

### 13. THE RAW DATA DIET, ALL-CONSUMING BODIES, AND THE SHAPE OF THINGS TO COME

LYNN HERSHMAN-LEESON

For the past three decades, I have been fascinated with the construction of identity and how it affects culture: the symbiotic relationship between the real and the virtual, and how identity reacts and shifts when processed through manipulated time. Most of the “bodies” I have used in my work have been female. *Synthia Stock Ticker* (2000–4), *Agent Ruby* (1991–2004), and *DiNA* (2004) are my most recent cyber fatales/autonomous agents. These works are in a constant state of change. They morph by cannibalizing information and exist as shifting reincarnated feedback patterns. Their cumulative identities are also a networked trajectory of consumed information. In the context of the Web, these pieces reveal cultural obsessions. Information flow swallows itself live.

For example, *Agent Ruby* is a self-breeding, artificially intelligent Web agent that recognizes users and talks to them. Not only is she fed information from AIML (Artificial Identity Markup Language), but her brain is a search engine, allowing her to converse on any subject that has ever been entered on the Internet. Her memory system is shaped by encounters with these users. Existing on a multitude of platforms with the capacity for increased intelligence and flexibility, *Ruby* is a reactive communicator—a networked conduit between individuals and society, bodies to technologies, the real to the virtual, and, ultimately, fragmented human subjectivity. *Ruby* converses with users, remembers their questions and names, and has moods and emotional synapses. Her mood may also be affected directly by Web traffic. Users can interact with *Ruby* through both voice and text and can download *Agent Ruby* onto Palm Pilots and laptops, thereby extending her life cycle into one of continual replication and breeding. *Agent Ruby* is seeded to users’ servers, as well as being downloadable to desktops or Palm OS handheld computers. She is multiplatform, integrating PC, MAC, and Palm systems. This Tamagotchi-like creature is an Internet-bred construction of identity that continually fleshes out through cumulative virtual use.

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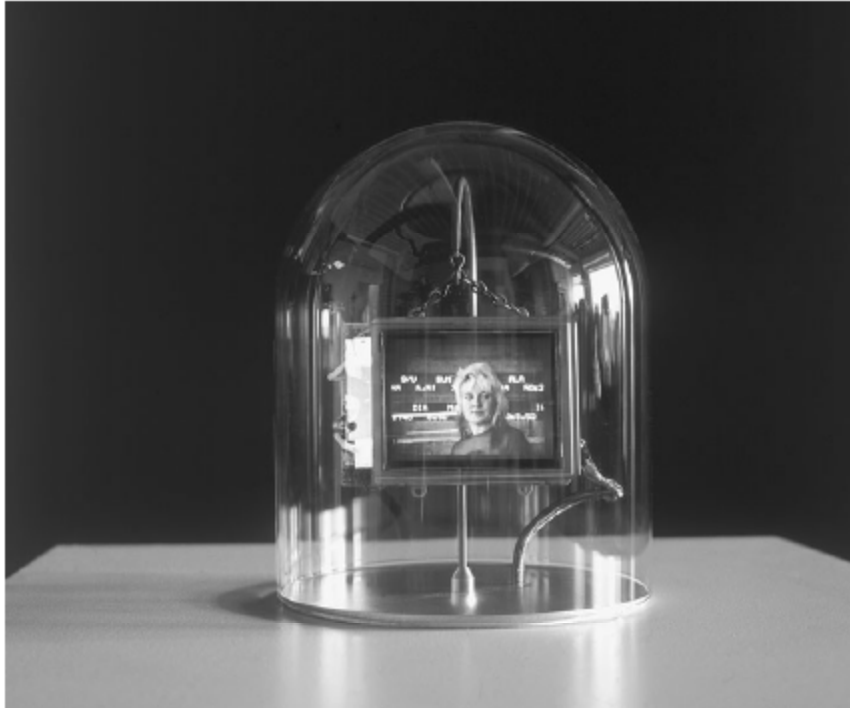


FIGURE 13.1. STILL FROM LYNN HERSHMAN-LEESON, *SYNTHIA STOCK TICKER*, 2002. INTERACTIVE NETWORK INSTALLATION. PHOTOGRAPH BY IRA SCHRANK.

