

On Simon Farid's "Being A.N. Other"

By Jeroen van der Hulst

Simon Farid's workshop "Being A.N. Other" develops on the difference between an "administrational identity" and the body, the Self. This administrational identity can be anything from names to bank account numbers and from addresses to email addresses.

As the workshop commences every participant is asked to introduce him- or herself. This type of practical information about the individual is very much linked to a perception of Self. The first participant gives a name, an age, an occupation, and a short list of hobbies. The rest of the participants follow suit in describing themselves according to the guidelines set by the first person. The first signs of what identity can manifest itself as start to appear. A second round of introductions means to introduce oneself without using the categories mentioned above. It raises a question *what to we want to achieve when we introduce ourselves?* For instance, already my name is not uniquely mine. The goal is to present oneself to the Other without actually showing too much individuality to begin with. Someone with a sexually deviant hobby would probably not mention it on the first meeting but rather another more innocent interest would be presented in order to flatten the field of conversation. Here I think the message is "Hello I am different but the same as you, I am not a threat."

For his residency at Wander, The Hague, Farid designed a questionnaire to be filled out by each participant, to be processed by him before the workshop. The back of the questionnaire contained a archetypical privacy statement by the artist stating the answers will be handled with care. Designed to explore the limits of comfort when sharing information with an administrative form the questionnaire tries to get an invasive look at 'you'. The level of invasiveness oscillates between questions. Intimate question number twenty-six "Have you ever lied to someone so you could fuck them?" is conveniently hidden between milder questions such as "What is your email address?". Either of these questions can be considered as intimate when they are separated. However, on a form asking for administrative details it would be expected that you have to fill in an email address. This expectation being satisfied left me feeling comfortable enough to actually think about the question that puts my sexual morality under a loop, in order to subsequently answer it.

Another loaded question was whether or not you would write down your PIN code on the form, a question followed by empty boxes where you could submit your PIN codes. Only 16% of the participants filled in this question. It is safe to assume then that it was a severely uncomfortable question to answer, perhaps because it would expose the access keys to your bank account, the indirect source of your food, your home, your security. Putting those details on a form makes alarm bells go off because of the possible risk of abuse.

I filled in my pin numbers.

When I set out to fill in the questionnaire I was debating the meaning of it within myself. One reason to fill them in is that I was going to fill in a question for the sake of an art project about how and what we share about ourselves and how this creates an 'administrational you' outside of yourself. The idea that it was for an art project gave me a sense of security, a sense of control. Another reason to fill them in, I am cynical about this, would be an acknowledgement to the risks already involved in using a bankcard to draw money from. It seems that by not sharing the information about your bankcard would mean the assumption of being safer. This sense of safety is a very physical desire to an otherwise administrative problem. Why not hide whom you want to fuck?

The majority of participants answered the more intimate questions about the Self, the individual. I think this is the exact discrepancy that Farid wants to convey. It could show that the always looming danger that your personal details could be abused has more ground than intimate questions about your Self. I'd like to think that this is because, in a very technical sense, administrative identity is strictly yours. My social security number is different from everybody else's, so is my email address, my bank account number, my phone number, etc. My more intimate secrets are much more universal. I admitted that I have been on public transport without paying, but 83% of the participants share this with me. Probably anything that concerns my sense of self, my morals, my beliefs, my vulnerabilities and fears, my experiences, can be

compared to everyone else's and can be categorised statistically. Yet, no one else has my email address. This is why it can feel much more intimidating when details such as pin codes or usernames come under scrutiny than anything that makes you human, because in a relatively safe Western, capitalist society thoughts are generally less threatening than the possible abuse of personal details. The relative innocence of the questions shows very well what Farid is after. Not to incriminate but rather to make the participant feel safe. Farid could go to the end with the questionnaire, of course. He could ask the really incriminating questions and put participants under a strenuous gaze but that would not show the subtleties of the debate. Of course religion, sexual orientation, political views, etcetera are all very sensitive pieces of information, making people vulnerable in large parts of the world. Here we must not be distracted from the situation at hand. There is calmness in the intimate questions that make the questionnaire friendlier – it gives a reason to surrender all the information it asks for.

The separation between the administrative “me” and some deeper awareness of how it is linked to the bodily self was highlighted when Farid instructed the participants to choose a partner, in order to swap wallets and phones with this person. Those objects, more than tools, function as attributes to the person who owns them. The idea was to be someone else for an hour, on your own, in public. The exercise starts with a sense of excitement about getting to do something you wouldn't normally be capable of trying out - to spend someone else's money and snoop through their phone, with their permission - but it is important to look beyond the initial novelty of this. The “being someone else” seems less of an actual sensation than a theatre play with yourself as the audience. Carrying someone else's wallet and phone amplifies the feeling that these items represent someone other than you. It bears resemblance to wearing a mask. During the time of the exercise participants are, to various degrees, playing the character of someone else. The difference is certainly very subtle. Where I normally use my own bankcard with my money to buy my food, after which I use my phone to send texts to my friends and take pictures of my cat, my partner does the same, but in his world, with pictures of his cat. In order to do it authentically - to accept the symbolic mandate of being another - there has to be an act that puts the mask at some kind of risk, while leaving the bearer untouched at the end. While participants before hand joked “This is the day I will kill someone” or some other type of horrible crime, perhaps doing exactly that would have taken the mask to the very definition of such pretence. The problem with the exercise is simply that it is too short to really feel the effects of swapping identity. Though Farid experiments with taking on other characters himself frequently, participants could not immerse themselves deep enough in what it means to wear the mask authentically. Thereby, the exercise didn't allow accepting the symbolic mandate of wearing someone else's mask and letting go of your own.

The use of someone else's daily tools for one's own use causes a struggle between individualism and collectivism, and private and public domain. I do the same as the person next to me, but I do it differently, for me. The processes and examples touched upon in the workshop have a truly mundane and almost trivial nature in day-to-day life. Probably posing less of a problem and more of a realisation, the examples Farid shows in his workshop are intriguing simply because they go unnoticed in their mundanity, yet they signify a vast cultural acceptance of certain use and distribution of personal information. Data imposed onto me and objects I choose to use daily can influence a sense of Self insofar as the data I use is more uniquely “mine” than my thoughts.

Simon Farid developed “Being A.N. Other” during his residency at Wander in The Hague and performed at De Boek.