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Lynn Hershman Leeson's Roberta Breitmore and the Art of Becoming a Woman

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LYNN HERSHMAN LEESON'S *ROBERTA BREITMORE*

AND THE ART OF BECOMING A WOMAN

A Thesis

Presented to

The Faculty of the Department of Art History and Visual Culture

San Jose State University

In Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the Degree Master of Arts

By

Maayan Glaser-Koren

December 2014

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The Designated Thesis Committee Approves the Thesis Titled

LYNN HERSHMAN LEESON'S *ROBERTA BREITMORE*

AND THE ART OF BECOMING A WOMAN

by
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APPROVED FOR THE DEPARTMENT OF ART AND ART HISTORY

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ABSTRACT

LYNN HERSHMAN LEESON'S *ROBERTA BREITMORE* AND THE ART OF BECOMING A WOMAN

By Maayan Glaser-Koren

Throughout the emergence of second-wave feminism in the 1970s, social and political activism inspired female artists to create powerful artworks that critiqued institutional discrimination and supported women's reproductive rights and workplace equality. Feminist artists raised the public's awareness of women's issues by making women the subject of their artwork. In California especially, these creators turned to performance art, often taking their creations to the streets.

This thesis focuses on Lynn Hershman Leeson's performance, *Roberta Breitmore* (1974–1978), and examines how, through the steps of the performance, the piece's fictitious title character became a living resident of San Francisco. It will explore how *Roberta Breitmore* mirrored her lived society to become both a “real” woman and a case study in defining female identity. In this research, *Roberta Breitmore* the character finds her place not only in the culture of her time, but in the history of art, feminism, and feminist art.

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INTRODUCTION

The 1970s were a time of great upheaval in the United States. California, especially, was an important boiling point for free-speech student movements, such as the anti-Vietnam War and Chicano movements. The 70's also saw the emergence of feminist groups that fought for women's equality in the workforce and reproductive rights, and protested violence against women. Such social and political activism inspired female artists to create powerful feminist artworks, raising awareness of women's issues by making women the subjects of creative endeavors.

Lynn Hershman Leeson (born in 1941 in Cleveland, Ohio) is an American conceptual and feminist artist living in San Francisco, California. Her work involves new media elements such as sound, video, site-specific installations, and online interactive projects. Examples of her early installations include *The Dante Hotel* (1969) and *The Floating Museum* (1975–1978). The former takes place in a local San Francisco hotel, where the artist rented two rooms to exhibit her work. The latter is a collaborative project in which Hershman Leeson helped artists secure places to present their artwork, such as empty buildings and a prison courtyard.

Hershman Leeson turned to performance art for her public installations. Her best-known performance, *Roberta Breitmore*^{*} (1974–1978), is the subject of this research. Performed in San Francisco, the fictitious woman *Roberta Breitmore* became a living

^{*} This thesis examines the intertwining lives of the artist Lynn Hershman Lesson and her invented character Roberta Breitmore. While it is my argument that this character takes on an independent identity I will, for clarity's sake, italicize the name of the character Roberta Breitmore throughout this thesis.

resident of the city through her social interactions. The *Roberta Breitmore* performance is an exploration of the ways in which a fictional character can become a real (socially and institutionally recognized) human being.

It is the goal of this research to prove that the *Roberta Breitmore* character was an outgrowth of her culture, mirroring the social and cultural experiences of real women in 1970s San Francisco, and serves as a case study in analyzing that culture. Moreover, because she was created in the context of the feminist art movement, the establishment of her identity illustrates Simone de Beauvoir's notion that a woman is defined by society:

Woman's enslavement to the species and the limits of her individual abilities are facts of extreme importance; the woman's body is one of the essential elements of the situation she occupies in this world. But her body is not enough to define her; it has a lived reality only as taken on consciousness through actions and within a society...¹

To understand why this performance is important to the feminist discourse, and its place in the history of performance art *and* feminist art, it is important to interrogate the supporting literature.

Hershman Leeson has created artwork for nearly thirty years, positioning herself as an avant-garde artist through her use of innovative materials and combinations of new technological media, such as film and surveillance cameras. Her work challenges the art world and the way viewers interact with art. Before 1978 museums did not exhibit her work. Hershman Leeson's art was shown mainly in private collections, such as that of Donald Hess in Napa Valley and Gallery Paule Anglim in San Francisco. In addition, today's art history survey texts such as Marilyn Stokstad's *Art History* (2002), Pohl Frances's *Framing America: A Social History of American Art* (2002), do not include her

work. Only in recent years have scholars such as Amelia Jones, Moira Roth, and Jane Wark began to address Hershman Leeson's artistic career.

This thesis will first examine the women's liberation movement in order to contextualize the artist's work and demonstrate its relationship to the political and social changes rocking the United States throughout the 1970s. There will follow a look at American art and feminism in northern and southern California to show the background and emergence of performance art in general, and Hershman Leeson's performance of *Roberta Breitmore* in particular. Third will come a discussion of two important articles by Amelia Jones and Jane Wark that place Hershman Leeson in an art-historical context, opening the door to further research about the importance of the *Roberta Brietmore* project to American art, performance art, and feminism. The study will close by discussing the importance of phenomenology and early feminist writings such as Simone de Beauvoir's book *The Second Sex* (1949) and Donna Haraway's essay *The Cyborg Manifesto: Science, Technology, and Socialist-Feminism in the Late Twentieth Century* (1985) to this performance's claim that *Roberta Breitmore* is a case study in defining an American woman's identity in the 1970s.

American Art and Feminism—Taking a Stand

The second wave of feminism (1960s) emerged in a time of social rebellion.² Women became involved in politics, establishing organizations such as the National Organization for Women (1966), which fought for legislation that would guarantee equal benefits and wages for women, as well as to grant women access to safe and legal abortion.

Focusing on the field of publications that emerged in this context grants a sense of the emerging feminist discourse. Betty Friedan established the problem of women in her seminal work *The Feminine Mystique* (1963), arguing against romanticized depictions of domestic life in media such as in magazines. Other well-known books of the time concerning women's oppression included the English translation of Simone de Beauvoir's *The Second Sex*, and *Our Bodies, Ourselves* (1971) by Judy Norsigian and the Boston Women's Health Book Collective, which discussed women's health and sexuality issues, including access to abortions and contraceptive pills.

In addition, magazines published criticisms of how women were represented in popular culture. *Cosmopolitan*, though by no means a feminist magazine, places an overt emphasis on women's desirability as a form of power, and in the 1970, represented female sexual liberation as a way to confront social and political institutions. *Ms* emerged in 1972 to counter *Cosmopolitan*'s depiction of sexualized women. This magazine became a central place to publish women's statements, and "sisterhood and challenges to patriarchy were the order of the day."³ Women shared stories about discrimination and transformed the personal into the political. In fact, the statement "the personal is political" was employed by feminist writers and activists to discuss women's roles in the house, for example as wives and mothers.

Scholarly articles and journals emerged as well, offering forums to discuss women's issues. Journals such as *Heresies* (1977–1992) published articles written by artists, art historians, and art critics, including Lucy Lippard and Miriam Schapiro, who wrote about art and politics. Each issue opens with a statement: "We are not only

analyzing our own oppression in order to put an end to it, but also exploring concrete ways of transforming society into one that is socially just and culturally free.”⁴

Furthermore, art historians became interested in discovering women’s voices and creations. In 1971, Linda Nochlin published the essay, “Why Have There Been No Great Women Artists?” changing the way women artists understood their own involvement in the art world. Nochlin claims that art production is not an autonomous activity, but is instead influenced by social forces, which previously were mostly determined by men.

Another authoritative text is Moira Roth’s *The Amazing Decade: Women and Performance Art in America, 1970–1980*, 1984, wherein Roth surveys performance art as a tool used for the sake of feminist activists’ expression.

The 1970s was an amazing decade for women. Coming from all walks of life, in pursuit of the goal of equal rights, women scrutinized and restructured their private and public lives. Not surprisingly during this decade, art served both to mirror and to comment on these profound social, cultural and psychological changes. By 1970 women artists had discovered that performance art – a hybrid form which combines visual arts, theater, dance, music, poetry and ritual – could be a particularly suitable form in which to explore their reassessments of themselves and other women.⁵

One of the artistic, feminist activist groups known to the public was the Art Worker’s Coalition (1969), who demonstrated in front of the Whitney Museum and the Metropolitan Museum of Art to demand an increase in the representation of women artists in exhibitions and collections.⁶ Additionally, female artists took action and created educational art programs that enriched women’s artistic creation and provided a space to create art without discrimination. In California, feminist art practice started in 1970 when Judy Chicago and Miriam Schapiro founded the Feminist Art Program at California State

University, Fresno. They provided art history classes featuring women artists while focusing on developing an artistic community for women.

