

I Express and Therefore I Am: Lynn Hershman Leeson's (In)Visible and (Dis-)Embodied Constructed Identities

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Abstract

In this thesis I evaluate the role of the body, visibility and visibility in constituting identities by analysing *The Dante Hotel* and *The Novalis Hotel*, two art installations made by Lynn Hershman Leeson. The differences between the art installations characterize the shift from materiality and surveillance to digitality and dataveillance. Surveillance tactics rely on visibility and read the surveyed objects' bodies through their outward performed bodily inscriptions. In contemporary society, dataveillance processes have emerged. These mechanisms do not rely on visible bodies anymore but have the power to deduce identities from metadata. I investigate how this shift is emphasized in the art installations in which material and digital artefacts are deliberately arranged by Hershman Leeson in order to represent the identities of the former inhabitants. By anticipating processes of signification with regards to the inanimate objects, Hershman Leeson implies identities for the audience to infer. By departing from a poststructuralist methodological framework and using semiotics as research method, I deconstruct the socially constructed and naturalised relation between signs and its connotations upon which both surveillance and dataveillance mechanisms rely in order to construct their objects' identities. By using the concept of *performativity*, a concept specifically helpful in understanding how identity is founded on socially constructed conventions, and the concept of the *simulacrum* or *hyperreal*, a concept that is useful for understanding how socially constructed conventions are perpetuated, I show how contemporary dataveillance mechanisms reinforce the arbitrary relation between signs and meanings and create false notions of 'realities' and agency.

Keywords: surveillance, dataveillance, identity, visibility, social constructivism, signification

Introduction

"I was working with the virtual and the non-virtual, what makes something appear as fiction and what makes it fact. Roberta was a fictional person; she was virtual, but she interfaced with reality all the time. I am interested in a blurring of the edges, of the boundaries." (Hershman Leeson 2010, 239)

The American artist Lynn Hershman Leeson (1941-) is concerned with the topics of identity, representation, technology, subjectivity and the redefinition of power and hierarchies. She incorporates these socially, culturally, and politically loaded terms in interactive artworks that transcend the boundaries between reality and the virtual; the public and the private; materiality and digitality; and the object and the subject. Hershman Leeson specifically does this by emphasizing the imitative and subjective aspects embedded within the construction of identity: "through her artificially constructed alter egos, active both in real and virtual life, cultural symbols are recomposed according to unedited modalities" (Bazzichelli 2011, 29).

The notions of reality and the virtual in Hershman Leeson's works refer to contemporary society in which technological developments have resulted in the so called 'digital age': identities are presented on social media platforms and interactive virtual spaces. Alongside the increase in online identities, there is an increase in the data that is acquired by these technologies and platforms: personal information is being stored and tracked in a controlling manner. Furthermore, not only has there been an increase in CCTV cameras and biometric technologies in public and private spaces to control and watch humans in the name of security within contemporary surveillance society, "human bodies are abstracted into a series of discrete flows of metadata" (Kafer 2016, 229). This metadata is consequently used to create profiles of the subjects of surveillance and inform about their identities and human bodies through a process of binary categorization. This modern form of surveillance that does not rely on the visible, as is the case with more traditional surveillance technologies such as CCTVs, is called *dataveillance*. Sociologist Kevin Haggerty and criminological researcher Richard Ericson note that "today, however, we are witnessing the formation and coalescence of a new type of body, a form of becoming which transcends human corporeality and reduces flesh to pure information" (2000, 613). This quote shows the separation of identity from the body – the body being the visible and the tangible; and identity being the invisible and the virtual. However, despite the disembodiment that characterizes contemporary surveillance

discourses, the researchers in law and risk management Gloria Fuster, Rocco Bellanova and Raphaël Gellert note that this distinction between the visible and the invisible "tends to hide the fact that they are both intrinsically related in the functioning of surveillance, to the point that the invisible is a constitutive element of the visible and vice versa" (2015, 512). These notions of invisibility and the absence of a visible body have gained my interests for analysing the constitution of identity within two art installations by Hershman Leeson.

Central to this thesis are the two artworks, *The Dante Hotel* (1972), and *The Novalis Hotel* (2018). In both these art installations, visitors are allowed to enter a hotel room and explore all materials and objects that are deliberately set up in such a manner by Hershman Leeson that they propose the idea of a person staying in the room, yet it is a room from a resident who has left the place and left all their belongings behind. Whereas the artefacts in the first work are material and refer to corporeality, the artefacts in the later work are technological tools and do not directly relate to any notion of corporeality. The question that I will pose regarding the installations that relate the construction of identity to the larger surveillance discourse on corporeal (in)visibility and the abstraction of bodily¹ signifiers is: "What does the prevalence or absence of material artefacts mean in *The Dante Hotel* and *The Novalis Hotel* and how can these artefacts be understood in relation to social constructivist mechanisms and formations of identity?"

In order to find out how identities are constructed upon (empty) signs that are given meaning to through performative and social conventions, I will divide my thesis into three sections. In the first section of my argument, I will be concerned with a general introduction to the artworks. I examine what the installations are made of material wise and how they can be interpreted. Central concepts to this section are materiality, digitality, identity, voyeurism and surveillance. The goal of describing the art installations, by using my own experience, texts by Hershman Leeson herself, and texts written about the installations by other authors is to show the similarities and differences between the two works. Having a clear view of what the artworks entail will consequently be useful in understanding the meanings embedded within them. In the second section, I elaborate more on the art installations and I will incorporate social constructivist theories that question the seemingly 'natural' and 'rigid' nature of identity into the discussion, in order to understand how Hershman Leeson uses material and digital artefacts in her art installations to construct identity. In the final section, I will connect the social constructivist theories on the construction of identity to surveillance and

¹Even though both installations are non-body works, I use the term 'bodily' to define the prevalence of artefacts that refer to a body, to corporeality, such as the wax figures and signs of a female guest in *The Dante Hotel*.

dataveillance practices in order to show how these systems aim to 'know' their surveyed objects' identities based upon visual signs and actively construct them through abstracted data at the same time.

