

Identity (Un)Inc.

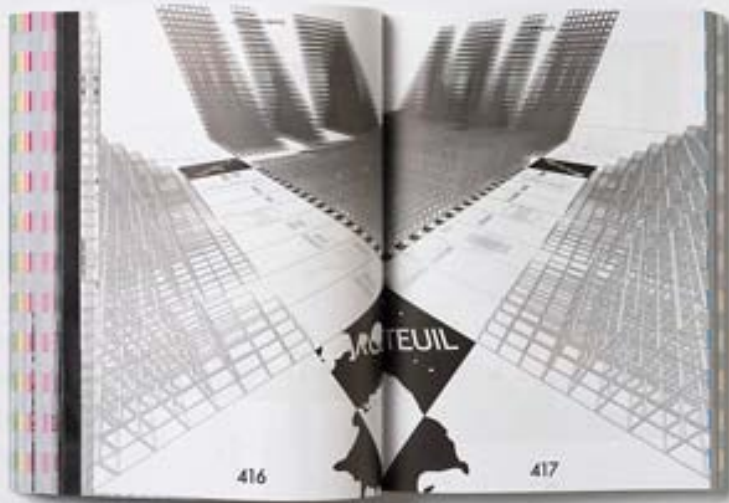
Alan Smart

At first glance, the new book *Uncorporate Identity* by Metahaven could be the punch line to a joke about a Swiss guy and a Dutch guy walking into a bar. It's a thick, XL-sized block of a book with a bit of the filmy, glossy slickness of a cheap celebrity gossip magazine. Flipping through the text confirms that it is (dis)organized on the model of an AMO product. It is a collaged, kluged, mash-up of images and text with essays and research and jumbled together with speculative design work, cartoons and flashy, gleefully gratuitous graphics. On the other hand, *Uncorporate Identity* has "Lars Muller" written all over it, both literally, as publisher, and in the baseline of cleanness, smartness, legibility and cool that underlies all the raucous Dutch exuberance. Upon reading, this double impression is first confirmed, then complicated, and finally made to dissolve completely and expand into something else altogether. It's a neat trick and performs the book's subject matter brilliantly.

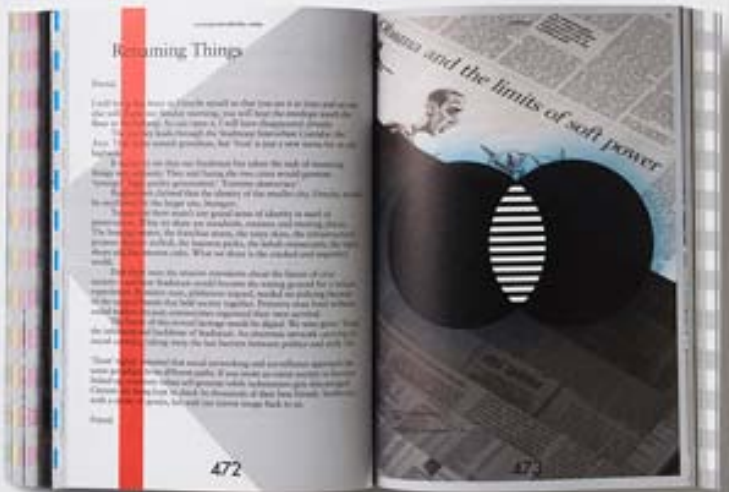
Metahaven is itself a brand that represents the design practice of Vinca Kruk, Daniel van der Velden and Gon Zifroni. Their work focuses on branding and identity projects for state and public entities or, more generally, making visible, legible presences for invisible entities. The book is their extended meditation on the formation of icons and symbols and the ways in which meaning is attached to places and things to construct their "identity". In this Kruk, van der Velden and Zifroni leverage their own dual status as both professionals and intellectuals to link the terms of corporate branding to their theoretical doubles and flip between the two modes of discourse in startling ways. "Constructing an identity" in the sense of building a brand is made to map onto the constructed identities of identity politics. Likewise, the idea of creating legible symbols quickly expands out from a discussion of logos to take on the semiotics of social and political structures. The graphic design also plays transgressively with design conventions and the memes of good taste. Glossy shapes printed on the cover shimmer into visibility only when light hits them right and the page layouts are rife with spray-paint-tool gradients and drop-shadowed text. The skill and bravura with which these are deployed, however, allow the book to go beyond a cheeky inversion of design-school dogmas to become something truly fascinating and frankly beautiful.

A series of researched case studies and speculative design projects by the authors provides an organizational framework for the book. Interviews and essays by invited contributors then flesh out this structure to make the book read more as a conversation than a monolithic narrative. Cameo appearances by such heavies as Florian Schneider, Chantal Mouffe and Michael Taussig as well as a host of emerging theorists and writers give the book the feeling of a conference captured in printed form.

The first three case studies have architectural objects at their center. The book opens with the story of an anomalous microstate called "Sealand" whose only territory is an abandoned fortress built offshore in the English Channel as part of British coastal defenses in the Second World War. Lying as it did in international waters, the concrete platform took on the ambiguous, extra-territorial status that made



it a useful broadcast point for pirate stations in the 1970s. Later it was converted from a wilderness to a frontier by a British family who occupied it declared it a sovereign nation. What began as a clever tax dodge and a quirky assertion of individuality would come to attract the attention of a group of techno-libertarians who negotiated to set up a “data haven” on Sealand to escape the regulations that, in the late 90’s, were beginning to restrict the once-wild internet. Metahaven takes up the project of creating an identity for Sealand and uses it to explore issues of sovereignty, autonomy and territoriality in the context of the emergence of virtual “spaces”.