Female experiences were the subject matter of the Fresno program's artwork,⁷ the most important project on which the students collaborated being the *Womanhouse*, a site specific installation and performance. The students renovated each room of the house into an art space designed to feature women's roles, such as mother, wife, and homemaker. They used unconventional media such as costumes to explore gender roles and sexuality.⁸ Performance art played an essential role in the program, as the artists used the female body as a medium to protest patriarchal notions of women's domestic roles while also employing traditional feminine crafts such as weaving. For example, in Sandra Orgel's *Ironing* (1972), the artist ironed a long linen sheet letting it pile on the floor.

Performance art took a different turn in northern California. In San Francisco, art fused with the streets and the daily lives of women. Women artists turned to performance in order to blur the line between art and life, challenging female identity, impersonating another to examine society's reaction and experience what is it to be someone other than a woman or other than themselves.⁹ For example, Linda Montano's *Chicken Woman* (1972) and Eleanor Antin's *The King of Solana Beach* (1975) featured the artists dressing in costumes and performing their personas in public spaces, such as the Golden Gate Bridge and on the beach. Hershman Leeson's *Roberta Breitmore* emerged at the same time as Montano's and Antin's performances, likewise exploring women's identity in northern California.

Roberta Breitmore in Literature

While much has been written about the feminist art movement and performance art by women artists, the majority of books dealing with *Roberta Breitmore* provide limited information about the piece. The first study of *Roberta Breitmore* appeared in *Performance Anthology: Source Book for a Decade of California Performance Art* (1980), in which the editors gathered different texts related to the *Roberta Breitmore* performance, including a segment from the exhibition catalogue.[†] The collection contains images from the Spain Rodriguez comic strip of *Roberta Breitmore*'s adventures and a short interview with Hershman Leeson by Moira Roth. Most of this interview was dedicated to the site-specific installation *Dante Hotel* (1972). After the publication of this book, *Roberta Breitmore* was ignored for nearly a decade, until it was mentioned again in newer books discussing feminist performance art.¹⁰

Hershman Leeson's *Chimaera Monograph* (1992)¹¹ contains Hershman Leeson's monograph, autobiography and interviews where she also describes *Roberta Breitmore*'s actions and adventures. *The Art and Films of Lynn Hershman Leeson* (2005), edited by Meredith Tromble, is a more recent monograph of her work. This collection of images, essays, and personal notes about Hershman Leeson's artwork provides broader information about the *Roberta Breitmore* performance.¹² A study by Amelia Jones, "Roberta Lives On," places *Roberta Breitmore* within the history of performance art in general and feminist performance art in particular. Jones reviews early performance artists, such as French Dada pioneer Marcel Duchamp, who created a female persona

[†] *Lynn Hershman Is Not Roberta Breitmore: M. H. DeYoung Memorial Museum, Golden Gate Park, San Francisco, California, April 1–May 14, 1978.*

named Rose Sélavy (1920–21), who signed her own name on artworks and appeared in portraits. Jones also mentioned the surrealist Lucy Schwob, who photographed her persona Claude Cahun in various poses and situations, her work referencing cross-genderism and sexuality. To discuss Hershman Leeson's contemporaries, Jones introduced 1970s pop art icon Andy Warhol, who created his public persona as a Hollywood movie star. With her overview of the history of performance art, Jones places *Roberta Breitmore* in performance art history and emphasizes why the piece is important to the art world. She claims:

Roberta Breitmore's emergence testified to the revived importance of self performance in the artistic negotiation of social and economic structure of power specifically as these structures related to sexual differences and art world conceptions of artistic identity and authority.¹³

In comparison to Warhol's persona, Hershman's *Roberta Breitmore* "opened the door to a quieter but potentially more profound interrogation of the limits of personal and public identity in relation to artistic subjectivity."¹⁴ In addition, Jones establishes a deeper relationship between Hershman Leeson and Schwob, describing both as trapped in the political moods of their times and having "embraced artifice to explore something profound in the experience of living as a woman in a patriarchal culture."¹⁵ Jones makes important points that set the background for *Roberta Breitmore's* performances. First, she relates Hershman Leeson to artists, such as Schwob, placing her in art history. Secondly, she relates the *Roberta Breitmore* performance to "the experience of living."¹⁶ Speculating on the relationship between *Roberta Breitmore* and the social-historical changes of her time, Jones explains, the performance reveals the experience of living as a

woman in 1974. Lastly, Jones places *Roberta Breitmore* within a philosophical tradition that illuminates the meaning of the work, writing:

Roberta's vivacity – her connectedness to what philosopher Maurice Merleau-Ponty has called the flesh of the world – keeps her alive as an embodied trope of the hinge between live art and its postmodern variations in the culture of the simulation.¹⁷

For Merleau-Ponty, the flesh of the world relates to the body, through which we experience the world. We gain knowledge not only through the mind but through the senses; we touch and hear and see and taste experience. Because *Roberta Breitmore* is an outcome of Hershman Leeson's bodily experience, and that experience in turn influenced the artist's performance, the character is part of both the real world and the simulation. By that, Jones elevates *Roberta Breitmore* from being a mere representation of a woman in society to becoming an actual participant.

An analysis of the *Roberta Breitmore* performance with existentialist phenomenology appeared in Jayne Wark's book, *Radical Gestures: Feminism and Performance Art in North America, 2006*. Wark describes the importance of French feminist and existential theorist Simone de Beauvoir's book *The Second Sex* (1949) to American feminists in general and feminist performance artists in particular. Beauvoir sees gender as a category and identity as an outcome of a socially prescribed role.¹⁸

Following this, she claimed

One is not born, but rather becomes, a woman. No biological, psychic, or economic destiny defines the figure that human female takes on in society; it is civilization as a whole that elaborates this intermediary product between the male and the eunuch that is called feminine.¹⁹

A woman *becomes* a woman; it is through interaction with society that a woman's identity is constructed. In doing so, Beauvoir calls women to take action to create their own destiny and change their situation.

Wark asserts that the American feminists in the 1970s saw in Beauvoir's analysis a way to fight for historic change. Wark claims that Beauvoir's notions inspired female artists to find their respective voices and "to speak about their particular experience as women."²⁰ Like many women during the 1970s, female artists started to ask questions: What am I? What do I want to be? These questions, according to Wark, "led many artists to engage with the ideas about subjectivity and otherness that Simone de Beauvoir had so forcefully articulated in the *Second Sex*."²¹ Because performance art allows for the transformation and exploration of the self, performance pieces such as *Roberta Breitmore* can be considered congruent with Beauvoir's existential theory. Although Wark mentions *Roberta Breitmore* briefly, most of the chapter titled "Personas and Transformation" is dedicated to Eleanor Antin's performances, *The King of Solana Beach* (1975), *The Nurse* (1976), and *The Ballerina* (1975). She summarizes thus:

The work of Hershman and Antin exemplified the interest among women performance artists at the time in personal transformation as a way to problematize notions of identity as fixed and singular.²²

Examining the women's liberation movement sets the background for understanding the changes in women's lives during the 1970s. These upheavals influenced countless artists and scholars, including Hershman Leeson. Performance art in feminist practice emerged both as a need and as a way to express women artists' struggle in a patriarchal art world based on institutions like museums and galleries. Whereas in

southern California, artists such as Judy Chicago turned to artistic collective production with an emphasis on women's domestic practice, artists in northern California focused on individual performances that challenged female identity.²³ The differences between northern and southern Californian women artists may be due to the political activism of the Black Panthers and the queer rights movements in San Francisco. Knowing the historical background of the feminist artistic practice helps in placing *Roberta Breitmore* in its temporal context and contributes to the understanding of her role in art history.

The two important sources mentioned above by Jones and Wark places Hershman Leeson's place in art history and within a philosophical discourse on performance art. The next section will explore further the relationship between Beauvoir and Hershman Leeson's *Roberta Breitmore*. This research will add to Jones's summarization of the persona and how *Roberta Breitmore* fits into the history of performance art, and complement and extend Wark's reading of Beauvoir together with *Roberta Breitmore* as an exploration of the construction of female identity.

Beauvoir's *The Second Sex* states that a woman is not born a woman but becomes one, which means that though a woman is born female, it is society, history and culture defines her as a woman. Within a patriarchal society, the woman is the Other while the man is the Subject, the superior. Therefore, part of being a woman is to take in male cultural and social assumptions of womanly identity. When Hershman Lesson expresses as *Roberta Breitmore*, she illuminates a woman's situation, what a woman is.

The first chapter of this thesis introduces the steps Hershman Leeson took in creating *Roberta Breitmore*, describes the way she constructed and embodied the

persona, and reveals some of *Roberta Breitmore*'s activities and the performance's relation to Beauvoir's phenomenological views of the woman as a cultural and a social entity.

The second chapter portrays *Roberta Breitmore*'s performance of invented identity. It discusses how she becomes Jones' "embodied trope" and the way the performance is understood within Beauvoir's view of the woman's situation.

