
PERFORMING IDENTITY

New Museum Kids Menu provides families with activities to learn about contemporary art and ideas at home.

Artist Lynn Hershman Leeson (b. 1941, Cleveland, OH) explores the relationship between identity and technology through performance, video, drawing, photography, collage, and mixed media. In one of her most well-known artworks, Hershman Leeson performed as Roberta Breitmore, a fictional identity, or character, for five years beginning in 1973.

Hershman Leeson's first public act as Roberta was taking the bus to San Francisco and checking into the Dante Hotel. Roberta had her own clothing, makeup, handwriting, mannerisms, and ways of walking and speaking. Roberta had her own bank account; obtained credit cards; rented an apartment; posted an ad for roommates in local newspapers and interacted with twenty-seven roommate applicants; and joined Weight Watchers. Hershman Leeson documented all of these activities over several years through drawings, photographs, and artifacts like checks, credit cards, and a driver's license. The photograph, *Roberta at Bus Stop*, is one artifact of this performance, which ended in 1979.

“...Roberta became this fractured, reflective identity that would go out and find ways to record her experience. It took a decade to flesh her out, and to create her handwriting, her psychiatric record, her checking account, her credit cards, all the things that make one real. There were three dancers that would go out and record the experiences that they had being her. They could mimic Roberta's body language, which was extremely specific, as was her...actual language... There's nothing extraordinary about Roberta whatsoever. She was just a normal woman who just wanted to fit in. I couldn't get credit cards, but Roberta could. This fictional person who had no record, who had a clean slate, was able to have more relevance. If you would go back... to that decade, you would find more documents that would record her and prove her existence than you would for me...”

– **Lynn Hershman Leeson**, *Artforum*

To learn more about Hershman Leeson's photographs, videos, collages, and mixed media artworks, [watch this video](#).



Key Words

- **identity:** the way we think about or define ourselves, including personality, physical traits, and preferences
- **fictional character:** an imaginary person or animal created for a story
- **performance:** a type of visual art where an artist uses their own body to create meaning and information. Performance can take many forms, including a theatrical staging, or something more improvised, where the artist creates the performance as it unfolds, like Hershman Leeson's Roberta Breitmore performance.
- **artifact:** a remnant of everyday life created by a human being; a document, photograph, or other object detailing human experience, which may hold some cultural or social meaning or value

START WITH ART: LYNN HERSHMAN LEESON



- What do you notice about the person in this photograph?
- How would you describe her hair and clothing? What objects do you think she is holding?
- What do you notice about the setting or environment?
- What do you think the woman is doing?
- How would you caption this photograph, or describe the story of what you think is happening?
- How can Hershman Leeson's **performance** and **artifacts** of Roberta Breitmore inspire us to create our own fictional character through performance and artifacts?

MAKE ART

Let's perform as our fictional character and create an artifact of the performance.

Materials

- Paper
- Pen or pencil
- Magazines, catalogues, newspapers
- Scissors
- Clothing in different styles (either your own, a sibling's, or parent's)
- A mirror
- A device for recording video or photographs

- Optional: a printer to print out photographs

Making

1. How would you describe yourself to a friend? What adjectives would you use for your personality, visual or vocal style, and vocal expression? Write down a list of traits or adjectives.
2. Do you ever imagine having a different personality or style and expression? Try to imagine a fictional character you can perform.
3. Look for magazines, catalogs, or newspapers at home for inspiration. Can you find pictures of people with traits you might pretend to have? Collect clippings of these.
4. Roberta Breitmore had her own walk and way of speaking. Think about how your physical movements would change as your fictional character and practice these movements in front of a mirror.
5. Hershman Leeson changed her physical appearance to be Roberta Breitmore by wearing a blonde wig. If you don't have a wig, consider wearing your hair differently, or putting on a hat or sunglasses.
6. Find clothing you can wear that is different from how you normally dress. Wearing the new clothing, practice moving as your fictional character again.
7. Take a few selfies, or even a short video moving and speaking as your fictional character.
8. If family members are available, consider performing as your new character. This doesn't have to be a staged performance. You might walk into a common family room or show up for a meal dressed as your character.
9. If you have access to a printer, consider printing out photographs of your performance and sharing these with friends.

Reflection

- If you were able to perform for a family member or show photographs to a friend, how did they react? Did they notice the changes you made to your appearance and behavior?
- Are there public places where you might be able to dress, move, and speak as your character? If this feels safe and feasible, try taking your performance outside.
- How does it feel to perform the traits of your character? Do you notice any changes to your own behavior once you return to your own identity?

Did someone forward this email to you? If you would like to receive these art activities directly, sign up [here](#).



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IMAGES: Lynn Hershman Leeson, *Roberta at Bus Stop*, 1978. Archival digital print; 8 x 10 in (20.3 x 25.4 cm). Courtesy the artist; Altman Siegel, San Francisco; and Bridget Donahue, New York.

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