Methodological and Theoretical Framework

In this section I discuss the methodology and theories I am working with. I examine these topics together because both are embedded in a social constructivist framework, a framework that emphasizes how meaning is arbitrarily constructed by social actors. This research lends itself to a poststructuralist methodological framework and Foucauldian theoretical approach. Poststructuralist thought is concerned with deconstructing subjects and examining how 'knowing subjects' are formed (Ramazanoglu and Holland 2002, 75). Key poststructuralist theorists, such as Jacques Derrida, Michel Foucault, Jean Baudrillard and Roland Barthes emphasize the "arbitrary and conventional nature of everything social – language, culture, practice, subjectivity and society itself" (Best and Kellner 1991). One manner in which the arbitrary nature can be assessed, is through deconstruction. Deconstruction as a tool is effective for "reflecting on, questioning and unsettling existing assumptions, meanings and methods" (Ramazanoglu and Holland 2002, 88). Central to postmodern² thought is thus to decompose existing suppositions and to question everything that is 'taken-for-granted' and given as a 'natural' fact. One example of what such an analysis led to is the poststructuralist premise, a premise often and rightfully associated with Foucault, that the human body is inscribed *with* meaning as a result of power and knowledge production, rather than meaning residing *in* the body (Ramazanoglu and Holland 2002, 94). It is this interplay between inscriptions, or visible 'characteristics' and meanings that I build upon to justify the methods and concepts I work with. In order to relate the art installations to my methodological choices, I will at first elaborate more on the roots of this framework and method, aiming to eventually construct a framework in which the methodological assumptions and chosen methods intertwine and consolidate each other.

Preceding the postmodern idea that meaning is inscribed onto, rather than resides in objects, is the poststructuralist framework that uses a semiotic approach to explain how meanings are arbitrarily conveyed through signs. Semiotics, the method that I use in this thesis, is namely concerned with the relationship between signs, signifiers, and the signified.

² Just like Caroline Ramazanoglu and Janet Holland, I use the term 'postmodern thought' to loosely refer to postmodernism and poststructuralism (2002, 84). There are differences between the two movements, but that would be another discussion. In this essay, the term postmodern thought is used to point to "power, selves and knowledge production and, in particular, at *how* the power of language and representation operates" (85).

Signs occur in the form of words, sounds, or images that carry meaning but do not have any meaning in themselves (Hall 2013, 4). These signs represent or stand for "the concepts and the conceptual relationship between them which we carry around in our own head and together they make up the meaning systems of our culture" (4). A sign can be divided into two constituents: the signifier and the signified. The former is the form of expression (any form of 'language') while the latter is the mental concept associated with those representations (20). The signifier and the signified thus come together in signs (23). In this thesis, the artefacts come to function as signs because they are objects that contain meaning.

Within poststructuralist thought, the signifiers are of greater importance than the signified (Best and Kellner 1991). The signs only acquire meaning through socially constructed conventions: no material nor object contains a meaning *an sich*, as there is nothing inherent to anything in the world (Hall 2013, 10). An example of such a sign is a traffic light. It is an object, a pole with different coloured lights, that enables people to know when they should stop or start driving. There is nothing in the object itself that tells drivers what they can or cannot do. Rather, the constructed conventions about what the colours of the traffic lights mean and should be associated with matter. It is the process of signifying (recognizing an object and naming it – relating signs to concepts, so *producing* meaning) that constructs meaning (Hall 2013, 14; Best and Kellner 1991). Postmodern thought consequently further elaborates on the arbitrary relationship between signs and meanings, applying these mechanisms that produce meaning to codes and rules that structure social phenomena in cultures and societies (Best and Kellner 1991). Signs, i.e. gestures, notes, words, clothes or expressions are, according to cultural theorist Stuart Hall, part of the material and natural world (2013, xxi). What this means is that they have the function of representing or standing for ideas, feelings or concepts that are conveyed in such a manner that they are to be 'read', decoded or interpreted by others on both denotative³ and connotative⁴ level (xxi). It is this decoding mechanism that Hershan Leeson anticipates on in *The Dante Hotel* and *The Novalis Hotel*, in which all prevalent artefacts function as signs of the inhabitant's identity. The audience get to 'know' the women through voyeuristic practices of looking at and examining her belongings. Apparent in both works are the visible and invisible signs, either material or digital, that are to be read through processes of recognition, steering the audience

³ Denotation refers to the first level of decoding signs: the descriptive level. Denotation is about recognizing an object and agreeing on its meaning i.e. 'lipstick' or 'book' (Hall 2013, 23).

⁴ Connotation refers to the second level of decoding signs. This level of reading signs concerns the question of what meaning is associated with a signifier (i.e. 'lipstick' refers to femininity or elegance and 'book' to education or intelligence). So, on connotative level, a connection is made between a conceptual classification of an object or sign and its broader, culturally dependent meaning (Hall 2013, 24).

to give meaning to the signs. What the art installations exactly entail will be further clarified in the first section, where I will pose the first subquestion: "What are the artworks made of and how do they relate to notions of visibility, materiality and digitality?" For now, it is important to note that the relation between perceiving signs in which meaning is inscribed and interpreting these meanings is at the heart of the social constructivist concepts I am working with: that of performativity and the simulacrum or hyperreal.

