derridean terms, notes in her discussion of Italo Calvino’s literary work “A King Listens,” listening to voices opens a way beyond the simple intelligibility of semantic code:

the act of speaking is relational: what it communicates first and foremost, beyond the specific content that the words communicate, is the acoustic, empirical, material relationality of singular voices [...]. When the register of speech is totalized—for instance, when it is identified with a language system of which the voice would be a mere function—it is indeed inevitable that the vocal emission not headed for speech is nothing but a remainder. Rather than a mere leftover, however, what is really at stake is an originary excess. Put another way, the sphere of the voice is constitutively broader than that of speech: it exceeds it. To reduce this excess to mere meaninglessness [...] is one of the chief vices of logocentrism. [...] Precisely because speech is sonorous, to speak to one another is to communicate oneself to others in the plurality of voices. In other words, the act of speaking is relational: what it communicates

first and foremost, beyond the specific content that the words communicate, is the acoustic, empirical, material relationality of singular voices.<sup>157</sup>

Roberta's voice is coy, shy, as she asks Irwin on advice on how to best apply for social security since he seems to know a few tricks. Irwin speaks about how he worked as a magazine telemarketer in London, computer dating, and the merits of marriage. Roberta tells Irwin she is wary of living with him because he is married. Irwin says he is separated and has not seen his wife in ten years before finally talking about the apartment they might share thirteen minutes into the phone conversation. She asks how many bedrooms the place has. He asks: "do you want two?" "I don't know, what did you have in mind?" she replies while chuckling as the conversation begins to resemble an awkward date. Irwin tells Roberta he once almost moved in with a woman in London, but they disagreed on how many bedrooms they should have. He wanted one, but she wanted two. Roberta asks him if he snores. Both say they don't. She agrees to meet him at a restaurant, Moulin Rouge, close to his place. He jokingly says it is a long wait until Monday, she reminds him that he said does not want anything easy. He laughs. "I knew I should've answered that ad," he adds. "You're very attractive" he tells her. "Do you think so?" she asks. "Do you think so" he asks her. "No I don't think so she replies." "Oh come on! I mean, really you are," he tells her.

The awkwardness of this conversation may owe to the interplay of the qualities of the voice and the sematic content of the conversation. As Mladen Dolar argues in relation to non-semantic signifying qualities of the human voice: "The vocabulary may distinguish nuances of meaning, but words fail us when we are faced with the infinite shades of the voice, which

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<sup>157</sup> Adriana Cavarero, *For More than One Voice : Toward a Philosophy of Vocal Expression* (Stanford, Calif.: Stanford University Press, 2005), 12–13.

infinitely exceed meaning. It is not that our vocabulary is scanty and its deficiency should be remedied: faced with the voice, words structurally fail.”<sup>158</sup> Dolar thus points to the instances when the channels of symbolic language break under the pressure of meaning and effects they cannot encode or accommodate. This is the realm of the absolutely qualitative, durational, the “analogue, continuous, or smooth ideas” which I mentioned earlier in relation to Floridi and Bergson.<sup>159</sup>

What those recorded voices convey is more than the mundane details of the conversation; they perform historically specific, Western heterosexual gender relations. It is through these qualities that, I argue, Hershman Leeson/Roberta is performing gender. I am here working with the definition of gender performativity first put forth by Judith Butler:

Gender reality is performative which means, quite simply, that it is real only to the extent that it is performed. It seems fair to say that certain kinds of acts are usually interpreted as expressive of a gender core or identity, and that these acts either conform to an expected gender identity or contest that expectation in some way. That expectation, in turn, is based upon the perception of sex, where sex is understood to be the discrete and factic datum of primary sexual characteristics [i.e., the seemingly unarguable givenness of anatomical differences between male and female].<sup>160</sup>

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<sup>158</sup> Mladen Dolar, *A Voice and Nothing More* (Cambridge Mass.: MIT Press, 2006), 13.

<sup>159</sup> Luciano Floridi, *Information: A Very Short Introduction* (Oxford; New York: Oxford University Press, 2010), 25.

<sup>160</sup> Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* (New York: Routledge, 1990), 278–79.

While we are all performing gender at all times, Hershman Leeson's performance as Roberta Breitmore exaggerates the gender specific phonic features of the performance of female gender specific to that historical and cultural context.

Along with the carefully crafted personality of Roberta Breitmore expressed in her sartorial choices, her demeanor and modes of embodiment, which I discussed in Chapter One, these voice recordings trace the contours of the personality of Roberta in a multimedia portrait. Just as the doll deployed in *Olympia: Fictive Projections and the Myth of the Real Woman* chases its ultimate referent across time and multiple media, Roberta Breitmore is compelled to live across space in a variety of traces.

Hershman Leeson's primarily performative multi-media practice—from the wax figures in *Dante Hotel* "sleeping" under the invasive and constant scrutiny of anonymous visitors, to the crafting of the persona of Roberta Breitmore, to the attempt to spark into life an artificially intelligent *Agent Ruby*, the cloning work of Rosetta Stone, the protagonist of *Teknolust*, to the crafting of an antibody structured after the artists' name—puts life and the life-like under the microscope. In many cases the viewer of these pieces participates in bringing them to life, from the interactions internet users have with *Agent Ruby* to the tip toeing around the Dante Hotel creating the impression of an actual invasion of privacy. The voyeuristic gaze of the Dante Hotel visitors and the fictional cloning work of *Teknolust*'s Rosetta Stone respectively perform and represent agency over living. In being placed as viewers of passive unwitting figures in a hotel room, visitors to the installation become part of a work performing the agency of a voyeur exacting their gaze over powerless shapes believed to be living, breathing bodies. While Rosetta Stone is granted life making powers and agency over genes and their manifestation in the bodies of clones. While performativity as the mimesis of grace as agency was achieved in Roberta

Breitmore through the crafting and enacting of Roberta's persona, the entanglement of agency and performativity is found in the relationship Hershman Leeson stages between the life-like, technology and viewers.

