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## **Heath Bunting: *Identity Bureau*. Against Residual Self-Image by Ida Hišenfelder**

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*Identity Bureau* was established by Heath Bunting to construct a custom-made physical person for the user, who would be able to function freely in society. The activities of the bureau extend also to instructions for other users to construct their own new identities. It undermines the habitual ways of climbing the social ladder and offers an alternative system to the dictate of there being a one and only "official" identity allocated to the individual by the state authorities. The bureau depicts the potential of computers and network-oriented coding, more specifically web tools and computation, and promotes the ability to cross-refer information on social security, health, residence and employment in order to define and possibly alter or construct a new identity.

While the fear of powerful information technologies borders on conspiracy theory paranoia in some of the populist mass media reports, and also finds its way into media art through projects that rightfully show the dystopian potency of such tools, Bunting takes a much more positive view of the matter. Although "these technologies may indeed be put to the service of surveillance, control, and repression by state apparatuses, they could be also used by citizens to enhance their control over the state, by rightfully accessing information in public data banks."<sup>1</sup> The core data base for *Identity Bureau* was the UK Common Law on privacy under which it is legal to own any number of aliases as long as they are not used to commit fraud or are not in conflict with criminal law. The obtained identity would prove to have standing in legal situation, and the identity holder could practice "the right to be known by a chosen identity". This provided the artist with an answer to a question on how it would be possible to live in the world outside of the legitimation of identity by the state. In the Slovenian local context, this question was involuntarily but thoroughly explored by the Erased, who were forced to invent their own system of existence, visibility and rights outside of the state. Yet again, in his own local context, the artist came across a patch of gray area in the coding of the system that he would use as his playground for artistic action. This time, he manufactured a perfectly legal parallel identity for whoever might be interested. Not only to show the absurdity or rigidity of administrative identities,

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1 Manuel Castells, *The Power of Identity*, Blackwell Publishing, 2010, West Sussex (p. 341)

but also to enable individuals to recognize their rights and offer them a possibility to transgress the determination of their existence.

However, one must first explore the question of what determines one's identity or identities. The national, ethnic, religious, local, gender and family background were traditionally considered some of the most powerful agents in construction of identity and "provide unbreakable, eternal codes, around which a counteroffensive will be mounted against the culture of real virtuality". Despite the possibility for the contemporary individual to explore and utilise the fluidity of identities, most people are still inclined to accept only one interpretation of their reality that would supposedly "provide refuge, solace, certainty, and protection"<sup>2</sup> to their lives. These people are not aware that the system that governs them is conducted by individuals who can afford to own many identities, and are therefore less responsible, and less transparent in their actions even if they are completely legal. It takes a bold and informed individual to face *the uncertainty of flexible networks in which the boundaries of membership and involvement are blurred and the production of social relations are individualised, while work, space and time are structurally unstable*.<sup>3</sup> However, these agents are increasingly overpowered by corporeal identities that bind all aspects of our lives as uncompromisingly as the traditional political or religious systems. The artist came to the conclusion that material proofs that would constitute one's identity were not only a passport, visa or birth certificate, as it was prior to the information age. Identity is increasingly constructed and legitimised by documentation on individuals provided by business firms and organizations of all kinds (library, health insurance, credit card, etc.). As the fear of corporate control over the lives and privacy of individuals grew stronger, the Web 2.0 sparked a shift in favour of the individual. The post-information age, as it was dubbed around the year 2007, has transformed the networked citizen of the global world into a demographic unit of one. The identity of an individual is hence defined by network applications and tools for connectivity. An individual is able to personalise these tools and have rather significant control over the privacy of their information. This might all change by the increasing automatisisation of semantic tools. Sometime in the future, we will perhaps speak of mechanical/automatised identities, but for now, let us stay with what we can play with.

For most, an adequate quick verification of an individual's identity would be a substantially high number of results from a search engine query that would list articles, blogs, video posts, FB, Twitter, or more professionally, Academia.org, LinkedIn and the like. An old friend of the artist, with whom he had been associated with in the 1990s, Keiko Suzuki is quite enlightening in her practice of spreading the idea of how all self-presentations could be entirely self-constructed. Similar to Suzuki, Bunting prepared the entire set of Internet presence for the new identities produced by *Identity Bureau*. However time consuming, the artist shows us that it is rather easy for a person familiar with Web 2.0 to make a support network for an identity online. Not only for a newly constructed one. In fact, we are inventing and reinventing ourselves online all the time and the more informed we are about the possible implications of our presence, the smarter we are in the way we use it. But there is still a vast digital divide between the small number of people who are computer / network literate and those who are not digitally alive at all. The bureau could therefore also be a suitable place to conceive oneself in the digital space, but it is highly unlikely that the

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2 Ibid. (p. 68)

3 Ibid. (p. 68)

"unborn" would come to the gallery where they could access this information. This still exists on the level of symbolic value to those who are able to read it. Therefore, the project not only considers digital space but also solid material proofs. The artist prepared an entire identity kit in a suitcase that contains all of the materials that were legally obtained by the artist and that support normal functions of the new identity with official letters, a home address, various shopping cards, library and other membership cards, a sim card, a social security number, etc. The kit, along with a guide book, contains everything one could possibly need apart from the sacred trinity of state-controlled "official" documents of identification: passport, visa, driver's licence. In recent years, one must add that it is possible to note a particular interest of artists working online to be present offline using the same logic, advocating that hacking of social space is not only possible online but also in other, material realities. They came to realise that material representation will never lose its grip on our perception of the real, much like the aforementioned traditional agents of identity construction.