Performativity and the simulacrum are concepts situated in social constructivist theories that emphasize the arbitrary creation of a 'real' or a 'naturally given'. What deploying these concepts in relation to the artworks does, is that they offer insights on how meaning is constructed and emerges through discourse. Discourse and discursive 'knowledge' are inextricably related to signifying practices: "[N]aturalism and 'realism' – the apparent fidelity of the representation to the thing or concept represented – is the result, the effect, of a certain specific articulation of language on the 'real'. It is the result of a discursive practice" (Hall 2006, 167). This quote thus states that representations and ways in which meanings are conveyed are related to the discourse they are produced in.

The first artwork is made during the period postmodern thought arose, which is in the second half of the twentieth century, while the second installation is made in the second decade of the twenty-first century in times of highly advanced technological development and an increase in information and dataveillance systems. The discourse in which the art installations are produced and the identities that are embedded in them has evidently changed. Whereas the first work centralizes around vision, visibility and materiality to constitute identity, the later work is rather concerned with notions of invisibility and digitality, characterizing contemporary surveillance and specifically, dataveillance discourses.

Contemporary surveillance tactics aim to know the objects that they, to certain extents, control by turning their bodily inscriptions and visual characteristics into abstract data and numbers to construct and represent an individual's identity. Such surveillance practices are embedded in Hershman Leeson's installations in which she exhibits what I like to call 'empty signs' – signs that do not have any inherent meaning in themselves but rather acquire meaning through social constructs. And, although the identities that are signified in both works are similar⁵, the form in which the signs occur and the discourses in which they are produced have changed. It is these changes that I am interested in to analyse and to deconstruct because

⁵ With this I refer to the identity that is constructed on the material and digital artefacts. In both these works, the artefacts signify the identity of a white, middle-class woman called Roberta. The 'image' the audience constructs of what Roberta looks like is similar in the two installations.

they inform us about the disembodiment of signification processes and the increasingly abstraction of identities. I use a combination of semiotics as research method and performativity and the simulacrum as leading concepts, because these social constructivist theories are particularly helpful in deconstructing the naturalized and stabilized relation between visual signs and identities. Both the simulacrum and performativity namely question the seemingly 'natural' and 'rigid' nature of what is presented – which are bodies when following Butler and symbols when following Baudrillard – and offer ways of seeing these signs, whether material or digital, as constitutive, established on aspects such as recognisability, repetitiveness and perpetuity.

The philosopher Judith Butler introduced the notion of performativity. According to Butler, "words, acts, gestures, and desire produce the effect of an internal core or substance, but produce this *on the surface* of the body, through the play of signifying absences that suggest, but never reveal, the organizing principles of identity as a cause" (1990, 136). These constructed acts and gestures are in turn performative "in the sense that the essence or identity that they otherwise purport to express are *fabrications* manufactured and sustained through corporeal signs and other discursive means" (1990, 136). She is thus saying that acts and gestures are based upon principles of recognition, expectation, and anticipation that reinforce and reproduce the illusion of a 'core identity' that is to be known through outer bodily inscriptions. For *The Dante Hotel*, Hershman Leeson arranged bodily 'signs' such as a sound installation with breathing sounds, a wax mask, and a figure of a woman. Other material signs that were also present in *The Novalis Hotel* are material artefacts such as clothes, cosmetics and books. These material artefacts have the function of 'representing' the core identities presented in both art installations. The material artefacts thus constitute the signs or the inscriptions that are to be interpreted, given meaning to, and expected to represent the person's identity. *The Hotel Novalis*, the installation that is made over forty-five years later than *The Dante Hotel* is similar to the first work considering that it also contains material artefacts. However, unlike the first work that contains 'bodily' artefacts, there are technological, 'non-bodily' objects such as a laptop with opened tabs, a phone, and a television. The most significant change concerns the presence of material and digital inscriptions but the absence of a material body. By posing the first subquestion "What is the relation between performing an identity and the material and digital artefacts in the two art installations?", I aim to evaluate the role of vision and visibility in relation to performative acts and bodily inscriptions in the digital age.

The concept of the simulacrum or hyperreal, as introduced by Jean Baudrillard,

follows a similar social constructivist line of thought as the concept of performativity, but in turn allows me to touch upon the manner of how notions of reality are perpetuated. The hyperreal namely points to "a blurring of distinctions between the real and the unreal in which the prefix 'hyper' signifies more real than real whereby the real is produced according to a model" (Best and Kellner 1991). What the signs represent is no longer related to the original because representation, according to Baudrillard, "stems from the principle of the equivalence of the signs and of the real" (2006, 456). Understanding the unequal relation between the signs and the real within the context of semiotics, in which signs are read on denotative and connotative level in order to give meaning to objects, people, events or identities, what is represented is no longer signified by the 'real' sign, but by a simulation of that sign, a simulacrum, that is presented as the 'real'. Hence, "[S]igns do not bear any resemblance or correspondence to the real world but rather produce their own hyperreality: an order of representation based on illusion whose power increases in direct proportion to its ability to make us forget that it is indeed illusory" (Cavallaro 2001, 207). Baudrillard thus argues that in contemporary society, there is no longer such a thing as 'the original' but only a copy of a copy. He points to meaning-making symbols and media, arguing that the prevalence of media is shaping the connotations people have with symbols in such a way that these symbols no longer represent reality (Baudrillard 2006, 456). Our perception of these symbols however is that they *do* represent reality. An example to explain the simulacrum is an airplane crash. Almost everyone is under the assumption that they know what an airplane crash looks like, but very few people have ever experienced it themselves. People only think to know what it looks like because of the images constructed by the media. So, following this line of thought our connotations are not based upon 'originals' anymore, but upon copies of copies. What does this notion of realness or originality mean in relation to the performed realities within Hersman Leeson's installations? The material artefacts are 'real' – they are visible and tangible, but what do they refer to and what do they represent? The second subquestion that I am considering when relating the art installations to social constructivist theories concerns the relationship between the artefacts, the (virtual) identity, and the concept of simulation and is as follows: "How does Hersman Leeson propose perceptions of offline and online 'realities'?" This question is important to ask since it evaluates (artificially re-)created realities and truths in an era of the abstraction of data and widespread accessibility to visual signs and images, which characterizes the digital age in the 21st century. In the final section, I will focus more on the construction of identity with regards to surveillance and dataveillance mechanisms that aim to know their objects' identities. The final subquestion that will be