## Conclusion

In looking at this body of work, I constructed a bridge between performativity and aesthetics to demonstrate the performative use of technology in Lynn Hershman Leeson's art practice. I have done so while tracing the leitmotiv of liveness and the life-like and its promethean echoes in the artist's work from the *Olympia* sex doll's three-dimensional presence and evocation of sexuality to the staging of the wax bodies of the *Dante Hotel*, the science fiction of cloning and life sustaining semen in *Teknolust* and finally to the *Infinity Engine*. The explorations of the effects of embodiment and the potential of individual and machine agency encapsulate both interrogations about the life, and political narratives, feminist and otherwise, contemporaneous to the artist's work and centered upon the emancipation of bodies and subjectivities. These explorations are also contemporaneous with technological developments that have had a profound impact on the recording of life and liveness beginning in the industrial revolution. In her study of these developments and of the rationalization of contingency that accompanied the birth of cinema and the capitalist industrial revolution in Western countries, Mary Ann Doane, drawing heavily on the work of Bergson, argued that "the rationalization of time characterizing industrialization and the expansion of capitalism was accompanied by a structuring contingency and temporality through emerging technologies of representation."<sup>161</sup>

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<sup>161</sup> Mary Ann Doane, *The Emergence of Cinematic Time: Modernity, Contingency, the Archive* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2002), 11.

Contingency is the structuring feature of duration and other purely qualitative realms, and the object of representation by a variety of media that proliferated in the twentieth century, from the phonograph, to cinema, video and television. The coexistence of the live and contingent on one hand, and the recorded and rationalized on the other, continues to be manifest in the work of Hershman Leeson in the form of live performance, artificial intelligence, genetic manipulation. While working in both realms identified by Doane, Hershman Leeson's work is united across media in its performative approach which forms the crux of its feminist political impact. Indeed, Hershman Leeson's work points to the possibility of exercising agency over one's own body, a question particularly relevant to the artist's feminist practice and the feminist context in which she worked, and that I explored in the previous chapter.

By placing this discussion against the backdrop of key texts in the history of Western aesthetics that informed modernist discourse contemporaneous to Hershman Leeson's work, I have also sought not only to situate it historically, but also to complicate the relationship of performativity to key notions that informed modernism. Hershman Leeson's foregrounding of the body manifested in many forms coupled with with an inescapable temporal dimension to all her works put her practice at odds with twentieth-century dominant modernist criticism and is symptomatic of her work's historical and political significance. The influential modernist critical paradigm put forth by critics like Fried formed part of the backdrop to Hershman Leeson's early career. The alignment of Fried's critical posture with Kantian aesthetics formed the basis of a program that segregated work deemed to be worthy of the title of Art for their allegedly apolitical and transcendent nature from bodies of work that foregrounded embodiment and artistic subjectivity, among them the work by women and other marginalised groups. The work of Judy Chicago, Martha Rosler, Dara Birnbaum and the Guerilla Girls are some of them. While

practices by these artists foregrounded embodiment and subjectivity, their relationship to the political relied heavily on the optics of representation as a meaning-making phenomenon and rallying cry. The path charted by Hershman Leeson, while intersecting with these practices has been comprehensively performative. Indeed, I have argued that performativity plays a role in Hershman Leeson's works in the way they are said to function through interaction with their public, in their use of technical and physical properties of media, and the diegetic worlds imagined for fictional characters in, for example, *Lorna* and *Teknolust*. I have also argued the imagining of agency through performativity has rested at the crux of the political potency of an oeuvre that yearns to seize the means of life-making, both literally (e.g. *The Infinity Engine*) and socially (e.g. *Roberta Breitmore*).

## Chapter Four

### The Agency of a Single Voice: The Diffracted Narratives of Hershman Leeson's *Electronic Diaries*

"In the story of the Arabian Nights the magical cave that's filled with treasure was opened through the power of a single voice"

Lynn Hershman Leeson in *First Person Plural: The Electronic Diaries of Lynn Hershman*.

"Representationalism takes the notion of separation as foundational. It separates the world into the ontologically disjunct domains of words and things, leaving itself with the dilemma of their linkage such that knowledge is possible"

Karen Barad, *Meeting the Universe Halfway*, 137.

In this chapter, drawing on Karen Barad's concept of agential realism and Henri Bergson's writing on duration and the qualities of experience, I examine *First Person Plural: The Electronic Diaries of Lynn Hershman*, the video diaries of Hershman Leeson compiled between 1984 and 1996, *The Infinity Engine*, and *Agent Ruby*. The diaries chronicle the artist's life struggles and trauma, in the beginning they feature mostly shots of the artist speaking into the camera, interspliced with excerpts of contemporaneous newsreel anchoring her testimonies in a given era. The artist speaks of the failure of her marriage and her struggle with her body image before disclosing trauma she sustained from child abuse, her family's experience of Nazi concentration camps, and images of Dracula (the fictional figure that haunted her childhood).

There are two ways I examine the *Diaries* in relation to Barad's Agential Realism. The first and the most obvious one look at the diegetic world of the film—without assigning any truth value to this performative work—and examine the ways in which its weaving of narratives to historical events can serve as an illustration, a representation or analogy of the relationship

discrete objects and events have to one another and the connectedness of everything and everyone. At the same time, rather than only diving into the work, and studying its signifiers and its formal and aesthetic qualities in relation to the work's narrative, I want to employ a method informed by what Barad calls onto-epistem-ology and assumes that "knowing is a material practice of engagement as part of the world in its differential becoming."<sup>162</sup> While discussing the *Diaries* in dialogue with *Agent Ruby* and *The Infinity Engine*, I approach these works not only as objects, but as phenomena.