The last chapter investigates Hershman Leeson's decision to end *Roberta Breitmore*'s performance in the time and manner she did, and the traces *Roberta Breitmore* left behind. Furthermore, this chapter introduces how *Roberta Breitmore* paved the way for Hershman Leeson's artistic career and the way the character reappears in some of her later artworks.

CHAPTER ONE: BECOMING ROBERTA BREITMORE

In her book, *The Second Sex* (1949), the French philosopher and feminist Simone de Beauvoir lays the foundation for understanding women's oppression in Western society. Beauvoir claims that a woman is defined not only through her biological role but also through her interactions in society, noting that the status of women in Western society reflects their oppression, alienation, and objectification. When *The Second Sex* was translated to English during the 1970s, its notions laid the groundwork for the woman's liberation movement in the United States.

During the late 1960s and early 1970s, the civil rights movement encouraged people to take a political and social stand for equality, and women's groups came together to form what would become known as second-wave feminism. Their main goals were to institute equal-opportunity employment and end sexual discrimination. In the art world, women artists experienced sexual discrimination when museums and galleries chose not to show their work, leading the women to search for different ways to exhibit their art. This chapter discusses Hershman Leeson's experience of rejection from those institutions firsthand and how she turned to San Francisco's streets to present her art. Hershman Leeson's early works, such as *Self Portrait as Another Person* (1969) and *The Dante Hotel*, emphasize her lived oppression in the arts and the stimuli that encouraged her to perform *Roberta Breitmore*.

Because Hershman Leeson was interested in analyzing the response to *Roberta Breitmore* and her interactions with society, the piece explores similar territory as *The*

Second Sex, particularly in the artist's and writer's similar views about a woman's body and her oppressive situation. Although there is no direct link between Beauvoir and Hershman Leeson, they share an interest in exploring how social interactions define what a woman is. *Roberta Breitmore* serves as a lense through which to examine the definition of a woman during the significant social changes in 1970s San Francisco.

From her early artistic career, Hershman Leeson was interested in assuming personas, such as her pseudonyms *Prudence Juris*, *Herbert Goode*, and *Gay Abandon* (1968-1972), who all wrote art criticism in various magazines. *Prudence Juris* was an editor at the well-known magazine *Artweek*, while *Herbert Goode* "wrote for national art magazines; and the third [*Gay Abandon*] freelanced for several European journals."²⁴ Hershman Leeson assumed their identities to write about her own work from different perspectives and create an archive of her work.²⁵ She states,

For a short time I assumed the identity of three fictional critics who wrote, from several perspectives and in different styles, about the work of Lynn Hershman in articles subsequently published in local, national, and international journals. With tangible reviews in hand, I was able to garner my first exhibition and legitimate critical evaluations.²⁶

In 1969, Hershman Leeson created an artwork featuring her transformation to "another person." *Self Portrait as Another Person*, was an installation created for the Berkeley University Art Museum. This installation included a wax cast of her face, painted black and outfitted with a dark wig. The head was put in a plexiglas box accompanied by a black tape recorder. The script, featuring audio with Hershman Leeson's voice, played when viewers approached the artwork. The recording started with a breathing sound, a sigh and then, "Oh, there you are, I've been waiting for you the

whole day, I am so glad that you come to see me, what is your name?” Another sigh, and then, “I didn’t hear you, what is your name? Tell me your deepest thoughts, I want to know all about you...”²⁷

Self Portrait as Another Person invites the viewer to participate. Unfortunately, the curator at that time, according to Hershman Leeson, claimed that “sound media was not appropriate material for an art museum and closed the exhibition.”²⁸ This was maybe due to the possibility in which sound media was a new technology for artists and seemed unconventional, while paintings and sculptures were acceptable mediums to portray art. This event led Hershman Leeson to explore different ways to exhibit her work.

In 1973, Hershman Leeson and local California artist and filmmaker Eleanor Coppola rented two rooms in the Hotel Dante in the North Beach area of San Francisco.²⁹ These rooms became the site for their artwork *The Dante Hotel*. Visitors could sign in at the front desk and obtain the keys to the two rooms. Coppola’s room, number 43, was open for only one week.³⁰ Coppola hired her friend Tony Dingman to live there and be observed by the visitors. One of the walls in the room was covered with polaroid photographs of the room’s objects, presenting the slight changes that had been made through time passing such as dust.³¹

Hershman Leeson’s room, number 47, was open to the public twenty-four hours a day for nine months. The room exhibited the personal belongings of imagined former residents such as books, eyeglasses, cosmetics, and garments. According to Hershman Leeson, these artifacts were clues to the residents’ identities. Under the bed was a tape recording that played breathing sounds and a radio broadcasting local news. “Pink and

yellow light bulbs draped shadows over two life-sized female wax cast women in bed.”³² These dolls were covered with a blanket so that only their heads on the pillow could be seen. On the ceiling, above the bed, Hershman Leeson installed repeated photographs of the room. The exhibition ended when a man visited the room, believed that the wax dolls were corpses, and called the police, who confiscated them. Although the installation ended dramatically, its concept plays an important part in Hershman Leeson’s artwork. *The Dante Hotel* examined issues such as the living environment and the creation of the life story of fabricated characters.

The Dante Hotel piece inspired Hershman Leeson to think about the people who might have inhabited that room, and thus spurred the *Roberta Breitmore* performance. In one interview, Hershman Leeson makes an explicit connection between these two artworks:

The work was constructed with the ephemera of somebody who might have lived in that room. It was all the negative space of that person: the books she’d read, the glasses she’d wear. Going through the room was essentially like an architectural flow chart of time. And then I thought, what would it be like to release this person in the world? That’s how she was born, really, out of rejection.³³

The term rejection in Hershman Leeson’s words expresses her rejection as a woman artist that could not exhibit her work in art galleries and museums because of her gender and it also reflects her decision to create fictional identities such as *Roberta Breitmore*, with rejection as an ongoing theme of the character’s life experience.

The Construction of Roberta Breitmore

Hershman Leeson created *Roberta Breitmore*'s psyche and personal history so she could be seen as an isolated individual, not fitting in comfortably with social norms. A wall-mounted note from Hershman Leeson recent exhibition *Autonomous Agents: The Art and Films of Lynn Hershman Leeson* (2007)³⁴, offers viewers facts about *Roberta Breitmore*'s life. She is a thirty-year-old Jewish female, divorced and unemployed, born August 19, 1945. She received one year of college education from Kent State University, where she majored in English and minored in art and drama. She left school to marry a man named Arnold Marx and moved with him to the suburbs of Cleveland, but soon felt very lonely and depressed in their relationship. After they divorced, and she moved to San Francisco,³⁵ the *Roberta Breitmore* character struggled with her weight, as well as depression and suicidal issues stemming from childhood sexual abuse.³⁶ She maintained a diary in which she wrote about her experiences.

Roberta Breitmore's physical appearance contributed to her behavior and social isolation. In an interview with art historian Patricia Maloney, *Looking for Roberta Breitmore* (2011), Hershman Leeson claims: "[Roberta] had her own language, her own voice, her own gestures; she was very different than I was physically. So I tried to make her objectified, an archetype of stereotypes."³⁷ Unlike Hershman Leeson, who was brunette and wore modest clothing, *Roberta Breitmore* was blond and wore provocative outfits including miniskirts, stockings, and boots. Furthermore, her appearance involved heavy makeup, a red-and-white polyester polka-dot skirt, a red suede jacket, and a green leather purse. Although there are few, if any, physical similarities between *Roberta*

Breitmore and her creator, there are identity similarities: both were Jewish and both lived in Cleveland. In contrast, the artist and her creation had different intellectual backgrounds, as Hershman Leeson holds a master's degree, while *Roberta Breitmore* did not graduate from college.

For Hershman Leeson, *Roberta Breitmore* was like a painting; her skin was the canvas and her makeup the paint. In Hershman Leeson's series of photographs of *Roberta Breitmore*, such as *Roberta's Construction Chart #1* (figure 1), the artist manipulates her persona's self-portrait by painting instructions over it that tell the viewer how to construct a "Roberta Breitmore face." As Glenn Kurtz describes in his essay, "Composing with Images: Lynn Hershman's Photography," *Roberta Breitmore's* face "has been marked like a topographic map, with dotted lines and numbered shaded areas."³⁸ The instructions at the bottom of the photograph match with the numbers on *Roberta Breitmore's* face. These numbers indicate the makeup brand and placement of specific colors; for example, number one is Dior's eye stick light.

Figure 1 Lynn Hershman Leeson, *Roberta Construction Chart #1*, 1975, photography, digital pigment print, 48.8x32cm, courtesy Galerie Waldburger, Brussels. © Lynn Hershman Leeson, Reprinted with permission from the artist.