answered is: "How do surveillance and dataveillance tactics disturb the outward performances of bodily and digital signification processes?" By answering this question, I aim to lay bare the relation between contemporary dataveillance strategies, objects and subjects of surveillance and notions of agency.

As made clear throughout this section, many oppositions seem to mark the differences between *The Dante Hotel* and *The Novalis Hotel*. The most significant oppositions that I will deconstruct are: visibility/tangibility and invisibility/intangibility; the object and the subject; the real/original and the fake/copy; embodiment/corporeality and disembodiment/non-corporeality; and the material and the digital. I will relate each of these oppositions to the art installations as well as to surveillance and dataveillance practices in order to denaturalize the manner in which they seem to inform each other. I will now at first examine the artworks, which will be referred to throughout this analysis because they form the starting point for working with the theories on surveillance and dataveillance.

Lynn Hershman Leeson, The Dante Hotel and The Novalis Hotel

One of the first works by Hershman Leeson, *The Dante Hotel*, is made in 1972-1973. She separates her work into two periods, referring to the Christian year count: *BC* (*Before Computers*) and *AD* (*After Digital*) (Mock 2012, 129). *The Dante Hotel* is situated within the *BC* period, whereas the other work central to this thesis, *The Novalis Hotel*, is made in 2018, the *AD* period. What is distinctive for these periods is, as the terms already imply, the prevalence or centrality of computers and digital culture. However, since I will discuss *The Dante Hotel* first, a work that is not concerned with technological or digital artefacts, this connection to the digital will be discussed more thoroughly when examining the latter work.

The Dante Hotel, which can be considered as Hershman Leeson's first experiment with site-specificity and interactivity, took place in a hotel in San Francisco (Held 2005, xvi). Hershman Leeson rented a room and furnished this room with material artefacts she found on the streets in her neighbourhood: "[T]he objects⁶ that surrounded her taste and background defined the identity of the occupant" (Hershman Leeson 1994). The audience/visitors were consequently allowed to enter the room and explore the objects by touching and moving them in order to "flesh out the inhabitant's identity, past and present" (Held 2005, xvi). The simulated identity of the resident was thus constructed and determined by external

⁶ "Books, glasses, cosmetics and clothing were selected to reflect the education, personality and socioeconomic background of the provisional identities. Pink and yellow light bulbs cast shadows and audiotapes of breathing emitted a persistent counterpoint to the local news playing on the radio" (Hershman Leeson 2005, 20).

informational sources in the form of encoded material and bodily artefacts (fig. 1), hence why Hershman Leeson calls this her first non-body work (Hershman Leeson 1994).

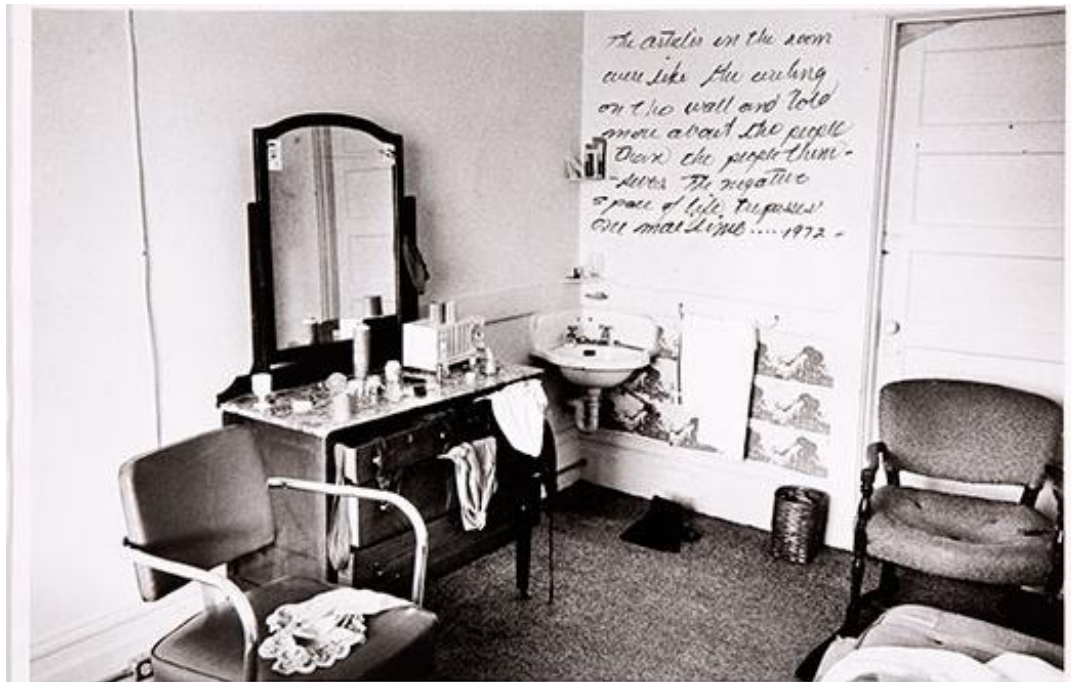


Figure
1. *The
Dante
Hotel*
(1973).