I begin by analysing the *Diaries*, the accounts they report, the imagery they use and contextualise the use of video they represent in relations to the emergence of video as an artistic medium. I then focus on the optical metaphors found in the *diaries* and—while discussing Barad's agential realism—elucidate the ways in which they performatively call forth events and psychic states. I then explore how the optical phenomenon of diffraction can be seen to explain how this performative use of media functions in both the *diaries* and *The Infinity Engine* while also drawing from Bergson's insight on the physical recording of psychic states. I examine Bergson's contrasting of the qualitative nature of experience and segmented and linear aspect of its physical rendition to complicate the narrative and material relationship of the *diaries* with the events the diaries call forth. I then go further in examining both *The Infinity Engine* and the *diaries'* relationship with the physical world and embodiment and remark on the ways in which they portray and produce marks on matter, and impact bodies. I draw on Vicky Kirby's scholarship on causality and behavioral scientist Arline T. Geronimus's research on the concept of "weathering" or the effect material and social circumstances have on bodies. Finally, I

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<sup>162</sup> Barad, *Meeting the Universe Halfway*, 89.

compare the role of diffraction and the bodily aspects of *The Infinity Engine* and the *diaries* with the disembodied *Agent Ruby* I discussed as an image of life in the previous chapter.

### **Multiple Lives, One Decade**

At the beginning of the 74 minutes video *First Person Plural: The Electronic Diaries of Lynn Hershman*, the year is 1984 and Hershman Leeson contextualises her personal struggles against the backdrop of momentous global historical events simultaneous to what she says is her own “personal apocalypse.” In a close up of the power switch of a video editing equipment we see a finger moving the switch from off to on, while Hershman Leeson’s voiceover says: “At the time I really didn’t know what power was or how easy it was to turn it on.” The medium of Video here is explicitly linked to the empowerment the *Electronic Diaries* are meant to perform.

Spanning a period of twelve years, these *diaries* begin with the artist recounting being abandoned by her husband and waiting for him for four years while turning to food for comfort. Personal accounts are interspliced with clips from news reports on contemporaneous events of the Reagan era. Hershman Leeson then chronicles her struggle with food and reaching a healthy weight, while news reporting on the 1984 trial of Nazi war criminal Klaus Barbie is spliced into her narrative. In the form of this clip, the painful memories of the holocaust that haunt the artist’s family begin to emerge. Hershman Leeson then recounts having to keep secret the sex abuse she endured as a child and the need she felt to escape her circumstances through her imagination: “for years I would pretend I was other people, sometimes I made them up and sometimes I would assume the identity of a character that I’ve read about in a short story.” The dreadful figure of Dracula is intertwined with Hershman’s account of her childhood. The film then introduces Henry, a man Herman Leeson describes as her opposite because he is black, a man, and self-

taught; however, they have in common the fact both have been diagnosed with tumors. While Hershman Leeson's tumor disappeared, Henry's did not. The diaries pay homage to Henry and highlight the randomness of ill fate. The artist then regresses into her childhood once again when she would scratch away the plaster of the wall by her bed, hoping to escape her life as a victim of abuse. The *diaries* then introduce Leslie, another woman whose mother survived the holocaust. She interviews Leslie's daughter Aria who has read Anne Frank's diaries, querying the transmission of intergenerational trauma. While Aria finds no immediate connection to Anne Frank, she knows her grandmother suffered in the same way Frank did. Continuing to recount episodes of wartime suffering endured by women, Hershman Leeson interviews a woman whose house was burned down by an American helicopter at age fourteen in Vietnam and who, as a result, suffered injuries caused by bomb shrapnel. An audio account is superimposed on a series of images reconstructing episodes of battery suffered by the artist, including the burning of a doll's hair to illustrate the times Hershman Leeson as a child had her own hair burned on a stovetop. The film concludes with Hershman Leeson recounting the process of making the *diaries* and their positive critical reception.

At the time Hershman Leeson began her electronic diaries, the association of video with a newfound creative freedom and political emancipation was about ten years old. Video was cheaper than film, and artists could instantly view what they've recorded and instantly see what the camera sees displayed on a screen. As noted by William Kaizen, in the late 1960s artists Andy Warhol, Frank Gillette, Nam June Paik, Lynda Benglis, and Dan Graham reveled in the properties of the new medium, paradoxically citing its immediacy. Video was self-effacing, what

you saw was what you got, and you got it right now.<sup>163</sup> Dan Graham proposed that “video is a present time medium.”<sup>164</sup> Video was the new medium of the moment happening in the moment, for the moment. Vito Acconci recounted, “the immediacy of video was the most startling thing [...] I could use video as a mirror.”<sup>165</sup> While capturing life events, the *diaries* employ the immediacy of video as a convenient medium to conserve testimony, to call forth past trauma and narrate the present into a videographic archive. While reflecting on the past, recounting the present and self-reflectively looking back at the *diaries* themselves near the end of the film, the work as a whole doesn’t commit to a temporal anchoring. This is at odds with the tropes of immediacy and presentness formed during the emergence of video. As Kaizen notes: “The response to video as immediate was conditioned by the immediacy of live television. Whereas film may also make distant events seem present, the events it depicts are understood as past. Filmic images are caught up in what Roland Barthes called photography’s ‘that-has-been’ effect.”<sup>166</sup>

### **Diffractive Video: How the *Diaries* Perform Narratives**

While at first sight, the *diaries* appear to perform this banal role of recorder testimony and engage with video in a strictly representational fashion, the words spoken by the artist, and her directorial choices create a testimony that complicates the simplistic relationship between medium and content at the crux of representationalism. While on the one hand a belief in the

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<sup>163</sup> William Kaizen "Live on Tape: Video, Liveness and the Immediate" in Tanya Leighton, Charles Esche, and Mark Lewis, *Art and the Moving Image: A Critical Reader* (London: Tate, 2008), 258–59.