If Sealand is an accidentally iconic architectural object in search of a sovereign identity the next two case studies are of monumental edifices struggling to rid themselves of the burden of terrible purpose. Where Sealand emerged from a libertarian impulse to fly to the periphery and seek out a frontier condition conveniently just outside the world, the “House of the People” in Bucharest and Pynogyang’s Rymgyong Hotel are the work of anxious totalitarianism hoping to hold the center.

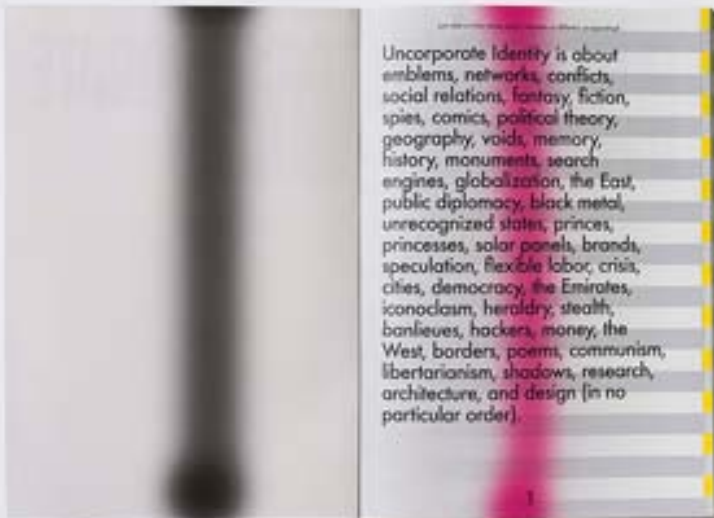


The mammoth “House of the people”, built by Nicolae Ceausceau, both housed and stood as a hulking symbol of the might and durability of his regime. In the years since Cheausceau was deposed there has been much debate about how to cope with the building’s connection to history and repurpose and resignify it to function in a democratic society. Awkward as both a piece of architecture and an icon the “House of the People” has thus far escaped demolition but frustrated efforts to comfortably convert it to serve as a seat of government or a cultural institution. In contrast, the monumental pyramid of the Ryugyong Hotel has been mostly the object of morbid fascination from afar. Intended as a symbol of North Korean prosperity and technological advancement, the hotel has fallen victim, not to the collapse of the régime that sponsored it but to rather to the erosion of the material means to complete it. Its bare concrete shell now looms over the Pongyang skyline a literal materialization of an empty signifier. In Uncorporate Identity these drifting signs that have come unmoored from their referents are made to reveal a space between iconic symbols and the invisible social and political structures that they represent. This space is claimed as the site of engagement for the rest of the book and an investigation is undertaken of the techniques and processes process by which symbols and structures are linked.

As the book moves on from specifically architecture the subject matter of the case studies become more abstract and the structure blurs from a series of sections into a collection of overlapping and interwoven themes. In this, issues of reading and communication and the implications of legibility and illegibility become central. Metahaven manages to link the inscrutable logos of Black Metal bands, machine confounding internet security “Captcha” and the “dark” regions of geopolitics. This begins with and analyses of the obsession with symbolic codes that marks conspiracy theories of the September 11 attacks. From there parallels are drawn with the dark sorcery of signs that facilitated the



rise of the American neo-conservative cabal and allowed those attacks to be instrumentalized in the consolidation of their power. These opaque icons of intentional obscurity are used as an illustration of an oppositional identity, carved out negatively from a homogeneous world of hyper-connected transparency. The central position occupied by concepts of clarity and readability in the norms of “good” design is here tied to reason, light and enlightenment. Conversely, it is suggested that the ability to “go dark” and be opaque or illegible is both the privilege of a certain kind of power and the means by which that power operates and perpetuates itself. At this point noir-ish cartoons come into the mix and a pair of strange, delightful fiction pieces by Keller Easterling and China Mieville enact as much as explain the semiotics of secrecy and deception.



The esthetics of identity defined either negatively or positively becomes explicitly politicized with the introduction of a perverse anti-advertising campaign produced by the Swiss government to dissuade Africans from illegally migrating to Europe. This turning backward of the traditional travel advertising narratives of openness and accessibility becomes an exemplary case of identity defined against otherness. Nationalist anxieties about immigration bringing about the dilution or dissolution of cultural identity are clearly shown to be both futile and tragically misguided. Taken seriously, however, is the problematic of contesting the diffuse but all-pervasive structures of network power and to resisting the smoothing out effect of global capitalism. This becomes a major theme in the final sections of the book. Speculative “identities” are proposed giving visible form to various invisible but powerful state and market entities, including the European Union itself. From this a narrative immerses of identity, freedom and conflict in the post-modern world. This narrative is every bit as fractured and contradictory as the world it depicts and, in this, would seem not to lay claim to any sort of critical distance. What is offered, in lieu of clean hands, is the possibility of moving forward, continuing to work towards the production of genuine difference and change against a neoliberalism’s background of high-speed-zero-net-velocity newness. While hardly counting as a happy ending, this does perhaps provide a glimmer of the hope that we here in United States have recently been pondering the possibility of in our longing for a giant that will make us a posse.



Uncorporate Identity succeeds in being both a good read and an important status report for design in the contemporary context. Those of us slugging it out in the arena of professional practice will find it snappy and entertaining enough to be consumed on the plane or subway (where we do our reading) and quite possibly glean some worthwhile insights on positioning our work in the semiotic blizzard of globalized culture. For those who have been able to escape these rigors, if only for the length of a stipend or the hot part of the summer, Metahaven’s book will be a strong contender for either the sexiest thing in your library carrel or the smartest thing in your beach bag.