<<http://mousse magazine.it/app/uploads/LHL020.jpg>>

The Dante Hotel marks the beginning of Hershman Leeson's work around the fictional and virtual character Roberta Breitmore, who would continue to 'live' for four years and eventually develop and evolve into many more different Robertas in varying forms for over forty years until now. What all of these Robertas have in common is that they pursue central themes and issues brought up in *The Dante Hotel* such as "constructing alternate realities, destabilizing ingrained notions of identity, and expanding the possibilities of an artwork's outcome by opening it to viewer participation" (Held 2005, xvi). In the following sections, I will focus more specifically on how these central issues are embedded within this work. Before I do that, I will discuss an AD work, *The Novalis Hotel*, which I visited in Berlin in June 2018.

The Novalis Hotel, another art installation by Hershman Leeson that is situated in a hotel, is considered to be the 'inverted' version of *The Dante Hotel*, because "[H]ere, identity is probed as no longer a body shaped by societal conventions, but identified as generative reproduction of information that is both disembodied and directly tied to our genetic material and the entities that control its surveillance" (KW Institute 2018). This is made apparent by two significant differences between the two works. First, the identity of the resident in *The Dante Hotel* is defined by material and bodily objects whereas these bodily artefacts have

been replaced by digital objects such as a laptop with opened tabs, a phone and a television in the later work – characterizing *The Novalis Hotel* as an AD artwork and leaving the audience with no corporeal signs that imply the prevalence of a person (fig. 2). Secondly, before entering the room in *The Novalis Hotel*, the visitors were asked to give personal data, voluntary, by drinking from a plastic cup. At the end of the installation, this data as well as the traces, such as fingerprints left behind by the audience in the hotel room would be further subject to forensic analysis. This interrogation and the switch from material/visible/tangible to digital/invisible/intangible artefacts marks an important theme that differs from the earlier work that was mainly concerned with voyeurism⁷, namely that of surveillance and dataveillance. How surveillance and dataveillance exactly connect to notions of materiality and digitality will be examined in the final section. For now, I have made clear what the artworks entail and will proceed with analysing the art installation with regards to social constructivist theories that enable the visitors to construct the identities of the inhabitants.

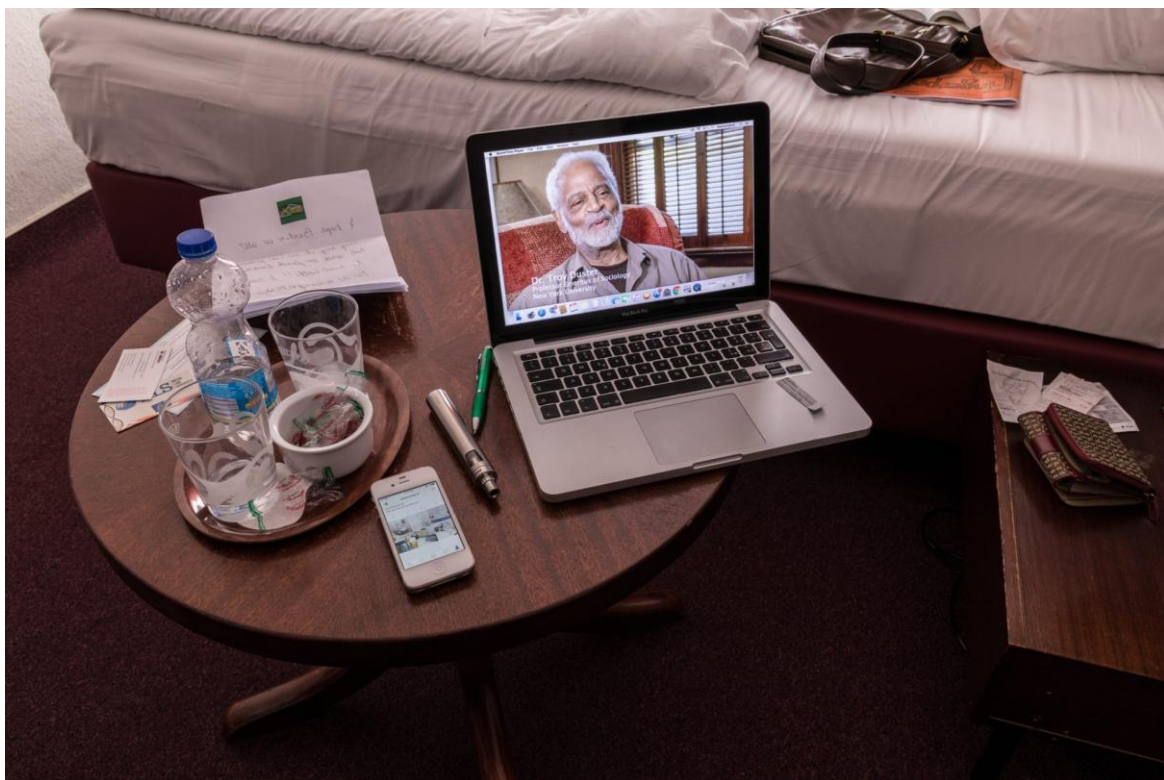


Figure 2. *The Novalis Hotel* (2018). < https://www.kw-berlin.de/files/180517_Hershman_0092_LQ-580x387.jpg>

⁷ I do not consider the audience to be passive voyeurs. I would rather call them active participants since Hershman Leeson invites them to alter and engage with the art installations by touching and moving the artefacts (Held 2005, xvii). Voyeuristic practices however are inevitably present in these art installations because audiences are invited into the room and can uninterruptedly and unknowingly look at personal belongings.