<sup>164</sup> Dan Graham in *Ibid.*, 259.

<sup>165</sup> Vito Acconci in *Ibid.*, 259.

<sup>166</sup> William Kaizen "Live on Tape: Video, Liveness and the Immediate," in *ibid.*, 262.

ability of recording media to fully account for the world and “the truth” is explicitly voiced, an attention to the material contingencies surrounding the making of the diaries and the entanglement of the apparatus of video recording to the emotional past of the artist, is also foregrounded. At once, Hershman Leeson tells us: “we’ve become a society of screens, of different layers that keep us from knowing the truth,” hinting at the belief that every layer of mediation takes us further and further away from a plenitude of meaning and experience. Later, recounting the trauma resulting from the sexual abuse she suffered as a child, she notes: “the scars are the length of this tape.” The impossibility of literally mirroring past events, of compelling them through a representational magic that no media is capable does not impede the *diaries*’ performance of past events. The scars left by abuse are part of the work rather than an object of its videographic gaze.

Seeking to optically retrieve and record events is bound to leave one wanting as Hershman Leeson’s voice-over is heard saying: “When you shine a light on your shadows, the reflection can be almost blinding. Demons have no reflections. They only exist when you can’t see them.”<sup>167</sup> I argue that the *diaries* are more than a record keeping of the artist’s life in video form and exist in relation to the histories and events they recount. Here I return to Karen Barad’s theory of agential realism to explore the ways in which the *diaries* function in relation to the events they recount. Barad proposes agential realism as a performative alternative to representationalism, or the atomistic assumption that the world consists in inert matter and discrete objects, separate from human subject are able to observe the world objectively.<sup>168</sup> Reading the *diaries* through Barad’s insights, I argue we can make sense of them as part of a

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<sup>167</sup> Lynn Hershman Leeson, *First Person Plural: The Electronic Diaries of Lynn Hershman*, 1984, 36:00.

<sup>168</sup> Barad, *Meeting the Universe Halfway*, 137–38.

greater historical phenomenon. While individual events are described in the *diaries* (from the breakdown of Hershman Leeson's first marriage, her abuse as child, the lives of holocaust victims and their survivors, and various contemporaneous events), they all participate in the making of the *diaries*. While a diary is commonly thought as inherently personal and subjective, envisaging the *diaries* as part of a greater meaning making apparatus helps provide a fuller picture of their performance of meaning. In Barad's agential realist ontology, the primary units of the material world are not objects; they are phenomena. From this perspective, subjects do not know this world from an external position. Instead, they are part of apparatuses that exist as phenomena.<sup>169</sup> Barad argues:

Making knowledge is not simply about making facts but about making worlds, or rather, it is about making specific worldly configurations—not in the sense of making them up ex nihilo, or out of language, beliefs, or ideas, but in the sense of materially engaging as part of the world in giving it specific material form. And yet the fact that we make knowledge not from outside but as part of the world does not mean that knowledge is necessarily subjective (a notion that already presumes the pre-existing distinction between object and subject that feeds representationalist thinking). At the same time, objectivity cannot be about producing undistorted representations from afar; rather, objectivity is about being accountable to the specific materializations of which we are a part. And this requires a methodology that is attentive to, and responsive/responsible to, the specificity of material entanglements in their agential becoming. The physical

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<sup>169</sup> Ibid., 141.

phenomenon of diffraction makes manifest the extraordinary liveliness of the world.<sup>170</sup>

Diffraction then is an alternative way of making phenomena and the world visible, one that does not rely on the linear optics of reflection that underpin the belief in the possibility of direct, objective observation and representation. As I discussed in the previous chapter, for the *Infinity Engine*, a team of scientists created an antibody bearing Hershman Leeson's name. But the existence of this antibody can only be confirmed by being made visible through the physical phenomenon of diffraction. Indeed, among the scientific material visitors to the *Infinity Engine* are made aware of, is an explanation of how antibody structure can be observed by exposing it to a synchrotron x-ray beam hitting a microscopic crystal and creating a diffraction pattern.

The *Infinity Engine* engineers a phenomenon out of an infinite set of possibilities and entangles the semantic meaning found in Hershman Leeson's name and her artistic approach to the organic material it interacts with. Similarly, the *diaries* entangle their content with the mechanical apparatus, making them intelligible through the electrical reading of magnetic fields in a videocassette player and the device which ultimately digitized the work to disseminate it online where I viewed it. I want to argue through this onto-epistemo-logical view of the Lynn Hershman antibody in the *Infinity Engine* that this view of the work as a phenomenon rather than a discrete object helps us understand how the work may be said to escape the traps of functioning as representation alone and enables it to perform meaning through its material relationships with the viewer and matter around it.

Central to Barad's understanding of the relationship of meaning to matter is her argument that:

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<sup>170</sup> Ibid., 91.

the primary ontological units are not "things" but phenomena -dynamic topological reconfigurings/entanglements/relationalities/(re)articulations of the world. And the primary semantic units are not "words" but material-discursive practices through which (ontic and semantic) boundaries are constituted. This dynamism is agency. Agency is not an attribute but the ongoing reconfigurings of the world. The universe is agential intra-activity in its becoming.”<sup>171</sup> The relationship between subject and object, for Barad is not one between two discrete ontological units but the results of intra-actions (rather than interactions) within phenomena which create what she calls an “agential cut.” There is no subject exterior to a world around them, “relata do not pre-exist relations; rather relata-within-phenomena emerge through specific intra-actions. Crucially, then, intra-actions enact *agential separability*—the condition of *exteriority-within-phenomena*.<sup>172</sup>

In stark contrast to the representationalist paradigm in which matter is inert and open to be objectively observed by subjects, Barad proposes a performative account of the world as phenomena where matter, meaning and subjects are entangled in an everchanging process of world making. While the *diaries* are full of testimonies about discrete objects and visceral embodied wounds (the burning of the artist’s hair, the testimony of the Vietnam war survivor extracting shrapnel from her body, the observation of a tumor on a CT scan and its later disappearance), they are the result of the entangled histories they narrate: A family history of

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<sup>171</sup> Ibid., 141.