Another material result of the project are the maps showing how a contemporary identity is an interconnection of a seemingly infinite number of agents. Visually, they resemble the back end of a visual programming language. The person that the map represents could be understood as the front end of the code. The artist constructed a matrix and visualised the hidden network of class struggle. He took information from a detailed questionnaire, computed it and connected it to a schematic web-like interface. His questions seem much more simple than one might expect, because what connects us to other people in everyday life are not only the big questions of religious denominations or ethnicities, but are also often quite banal daily habits. Similar maps were already presented in various stages of Bunting's *Status Project*, which he initiated in 2004, of which *Identity Bureau* is one of the latest offspring. Even at the time that the artist started the *Status Project*, the question of identity and privacy was not his only concern. The overall interest of the project is still to explore "the system" that governs the quality of living, compromises our freedom, supports discrimination, protects ownership, controls social mobility, etc. It advocates that in order to secure freedom of their contemporary condition for any individual, it is necessary to enable them with, first and foremost, fairly equal access to social mobility of cultural and economic capital. If we are to increase social mobility, we have to think of how to make habitual symbolic capital more flexible. And the utopian result of the project would be the empowerment of people who would be aware of the agents that construct their identities, and could therefore conjure ways of manipulating them, when they felt trapped in a certain social situation. However, the majority of the population would not be able to do this, not only because of social, economic or symbolic conditioning, but rather by self-discrimination. *Identity Bureau* attempts to address the acceptance of the inferior role. If the Erased, for example, would not have made a declaration of their existence and claimed their space, they indeed would have never existed in the public realm. One of the major stakes in these struggles is the definition of the boundaries between groups, that is to say, the very definition of the groups which, by asserting and manifesting themselves as such, can become political forces capable of imposing their own vision of divisions.

But the problem resides much deeper. Theoretically "constructed classes can be characterized in a certain way as sets of agents who ... occupy similar positions in social space... The homogenizing effect of homogeneous conditionings is at the basis of those dispositions which favour the development of relationships, formal or informal, which tend

to increase this very homogeneity."<sup>4</sup> It might seem contradictory, but it is "easier" for marginalised individuals who are discriminated against on the basis of similar categories to find common ground and form an alliance of solidarity with other individuals than it is to mobilise the masses. A category like "working class" for a long time seemed too versatile and dispersed to exist as a homogenous group in reality. Mobilisation was fragmented from a theoretical group, e.g. working class, to practical individuals that associated with one another according to mutual social and political interests. Bunting therefore does not speak of given classes but rather pictures a process of inter-relations that he divides into relations between the dominated natural persons, or "straw men", and the dominating artificial persons, or corporations. Here, the usage of the nominal relations considers the original meaning of the words. The usage of "natural" would be equivalent to natural / raw materials, and the usage of "corporate" means that "the group represented is nothing other than what represents it. It is the power of the representation itself."<sup>5</sup> Human beings may possess the identity of only one natural person, several natural persons or control one or more artificial persons, whereas the lowest classes would not have the power to possess any identity other than that of one natural person. The creation of a new identity would therefore have an impact on their possibility of social mobility.

The problem detected by the artist was that most individuals are not aware of the categories and relations in which they are living, because social reality presents itself neither as completely determined, nor as completely indeterminate. From a certain angle, it presents itself as strongly structured, and is expressed in a symbolic space of visible distinctions, from another it does not facilitate the direct deciphering of social signs. The project would ideally help the audience to become aware of some of their habitual conditions in order to start associating and forming unpredictable social structures for which they could also make use of manuals for different practical solutions in constructing a new identity. Such a realisation of the basic division between natural and artificial persons came into massive play and gained momentum as the 99 percent recognised their essential subordination and the state of dispossession of their own condition, and took it to the streets. Also, in this context, Bunting's maps prove to be visionary, since they portray the exact versatility of identity of the subordinated. The *Occupy* movement is often criticised for lacking a unified political programme with no realistic common goals. Such attempts to package the movement in the ideology of democratisation and individualisation are not capable of looking outside of the given system of cultural values. The ultimate aim of the political collective struggle of the masses is, in fact, the power to nominate themselves, to undermine the monopoly of the state and enforce legitimate symbolic violence, to impose representations (e.g., demonstrations) that create the very things represented, and make them exist publicly, officially. Their goal is to assert a new vision of the social world, and make transparent the principles of division.

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4 Pierre Bourdieu: "What Makes a Social Class? On The Theoretical and Practical Existence of Groups", in *Crime and Social Justice*, Nos. 27–28, San Francisco (p. 6)

5 Ibid. (p. 14)