Performativity and the Simulacrum

The art installations are both concerned with signifying practices, that is, the constant negotiation between (re)presentations of (material or digital) signs on denotative level and the interpretations of those signs on connotative level by the audience. In this section I will deconstruct the relation, upon which the constructed identities are founded, between signs and its connotations by using the social constructivist concepts of performativity by Judith Butler, and the simulacrum by Jean Baudrillard.

In *Gender Trouble*, Butler argues that within compulsory heterosexual society, gender is performative: gender expressions, gender identity and sex are assumed to be contingent. In order to be 'perceived' in a specific manner, gender is expressed not as something that one is, but rather as something that one does, a "stylized repetition of acts through time" (1990, 140-1). Her idea on gender performativity is thus in line with the semiotic approach from which can be argued that there is an arbitrary constructed relation between the signs (gender expression) and the connotations (gender identity).

In this thesis, I am not focusing on gender. Instead I investigate the underlying mechanisms inherent to performative acts that constitute the illusion of a solid identity, based upon expectations, recognition, and perpetuation. Performative acts can be related to signifying practices in the sense that both rely on the anticipation and interpretations of signs that 'carry' meaning. By repetitively doing certain visible acts and for instance, wearing certain clothes, one enables others to read those signs in accordance with their 'inner cores'. In this fashion, meaning is inscribed upon those bodies that perform their 'internal core' on the surface (Butler 1990, 136). In light of the identities in the art installations that are to be inferred by the audience, what is happening in both works is that the artefacts function as signs that are to be interpreted by the audience. The material artefacts such as the clothes and cosmetics in both installations connote femininity, pointing to the identity of a woman. The prevalent clothes also included lingerie, giving the visitors the idea that this woman is sexually active and young, or at least not middle-aged. Other material artefacts in both works, such as the books and the written letters can be associated with intelligence and therefore with class, referring to a woman who is well-read and has had the opportunity to become educated. The bodily artefacts in *The Dante Hotel*, such as the wax mask are furthermore white-skinned, steering the audience to imagine the former presence of a white, young, middle-class, educated and feminine woman called Roberta Breitmore. Whiteness is not represented as clearly in *The Novalis Hotel*, yet I still very much felt that the identity of a white woman was

presented, possibly due to the brands of the cosmetics such as Chanel and Lancôme whose commercials almost exclusively feature white women and whose products connote wealthy whiteness.

As I am writing this, the fact that so many connotations can be derived from so few materials feels absurd. There is no inherent meaning to, for instance, a cosmetic brand or a piece of clothing, yet so many assumptions can be made from such signs. This is a result of the fact that these artefacts are not neutral but contain meaning because the process of signification and the 'mapping' of signs is 'structured in dominance': this communicative process of signification is founded upon "performative rules – rules of competence and use, of logics-in-use – which seek actively to enforce or prefer one semantic domain over another and rule items into and out of their appropriate meaning-sets" (Hall 2006, 169). The identities created and proposed in *The Dante Hotel* and *The Novalis Hotel* anticipate such a 'preferred reading' – that is, the meaning that is in line with the dominant understanding of what the signs connote. Just like signs and acts are reiterated and exaggerated with the performance of identity, the artefacts in the installations function as performed outward signs that hyperbolize and mime existing signifiers, enabling the audience to actively construct the object's identity upon visual signs (Lloyd 1999, 202).

What must be noted is that this mechanism of performativity is not only applicable when talking about visibility and visibility. What signification and bodily inscriptions entail for the digital/'invisible'/non-corporeal bodies and identities will be discussed after I have moved on to Jean Baudrillard's concept of the simulacrum. In this section I will elaborate more on the arbitrary nature of meaning-making symbols, continuing to show how the socially constructed relationship between signs, representation and visibility is powerful in creating identities.

Baudrillard argues that the system of signs that represent the 'real' is no longer applicable to contemporary society as a result of the increase in media that shape the connotations people have with signs. The effect of this is that "conventional assumptions about an object's function or relation to a specific place have become obsolete. That is to say, objects are no longer defined by the contexts in which they appear or by the practical purposes that they may serve" (Cavallaro 2001, 208). Hence, signs do not represent the real anymore, but the real is represented by a simulacrum – a simulation of that sign that gives of the illusion of it being the original. Moreover, it is not just faking to be the 'real', it is becoming what it pretends to be. It is this latter act that succeeds in blurring the distinction between the real and the fake. Within the two art installations, the distinction between reality

and the fake has faded because the art installations are performances of what could be real. They are performed because the hotel rooms are deliberately set up in a certain manner by Hershman Leeson⁸ and the visitors are specifically asked to enter the room. At the same time, what is performed is a reality, or at least something that could be real. All signs and artefacts refer to the actual world and to a person who has the potential to be real, but by definition cannot be real because her identity is founded on and represented by artefacts that belong to many other people. In this sense, the identities of the Robertas are simulacra: they pretend to be the real and they pretend to be referring to a real body, yet they signify no reality nor existing physical body or entity.