<sup>172</sup> Ibid., 140.

abuse and trauma, war and bodily harm, psychic projections into the future, another world or alternative personae, the material struggle of producing a video diary on limited means. While the *diaries* shed light on a variety of events and phenomena, I want to argue they result not so much in a sum of testimonies but in an entanglement of temporally and physically disparate events. Unlike a simple sequence of events, this entanglement is non-linear. As noted by Barad, Niels Bohr's work has shown that classical physics a particle is a discrete object that can only be in one place at the same time, in quantum physics, subatomic particles can be observed being in various places at the same time. In classical physics, particles behave like the bigger objects we encounter in our daily life, if it here in front of us, it cannot at the same time be elsewhere. Waves, on the other hand are understood to be different; they can be here and there and interfere or merge with one another.<sup>173</sup> When Bohr and Einstein repurposed an apparatus used to demonstrate the wave-like behaviour of light—Thomas Young's famous two-slit experiment—they found that a subatomic particle is either here or there, the patterns obtained by the experiment showed everywhere the particle can be at once, behaving like a wave.

When two or more waves intersect, a diffraction pattern occurs, this phenomenon can be observed in our everyday life in the diffraction pattern of water waves in a pond for example but can also occur in light and sound waves.<sup>174</sup> Diffraction is an optical phenomenon distinct from the phenomenon of reflection, as Barad argued drawing on Donna Haraway's 1992 essay "Promises of Monsters: A Regenerative Politics of Innapropriate/d Others":

The physical phenomenon of reflection is a common metaphor for thinking-a  
little reflection shows this to be the case. Donna Haraway proposes diffraction

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<sup>173</sup> Ibid., 100.

<sup>174</sup> Ibid., 28.

as an alternative to the well-worn metaphor of reflection. As Haraway suggests, diffraction can serve as a useful counterpoint to reflection: both are optical phenomena, but whereas reflection is about mirroring and sameness, diffraction attends to *patterns of difference* [my italics].<sup>175</sup>

While representationalism may be in tune with is the intuition of classical physics, Barad's performative account draws from quantum physical phenomena. And while representationalism rests on optical metaphors of mirrors and reflections through which the subject apprehends the world outside them, Barad's theory envisions phenomena where meaning is diffracted rather than reflected: "In contrast to reflecting apparatuses, like mirrors, which produce images-more or less faithful-of objects placed a distance from the mirror, diffraction gratings are instruments that produce patterns that mark differences in the relative characters (i.e., amplitude and phase) of individual waves as they combine."<sup>176</sup> These difference in relative character of which Barad speaks, cannot be read without thinking of Henri Bergson's idea of duration I discuss in the previous chapter, and which he defines as purely qualitative and devoid of the discrete units of measured time.

### **Phenomenal Diaries and Delineated Agencies: Karen Barad, Henri Bergson and Reading the Phenomenon of the *Diaries*.**

In *Time and Free Will*, Bergson imagined time as a homogenous realm akin to space in which psychic states are juxtaposed. Our mind, he suggests, externalizes psychic states and

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<sup>175</sup> Ibid., 29.

<sup>176</sup> Ibid., 81.

organises them in the same way objects are juxtaposed in space, with discrete objects marking a given point in space: “we are compelled to borrow from space the images by which we describe what the reflective consciousness feels about time and even about succession.”<sup>177</sup> On one level, Hershman Leeson’s *diaries* can be seen to do just that, externalizing into video different life events, recording time-specific emotions and aligning them in a linear fashion on the length of a videotape. But on another level, as suggested by Hershman Leeson when saying “the scars run the length of this tape,” the experiences recounted do not exist in a static and definite point in time; they exist in relation to other moments, other spaces.

Bergson posits that psychic states, like duration, are purely qualitative and heterogeneous in nature, and that they do not admit distinct multiplicity, externalisation or segmentation. Bergson proposes that a reflective consciousness urges the mind to apprehend psychic states as spatial and to make use of “clean-cut distinctions”<sup>178</sup> Distinguishing psychic phenomena from ones occurring space Bergson writes: “What we must say is that we have to do with two different kinds of reality, the one heterogeneous, that of sensible qualities, the other homogeneous, namely space.”<sup>179</sup> He sets out to demonstrate how pure duration is not spatial by writing:

Pure duration is the form which the succession of our conscious states assumes when our ego lets itself *live*, when it refrains from separating its present state from its former states. For this purpose, it need not be entirely absorbed in the passing sensation or idea; for then, on the contrary it would no longer *endure*. Nor need it forget its former states: it is enough that, in recalling these states, it does not set them alongside its actual state as one point alongside another, but forms both the

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<sup>177</sup> Bergson, *Time and Free Will*, 91.

<sup>178</sup> *Ibid.*, 97.

<sup>179</sup> *Ibid.*

past and the present states into an organic whole, as happens when we recall the notes of a tune, melting, so to speak, into one another.<sup>180</sup>

Hence, for Bergson psychic states and duration are not a succession of linearly aligned discrete states; they are an infinitely heterogenous flux that resemble Barad's phenomena, themselves based upon the wave-like behaviour of matter observed by Niels Bohr.

