



## The Importance of Being Roberta

written by Katerina Gregos

Pioneering artist Lynn Hershman Leeson (b. 1941, USA) holds a special place in art history. With a practice spanning more than forty years, Hershman Leeson has worked in performance, moving image, drawing, collage, text-based work, site-specific interventions, and later new media / digital technologies, and interactive net-based works, making her one of the first truly multi-disciplinary artists. In the pantheon of feminist artists, she also holds a special place, having investigated the question of gender, identity politics, and selfhood – a key field of interest in her practice – in-depth, over time and with a complexity that far surpasses many of her peers.

This complexity is best manifested in Hershman Leeson's seminal project *The Roberta Breitmore Series* (1974-1978). From 1974 until 1978, the artist conceived of, constructed and 'developed' a fictional persona and alter ego: that of Roberta Breitmore. The creation of Roberta Breitmore consisted not only of a physical self-transformation through make-up, clothing, and wigs which enabled the occasional role-playing, but a fully-fledged, 'complete' personality who existed over an extended period of time and whose existence could be proven in the world through physical evidence: from a driver's license and credit card to letters from her psychiatrist. According to the artist, Roberta's character was born one day in 1974 when she arrived on a bus in San Francisco and checked into the low-budget Dante Hotel, with \$1800 in her pocket. The fabrication and corroboration of her existence began at that moment, through a series of carefully orchestrated actions such as placing an advertisement in a newspaper seeking a roommate through to blind dating via the same means. The latter resulted in a series of physical encounters that Roberta had, with real people, in the real world, the repercussions of which played a key role in the formation of her psyche. Thus Roberta's existence came to be manifested into the world,

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Rue de la Régence 67 Regentschapsstraat, 1000 Brussels  
[www.waldburgerwouters.com](http://www.waldburgerwouters.com), [info@waldburgerwouters.com](mailto:info@waldburgerwouters.com)

through such encounters and accumulating material traces, which at the end of the project numbered hundreds of documents from which one could attempt to piece together a portrait of this young woman in mid-seventies, West Coast America.

This fracturing or splitting of personality and fragmentation of identity was later taken to further lengths when Hershman Leeson introduced another three 'Robertas', by hiring three additional performers to enact her character. These 'clones' of Roberta adopted the same look and attire, engaged in some of Roberta's correspondence and also went on some of Roberta (Lynn's) dates. Towards the end, Hershman Leeson, the 'original' Roberta, withdrew from her character leaving the three 'clones' to continue her work, until the character(s) were finally terminated in a performance at the Palazzo dei Diamanti in Ferrara, Italy in 1978, during an exorcism at the grave of Lucrezia Borgia. What remains are the standardised physical artefacts of any life: documentation and, of course, personal effects: from legal and medical documents to a personal diary. Though these 'prove' the existence of Roberta, what was of fundamental importance to Hershman Leeson, were the real experiences of Roberta, which perhaps more importantly 'determined' her character.

But who exactly was Roberta Breitmore and how can we come to know her? To what extent? Indeed how do we come to know anyone (including ourselves) and to what extent? How far was Roberta Breitmore fashioned out of Lynn Hershman Leeson? And how much of Roberta permeated into and shaped Lynn Hershman Leeson, given that Lynn spent considerable time *being* Roberta? If Roberta Breitmore is a figment of the imagination, then how much 'reality' resides within her? These are but some of the questions raised by Hershman Leeson in this work. Clearly the existence of Roberta was dependent on Lynn, but at same time she also became completely independent of her, the two identities being conjoined like Siamese twins but also separated.