Another step in *Roberta Breitmore*'s construction is Hershman Leeson's photograph *Roberta Construction Chart #2* (figure 2), in which the artist draws contour lines across *Roberta Breitmore*'s face to indicate the areas that will be covered with makeup and those that must be reshaped. For example, the cheeks are blushed and the eye shadow's color is light blue. In addition, the painting instructs its viewer that *Roberta Breitmore* is to wear false eyelashes and gold glasses, and to add a mole to the upper left

side of her face. These two construction charts imply that anyone can visually transform into *Roberta Breitmore* with but a simple recipe.

Figure 2. Lynn Hershman Leeson, *Roberta's Construction Chart #2*, 1975, photography, digital pigment print, 63.8x50cm, courtesy Galerie Waldburger, Brussels. © Lynn Hershman Leeson, Reprinted with permission from the artist.

As the construction of *Roberta Breitmore's* face is accomplished through makeup and artifice, so too is her name an artificial construct based on linguistic and literary inspiration. *Roberta* is the female version of the name *Robert*, which means “bright

fame.”³⁹ in ancient German. *Bright* and *Breitmore* form a metonymy. Furthermore, *Roberta Breitmore*’s name and actions were inspired by Joyce Carol Oates’ short story “Passions and Meditations” (1972), in which the main character is a woman named Robert Bright. Interestingly, Oates’ Robert and Hershman Leeson’s *Roberta Breitmore* perform similar activities. They both place an advertisement in the newspapers. Robert tries to get in touch with a well-known composer. She writes him letters, and when he does not respond, she places ads in the local newspaper, searching for him.⁴⁰ *Roberta Breitmore* does the same, placing ads to find a roommate or lover.

Transforming Roberta Breitmore

After *Roberta Breitmore*’s appearance and personal history were set, Hershman Leeson transformed herself into a crafted persona. Coppola documented one of the first transformations in a short black-and-white film, *Lynn Hershman Leeson, Constructing Roberta* (figure 3). The artist documented, step by step, her transformation into her persona, from donning *Roberta Breitmore*’s wig to applying her makeup. Having established her character’s background, Hershman Leeson was ready to come out and experiment.

Figure 3. Lynn Hershman Leeson, *Constructing Roberta*, film by Eleanor Coppola, 1975, film still, chromogenic print, 20x25.5cm, courtesy Galerie Waldburger, Brussels. © Lynn Hershman Leeson, Reprinted with permission from the artist.

Roberta Breitmore had a starting point. She took her first step into the real world after arriving in San Francisco on a Greyhound bus with only eighteen hundred dollars in her pocket.⁴¹ She walked through the city streets and rented a room at the Dante Hotel, staying there for two nights. After leaving the hotel, she rented a room at Baker's Acres

at 3000 Jackson Street. In her diary she writes: “I’ve rented a room, nothing fancy . . . It is lonely here, nothing to do but to be alone.”⁴²

To overcome her loneliness and cut the cost of her rent, *Roberta Breitmore* looked for a job and a roommate. In 1974, she placed an ambiguous advertisement (Figure 4) in the local newspaper, *S.F. Progress*: “Woman, Caucasian, seeks a bright companion to share rent and interests.”⁴³ *Roberta Breitmore* placed her ad, receiving forty-three letters from candidates, mostly lonely men.⁴⁴ Hershman Leeson documented the letters, which became part of a series. For example, the letter from the collection *Untitled from Adventure Series: Meet Mr. America* (1975–1978) reveals one of her correspondents (figure 5), a man named Irwin, who was looking for a companion with whom to discuss art and visit galleries and art openings.⁴⁵ Responding to another letter, *Roberta Breitmore* met Blaine, a forty-five-year-old man interested in women under the age of thirty-five.⁴⁶ Photographers Edmund Shea and Marion Gray documented these encounters with surveillance photography.

Figure 4. Lynn Hershman Leeson, *Want Ad*, *S.F. Progress*, 1974. Photography, digital pigment print, 16.7x24.2 cm, courtesy Galerie Waldburger, Brussels. © Lynn Hershman Leeson, Reprinted with permission from the artist.

Figure 5. Lynn Hershman Leeson, *Letter from Irwin to 'Rhoda' and Image of them Meeting*, 1975. Photography, digital pigment print, 18x14 cm, courtesy Galerie Waldburger, Brussels. © Lynn Hershman Leeson, Reprinted with permission from the artist.

As curator Robin Held explains, *Roberta Breitmore* met with “each respondent three times at most, in order not to establish too close a relationship.”⁴⁷ None of these meetings led to a relationship or to her finding roommates.

In her third year of the performance, Hershman Leeson decided to multiply *Roberta Breitmore*, perhaps because she wanted to add multiple dimensions to the persona’s experiences. She recruited three different actresses, all significant figures in the current artistic landscape: art historian Kristine Stiles, choreographer and performance artist Helen Dannenberg, and artist Michelle Larsen. They wore the same clothing and cosmetics Hershman Leeson did when performing *Roberta Breitmore* and took on her role. They went on some of the character’s dates and jobs. Kristine Stiles, the first to experience a role as *Roberta Breitmore*, claimed:

Once Hershman projected Roberta’s character onto me, she released authority over her artwork and simultaneously reestablished it. Thus began the immediate process of multiplying “Roberta Breitmores” into multiple multiples, mapping her double onto any number of willing female subjects, a multiplication that became potentially endless and tedious to Hershman.⁴⁸

When Hershman Leeson embodied *Roberta Breitmore* she was interested in the way she could experience the world through a different set of eyes. She was, as Stiles states, her creator’s double. Hershman Leeson claims about *Roberta Breitmore*: “To me she was my own flipped effigy: my physical reverse.”⁴⁹ But unlike an effigy or a mirror image, Hershman Leeson and *Roberta Breitmore* shared the same body.

Roberta Breitmore Becomes a Situation

As mentioned before, there is an indirect connection between Hersman Leeson's *Roberta Breitmore* and Beauvoir's feminist theory. Beauvoir's theory is based on phenomenological notions in which the human body is considered part of its social and cultural situation, and the human body is central to performance art and phenomenological theory. Beauvoir's views of the body were inspired by the work of Jean-Paul Sartre and Maurice Merleau-Ponty, who both examined the way the body projects and is defined by its situation.

For Beauvoir, the body is not only a vessel through which we live but also a situation. In relation to the woman as an oppressed and objectified entity, she claimed in the *Second Sex*, "[I]f the body is not a *thing*, it is a situation: it is our grasp on the world and the outline for our projects."⁵⁰ In her book, *Sex, Gender, and the Body* (2005), contemporary writer Toril Moi reflects upon and explains Beauvoir's assessment of the woman and her situation. According to Moi, the concept of the body as a situation is fundamental for Beauvoir because "the body, it is both a situation *and* is placed within other situations."⁵¹

Yet this perspective does not imply that a woman has no choice within the constraints of her situation. Beauvoir points out that a woman's sexuality, biology, familial and material life; all of these are limits on her freedom within society. According to Moi, "to claim that the body is a situation is to acknowledge that the meaning of a woman's body is bound up with the way she uses her freedom."⁵² Moi asserts that for Beauvoir, freedom is situated in the body because it is an important part of the woman's

way of experiencing the world. Conversely, it is her social, political, and cultural engagement with the world that affords her a certain degree of freedom – the body is limiting, the mind liberating.

The relationship between Beauvoir's view of the body as a situation and Hershman Leeson's performance is reflected throughout the *Roberta Breitmore* performance. When Hershman Leeson embodies Roberta, she uses the character as an agent to experience the world. Using her own body, Hershman Leeson explores the limitations and freedoms imposed upon a woman. In this way, the *Roberta Breitmore* performance creates a dialogue with Beauvoir's theories. The artist's body becomes the place and the means of experiencing the character *Roberta Breitmore's* situation.

Roberta Breitmore was born out of Hershman Leeson's situation as a woman artist. The performance was an experiment in trying to masquerade behind a persona different from her own. For Hershman Leeson, *Roberta Breitmore* is not a separated and individuated woman. They share the same body, and thus the same situation. This reflection prompts a question that will be interesting to investigate in the next chapter: In acting as another woman, can Hershman Lesson free herself from the social, economic, and cultural patriarchal norms that deprive women of their freedom?

The next chapter will continue the discussion of Hershman Leeson's *Roberta Breitmore* performance and its relation to Beauvoir's theories in *The Second Sex*, and further explore the woman's situation as revealed through the *Roberta Breitmore* performance. As being established Hershman Leeson became *Roberta Breitmore* by

embodying her physically. Chapter two will investigate whether *Roberta Breitmore* becomes a real person and a real woman, when embodied.