The idea that experience may not always be quantifiable because it exists as a purely qualitative phenomena where the appearance of discrete units is only the result of intra-actions for Barad, and of spatialised rationalisations for Bergson, comes full circle with neuroscientist Kristof Koch's contention that consciousness cannot be computed and that even complex computers cannot experience because a computer "has no intrinsic causal powers and does not exist for itself, as it is reducible to its individual processing units."<sup>181</sup> Similarly, there are no individual units in Bergson's description of psychic states and duration as eluding measurement: "When I follow with my eyes on the dial of a clock the movement of the hand which corresponds to the oscillation of the pendulum, I do not measure duration, as seems to be thought; I merely count simultaneities, which is very different. Outside of me, in space, there is never more than a single position of the hand and the pendulum, for nothing is left of the past positions."<sup>182</sup>

In Barad's terms, what Bergson is describing is an apparatus in which a human subject attempts to make sense of time and in which this intra-action results in an agential cut:

the apparatus enacts an agential cut—a resolution of the ontological indeterminacy—*within* the phenomenon, and *agential separability*—the *agentially enacted material condition of exteriority-within-phenomena*—

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<sup>180</sup> Ibid., 100.

<sup>181</sup> Koch, *The Feeling of Life Itself*, 142.

<sup>182</sup> Bergson, *Time and Free Will*, 108.

*provides the condition of possibility for the possibility of objectivity.* This agential cut also enacts a local causal structure in the marking of the measuring instrument (effect) by the measured object (cause), where “local” means within the phenomenon.<sup>183</sup>

Hence the possibility for the *diaries* to exteriorize embodied experiences rests on an agential separability within a phenomenon. The agencies delineated, that of the artist herself and those of the people she interviews, are in direct relation with the material world from which their testimonies draw their power. I have already noted how the *Diaries*, while attempting to record a moment, also highlight the impossibility of accurately and fully mirroring, reflecting, and recording events and psychic states.

The *Diaries*, while presented as a viscerally personal account of Hershman Leeson’s life and trauma, exists and takes part in various contemporaneous, past, and future phenomena. Hershman Leeson, visually and narratively anchors temporal elements to events surrounding them. Close-ups of the digital screens displaying the minutes and seconds of a video on an analogue video equipment are repurposed to show a given year and these shots are edited together with a voiceover describing that year’s historical context. Like a pond in which multiple waves and ripple effects originate from various physical events, the *Diaries* form an image of diffracted narratives and the marks they leave upon bodies. At the same time as it emphasises what Bergson termed spatial time or the division of time into discrete units through references to calendar dates and contemporaneous events, the *Diaries* attempt to dissolve these temporal distinctions. Memories of the past are experienced in the present and so are longing for the future.

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<sup>183</sup> Barad, *Meeting the Universe Halfway*, 175.

As Barad notes regarding causality phenomena citing Vicky Kirby “what is important about causal intra-actions is that ‘marks are left on bodies’: bodies differentially materialize as particular patterns *of* the world as a result of specific cuts and reconfigurings that are enacted.”<sup>184</sup> A concrete example of this can be found in research about the effect of stressors resulting from racism, prejudice, and deprivation on the bodies of individuals on whom these circumstances are inflicted, what neuroendocrinologist Bruce S. McEwan and epidemiologist Teresa Seeman called allostatic load, a concept which behavioral scientist Arline T. Geronimus sums up as: “the cumulative wear and tear on the body’s systems owing to repeated adaptation to stressors. McEwen and Seeman, and Seeman and colleagues conceptualized allostatic load as the physiological burden imposed by stress.”<sup>185</sup> The consequence of this allostatic load upon bodies is what Geronimus termed “weathering,” explaining that: “because the stress response disrupts regulation of various systems throughout the body—for example, the cardiovascular, metabolic, and immune systems—the concept of weathering encompasses multiple systems and includes impacts on them that might not yet register clinically.”<sup>186</sup> Her research found that “weathering effects of living in a race-conscious society may be greatest among those Blacks most likely to engage in high-effort coping.”<sup>187</sup> In the *Diaries*, multiple events leave marks on bodies beginning with the holocaust suffered by previous generations, the sexual assault of which the artist was a victim, the abandonment by her first husband and the ensuing eating disorders. The figure of Dracula in cinema—and the bloody marks he is thought to inflict upon bodies—which haunted Hershman Leeson as a child is overlapped with accounts of memories of child abuse, creating a

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<sup>184</sup> Ibid., 176.

<sup>185</sup> Geronimus AT et al., "'Weathering' and Age Patterns of Allostatic Load Scores among Blacks and Whites in the United States," *American Journal of Public Health* 96, no. 5 (2006): 826.

<sup>186</sup> Ibid.

<sup>187</sup> Ibid.

diffracted pattern of dread, fear, and suffering on screen. The causal intra-actions of becoming a person and delineating one's agency through an agential cut are recounted in a narrative fraught with bodily assaults, transgression and the coming to terms with the artist's own body. From the passed-on memories of the holocaust to child abuse, and issues of body image.

Throughout the *Diaries*, Hershman Leeson's weight is periodically displayed, complementing the account of her struggle with maintaining a healthy weight following the emotional upheaval of being deserted by her husband. Her toxic relationship with food is discussed as a substitute for erotic intimacy: "to me cookies were a forbidden and exotic substance that became almost a sensual substitute for sexuality. What I would do would be to go into my bedroom, light a fire, have some music on, lock the door—it was very much like having a romantic or clandestine affair. And when I thought nobody would be around, I would ravish these morsels of caloric excesses." Within the phenomenon that is the *Diaries*, intra-actions produce agential cuts in which the body of the artist is a victim enduring the agency of an abuser, the subject of an emotionally charged eating disorder and the site in which the artist asserts her agency. Material circumstances weather the body with phenomena, what Barad calls intra-actions. Marks take the form of trauma, passed down memories of war crimes or shrapnel extracted from one's body.