*The Roberta Breitmore Series* thus constitutes one of the most profound meditations on existence and the impossibility to neatly circumscribe the human psyche and identity. It highlights the fact that identity is both nature *and* culture, both self-consciously constructed, as intrinsically experienced, and that it is often hard to pinpoint which of the two elements dominates. Finally, in a way that is both phantomic and very real, *The Roberta Breitmore Series* captures in an unequivocal way the complexity of identity, the fact that we all have many 'selves', some of which we may not recognize, who appear as estranged from our person as Roberta often does from her own. These different 'existences' cannot be easily be separated, much in the same way that Lynn Hershman Leeson cannot be separated from 'her' Roberta Breitmore. But who exactly was Roberta? We know that she was married, divorced, at some point unemployed, battling weight gain, and getting psychotherapy. There is evidence of all of this. But to what extent can she become knowable?

Nearly forty years on, the importance of *The Roberta Breitmore Series* cannot be overestimated. The questions it raised about the ungraspable, fluid state of identity, about 'truth' and 'authenticity', the difficulty to often draw the line between fact and fiction, biography and autobiography, the impossibility – perhaps - of entirely achieving that ancient Greek dictum of 'knowing thyself', the question of how appearances deceive, and the fundamental constructedness of identity remain; perhaps now stronger than ever given the advent of the internet and the emergence of virtual identities; and of course the increased importance attached to image and selfstyling in our 'lifestyle' conscious culture of appearances.

Roberta Breitmore was the flesh-and-blood *real* equivalent of an existence that would now be found in something like Second Life (where she also had a stint), or disguised behind an adopted digital persona, while hiding behind the safety of internet anonymity, in the comfort of one's home. The risk that the artist Lynn and the character Roberta were exposed to, by stark contrast, was very real. To give an example, Roberta placed personal ads in newspapers, which were answered by men who agreed to meet her for a date. On one of the subsequent dates, a man arrived with five others and asked Roberta to join a prostitution ring (Roberta fled and, naturally, became depressed and suicidal).

At the same time, *The Roberta Breitmore Series* stretched the limits of female empowerment (and the issue of deciding upon and asserting ones chosen female identity) to an extent that few artists have done: by almost completely blurring the boundaries between art and life over a timespacecontinuum that transcended most other similar investigations by women artists of that time which were mostly confined to the gallery, the studio or the street and were, in essence, short-lived experiments of an often symbolic nature. The extents to which Hershman Leeson went to render her fictional character as *real* as possible far surpass the momentary, theatricalised mimicry that can be seen in the work of artists such as Cindy Sherman, for example, or the voyeuristic, self-consciously self-indulgent explorations of the self in the work of Sophie Calle.

In a sense, *The Roberta Breitmore Series* can be considered the definitive feminist *gesamtkunstwerk*: incorporating as it does private and public performative elements (*in real life*); static, object-based, mixed media 'artworks' (which were at the same time documentation); and interventions made by others (such as, for example, the instance when Hershman Leeson commissioned cartoonist Spain Rodriguez to create a comic-strip of Roberta's adventures). Thus, the live, the time-based, the sculptural, the real and the fictional, the material and the conceptual all come together in one artistic universe where the boundaries between all of these are collapsed but also deployed to give birth to a new artwork and a new life.

Evidence of the events that gave life to Roberta's character and physical documentation of her existence constitute one part of this project, which I would call the horizontal part, metaphorically speaking. This consists of the 'bureaucratic' evidence of one's existence in the real world such as driving license, credit card, bank account. The other – equally, if not more important – concerns the mining of and providing

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insight into the depth of Roberta's *existence*, the 'vertical' element. Roberta's psychological state is revealed both through standardised material evidence as well as by perspectives provided by herself (through her diary) and others: her therapist, a journalist, the cartoonist. *The Roberta Breitmore Series* thus remains singular in its breadth, scope and complexity in relation to the construction and mutability of identity, stereotypical notions of the female, the mediated expression of self, the self-conscious adoption of role-play, the desire to disguise, to move away from the innate self, to be other than what one is. At the same time it is a poignant statement on voyeurism and the gaze: the gaze upon the other as well as deep into ourselves.

Katerina Gregos, October 2011