CHAPTER TWO: ROBERTA BREITMORE CONFRONTS HER SITUATION

I wanted Roberta to extend beyond appearance into a symbol that used gesture and expression to reveal the basic truth of character- Lynn Hershman-Leeson, “Romancing the Anti-body: Lust and Longing in (Cyber)space.”⁵³

The previous chapter introduced the steps that triggered Hershman Leeson’s conception of *Roberta Breitmore* and discussed how Hershman Leeson incorporated both physical and psychological features to transform herself into the character. The chapter also compared *Roberta Breitmore*’s construction with *The Second Sex*, where Beauvoir claimed that the construction of identity is both social and cultural. In creating *Roberta Breitmore* from the cultural stereotypes of her time, Hershman Leeson reflects this claim.

In addition, the previous chapter introduced Beauvoir’s notion of the woman-as-situation. In her book, she explored the factors that led to the discrimination against women as the “Other” to men. In a patriarchal society, men hold both economic and political power and are the agents who lay out community goals and social ethics. For this reason, the manner in which society at large addresses women is set by the manner in which women are positioned in regards to men. Beauvoir claims:

History has shown that men have always held all the concrete powers; from patriarchy’s earliest times, they have deemed it useful to keep a woman in a state of dependence; their codes were set up against her; she was thus concretely established as the Other.⁵⁴

The Other is a role that men have given to women—man is the trusted Self, woman the alien Other. The woman’s situation is previously discussed in this paper in

terms of her body, and how social ideas of body limit the sphere in which a woman can move. The woman's situation is her place and role in Western society.

Hershman Leeson's *Roberta Breitmore* depicts the character's process of becoming a woman as she interacts with patriarchal society. By interacting with that society, *Roberta Breitmore*'s identity is literally shaped by it, a "living" representation of the process which is similar to Beauvoir's description. The moment *Roberta Breitmore* began, its title character immediately began to participate in society—she was placed in situations and experimented with them. This chapter explores *Roberta Breitmore*'s actions within society and the steps Hershman Leeson took to establish the *Roberta Breitmore* persona as part of her San Francisco surroundings and lifestyle. In addition, over the course of this writing, the research will examine how to analyze *Roberta Breitmore* through Beauvoir's complicated notion of the woman as a social product.

Becoming a Woman

To become a real person, Hershman Leeson, as *Roberta Breitmore*, collected personal documents providing proof of her existence. Between 1975 and 1976, *Roberta Breitmore* established her identity as a San Francisco resident by opening a checking account and receiving a credit card and checkbook from Bank of America (figure 6). She visited a dentist and had dental x-rays taken, which proved her identity, much like a fingerprint. She took a driving test and received a driver's license to serves as an identity card (figure 7).

Figure 6. Lynn Hershman Leeson, *Check Book*, 1974. Bound paper, 15x7.5 cm, courtesy Galerie Waldburger, Brussels. © Lynn Hershman Leeson, Reprinted with permission from the artist.

STATE OF CALIFORNIA
DEPARTMENT OF MOTOR VEHICLES

**INTERIM DRIVERS
LICENSE (TEMPORARY)**
DIVISION OF DRIVERS LICENSES

VALID FOR 60 DAYS FROM _____
DATE

Roberta Breitmore
3007 Jackson
San Francisco, CA 94115

SEX HAIR EYES HEIGHT WEIGHT PRE LIC EXP
F Brn Brn 5-9 155 None

DATE OF BIRTH **3-19-45**
SOC. SEC. NO. _____

OTHER ADDRESS
CLASS 3. 3 AXLE HOUSE CAR AND ALL 2 AXLE VEH. EXCEPT BUS OR 2 WHEEL
MOTORCYCLE, MAY TOW VEH. UNDER 6000 LBS. GROSS.

CLASSES
ADDITIONAL PRIVILEGES ONLY AS CHECKED BELOW

☐ NONE.

4 ☐ MAY DRIVE 2-WHEEL MOTOR-CYCLE.

2 ☐ MAY DRIVE ANY SINGLE VEHICLE OR BUS EXCEPT 2 WHEEL MOTORCYCLE.

1 ☐ MAY DRIVE ANY VEHICLE OR BUS EXCEPT 2 WHEEL MOTORCYCLE. MAY TOW ANY VEHICLE OR COMBINATION OF VEHICLES.

SEE OVER FOR ANY OTHER CONDITIONS ☐ MUST WEAR CORRECTIVE LENSES ☐

X

1-20-76 SnF 1r

FEE \$3.25

APP. No. **DF 219767**

EXAMINER _____ BADGE NO. _____

TRACER USED } DL22 _____ Date _____

Office _____

P L

Figure 7. Lynn Hershman Leeson, *Roberta's Driver's License* (DF219767, SnF 1r. January 20, 1976), 1976. Photography, chromogenic print, 20x25.4 cm, courtesy Galerie Waldburger, Brussels. © Lynn Hershman Leeson, Reprinted with permission from the artist.

In her essay, “Roberta Breitmore Lives On” (2005), art historian Amelia Jones claims that because she attained personal documents, *Roberta Breitmore* existed,

Not just as a body to be seen and represented, but as the officially corroborated subject who possessed credit cards, a checking account, a driver’s license, and even her own therapist, that ‘beyond’ is explicitly marked as economic and institutional.⁵⁵

She became a part of various institutions, signing contracts with her employers, landlord, and bank, and so from an institutional point of view, *Roberta Breitmore* was a

real person. It was not only institutional and bureaucratic actions that contributed to *Roberta Breitmore*'s reality, but also her interactions with other people.

Part of the performance was to keep *Roberta Breitmore* a fictional character, and to keep her nature as such hidden from the individuals with whom she interacted. These people included the men she dated, her Social Security and banking clerks, her Weight Watchers group, the people she met at EST seminars, and her therapist. To them, *Roberta Breitmore* seemed as real as any other person. The artist Suzanne Lacy writes that the individual who interacted with *Roberta Breitmore* "was not a spectator, but an unwitting accomplice in the dramas of Roberta's life."⁵⁶ For example, during the second year of the performance, *Roberta Breitmore* visited San Diego. She placed an advertisement in the *San Diego Tribune*, looking for a roommate. She met a man in the Belmont Amusement Park, who, with a group of other men, tried to persuade her to join a prostitution ring. The character escaped the men by running into a nearby restroom and changing back to Hershan Leeson. This traumatic experience emphasizes the fact that *Roberta Breitmore* was perceived as a real woman, real enough to nearly fall prey to the sexual violence of the 1970s, the decade that saw the birth of the antirape movement, which opened centers to support women. One of the first such centers was located in San Francisco.⁵⁷ The sexual harassment that *Roberta Breitmore* endured in San Diego led her to schedule an appointment with a psychiatrist. Her therapy sessions reveal her complex identity as a woman of her time. The sessions take place five years after the *Roberta Breitmore* performance began.

In *Untitled from Roberta's Internal Transformations: Language from Roberta* [page 2 from Roberta's psychiatric report] (1978), the psychiatrist notes that he met with the character called *Roberta Breitmore* twice. The first session was short because she had a job interview. The second session took longer and revealed her emotions as she reflected on her problems, including depression and suicidal thoughts, which arose from her failure to lose weight, obtain a job, and locate a roommate. After two sessions, the psychiatrist diagnosed her with chronic depression and placed her under the criteria for "pseudoneurotic schizophrenia or borderline personality."⁵⁸ In addition, he adds, "[Roberta] is severely disabled and incapable of self-support."⁵⁹ Judged by a man, *Roberta Breitmore* again suffered a negative and othering experience.

Roberta Breitmore's confessions to her therapist about her painful ordeals as a woman demonstrate Beauvoir's ideas on the woman's situation. *Roberta Breitmore* struggled to keep her job and lose weight so as to attract men. Her unsuccessful romantic life involved men who tried to take advantage of her womanhood, going so far as to try and force her into prostitution. These experiences further reflect Beauvoir's notion of the woman as the Other, as a subject for men to exploit and abuse, the nature of that exploitation, and thus her situation and mobility, determined by her body. Male-originated myths and presuppositions about female identity trap women within certain acceptable parameters of attractiveness and behavior, thereby denying her agency. The same is true for *Roberta Breitmore* and her situation as a woman. Experiencing the world through her body and the mind, *Roberta Breitmore* found her identity shaped and constructed by society. Hershan Leeson created in *Roberta Breitmore* an entirely fresh

personality, yet could liberate neither herself nor *Roberta Breitmore* the woman's situation. In this way, she became, like every woman of her time, forced to live in a world constructed for women by men.

Roberta Breitmore as Every Woman

In her article, "Romancing the Anti-Body," Hershman Leeson claims that *Roberta Breitmore* metaphorically represents every woman.⁶⁰ She faced reality like everyone else. Like every woman, she is exposed to alienation, oppression, and objectification by men. In her book, *Radical Gestures: Feminism and Performance Art in North America*, Jayne Wark notes that, although the female experience is different for each woman, as a group, women have the same experience, as "women have never been able to participate in culture and society on their own terms."⁶¹ The fact that multiple women have performed *Roberta Breitmore* in different scenarios, yet related similar oppressive experiences, affirms Wark's idea. Individual women experience the objectification common to women as a group. Hershman Leeson states:

[T]hey followed a similar progression into increasingly negative experiences and feelings of alienation. Through this process, Roberta Breitmore and her multiples revealed what it was like for a single woman to forage for herself in the San Francisco Bay Area during those tumultuous years of social change."