Hershman Leeson also explores this visceral materiality of life in the *Infinity Engine* discussed in Chapter Three. In this work, the idea that "nature" in the form of genes and antibodies is separate from individuals observing it and from the semantic repertoire and epistemological practices they use to make sense and attribute meaning to genes and antibodies appears to be foregrounded and abandoned. Foregrounded in the work's visual repetition of scientific tools, the syringe in the hands of god in a modified Sistine chapel collage creates a

scientific iconography equating scientific agency the divine sparking of life onto earth.

Nevertheless, the work's insistence on explicating its process in an almost didactic manner reveals agencies in the relationship of matter to meaning to be contingent.

Meanwhile, as I argued in the previous chapter *Agent Ruby*, it can be said to perform rather than represent. I have argued by simulating the effects of a conversation and a degree of intelligence without being a conscious agent, *Agent Ruby* remains an image of life, rather than life itself, an image of the performative. The *Electronic Diaries* provide documentary accounts of the emergence of all the artistic meaning making phenomena employed by Hershman Leeson. It recounts how the artist since her childhood would invent personae: "In my situation, the truth was much more difficult to believe than anything I made up." *Agent Ruby* is the ultimate made-up persona; unlike *Roberta Breitmore*, she does not exist in the form of a living person, while borrowing the impression of personality traits embodied personae possess. *Agent Ruby* is the ultimate apparatus demonstrating the impossibility of objective observation of an object, as interactions with Ruby reveal, there is nothing there behind the picture, web interface and "conversation" with it. While the website used to converse with *Ruby* features a face resembling Tilda Swinton's character in *Teknolust*, there is no illusion of indexicality as the work exists purely through being performed, and in the form of the server hosting it. No matter what form Hershman Leeson's work takes, this ambivalent relationship to an ultimate originary referent—buttressing the economy of representation—is remarkably consistently.

## Conclusion

In this chapter I have read these *Diaries* through Barad's agential realism to better account for the entanglement of material circumstances and lived experience through which this video testimony is performed. By calling upon the work of Henri Bergson and Barad's optics of refraction, I wanted to help explicate how experience may be communicated in material form beyond the optics of representationalism alone.

In a particularly poignant segment of the *Diaries* discussing the intergenerational legacy of trauma, the disembodied voiceover of the artist says: "In the story of the Arabian Nights the magical cave that was filled with treasure was opened through the power of a single voice" over a shot of waves crashing on a rocky shore. Here, the potential for agency in the face of seemingly uncontrollable forces takes the form of rocks remaining unmoved by the ocean battering, and the fabled possibility for the emerging of the agency of a "single voice" through intra-actions. The struggle for the emergence of agency in the battering waves of social circumstances and material situatedness haunts the *Diaries*. This passage from the electronic diaries also echoes the role of the voice in western metaphysics as Derrida called the metaphysics of presence (discussed in Chapter Three) yet also speaks (loudly) to the magic/power of the performative and its entanglement with matter. Through the recording and splicing of sound and video, an agential cut is performed, empowering the artist and the ones she interviews. Accessible, and easier to process than film, video provided the material possibility for these narratives to be disseminated.

## Conclusion

Working through eras of social change and technological innovation, Lynn Hershman Leeson has steadily produced technologically pioneering feminist work and enduringly meaningful performances. Deployed in a great variety in media and live, Hershman Leeson's oeuvre exists as a palimpsest of code, embodied performance, genes, film, laser disc, photographs, stock ticker as well as artefacts. By skillfully blending an approach anchored in performativity to representationalism in her rendering of the life-like, she put forth her feminist politics by participating in a historical shift away from the belief in essential sovereign subjectivity to highlight the contingent, the embodied, and the performative. As a whole, Hershman Leeson's oeuvre sheds light on political entanglement of bodies to subjectivities and materiality. As I have argued in Chapter Three, it also instantiates the ways in which performativity's political power may come in part through its mimesis of agency or freedom found in the concept of grace.

In Chapter One, "Setting the Stage," I contextualised Hershman Leeson's work within contemporaneous critical discussions surrounding the relationship of performance to materiality, technology, performativity, and feminism. I argued that the Hershman Leeson's performative approach set her apart from her feminist contemporaries' reliance on representationalist strategies, as well as the claims by performance artists such as Marina Abramovic of presence and its transformative potential. Drawing on Karen Barad's distinction between performativity and representationalism, I illustrated—through an analysis of Hershman Leeson's *Self-Portrait as Another Person*—how this work disturbs representationalist assumptions that depictions and other representations can accurately reflect a referent regardless of the contingencies involved in

the presumed atomized relationship between knower and known. I compared the *Self-Portrait* to the more explicitly representationalist approach found in Judy Chicago's iconic feminist work *The Dinner Party*. Through this comparison I also asserted that the *Self-Portrait* and other work by Hershman Leeson worked to denaturalise understandings of mediations that assumed fixed, and autonomous subjects while foregrounding the contingencies and performativity of subjectivity years before they were theorised in the work of scholars, such as Judith Butler and Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick.

In my analysis of *Synthia Stock Ticker*, I theorised how Hershman Leeson's performative approach manifested itself in electronic and cybernetic media. The aesthetic and political effects of the work owe less to an ability to depict or represent and more to the process the transduction of market data into aesthetic and narrative experience. Turning my attention to the multi-media manifestations of Hershman Leeson's landmark, years-long performance project of *Roberta Breitmore*, such as the 1995 *Dollie Clones Tillie* and *CyberRoberta* and *Robota*, I drew on Derrida's concept of iterability (developed in response to Austin's speech-act theory) to argue that they can be seen to function as complex systems of marks. They only appear to function as empirical marks; they are neither transparent nor opaque media but simply performative.

