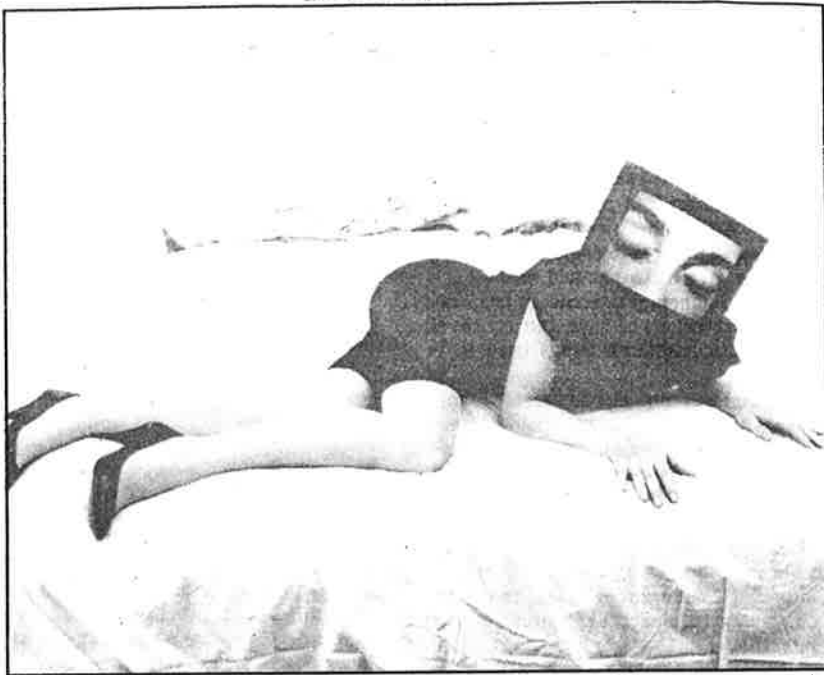


# The Villager

West Village, East Village, Chelsea, Soho, Tribeca and Lower East Side



Villager photo courtesy The Kitchen

Veteran performance artist Lynn Hershman Leeson in her 1988 piece "Phantom Limb/Seduction"

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## A career spent creating on uncharted waters

BY DAVIDA SINGER

"This work really comes out of performance art and sculpture," says media artist Lynn Hershman Leeson, whose TV Dinner show and gallery exhibit will be presented at The Kitchen this week.

Originally from Cleveland, Leeson, 57, studied art and painting at Case Western Reserve and started doing "site specific" work in the 1970s. Although she'd moved to California, there were lots of New York projects, in places like the windows of Bonwit Teller. Other highlights of her prolific career in video, film and interactive



computer-based installations (including over 300 worldwide exhibitions) have been the Roberta Breitmore project-- a 10-year identity piece, and "Lorna," done between 1979 and 1983 and credited as the first interactive art videodisk.

"I never studied film or video," Leeson tells me from San Francisco. "Nobody was teaching what I did. People thought I was crazy, and my work was not acknowledged at the time. Nobody could understand it. That's part of the price you pay."

What kept her going?

"I didn't know how to do anything else."

Recognition finally came when Leeson turned 50 and she won the Crystal Trophy competition in France.

"After that, I got European commissions, and my first grant in the U.S.

was this past year," she recalls. "I try to make things visible that aren't. I deal with power and identity and the ways the media environments we live in affect how we feel about ourselves."

Leeson's gallery exhibit at The Kitchen is a piece she did from 1990-93 entitled "Interactive Rifle," in which one pulls the trigger and sees themselves in the gun site.

"It's about the ways media works to make you a victim," explains Leeson. "It's based on a gun created by Maray in 1888. Instead of using bullets, he used celluloid for the first motion pictures. So there's a link between media and weapons."

According to the artist, whose daughter and granddaughter live in New York, the T.V. Dinner show (it offers a buffet meal to the audience) will include samples from 30 years of her work and electronic diary, and discussion of her recent feature film, "Conceiving Ada."

"We're showing excerpts, quick clips of things, including the making of the film. We used 'virtual sets,' a new process which has photographs as background for the film. It's a new way of doing this-- in real time. 'Concerning Ada' is a high-tech, sci-fi film. Ada Lovelace was the daughter of Lord Byron, and her work predates major ideas in computer programming and language. Women didn't used to sign their names to things they did, so people didn't even know they did them. There's also a second character, an American woman from this century, who's an artificial life planner. The two have parallel lives, in that both have conflicts about the work they do. Feelings of invisibility."

"Conceiving Ada," a four-year project which will be released on Feb. 26 at Cinema Village, has already appeared in 35 film festivals and won numerous awards, but this is its theatrical premiere. The cast includes Tilda Swinton ("Orlando"), Timothy Leary and John Perry Barlow, with music by the Residents.

The film's message?

"Pursuing your own vision, whatever the cost and risk, to its completion," answers Leeson. "Things that are not popular, haven't been done. I'm now seeing my own work going into museums, and it's quite gratifying. But it's never easy, because there's always new work they still don't understand. They just don't laugh as loud now."

When I asked Leeson about her hopes for both "Conceiving Ada" and the T.V. Dinner evening, the softspoken 1998 winner of The Flintridge Foundation Award for Lifetime Achievement in the Visual Arts

assured me that the film is a little of what the evening is. "Working despite invisibility, taking one's own originality and pushing it to its limits.

"We're lucky in a lifetime if we have three ideas. So I try to keep a sense of humor. I hope they enjoy the evening, ask questions-- so they can be educated in a fairly easy atmosphere. I think the film itself really speaks to a lot of people who've worked in their lifetime without recognition. I think it says that what we put into the world becomes the heritage of the next generation. I'm focusing on the positive that people do and leave for others to inherit."

Visible wisdom.

**Lynn Hershman Leeson, in T.V. Dinner No. 3, at The Kitchen, 512 W. 19th St., Fri. & Sat., Feb. 5-6, 6:30 p.m., res. req., \$25 with meal, \$15 without, related exhibit on**