The fact that *Roberta Breitmore* (and her multiples) struggled to keep her job and to find a roommate or romantic partner illustrates the way she became a mirror of her time, a reflection of womankind's daily struggle. As a woman living during the period of unrest which included the civil rights movement, the feminist movement, and anti-war

protests, *Roberta Breitmore* projected the unsuccessful attempts of women to overcome the economic and social limitations of their tumultuous time.

In the workplace, for example, women could only access jobs that paid low salaries and lacked opportunity for advancement. The *Roberta Breitmore* character's life reflects this disadvantage in her inability to pay rent and her need to cut costs by finding a roommate. Even with the feminist movement in full swing, *Roberta Breitmore* the woman could not fully liberate herself. In an interview with the magazine *Art Practical*, Hershman Leeson states that the *Roberta Breitmore* performance was "a mirror of culture. If you are going to take a profile of the context you live in, then she was a composite of all those stereotypes that people had at that time."⁶²

Roberta Breitmore reflected its culture because its character was exposed to the trends of her time, including the media's objectification of women. She was the blond, sexualized woman who struggled with her weight to fit in. Hershman Leeson did not let *Roberta Breitmore* overcome those stereotypes and objectifications because they were her essence, her suffering a necessary aspect of the performance's narrative. This is why *Roberta Breitmore* can be understood in relation to Beauvoir's claim that there must be a collective social change for women to be free. While society represses women, no woman has the means to forge her own destiny.

But is it enough to change laws, institutions, customs, public opinion and the whole social context for men and women to really become peers?...This would mean that today's woman is nature's creation; it must be repeated again that within the human collectivity nothing is natural, and woman, among others, is a product developed by civilization; the intervention of others in her destiny is originary: if this process were driven in another way, it would produce a very different result.⁶³

Roberta Breitmore was an unsuccessful individual because her interaction with society created her as such. Then, in a way, she became real, gaining problems associated with being a woman because she depended on society to construct her identity, making her powerless from conception, hobbled from birth – just like a real woman.

Beauvoir asserts that women could never free themselves as long as they agree with the objective ideals that define them. The *Roberta Breitmore* performance adds another layer to the documentation of women's oppression. Hershman Leeson suggests that womankind's situation is social and psychological. The feminist movement of the 1970s did not ask "what is a woman?" but fought for economic and social equality on the basic assumption that a woman was equal to a man. *Roberta Breitmore* is an example of a woman whose psychology is part of her situation, made unequal by society.

In *Roberta's Body Language Chart* (1978), Hershman Leeson created a chart from surveillance photographs taken during Roberta Breitmore's therapy sessions (figure 8). Each photo is accompanied by a text pronouncing a stereotype based on analysis of *Roberta Breitmore's* body language and psyche. An image of *Roberta Breitmore* sitting on a couch is followed by the text "Do crossed arms mean that I am frustrated?"⁶⁴ Another image shows *Roberta Breitmore* pulling her skirt to cover her knees, while the corresponding text reads: "Covering the legs reveals frigidity, fear of sex."⁶⁵ *Roberta Breitmore's* body language, psychology, and unsuccessful attempts at losing weight, finding a roommate, or falling in love, all become part of the complex reality of a woman as defined by culture.

Figure 8. Lynn Hershman Leeson, *Roberta's Body Language Chart*, 1978. Photographed during a psychiatric session, photography, digital pigment print, 59.5x79 cm, courtesy Galerie Waldburger, Brussels. © Lynn Hershman Leeson, Reprinted with permission from the artist.

It may be concluded that the case study of *Roberta Breitmore* teaches us about a woman's situation. It does not matter whether the individual is a fictional woman or a real person, the situation is the same. Hershman Leeson did not liberate herself through *Roberta Breitmore*. She did not escape the social generalization, even in a time of social change. At the end, she was the victim; she did not find love or a roommate, nor even the power to support herself. *Roberta Breitmore* confronted the media image of the ideal woman, and attempted to model herself after this ideal with a blond wig, heavy makeup, and weight loss, attending Weight Watchers in an attempt to embody the perfect media body image.

In addition, by exploring *Roberta Breitmore's* situation in psychological terms and through the body, Hershman Leeson comes to occupy an interesting feminist position. Her position differs from that of second-wave feminists, who sought a way to liberate the body from its sexual perception and concentrated instead on gender equality. For example, the well known second-wave feminist Betty Friedan states in her book *The Feminine Mystique* (1963),

In almost every professional field, in business and in the arts and sciences, women are still treated as second-class citizens. It would be a great service to tell girls who plan to work in society to expect this subtle, uncomfortable discrimination--tell them not to be quiet, and hope it will go away, but fight it. A girl should not expect special privileges because of her sex but neither should she "adjust" to prejudice and discrimination.⁶⁶

Hershman Leeson used the sexual image of *Roberta Breitmore* to objectify her in the same way a man's gaze might. Thus, she limited *Roberta Breitmore's* ability to control her destiny. In the end, *Roberta Breitmore* was lonely and isolated, and the only solution was to end the performance. The next chapter will discuss *Roberta Breitmore's*

death and afterlife. It will explore her legacy and how it contributes to her uniqueness.

Roberta Breitmore paved the way for Hershman Leeson's artistic career and she reappears in other works, constantly helping to redefine the woman's role as shaped by a changing society.

CHAPTER THREE: ROBERTA BREITMORE BECOMES A GHOST

Roberta Breitmore the character became real within the time that she lived, made so by her actions and interactions within San Francisco's society. She became part of the city's institutions by obtaining a checking account and driver's license. She interacted with people and took part in social groups such as Weight Watchers. She saw a psychiatrist to try and overcome her fears and stressors. Fully embodied by Hershman Leeson, *Roberta Breitmore* became an everywoman. But this embodiment took its toll, and at the end, Hershman Leeson decided to terminate her persona, claiming, "[The Roberta character] exposed my fears. As can be inferred by both our records, her life infected mine. Closure and transformation of her life would surely encourage my own individuation."⁶⁷

This chapter explores the way Hershman Leeson chose to end *Roberta Breitmore*'s performance and the meanings of this ending. In addition, although *Roberta Breitmore* ceased to exist, she became a leading thread in Hershman Leeson's artistic career. She reappears physically and theoretically in Hershman Leeson's artworks *Teknolust* (2002) and *Roberta Ware* (2007), artworks that portray key ideas that began with *Roberta Breitmore*, such as female objectification, the woman-as-victim, and the creation of a woman. *Roberta Ware* and *TeknoLust* show a connection to and incorporate ideas from both Simone de Beauvoir's existential theory and Donna Haraway's cyborg theory.

Exorcising Roberta Breitmore

This section explores the reasons the *Roberta Breitmore* performance came to an end, and how the artist brought that end about. Hershman Leeson asserted that becoming *Roberta Breitmore* helped her to move beyond her her own familiar life habits and try new things, but ultimately Roberta both liberated and imprisoned her creator. In her monograph, Hershman Leeson confesses her difficulties separating *Roberta Breitmore*'s activities from her own ongoing hardships— during this period, the artist went through a divorce and had to provide for her child. “Yet in a critical moment Roberta always prevailed,” she recalls. “Lynn was left to find solace on her own.”⁶⁸ *Roberta Breitmore* took over Hershman Leeson's life and body – by Beauvoir's definition, *Roberta Breitmore* dictated her creator's situation.

Amelia Jones notes the complex relationship between artist and creation: “Enacting a perpetual process of virtual becoming, Hershman stages the self as both simulacral and embodied.”⁶⁹ In other words, Hershman Leeson created in *Roberta Breitmore* a copy of herself, a copy who ultimately took on a life of her own, and the performance of this life co-opted the life of the creator. Thus Hershman Leeson chose to terminate *Roberta Breitmore*, ending the artwork's active life in order to resume the artist's.

Throughout the years of the performance, Hershman Leeson intended to conclude *Roberta Breitmore*'s life through suicide (figure 9). In an interview with Martha Ericson (1975), Hershman Leeson claims, “When Roberta becomes sufficiently ‘real’ to the

public, she will probably commit suicide in a well-publicized leap from the Bay Bridge.”⁷⁰ Yet this was not how *Roberta Breitmore* ended. Instead, Hershman Leeson decided to free herself of *Roberta Breitmore* symbolically through an act of exorcism, reclaiming her body, her situation, without symbolically destroying it.

Figure 9. Lynn Hershman Leeson, *Roberta Contemplating Suicide on the Golden Gate Bridge*, 1978. Photography, digital pigment print, 15.7x23.4 cm, courtesy Galerie Waldburger, Brussels. © Lynn Hershman Leeson, Reprinted with permission from the artist.

