

Lynn Hershman Leeson's Impersonal Politics

Article by William Kherbek // June 14, 2018

The phrase “the personal is political” is familiar, even cliché, and it is clear enough that in an age in which personal civil liberties are being eroded by repressive governments, where historically oppressed groups face new forms of violence to support the same old hierarchies, and where more and more of our lives are recorded, commodified and interchanged, individual decisions and identities are the subject of greater political scrutiny than ever before. Resistance, therefore, must have as much of a personal as policy-based dimension. Viewing **KW Institute for Contemporary Art's Lynn Hershman Leeson** retrospective, ‘First Person Plural,’ the following question arose: If “the personal is political” is increasingly self-evident as a concept, what about the converse? Is it true that the political is also personal? It seems increasingly true that politics are more and

more and



Lynn Hershman Leeson: 'Venus of the Anthropocene', 2017. Installation view of the exhibition 'First Person Plural' KW Institute for Contemporary Art, Berlin, 2018. Photo by Trunk Gauding

The work that brought this question to the forefront of my mind was Hershman Leeson's ‘Venus of the Anthropocene’ (2017), which employs facial recognition software alongside a display that includes the ephemera of intimacies—a wig, a dressing table, a medicine bottle—all of which are familiar tropes of Hershman Leeson's work. A black screen

evokes the notion of a mirror, but the reflection goes only one way; it captures a version of the visitor and ostensibly fits them into a matrix of characteristics which it then displays. The mirror responds to the viewer but on its own terms. Although each object in the installation could be said to have both personal and political dimensions, the inclusion of facial recognition technology seems to force questions about agency, representation and control to the fore: if consumer technologies are more invasive and personalized than ever, and they ultimately exist to provide corporations or political entities with more data to exploit, what meaning can actually be found in the personal character of this information? Is the collective data of individuals a means of creating an aggregation that is a “person” but not in the familiar meaning of the term? A being who is merely a set of characteristics, stripped of personality, emptied of beliefs, goals and ideologies, the ultimate aim of whose construction is making politics simply about outcomes? Hershman Leeson's mirror analyzes its viewer and churns out a new entity ready to market and be marketed.

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The management and control of identity, and the distribution of personality and agency, have been subjects of Hershman Leeson's work since she began making "videotapes" more than four decades ago, and 'First Person Plural' does an excellent job of drawing connections between the earlier and later works, highlighting the ways in which Hershman Leeson has



Lynn Hershman Leeson, *First Person Plural*, the Electronic States of Lynn Hershman, 1984-95, installation view, Oll Institute for Contemporary Art, Berlin. © Photos by Franki Poesling

evolved in order to remain the same artist with the same set of concerns. The first room of the exhibition, housed in an abandoned warehouse complex near the **Moritzplatz** U-Bahn station, is oddly homely, emphasizing the ways in which technologies and personalities interact. Hershman Leeson deftly explores the ways in which agency is often subsumed within the deceptive performance of "making choices." In the Cold War America of Hershman Leeson's earlier works, for example, the ability to make choices, particularly consumer choices, was a way of distinguishing Western societies from those behind the Iron Curtain: Communist

populations were passive victims with no control over their own lives; the "government" made

In the adjacent space, a selection of Hershman Leeson's videos play on a serried line of four televisions and on four screens set one behind the other, each with a small bench and speakers on either side. The televisions screen works from the 1970s, including 'A Commercial for Myself' (1978) in which various individuals cheerily (or eerily, as the case may be) announce themselves to be "Lynn Hershman" and invite the viewer to "come and see me" at various spaces, including the **Plaza Hotel** and the **Chelsea Hotel**. Hershman's interest in the ways in which technology—even the relatively primitive media technologies of 1978—permit an individual to distribute and redefine (or satirize) one's identity, and the

