

# How to Cross Borders, Social or Otherwise

By Elizabeth Bard, Oct. 27, 2004

In the basement of the New Museum of Contemporary Art's temporary home in Chelsea, a seemingly ironic invitation appears on a black-and-white label next to a flat-screen computer:

"The Status Project aims to aid those who seek change, for example moving from homelessness to a career in bank management, or from the legal identity of a 32-year-old American woman to a male Pakistani teenager."

This is not a joke. Or rather, it is a joke, but one with potentially serious consequences.

Heath Bunting and Kayle Brandon, two British artists, are compiling a database exploring elements of legal status in Britain, with the ultimate goal of allowing people to create a new identity from information collected on the Internet. The first stage of their project is the focus of "Rules of Crime," a small show that runs through Nov. 13 at the New Museum.

The art-history books have plenty to say about false or alternative identity; from Rembrandt's biblical set pieces to Cindy Sherman's film stills, artists have long experimented with disguise and metamorphosis.

Unfortunately for Mr. Bunting and Ms. Brandon, the law books have a lot to say, too. In its final form, their project may be viewed as the Homeland Security Department's worst nightmare: a road map enabling all sorts of undesirables to penetrate a nation's borders, banking systems, supermarket loyalty clubs.

Mr. Bunting and Ms. Brandon are among a growing number of artists who are harnessing technologies associated with governments and corporations to challenge the status quo. Increasingly, such artists find that they need a good lawyer as they walk a fine line between artistic expression and criminal activity.

Amy Goldrich, a lawyer consulted by the New Museum, while declining to name specific laws that the artists might be violating, said that tolerance for false ID cards had all but evaporated since 9/11. "When it's a teenager, it seems pretty benign: you want a beer," she said. "But now it can get you in very serious trouble."

"We probably couldn't show this project when it's completed," said Rachel Greene, curator of the exhibition and the executive director of Rhizome.org, a new-media arts portal. "It would be too legally complex."

In May, there was the widely publicized arrest of Steven Kurtz, an associate professor of art at the State University of New York at Buffalo, who has since been indicted on mail and wire fraud charges. Mr. Kurtz, whose work is a critique of corporate control of biotechnology, had set up a mobile DNA-extraction laboratory in his home to test for genetic modification in foods.

F.B.I. agents searching his home found illegally obtained biological materials like E. coli bacteria. The presence of scientific materials was enough for the authorities to charge Mr. Kurtz and impound his computers, manuscripts and books.

For now, the Web site for Mr. Bunting and Ms. Brandon's identity caper, known as the Status Project ([status.irational.org](http://status.irational.org)) doesn't look particularly dangerous. It offers what resembles an altered map of the London Underground with a cluster of overlapping dots, each corresponding to a form of legal status (for example, "British citizen") or social status ("poor"). A series of tree-graphs even playfully assigns status predating the moment of birth: "envisioned by my mother."

The database uses the rules of formal logic to define relationships between statuses; for example, "If you are a blood donor, then you are not an injector of drugs, taking antibiotics, a prostitute, gay or less than one year from having a piercing."

But the project is not just a conceptual costume drama, an art-world game of social dress-up. It is also a plea for a more nuanced consideration of identity and borders in the post-9/11 political climate. In a sense, the two artists are frantically waving their hands in the air, saying it is not all that simple to tell the difference between "us" and "them."

"I started working on A-list celebrity yesterday," Mr. Bunting said by phone from Bristol, England. He is hoping to find the social or legal markers that define that status -- inclusion on People magazine's best-dressed list, perhaps, or red-carpet security clearance at the Oscars.

The Status Project may not threaten security, but it makes some risky promises. At the Web site, a manifesto of sorts under the heading "Proposal" says it will provide, as the project develops, a how-to guide to getting a passport. (You can get started, the artists suggest, by acquiring various junk statuses like supermarket loyalty cards and video club memberships.)

Mr. Bunting and Ms. Brandon have already begun acquiring false statuses, sometimes building on the work of fellow artists. He holds an international student ID card that he obtained from the Web site of the Mexican artist Minerva Cuevas. Ms. Cuevas issues the cards through her Mejor Vida Corporation (Better Life Corporation), a nonprofit company she set up to challenge traditional models of late market capitalism.

Student ID holders are entitled to discounts on museums admission and air fares. Mr. Bunting used the student card to get a Young Person's Railcard, which guarantees discount travel on British Rail.

The Status Project grew out of BorderXing, a 2002 commission for the Tate Gallery in London, in which Mr. Bunting, 37, and Ms. Brandon, 28, documented illegal treks they made across European borders.

"I've always wanted to be nomadic -- to beg, borrow, find things," Mr. Bunting said. He travels light, often with no change of clothes and only a few basics: a penknife, a diary, a passport.

The BorderXing Web site, available for individual use by request (at [irational.org/cgi-bin/border/clients/deny.pl](http://irational.org/cgi-bin/border/clients/deny.pl)) offers pictures, suggested routes and tips for evading the authorities. A vacation slide show of the couple's journey is on view at the New Museum, as well as online, without registration, at [duo.irational.org/borderxing--slide--show](http://duo.irational.org/borderxing--slide--show).

Despite the political provocation involved, the project retains the aura of a pilgrimage -- to be close to the land, to throw off the weight of nationality and statehood, simply to put one foot in front of the other and go.

If BorderXing is concerned with the physical, visceral aspects of travel, the Status Project explores the more abstract notion of how people move from one social territory to another.

"When you say you can change your identity or disappear, people's ears prick up," Mr. Bunting said. "They want it to be a utility; I would like it to be more of a game, a conjurer's fancy."

The project will ultimately be a guide to obtaining status, but not just legal status, Ms. Brandon said. In collecting their data, she said, "we are also looking for the loopholes in the -- I don't want to say the matrix -- in the social grid."

But the 1999 cult film "Matrix" is not a bad comparison. It presented a world in which reality was a game, and only a few lucky individuals were unplugged and able to see the system for what it was.

It's a long way from a student ID to a fake passport, but Mr. Bunting readily acknowledges the project's more sinister potential. "This is a system of knowledge that can be used as a weapon," he said. "Will it be used as that? It's the same as giving people a street map. It could help prepare burglaries or riots, but it could just help you walk around."

Such statements will seem cavalier to some, threatening to others. But the Status Project raises a larger question: as the tools of everyday life, like the Internet or ID cards, become the tools of art, where do you draw the line between the two?

The artists did not have far to look for examples of the blurring of the line between art and its real-life consequences. Mr. Bunting was unable to attend the Sept. 18 opening of "Rules of Crime" because of visa trouble.

In 1991, on his way to speak at a conference in Los Angeles, he was turned back at the Canadian border near Ottawa by United States customs officials, whose suspicions were raised by a man traveling without a bag. He tried to cross again in Vancouver two days later and was told that he was "port shopping," a felony offense. He was permanently barred from entering the United States.

In March, the New Museum applied for an O-1 Visa Extraordinary Ability (arts, motion picture or television) for Mr. Bunting. At publication time, it was still being processed.

"I do consider myself a combatant," he said. "The artist doesn't just gaze. It's not just the perception of reality that is up for grabs, it's reality itself."

And what of Mr. Bunting and Ms. Brandon's status as artists? For Mr. Bunting, it is a double-edged sword. Confining his work to a museum setting affords both protection and a certain impotence.

"You take people with dangerous or provocative ideas and put them into a white-walled container," he said.

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