Roberta Breitmore's performance ended in 1978 in the crypt of Lucrezia Borgia, at Palazzo dei Diamanti, in Ferrara, Italy. Hershman Leeson divided the performance space by placing two pedestals facing each other, each bearing two glass vases. One vase held artificial flowers, the other real flowers, to create a division between the reality and artifice, each side a mirror image of the other. *Roberta Breitmore's* first multiple, Kristin Stiles performed the act. Stiles entered the gallery dressed as *Roberta Breitmore* while performing a "subtle emotive dance"⁷¹ set to "artificial tones that had been constructed from the shuffling sounds of her walk."⁷² Finally, Stiles-as-*Roberta Breitmore* stood in front of the construction chart that hung from the crypt's wall.

Making slow, dance-like body movements, swaying back and forth and then suddenly thrusting her body and turning to the archway, she removed the vase with the artificial flowers from its pedestal, leaving the one with real flowers untouched. She carried the vase toward a picture of her construction chart, "jerking her body as if a demonic spirit possessed her."⁷³ Suddenly she reached for a photograph of *Roberta Breitmore's* self-portrait and set it on fire, and put the ashes in the vase. The performance ended when Stiles-as-*Roberta Breitmore* lay on the floor, holding artificial flowers in her hand (figure 10). On the right side of her body there was "a coffin-like vitrine that held the relics of her life."⁷⁴ Hershman Leeson says, "As Roberta Breitmore froze into her final position, witnesses of the event left the room."⁷⁵

Figure 10. Lynn Hershman Leeson, *Roberta Multiple Is Exorcised With Flaming Vase (Michelle Larson)*, 1978. Photography, gelatin silver print, 25.4x20.4 cm, courtesy Galerie Waldburger, Brussels. © Lynn Hershman Leeson, Reprinted with permission from the artist.

This symbolic exorcism of *Roberta Breitmore* raises many questions. For example, why did Hershman Leeson choose the crypt? And was she able to achieve her own individuation? As is clear from its name, the crypt where *Roberta Breitmore* was exorcised serves as the burial place of Lucrecia Borgia, Duchess of Ferrara (1480 – 1519), a woman who, in life and beyond, suffered a negative reputation as a traitor and schemer. She became part of Ferrara’s political and social scene at an early age, and was hounded throughout her life by endless rumors of unconscionable behavior, including

various crimes and bearing a bastard child.⁷⁶ There are additional similarities between Borgia and *Roberta Breitmore*. Borgia the woman, in her lifetime, saw her identity co-opted by the legend of Borgia the seductress, adultress, and intriguer, much like *Roberta Breitmore* co-opted the life of Hershman Leeson.

Furthermore, *Roberta Breitmore*, being fictional, was a collection of tropes and character-building ideas. Likewise, Borgia, as a politically active woman, represented certain ideas about women with power, without necessarily having those traits to the degree people believed. In other words, *Roberta Breitmore* was a fictional character who seemed like a real person, while Borgia was a real person who became a fictional character.

The Implications of Roberta Breitmore's End

Roberta Breitmore left behind artifacts such as documents, correspondence, and personal articles that contributed to her existence and corroborated her mark upon the world. Hershman Leeson saw some of *Roberta Breitmore's* personal objects as her relics, a term that carries unavoidable religious connotations. According to the Oxford English Dictionary, a “relic” might be a physical remnant of a deceased saint or a martyr, or a piece of clothing or personal object that belonged to the holy individual.⁷⁷

Hershman Leeson certainly saw *Roberta Breitmore* as a martyr. In her interview with Linda Montano, *Performance Artists Talking in the Eighties: Sex, Food, Money/Fame, Ritual/Death*, 2000, Hershman Leeson states that *Roberta Breitmore* was a victim of systemic and personal female oppression, and ending her life through exorcism

let *Roberta Breitmore* symbolically exorcise those social ills. “Roberta’s evolution from temporary victim to eternal victor was intended as an aesthetic conversion that transcended values—good and/or evil.”⁷⁸ During her lifetime *Roberta Breitmore* was always a victim, a martyr for the female experience, but in her exorcism she became a liberated woman. As such, her personal belongings are valuable proof of her existence as a woman. They are her archive, and are exhibited as such. For example, a lost button from her coat was mounted on a board and placed in a Plexiglas box,⁷⁹ her blond wig and dress, letters, diary, and documents exhibited behind a vitrine. These relics of her life express her existence as it survives through time, saved for her afterlife and for her resurrection.

Roberta Breitmore’s Resurrection

In 2006, Herhman Leeson created *Roberta Ware* to represent the original *Roberta Breitmore* in the virtual world of Second Life® (2003). According to Hershman Leeson, *Roberta Ware* is a virtual character that looks “very much like the first Roberta,”⁸⁰ and wears the same outfits as *Roberta Breitmore* did during the 1970s. Her role in this virtual platform is to guide user avatars around the online installation of Hershman Leeson’s 1972 performance, the *Dante Hotel*. A year later, the artist created a virtual gallery of *Roberta Breitmore*’s performance, which presents her archive to visitors. Images and documents hang on the digital walls, together with *Roberta Ware*’s framed images. In this manner, *Roberta Breitmore*’s relics are preserved in another form, an online archive. With the internet as her reliquary, *Roberta Breitmore* can exist forever, her every document experience preserved endlessly on the web.

Roberta Breitmore's Reincarnation

If *Roberta Ware* was Hershman Leeson bringing *Roberta Breitmore* back to life online, the artist's feature film *Teknolust* distills the essence of the *Roberta Breitmore* performance into a story about a scientist and her online clones. In the film, biogeneticist Rosetta Stone (Tilda Swinton)⁸¹ creates three clones by uploading her DNA onto computer software. The clones – named Ruby, Olive, and Marianne after the three primary colors and all played by Swinton – look human and have unique personalities. Ruby is the central protagonist, the sexy sister who keeps an online presence called “Ruby’s E Dream Portal,” where she invites men to chat with and “dream with” her. In some cases, she creates a synthetic body to share intimate encounters with the men from her portal. These men are soon afflicted with impotence, have barcodes appear on their foreheads, and see their computers destroyed by a virus.

Eventually, the FBI investigates Rosetta’s laboratory in order to find the virus’s origin point, their interference causing her to neglect her clones. Feeling abandoned, they break their creator’s rule and leave their virtual environment. As a result, Ruby meets Sandy (Jeremy Davies), and they fall in love and conceive a child, while Rosetta lives happily ever after with her chief investigator.

Roberta Breitmore's influence can be detected throughout *Teknolust*. In the *Roberta Breitmore* performance, Hershman Leeson introduced key ideas such as data collection, artificial intelligence, female objectification, and cloning through the use of doubles. *Roberta Breitmore* and Rosetta’s clones are both constructed from data collection. As

mentioned previously, *Roberta Breitmore*'s psychology and background, including childhood traumas, were "composed from accumulated psychological data,"⁸² while *Ruby*'s promiscuous behavior is based on seduction scenes aggregated from classic movies. Both *Roberta Breitmore* and *Ruby*'s interplay with society are based on predetermined behaviors and collections of social norms infected and influenced by the media or related to the objectification of women.

In addition, representations of women in the media are dominant in both the *Roberta Breitmore* performance and in *Teknolust*. *Ruby* is the sexy femme fatale, wearing red outfits and lipstick, while *Marinne* and *Olive* have their own tight-fitting and colorful kimono-like outfits. The three clones have hair that fits the male perception of female coloration, the sexualized "fiery" redhead, the materialistic blonde, and the demure brunette. *Roberta Breitmore* likewise fit the media's portrayal of women, wearing a blond wig, heavy makeup, and a short skirt.

With *Roberta Breitmore*, Hershman Leeson introduced the idea of an avatar before the age of digital worlds made avatars an everyday assumption. Existing in two layers, she was both a persona and an artificial agent that touched and participated in the real world. Through *Roberta Breitmore*, Hershman Leeson communicated and interacted with people who never knew she was not real. Thirty years later, with *Teknolust*'s *Ruby*, Hershman Leeson returns to the notion of the artificial agent. *Ruby* calls men to interact with her via a virtual portal, and then encounters them in the real world. Throughout the

experience, the men think *Ruby* is a real person and not a virtual representation of one. *Roberta Breitmore* and *Ruby* perform on two platforms: the real world and the virtual.

Encountering Feminism

While both *Roberta Ware* in *SecondLife* and the movie *Teknolust* explore *Roberta Breitmore* through modern technology, the original *Roberta Breitmore* was born during the 70s, a product of second wave feminism. Thirty years later, this movement still resonates with current feminist thought and action. *Roberta Breitmore* exemplified the stereotypes and preconceptions of her time, so Hershman Leeson explored whether or not *Roberta Breitmore* the character could overcome her social limitations, in part by finiding a job and finding love. *Ruby* of *Teknolust* represents the femme fatale who seduces and uses men, the victimizer rather than the victimized woman. As the protagonist of her film, a predator rather than a victim, she is nominally a feminist figure.