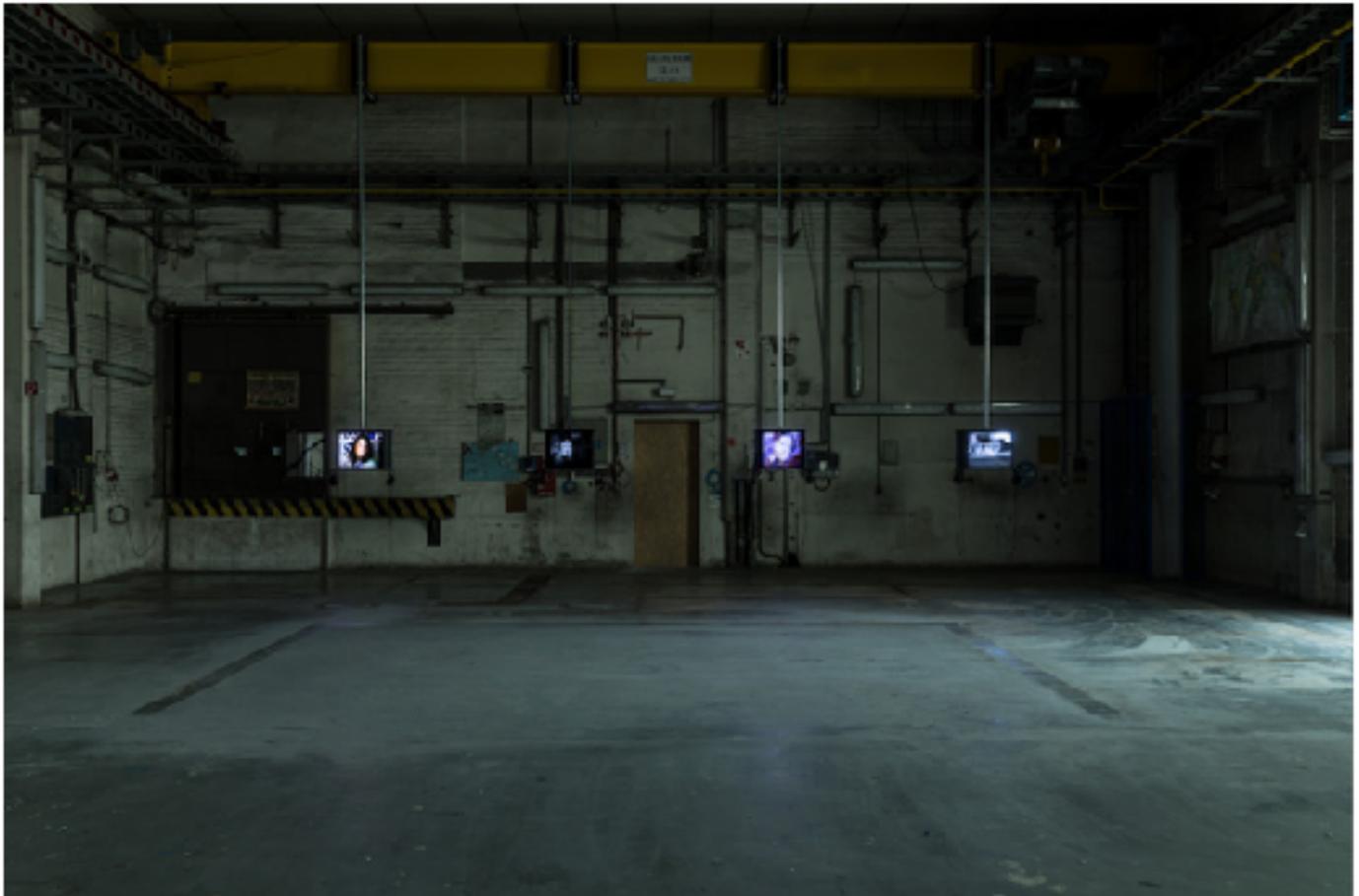


Lynn Hershman Leeson, *Contra*, 1978-82, installation view of the exhibition *First Person Plural*, 1993, Oll Institute for Contemporary Art, Berlin. © Photos by Franki Poesling

ways in which technologies make the people displayed on screens and in programs "available" to others, feels exceptionally current. The frequent references to hotels in this work, as well as the inclusion of 'Dante Hotel' (1972-73), which takes its title from Hershman Leeson's immersive installation of the same name, bespeak the artist's enduring interest in these sites of temporary shelter. They are locations where identity can be performed, shed or almost completely ignored.

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With a similar function to that of 'The Dante Hotel' and simultaneous with 'First Person Plural' is an installation at the **Novalis Hotel** in central Berlin, where visitors can enter a room, not unlike Lorna's but where the dynamics of control have a somewhat different valence. The visitors to the Novalis, in addition to picking through the ephemera of the life of Hershman Leeson's invented character, Roberta Lester, can have their own DNA sampled upon arrival. The samples are then given further analysis and the results are to be discussed by Hershman Leeson and the scientist **Lutz Roewer** at a presentation concluding the installation. The politics of the personal could scarcely be more intimate; 'The Novalis Hotel'



Installation view of the exhibition 'First Person Plural', KW Institute for Contemporary Art, Berlin, 2018 // Photo by Frank Spelling

Exhibition Info

KW INSTITUTE FOR CONTEMPORARY ART ON LOCATION

Lynn Hershman Leeson: 'First Person Plural'

Exhibition: May 19 – Jul. 15, 2018

Prinzenstraße 34, 10969 Berlin, [click here for map](#)

Lynn Hershman Leeson: 'The Novalis Hotel'

Installation: May 19 – Jun. 17, 2018

Novalisstraße 5, 10115 Berlin, [click here for map](#)