

On Being A.N. Other - Identity Experiments with Simon Farid

by Fela Kim

Haven't we all wished we were someone else sometimes? Haven't we all wondered who we are and what makes us who we are? I know I have. Especially when I had to fill in a form: name, age, gender, birthdate, marital status, address, what do the answers I give to these questions say about me? To what extent do my answers define me? How do my answers relate to my physical presence in this world? These seem to me exactly the questions Simon Farid addresses in his work. Or to quote from the Wander website: "Simon Farid is interested in the relationship between administrative identity and the body it purports to codify and represent". So there I was at De Boek, Friday the 21th of March 15.00 with about 12 others, to participate in Being A.N. Other.

Simon started by introducing himself and his work, mostly the work that led up to his stay at Wander. As an extension of his work *The Show Trial of Mark Kennedy and Mark Stone*, he found a way to take over part of the administrative identity of Mark Stone. Mark Stone was the fake identity undercover police agent Mark Kennedy used when he infiltrated several groups of environmental activists all over Europe from 2003 until 2010, when he was exposed. This was followed by a big media blow-out in Britain because he had also entered into a romantic relationship with a female activist during that time. After this the identity of Mark Stone lay abandoned and Simon found a way into this. Then sometimes he would go out, leaving his own administrative identity (bankcards, ID, etc.) home and only take Mark Stone's. He said this felt great, it gave him such a sense of freedom not to have his own administrative identity stuck to him for a while. This experience led him to wonder what the influence of administrative identity is on the body and he came to Wander to investigate this.

Part of his investigation was the questionnaire people were asked to complete before joining the workshop. The questions ranged wide, from 'what is your address?' to 'Have you ever lied to someone so you could fuck them?'. We talked about this in the workshop, about how the questions made you think. What is lying anyway? What do my answers to these questions say about me? Do I want to answer this? How is this going to be used to "develop a free personal ID card for each person that fills in the questionnaire" as was stated on the questionnaire? The answers to the first questions raised differed per participant but the answer to the last became apparent. Together with David Veneman, Simon had set certain parameters in the questionnaire that translated into certain fonts and styles to create a personalized business card for the person who filled it out. They laid the cards out on the table face-down without showing any of the personal details, just the style and the font, and we were asked to pick our own, solely based on the design. I just picked the one I liked most and it turned out to actually be mine. So it is possible to distill from a questionnaire something that really corresponds to the person, the body, filling it out. I didn't think about the answers I gave in the questionnaire when I was picking, I wasn't intellectually involved, I just followed my gut feeling to the one I liked most.

Following my gut feeling turned out to be quite hard once we had actually swapped administrative identities later in the workshop. But before we came to that we laid everything that was in our wallet, the entire administrative identity we carried, out on the table. There was a lot of difference here, from people who only had a couple of cards and coins to people who seemed to be carrying their entire administration in their wallet. Simon then explained that everything in our wallet is a tool and invited us to think on who the tool was for. Was it for us, for a company or for the state and how did these overlap? The conclusion we reached was that everything made by a company or the state was also a tool for them, to track or collect data. The only things that were purely a tool for us were analog. They did not correspond to a database and were often

self-made. Think of handwritten notes or pictures of loved ones. Even though I kinda knew this, it was still a bit of a shock to me to see it so clearly: Personal data has now become a commodity, we think stuff is free or easy-to-use, but we pay for it by delivering data.

Data which we were about to mess up, the last and most radical experiment of the workshop was about to start. In order to investigate on a larger scale how becoming unstuck from your own administrative identity influences the body, Simon asked us to pair up and actually switch administrative identities (wallets, bags, phones) for an hour. Writing about this I still feel my muscles tensing and I just swallowed hard and took a deep breath. This was very exciting and very scary at the same time. I was so tense that I had problems remembering my own pin code when I had to tell it to my swap partner. Unfortunately this tension persisted through most of the hour of the swap which in my case led to not really experiencing it, not really experiencing me. We had gotten some instructions for the hour we would spend as each other outside (take public transport, buy something with a debit card, be alone where there is no cctv, buy gift for swap partner) and all the time I was worrying about these. An hour is short and there was so much to do! My mind was racing the whole time. It was not until I was almost back at De Boek again that I realized I had completely fallen into my own trap again. If I get nervous and really tense I tend to forget about myself and focus on others. 'What do I have to do to do it right?' instead of 'What do I want to do?'. And because I wasn't myself, I didn't have my own administrative identity with me, every time my thoughts went to 'what do I want?' I thought 'but I am not me, should not be me, I have to be someone else, but how?' and then my mind would start racing again. In short, swapping identities wasn't such a nice experience for me because it confronted me with part of my identity that I would rather leave behind. I guess this would have been different if there was more time, more time to adjust and less pressure to complete certain tasks in a limited timeframe. This was an often heard remark, an hour was just too short.

However most people did manage to make the most of it, though a lot of the participants experienced some sort of discomfort. This often came from the fact that they were not wearing a fake identity but someone else's identity, which is radically different from each other. Because of wearing someone else's identity half of the participants felt really responsible and afraid to break or loose anything, which led to stress and a heightened sense of awareness. But there were also nice stories. About how David didn't really feel like Thomas until he talked to a stranger in a bar about Thomas's work as if it was his own. He even managed to slip the sentence 'sometimes it's nice to be someone else' into the conversation. A lot of people were also focused on doing the opposite of what they would normally do because they were someone else, like Cybil who went to an unfamiliar neighborhood on purpose, trying to lose herself. Which ties in with my own experiences, but gives it a much more positive spin.

But even though my own experience was not all together pleasant I am still glad I participated. Not everything has to be pleasant, especially not in art. It was a very valuable workshop. Valuable in the sense that it raised a lot of questions on something we often take for granted, what we keep in our wallets and how this relates to ourselves. Especially in a society that is more and more based on numbers, data instead of people it is vital to think about these things. The strength of Simon's work is that he does so in a very accessible, playful way.

Being A.N Other was a project by Simon Farid during his residency at Wander in collaboration with De Boek.