Yet while *Ruby* is a strong individual, she also wants to become a “real woman” which, within the context of the film, means the traditionally feminine craving for love and family. Her human desires clash with her robotic reality to create an interesting dialogue between Beauvoir’s theory on the definition of women and Donna Haraway’s cyborg theory (in which the cyborg resists the natural body).

In *The Cyborg Manifesto: Science, Technology, and Socialist-Feminism in the Late Twentieth Century* (1985), Haraway suggests a new living experience for the woman, rejecting her default role as reproductive agent, offering instead a “cyborg,” a metaphor for human-animal-machine symbiosis. “The cyborg,” she claims, “is a matter

of fiction and lived experience that changes what counts as women's experience in the late twentieth century.”⁸³ For Haraway, a woman who sees herself as a cyborg opens herself to new opportunities and experiences, different from those of the Eve archetype. The cyborg was not created from a man's body, and does not need a man as her shadow.⁸⁴ Moreover, the cyborg has no history and it is neither a biological nor a natural entity.

Therefore, the cyborg perception of a woman's body and reproductive role offer a fresh start, freed from prior social and cultural biases about conception and female behavioral norms. The cyborg does not define a woman based on her biological reproductive role, but is a hybrid, different from Beauvoir's woman, unconstrained by any single definition. Ruby was created from an interaction of human and machine, an amalgam of human DNA and computer software, and can thus both desire the traditional reproductive role and reject its innate oppression. Ruby thus exemplifies both Haraway's cyborg post-woman and Beauvoir's traditional woman.

In *How We Became Posthuman: Virtual Bodies in Cybernetics, Literature, and Informatics* (1999), Katherine Hayles argues that while the body is spliced and rewired via computers, allowing us to discuss hybridity and identity, we are already posthuman because gender is rewired through cyberspace. She notes that bodies and refigured bodily relations expand our minds toward an entirely new way of thinking. Ruby is a hybrid who, upon becoming flesh, cannot separate herself from her female body's reproductive role, as illustrated when her cyborg body becomes pregnant. Even if Ruby is the model of

the new woman, her body is still female, and continues to do what most defines Ruby as a woman, just as insemination most defines a man as male within a reproductive context. Once more, Ruby exemplifies Haraway's and Beauvoir's ideals, defined by her programming, restrained by her biology. In other words, Ruby is an amalgamation of two ideas: the woman as situation (Beauvoir) and the woman as cyborg (Haraway).

In conclusion, while *Roberta Breitmore* was exorcised and discarded, to exist only as a virtual museum, *Ruby* is freed from her virtual environment and enters the real world. She overcomes her loneliness, finds love, and conceives a child. But in the real world of phallocentric norms, she is confined by the way society and culture shape a woman's destiny. Therefore, all of these artworks return to idea of bodily experience. Beauvoir's statement seems hold true for *Roberta Breitmore* in all her manifestations: *Roberta Breitmore* is not born a woman but becomes one, according to how society defines her and from this situation she struggled for agency.

CONCLUSION

Hershman Leeson performed *Roberta Breitmore* in San Francisco during the political and social tumult of the civil rights movement, women's liberation, and the gay and lesbian movements. During this time, Beauvoir's *The Second Sex* was translated to English, and its feminist ideas inspired American Feminism. It is not a coincidence that these events influenced Hershman Leeson's work. This thesis has investigated the connections between Hershman Leeson's *Roberta Breitmore* performance and Beauvoir's theory about womankind. *Roberta Breitmore* was born out of Hershman Leeson's situation as a woman artist, and is not a separated and individuated woman, but a part of her creator. When Beauvoir claims that a woman is not born a woman but becomes one, she means that womanhood is a social, cultural, and historical construct. Since men determine social, cultural, and historical conditions in a patriarchal society, women are subjected to male definitions of womanhood. This paper has argued that *Roberta Breitmore* is a case study in defining this constructed identity –while Hershman Leeson succeeded in making her fictional character a real person, as a real woman she did not overcome her alienated situation.

Hershman Leeson as *Roberta Breitmore* did not escape the social generalization, even in a time of social change. She was a victim of her time. She found it hard to support herself and was always confronted with the media image of the ideal woman, an objectification of the male's gaze. She was lonely and isolated and at the end she was terminated which was a step toward *Roberta Breitmore*'s liberation.

Roberta Breitmore left a legacy that reappears in Hershman Leeson's later artworks. She has evolved throughout Hershman Leeson's artistic career; a victim in her original performance, she becomes a strong woman in *Teknolust*'s Ruby. She lives on as a spirit within a machine as the *Second Life* avatar *Roberta Ware*, leaving behind an online archive of her life and maintaining the idea that she truly lived. Through these representations, Hershman Leeson explores the female condition in a rapidly changing technological environment. She offers new ways to liberate women from their oppressed and isolated situations by combining the futuristic idea of a cyborg, a human-machine symbiosis, while securing the important role of the woman's body.

Although she empowers Ruby and *Roberta Ware*, they are still subjected to the body image dictated by the media. Even today, after the feminist efforts of the 1970s, women in patriarchal contemporary society continue to be objectified and alienated. Thus *Roberta Breitmore* is relevant to our society as a case study for the woman's situation. Beauvoir offered suggestions on how to overcome this barrier, but until true equality is achieved, women are still bound to their situation as the Other, as the minority.

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NOTES

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⁶ Linda Nochlin, “Why Have There Been No Great Women Artists?” *Women, Art, and Power: And Other Essays* (New York: Harper & Row, 1988), 158.

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¹⁴ Ibid.

¹⁵ Ibid.

¹⁶ Ibid.

¹⁷ Ibid., 105.

¹⁸ Jayne Wark, *Radical Gestures: Feminism and Performance Art in North America* (Montreal: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2006), 59.

¹⁹ Ibid.

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²⁸ Tromble, "Private I," 23.

²⁹ Eleanor Coppola is a documentary filmmaker, artist, and writer. She is the wife of Francis Ford Coppola, a well-known filmmaker and director, and mother of Sofia Coppola, a screenwriter and director. Most of her films document the work of her husband and her daughter.

³⁰ Tromble, "Private I," 20.

³¹ Ibid.

³² Ibid.

³³ Patricia Maloney, "Looking for Roberta Breitmore," *Art Practical*, 2.15 / *Performance: The Body Politic*, http://www.artpractical.com/feature/looking_for_roberta_breitmore/ (accessed February 3, 2011)

³⁴ I mentioned here information from an exhibition in 2007 because Hershman Leeson has incorporated Roberta Breitmore in her recent work.

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³⁶ Tromble, "Private I," 25.

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³⁹ Susan Broadhurst, *Identity, Performance, and Technology: Practices of Empowerment, Embodiment and Technicity* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2012), 136.

⁴⁰ Tromble, "Private I," 33.

⁴¹ Tromble, "Private I," 25.

⁴² "Lynn Hershman Leeson," <http://www.lynnhershman.com/> (accessed December 7, 2012).

⁴³ Tromble, "Private I," 28.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, 26.

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- ⁶⁴ Tromble, "Private I," 109.

⁶⁵ Ibid.

⁶⁶ Betty Friedan, *The Feminine Mystique* (New York: W.W. Norton, 1963), 508.

⁶⁷ Tromble, "Private I," 33.

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⁷¹ Tromble, "Private I", 31

⁷² Ibid.

⁷³ Ibid.

⁷⁴ Ibid.

⁷⁵ Ibid.

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⁷⁹ "Lynn Hershman Leeson," <http://www.lynnhershman.com/> (accessed December 7, 2012).

⁸⁰ Tatiana Bazzichelli, "An Interview with Lynn Hershman Leeson: Hacking the Codes of Self-Representation," *Leonardo Electronic Almanac* 17, no. 1 (August 2011), http://www.leoalmanac.org/wp-content/uploads/2011/08/03_LEA_Vol_17_No_1_Bazzichelli.pdf (accessed November 5, 2013).

⁸¹ The Rosetta Stone is an Egyptian stone that has text on it. The text was written in two languages: Greek and hieroglyphs. The Greek text allowed for the translation and understanding of Egyptian hieroglyphs. The term "Rosetta Stone" is also used as a metaphor for solving a problem. *Oxford English Dictionary Online*, s.v. "Rosetta stone,"

<http://www.oed.com.libaccess.sjlibrary.org/view/Entry/167583?redirectedFrom=Rosetta+Stone>
(accessed November 11, 2012).

⁸² Tromble, "Private I", 25.

⁸³ Donna Haraway, "A Cyborg Manifesto: Science, Technology, and Socialist-Feminism in the Late Twentieth Century," in *The Cybercultures Reader*, ed. David Bell and Barbara M. Kennedy (London: Routledge, 2000), 34.

⁸⁴ Ibid.