

Betwixt remembering and forgetting: Lynn Hershman-Leeson's online archives

Online Narratives



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New online technologies make it possible to archive and present works – moving images – whose viewers become active researchers and co-creators of the tales told by artists

The American artist Lynn Hershman-Leeson (pioneer of interactive video and author of acclaimed works including the 2010 “!Women Art Revolution!”) playfully and yet tellingly divides her own body of work into BC (Before Computers) and AD (After Digital) periods. Technological development is at once at the core of her art, in which she frequently draws upon state-of-the-art solutions, as well as being an object of direct reflection in her films such as “Conceiving Ada” (1997) and “Teknolust” (2002). The growing popularity of the Internet is also very significant in her work; she is the author of many online works, either created there independently or forming an extension, transformation or follow-up of pieces originating from elsewhere. One particular version of such works are digital archives (co)created by the artist: spaces for documentation and creation, art and meta-art, and – finally – remembering and forgetting.

Online cinema: between the narrative and database

The influential concept developed by Lev Manovich, the Russian-American theoretician of new media, involves two opposing ways of presenting information: a narrative whose elements are arranged linearly, and a database making it possible to pick and choose data in all directions. The former is widely used in traditional novels and cinema, while the latter is typical of the computer era. It should be noted that according to Manovich cinema has long relied on selecting elements from a catalogue of material (almost always far more extensive than the final film) and using them to construct a linear story.

A particularly apposite illustration of this is Hershman-Leeson's film “!Women Art Revolution!”. Slightly over 80

minutes long, it includes fragments of interviews with female artists, curators, and scholars conducted by Hershman-Leeson since the late 1960s. The director nevertheless envisioned this as a more comprehensive project, making it possible for the audiences to experience all the material she collected. In 2008, she donated all the footage to libraries at Stanford University in California, which processed them and posted them online. The actual film itself is thus one possible, although not unique, route through a sea of data: viewers become active researchers, taking conscious decisions about what they want to watch.

Participants in the RAW/WAR online art project, featuring works by historical and contemporary artists, have an even greater freedom of working with moving images. Users can add videos or documentations of works by any artist with their own descriptions. This interactive, community-curated archive is fully accessible to all users, allowing them to browse it to discover all the artwork contained within. RAW/WAR is more than just a social network: it has taken on a form of an art installation in its own right, first unveiled during the 2010 Sundance Festival. Using a “virtual flashlight,” users navigate the archives discovering individual elements – artworks and their descriptions – from a symbolic “darkness” of apathy and oblivion. Once again, Hershman-Leeson is here using new media as a tool emancipating both the artists and the audiences.

Second lease on life

Hershman-Leeson has been using online space to archive her projects for a number of years. Back in 2006, also working with Stanford University, she used the online virtual world of Second Life to present her previous artistic endeavors. Known as “Life Squared,” the project readdressed Hershman-Leeson's works from the 1970s: a site-specific installation “Hotel Dante,” and an unusual performance “Roberta Breitmore,” featuring Hershman-Leeson herself and others taking on the role of the fictitious character, using her appearance and name to participate in real social life of the time.

Attempts to reconstruct “Hotel Dante” and “Roberta Breitmore” in the virtual environment of SL had a certain utopian quality from the very outset. The idea was to create a seemingly impossible reconstruction of an authentic time and place, together with the spontaneous and unpredictable behavior of the participants. Even



Screening of "Strange Culture" in Second Life, January 2007. In the background, fragments of one of the versions of "Hotel Dante". On the right, Lynn Hershman-Leeson

the partially-reconstructed "Hotel Dante" fast became a setting for new artistic activities, digitally-processed "memory", and creating and adding new elements to the story. The option to copy all materials and drag them anywhere within SL means that the virtual world now includes a few replicas of the original hotel, with different details and purposes. Eventually, in 2007, a premiere of Hershman-Leeson's documentary "Strange Culture" was screened at one of them, believed to have been the first broadcast of a feature film in Second Life. The screening was held concurrently in SL and a "real-life" cinema during the Sundance Festival; the cyberspace audience was able to participate in the question-and-answer session with the artists after the Festival screening.

Remembering and forgetting in the computer age

Hershman-Leeson's digital archives, acting as spaces for gathering and creating art, appear especially paradoxical when their very existence comes into question. Locations and pages available online one day and gone the next, sometimes reappearing in a different form, leave visitors with a sense of uncertainty as to the "original" version; is there even such a thing in the digital era? "Hotel Dante" is now gone as a discrete location in SL, but it can still be found in other places where it forms a part of a greater whole; however, no one knows for certain how long it will remain there. As this article was being written, the site rawwar.org presenting the archives of the RAW/WAR project was down following attacks by hackers; it has since been reactivated. At one point, avatars of characters placed by Hershman-Leeson in Second Life were being radically transformed by users, which seems a natural consequence of interactive artwork in the extreme sense.



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As such, online archives are ongoing projects, always open and never constituting a finished whole, lest the technology maintaining them comes crashing down. They open a dialogue with the community of viewers while posing a specific challenge: having grown out of a dream of a totality, they remain unfinished and fragmented; they disappear and reappear in a space dedicated to creating, forgetting, and reconstructing. ■

Further reading:

- Life [to the power of] n.* (2008). Catalog of an exhibition of Lynn Hershman. San Francisco: Hotwire Productions.
- Manovich L. (2006). *The Language of New Media*. Cambridge: MIT Press.
- Tromble M. (ed.). (2005). *The Art and Films of Lynn Hershman Leeson*. Berkeley–Seattle: University of California Press.
- Levinson P. (2009). *New new media*. Boston: Allyn & Bacon.