In *The Novalis Hotel*, such an abstraction of signs that represent Roberta Lester's identity is taken even further. Her identity is represented by the websites she visits, the videos she watches, the apps on her phone and the information and photos she shares online. To illustrate this, she even has an Instagram account⁹. Within digital culture, the ultimate construction of identity seems to take place on social media platforms. People repetitively need to decide on what to say on the internet and have to consider what photos they post on social media in order to represent themselves in a certain way. It is a constant negotiation of how one performs their identity outwards to other people, not through physical expressions, but through written language and JPEG files, transmitted by coded language and metadata. No longer is there any direct relation to a physical entity necessary to interpret signs of that person's identity, nor is it even certain that any digital signs refer to the existence of a real person, as is demonstrated in *The Novalis Hotel*.

In this section I analysed how the identities proposed in the art installations by Hershman Leeson are founded on artefacts. On the first level of decoding, the artefacts are just objects. On the second level of decoding, these artefacts are inscribed with meanings that are in line with dominant conventions and associations. In the art installations, the preferred readings of signs or the most common connotations people have with specific material objects or digitalized signs are emphasized in order to construct the illusion of a real identity. In the next section I will begin showing how processes of (digital) signification and performances of outwards signs are disrupted by surveillance and dataveillance strategies.

⁸ With the deliberate set up, I refer to the presence of all artefacts which are carefully chosen by Hershman Leeson in order to form the illusion of a 'coherent' identity. As mentioned throughout this thesis, the audience was allowed to touch and move the artefacts. Hershman Leeson did not interfere into changes that were done to the set-up by the visitors. This allowance to move things had the purpose to keep the room 'lively'. The choice to not intervene with the installations in turn also deliberately decided.

⁹ Roberta Lester (@stayhumanx2), <https://www.instagram.com/stayhumanx2/>

Surveillance and Dataveillance

Surveillance tactics have been present for centuries, but theories on these tactics have become more prominent with the introduction of the *Panopticon* by sociologist Jeremy Bentham at the end of the eighteenth century (Abu-Laban 2015, 46). Bentham argues that within situations of surveillance, there is always one person who is watching ("the omnipresence of the inspector ensured by his total invisibility" (Manohka 2018, 231)) and one person ("the universal visibility of objects" (Manohka 2018, 231)) who is constantly being watched. Foucault elaborated on Bentham's theory in the second half of the twentieth century and his insights consequently became the basis for discussions on surveillance (Fuster, Bellanova and Gellert 2015, 514). Foucault incorporates the notion of power to the Panopticon, arguing that the person who is looking (the subject) has power over and controls the person who is being looked at (the object): it is the subject that creates the object.

In *The Dante Hotel*, the visitors take up the position of the subjects since they are able to look at the object. They get to 'know' Roberta Breitmore through the process of looking at and ascribing meaning to the artefacts that are assumed to represent the inner 'core' – her identity. Roberta Breitmore is not able to interfere with or disrupt the subject's unilateral gaze nor has the power to show any resistance to the objectification, for she is only represented by inanimate material and bodily artefacts and not embodied by an animate physical body or mind.

In *The Novalis Hotel*, the material artefacts that are presumed to represent Roberta Lester's identity are also subjugated to the visitors' visions. In this installation, the visitors are the people who look at the objects and therefore form the 'all-knowing' subjects again. Alike *The Dante Hotel*, the object is not able to interfere with the subjects' gaze because the material and digital artefacts that represent her identity are inanimate. However, there is a small yet vital difference between the art installations: in the later work the visitors, who in the first place seem to be subjects, form the objects as well. The traces the visitors left behind, by touching the materials and providing their DNA, come to function as signs, as representation of *them* and enables the artist to uncover and construct the visitors' identities in a similar fashion as they used to construct Roberta's identity in *The Dante Hotel* and *The Novalis Hotel*.

Furthermore, inherent to the practices of looking and the ever-present gaze lie operating power mechanisms that cause the object to perform power on and control/police itself, in line with expectations of the subject who *could* be looking at the object (Manohka 2018, 226). This mechanism is called the 'technology of the self', which can be understood as

"the manner in which panoptic settings make individuals perform *on themselves*, without coercion, different operations and exercises of power" (Manohka 2018, 220). So far it is clear that power operates together with vision, but, as we see with Foucault's 'technology of the self', vision is not the equivalent of visibility or the presence of a body. As Foucault mentions:

Disciplinary power [...] is exercised through its invisibility; at the same time it imposes on those whom it subjects a principle of compulsory visibility. [...] And the examination is the technique by which power, instead of emitting the signs of its potency, instead of imposing its mark on its subjects, holds them in a mechanism of objectification. In this space of domination, disciplinary power manifests its potency, essentially, by arranging objects (Foucault qtd. in Fuster, Bellanova and Gellert 2015, 512-3).

So, it is the possibility of being watched by someone that surveillance mechanisms rely on to purport social control. In *The Novalis Hotel*, such self-censoring acts manifest in two ways: on the level of the audience (as object) and on the level of the inhabitant (as object).

I visited *The Novalis Hotel* myself in June 2018 in Berlin. At the arrival we were asked to drink from a plastic cup, voluntary, to offer an anonymous sample of our DNA. The results that would be withdrawn from the DNA samples were characteristics such as sex, eye colour and race, giving the visitors a sense of being under surveillance themselves. Moreover, after the quite 'formal' procedure regarding the DNA samples, entering a room which felt so real that it made me feel like I was intruding someone's private space, I immediately started acting more suspiciously. It felt like the inhabitant could walk into the room at any moment, which made me act more reserved – hesitating to touch the artefacts, and constantly and perspicuously looking around in fear of being caught. This experience can be considered to be an example of how self-restraining behaviour can be induced by external sources which consequently can be helpful in purporting social control¹⁰.