*Agent Ruby* evokes questions about the networked potential of consciousness and identity, but through her interactions she also encounters both corruption and redemption. All of the double-sided mirroring and reflections are implicit in the resulting “double”:

In effect, they are a summoning of a contemporary golem. According to this interpretation, Hershman, as the artist, represents a modern version of the learned one, the devoted Talmudic disciple, who seeks to bring her own creation into the world. Furthermore, the golem is a form (or, shall we say, image) that is given life through a magical formula, such as the power of the letters of the divine name or the word for “truth” that according to some legends is inscribed on the forehead of the golem. What better description of a Golem than a “simulated” person?

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There were two legitimate reasons for creating such a golem. One was to protect the community. In the case of Hershman's work, we could interpret community to mean the family. . . . The other legitimate reason to invent a golem was to achieve a greater understanding of the creative process.<sup>1</sup>

*Synthia*, also female, is the personification of the stock market. Her "drive" is composed of accumulated stock data that are compiled and then transferred to her response in real time. The market numbers are also on view in the piece and indeed become part of *Synthia*'s identity. Live online Internet information is transferred into the real space of a miniaturized stock ticker, modeled after Thomas Edison's original stock ticker. *Synthia* reacts in real time to changing stock data, which include the DOW, NASDAC, S&P, and Russell Small Cap, by exhibiting behavior that is guided by two percent changes in the market. Examples of how *Synthia* interacts with her own received data include:

- If the market is flat, she goes to bed.
- If the market is up, she dances.
- If the market is hot, she turns to fire and does back flips.
- If the market goes down, she chain-smokes.
- If the market is very low, she turns to water and becomes depressed.
- If the market goes up, she shops at Hermès or Dior.
- If the market goes down, she goes to Goodwill, takes a gun to her head, has nightmares, visits the zoo, goes to the stock exchange, checks her e-mail, or dances.
- When the market volume is up, her pet bull morphs into a bear and her fish swim fast.
- If the market volume is down, her fish go belly up.

There are sixteen base behaviors for the characters that are made in modules that correspond in real time to her compiled and compressed data. It is the data that define and defy this piece, just as we humans are programmed to act on the information we receive or the perceptions of information that filter through our own systems.

What is most interesting about *Synthia* is the attempt to give her a kind of life that is dependent on the virtual environment of the financial markets, but which is algorithmic and not fixed, and certainly independent of direct manipulation by either the artist or the viewer. In the "AD" era, this "animation" has

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increasingly hinted at, both rhetorically and in the artwork, the notion of an independent (but connected) existence of the artificially intelligent, virtual, and cyborgian other.<sup>2</sup>

My newest work, *DiNA*, will use *Ruby*'s "brain" and the aesthetics of her accumulated information, but she is more developed, autonomous, with a specific programmed personality. She too enjoys feeding on the pulse of life and information as it happens through her active internal search engine. *Ruby* and *DiNA* talk with immediate lip-synched animation via a program called the Pulse 3D Veeper System.

*DiNA* employs a global view of information garnered from several feeds. What is significant about this work is that the data actually interact and exist by modifying live Internet reactive data transmitted in real time.

Art produced in the second half of this century was often based in destruction, decomposition, and deconstruction, perversely and pervasively eroding aesthetic preconceptions. Art became not only live, but unstable. Form merged with content to create an aesthetic of rupture, participation, and interactivity. Delivery systems through which art reached its audience were also shifting and became at least as subversive as the art itself. A new audience emerged comprised of a broad community of receivers/participants, whose interactions helped to shape a revolution of art capable of self-replication, unstable and shifting content, and database information reconfigurations, all processed in real time, creating reflections of our cultural obsessions, such as privacy in an era of surveillance and personal identity in a time of pervasive manipulation.

In an era of digital and human biological sampling, our relationship to computer-based virtual life forms that are autonomous and self-replicating is critical. The political as well as the psychic stakes are urgent, compelling, and inescapable.

#### NOTES

1. Ruby B. Rich, "My Other, My Self: Lynn Hershman and the Reinvention of the Golem," in *The Art and Films of Lynn Hershman Leeson: Secret Agents, Private I*, ed. Meredith Tromble, DVD ed. Kyle Stephan (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, forthcoming).

2. Steve Dietz, "Animating the Network," in *ibid.*