

KW Institute of Contemporary Art
Lynn Hershman Leeson
“The Novalis Hotel” and “First Person Plural”
May 19 – June 17, 2018

“I hope Berlin is all they say it is! A place to hide and to find dreams. I need both!!! I need to be anonymous... But I wonder, can anyone truly be anonymous now?” To hide and to find, to seek anonymity yet to open her hotel room to the public, these are the contradictions Lynn Hershman Leeson sets forth as her alter ego, Roberta Lester, in *The Novalis Hotel*.

What it means to have privacy is at the core of Lynn Hershman Leeson’s “The Novalis Hotel” and “First Person Plural” at the KW Institute for Contemporary Art. For the most part using a form that approaches non-form—staging—Hershman Leeson places the marginal (items to be discarded, confessions to be buried) at the center.

In 1973, Hershman Leeson began a series of private and public performances as fictional characters. In one such performance, her alter ego arrived by bus in San Francisco and checked into the Dante Hotel. This would become *The Dante Hotel*, the artist’s staged occupation of a real hotel bedroom in North Beach, San Francisco’s historically Italian-American neighborhood. The installation, open to the public 24 hours a day between 1973 and 1974, was one of her earliest site-specific works. It also marked the beginning of her interest in forensics and biosurveillance, which would become the north star of the 77-year-old artist’s career.

This summer, Hershman Leeson revisited *The Dante Hotel* in the form of a new commission, *The Novalis Hotel*. Like visitors of the Dante Hotel, those of the Novalis Hotel in Berlin Mitte were presented with a key. What was new—visitors of the Novalis Hotel were also given the opportunity to leave something behind—a DNA sample for testing. “The aim of the art project,” writes Hershman Leeson in the declaration of consent, “is to show the visitor what conclusions can be drawn from the background of the biological material left behind.” This biological material would later be culled, interpreted, and presented by the forensic scientist, Lutz Roewer. Here, identity is reduced to information. Or, as Hershman Leeson has said, “DNA is a perfect archive.”

Entering Roberta Lester’s hotel room, though permitted, even explicitly encouraged, had the effect of trespassing. Her identity was constructed through the artifacts she left behind: cosmetics, clothing, and an accumulation of notes and receipts. Though her life was lived behind closed doors, she was compelled to leave this one open.

With *The Novalis Hotel*, Hershman Leeson asks: *How far do you go? How is identity assembled? What are you willing to leave behind?* But the work also reminds us of Roberta Lester’s invocation, “can anyone truly be anonymous now?” The answer might lie in two recent events: a controversial law that gives Bavarian police new power to use forensic DNA profiling and

Microsoft's call to U.S. Congress to limit the use of facial recognition technology. We are vulnerable in the world; we can be read by it.

The artist's coinciding retrospective, "First Person Plural," presents *Lorna*, 1979-83, one of the first interactive media installations of its kind. With the help of a remote control, the video game allows users to explore and control the world of the titular Lorna, who suffers from agoraphobia. Users can guide the character through various interactive chapters, each concluding with a psychological testimony that enumerates her fears. Most poignantly was "TVs like mirrors reflect our fears." Hershman Leeson welcomes the liability of investigation, but also empathizes with the claustrophobia introduced by screens and walls. In a medium that at once recalls the series of children's gamebooks, *Choose Your Own Adventure*, and foresees contemporary interactive design and media, Hershman Leeson addresses the age-old question, where does the stage end and the world begin?

For all its theatrical appeal, Hershman Leeson's work positions itself—and the female protagonists it constructs—at the forefront of real, civic demand.

— Sophie Kovel