The other manner in which social control is related to the power of the gaze in the art installation concerns the online activity of the inhabitant that visitors can explore because of the prevalence of digital artefacts: online data is being collected and digital traces can be tracked down and used for unknown purposes. Knowing that much data is being gathered on the internet by many sources, online individuals might begin employing self-restraint by for instance restricting themselves with uploading personal information or considering which

¹⁰ The uncertainty of not knowing whether I was being watched or would be 'caught' doing a 'bad' thing made me very self aware of my actions.

websites to visit (Manohka 2018, 228). Noteworthy about this relation between digital culture and surveillance is that, just like the traditional Panoptic settings, the invisible force inherent to the probability of being monitored affects the manner in which individuals behave, perform and represent themselves.

Besides purporting social control, surveillance tactics also aim to know their objects' identities: their identities are being read according to their performed bodily inscriptions that are presumed to signify and represent its core characteristics. Contemporary dataveillance perform social control in a similar fashion. These technologies characterize the contemporary Western developments of the decentralization and disembodiment of the body. With the increase in online identities, interaction and computer technologies, there seems to be a separation between identity and the body: "we are witnessing the formation and coalescence of a new type of body, a form of becoming which transcends human corporeality and reduces flesh to pure information" (Haggerty and Ericson 2000, 613). These new types of bodies are not only constituted voluntarily by users that represent their identities online on social media platforms. Such bodies are rather constructed through dataveillance practices and biometrical technologies that read physical data, abstract the bodies into numbers and consequently categorize these characteristics that are secured in metadata (Barnard-Wills and Barnard-Wills 2012, 205). Dataveillance tactics thus also constitute the objects' identities through bodily inscriptions – the objects' bodies being used as a measure of identity – but whereas surveillance processes deduce the identities from physical evidence as is shown in *The Dante Hotel*, the identities retrieved by processes of dataveillance are deduced from the abstraction of physical evidence: they are reductions of metadata. Such a decentralization of a physical object is at the heart of understanding contemporary surveillance mechanisms with regards to simulation: "we do not produce our databased selves, the databased selves produce us" (Simon 2015, 16). The institutional and social power that is embedded within these notions of digitality allows "others to assign identities to individuals or groups authoritatively, and to reduce the ability of the latter to contest or reject these attributions" (Raab 2009, 242). The result of what such systems do, relating identities to (meta)data, thus effectively influences the agency individuals have over their identity: "identity then is not something that individuals can control, but rather it is also assigned and administered across the social field by digital surveillance systems" (Kafer 2016, 231). So, whereas the audience form the subject in *The Dante Hotel*, the visitors enter *The Novalis Hotel* with the illusion of being the subject as well but turn out to be the object of surveillance themselves. The data acquired by the visitors is not used to define the identity of the inhabitant, but to define the identity of the visitors

themselves, who in turn no longer have any agency about what will be done with the data they left behind. The identity the visitors hope to construct is no longer only defined by material artefacts that function as signs but is inferred from invisible traces they left behind. The differences in these works thus characterize the shifts inherent to contemporary society, the shift from the visible to the invisible along with the disembodiment of the object of surveillance and shows how the roles of objects and subjects are, unknowingly and possibly unwanted, turning.

Conclusion

The Dante Hotel and *The Novalis Hotel*, two art installations by Lynn Hershman Leeson propose different themes regarding the construction of identity. Closely related to the formation of identity are contemporary practices of surveillance and dataveillance that actively reinforce the formation of identities by deriving information, in both material and digital form, from physical bodies and from online data. In this thesis, I asked what the presence and absence of the material and digital artefacts – the artefacts functioning as signs and bodily inscriptions – in the art installations mean in relation to the formation of identities through social constructivist theories. By using semiotics as a method, which has its roots in poststructuralist methodology, I tried to deconstruct all 'natural' relations that are at the heart of the idea that we can 'know' someone's identity based upon visible characteristics and inscribed bodies, and questioned whether the same deconstructive tools could be used to understand how dataveillance mechanisms try to naturalize and stabilize a relation between bodies and identities. By analysing the two art installations with regards to the artefacts that function as signs for Roberta Breitmore's and Roberta Lester's identity, I deconstructed the most significant oppositions – visibility/invisibility; materiality/digitality; corporeality (embodiment)/non-corporeality (disembodiment); subject/object; and the real (original)/fake (copy) – inherent to surveillance and dataveillance practices.

Analysing the art installations by using the concept of performativity has shown how identities are socially constructed. Bodies and its (visible) inscriptions are assumed to inform others, the subjects, about the 'inner cores' of the people, the objects, who perform the signs outwards. The connotations of these signs in turn will allow the subjects to 'know' or infer the identity of the object. Surveillance and dataveillance tactics constitute their surveyed objects' identities in a similar fashion, deriving information from bodies and using this to define and construct solid identities, based upon nothing more than physical evidence. Moreover, for contemporary dataveillance strategies, there is even no necessity for the presence of a

physical body or any direct relation to physicality in order to construct identities. Abstracted metadata and online information is being read in a similar fashion as physical bodily inscriptions are used to inform the subject about the object's identity. The result of this shift from materiality and embodiment to digitality and disembodiment, as represented in the two art installations, shows how contemporary dataveillance practices no longer rely on notions of visibility and corporeality but still have the power to construct the identity of the disembodied, invisible object whose agency about its performed identity is decreasing. How this exactly affects the object and empowers the subject is an interesting question to ask for further research on created and simulated identities in the digital age.

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