Moving from this exploration of the performative modus operandi at work in Hershman Leeson's oeuvre, in chapter two—"Promises of Contact"—I discussed the longings for communion that accompanied both the historical era of Hershman Leeson's early career and the development of the new technologies used in her work. Concepts of liveness, global presence, and immediacy surrounding development in broadcasting in the 1960s found a manifestation in *Self Portrait as Another Person*, a portrait that explicitly expresses the desire to know everything about its beholder. A decade earlier, Claude Shannon and Warren Weaver's *Mathematical*

*Theory of Communication* had postulated noise to be an inherent feature to communication channels. With what I argued to be echoes to Platonic views on writing and liveness, Shannon and Weaver showed that material mediation between two communicants cannot convey the qualitative fullness of their utterances. I turned to the work of John Durham Peters to explore how many of the media used by Hershan Leeson have been viewed at the time of their emergence through this Platonic lens. In the context of art criticism, in the late twentieth century, anxieties about cybernetics manifested themselves in work, such as Nicolas Bourriaud's influential *Relational Aesthetics*. I argued that this rejection of cybernetic mediation was structurally homologous to Plato's critique of writing or, in Bernard Stiegler's words, "the spatialisation of temporal experience"<sup>188</sup> and to Henri Bergson's distinction of duration as a purely qualitative experience and rationalised and segmented spatialized time. In Chapter Two, I thus argued that performativity sidesteps these debates surrounding the opacity of mediation. With this framework, we can then see the difference between performativity and representation revealed as the difference between things that happen and things that depict, things that do and things that mirror. There is no need to worry about the reflectiveness of the mirror when no mirror is required. With that in mind, I compared Hershan Leeson's *Lorna* to Dara Birnbaum's *Wonder Woman*.

In Chapter Three—"How to Do Things with Life"—I moved from exploring the performative process occurring in Hershan Leeson's work to exploring specifically her performative renderings of the life-like, which I define as an attempt in any medium to convey the feeling that an object resembles or behaves as a living being would. This is different from mere attempts to render likeness in a portrait where the inertness of the medium is taken for

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<sup>188</sup> Stiegler, "The Participatory Condition Closing Keynote."

granted and is expected to be mirroring a clearly identified referent or sitter. The life-like is a different kind of illusionistic approach that performs the phenomenality of living bodies either by resembling them or appearing to behave or “think” like them.

My analysis of Hershman Leeson’s works *Olympia*, *Teknolust*, *Deep Contact*, *Difference Engine*, *Agent Ruby* also included a discussion of contemporaneous aesthetics debates, Kantian aesthetics, and Bergsonian notions of duration, and led me to hypothesize that Hershman Leeson’s work shows that performativity can be viewed as a mimesis of what I call “grace as agency.” Performativity’s freedom from the duties of representing or corresponding to a pre-existing object or phenomenon is structurally homologous to Kant’s notion of freedom in the act of mimesis as extrinsic from any economic exchange. I showed how Michael Fried saw this freedom operating in modernist art and how he claimed the effects of presentness it produces are akin to divine grace, transcending the contingent and the circumstantial, the personal and the political. I noted that Bergson shed light on the qualitative features of grace as aesthetic experience, untethered from representation, segmentation, or rationalisation. Whether it is Bergson’s aesthetic feeling of grace or Fried’s theologically inflicted presentness as grace or the freedom Kant sees in mimesis, these notions have the question of agency at their core, in the form of untetheredness from the economy of representation or the hypothesised absolute agency of a deity. Performativity’s mimesis of grace as agency does not confer on the performer the power to transcend the vicissitudes of the politics of subjectivity and subject position; it allows artists and their public to behold what being afforded agency might feel and look like. It is this beholding, I argued, that instantiates the political potential of performative approaches in Hershman Leeson’s art practices.

In Chapter Four, “The Agency of a Single Voice,” I moved from the mimesis of grace as agency to the ways in which agency is articulated in Hershman Leeson’s *First Person Plural: Lynn Hershman’s Electronic Diaries*. While discussing both the diegetic world of the film and the artist’s directorial choices, I grounded my discussion in Karen Barad’s notion of agential realism and her method of onto-epistem-ology, testing the notion that “knowing is a material practice of engagement as part of the world in its differential becoming.”<sup>189</sup> I turned to this approach in my analysis of the *Diaries* and showed that while at first sight, they appear to resemble a banal chronologically ordered recollections of life events, they in fact complicate this assumption of a diary as a simple account or a testimony. The notion that they may mirror a passed reality while at some points is fully embraced by the artists’ directorial choices and narratives, the limitations of this documentary and representationalist approach are also voiced.

I turned to the optical phenomenon of diffraction as discussed by Barad to explain the ways in which meaning is generated in the diaries. The diffractive model allowed me to view how the *Diaries* made events visible beyond the linear optics of reflection. In doing so I argued that while the *Diaries* do shed light on events and phenomena, they do so as an entanglement of temporally and physically disparate events in a non-linear fashion. If the *Diaries* are to be viewed as a phenomenon rather than a representation reflecting or mirroring the past, it is one within which agential cuts are enacted delineating the agencies of the persons interviewed, the artist herself, and all of these subjects’ relationships to the material world.

Hershman Leeson’s feminist participation in the twentieth-century denaturalisations of sovereign subjectivity and transcendent aesthetics unfolded through relational and performative relationships among bodies, media, and meaning. While Barad’s notions of performativity and

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<sup>189</sup> Barad, *Meeting the Universe Halfway*, 89.

agential realism hinge upon a divide that physicists in search of a theory of everything have to date failed to bridge between classical physics and quantum physics, the optics of reflection and diffraction, and the states of discrete objects and waves, a close study of Hershman Leeson's navigating the tension, between representationalism and performativity can serve as a case study for the sketching of a theory of everything in art and aesthetics. A theory that reconciles art's representational vocation as a medium and its existence as performative process.

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