



The Saddest Map of Our Time, Courtesy of Online Dating Profiles

By Menachem Wecker

When millions of people dig deep into themselves to craft online dating profiles that will set them apart from the pack of other love-seekers, they create unconscious, collective maps of longing and fears. That's the takeaway from a data-rich work of art currently on exhibit at the National Academy of Sciences in Washington, D.C.

After experiencing a bad breakup, New York artist R. Luke DuBois succumbed to pressure from friends to join the online dating world. A self-diagnosed obsessive, DuBois couldn't check his professional identity as an artist, so he joined 21 dating services as a gay and straight man and woman in every U.S. ZIP code. As he explained in a 2016 TED talk, DuBois downloaded 19 million profiles, analyzed the data and created a work entitled "A More Perfect Union" from 2008-2011 — a map as an alternative to the U.S. census.

"What if, instead of looking at whether we own or rent our homes, we looked at what people do on a Saturday night?" he writes in an artistic statement. "What if, instead of tallying ancestry or the type of industry in which we work, we found out what kind of person we want to love?"

The map, printed in several parts on canvas, is installed on a single, curved wall at NAS as part of the exhibit Love in the Time of Data. U.S. city and town names are replaced by the most common, yet unique, words that appear in residents' dating profiles. For example, cities nearby to Washington become "Unexplained," "Procrastinate" and "Bullshit." Houston is identified as "Rich" and LA as "Acting." Some New Jersey cities become "Extrovert," "Annoying" and "Cynical." Baltimore is "Afraid," and somewhere near Harrisburg, Pennsylvania, is "Frightening."

Standing before the map, which doesn't include the familiar names of cities, is disorienting and wistful. Here DuBois allows viewers who can't immediately conjure an encyclopedic mental image of U.S. geography to consider large and small cities and towns alike — with words from people who feel that someone is missing from their lives. In fact, DuBois created several other maps with the data he gathered, including one of national loneliness.

"A More Perfect Union" finds commonality in dating profiles and distills something Freudian in the ways that residents use language to project how they'd like to be seen, says Anne Collins Goodyear, co-director of the Bowdoin College Museum of Art and curator of the exhibition. "DuBois identifies words that aspirants hope will provide social and maybe even emotional interconnection," she explains.

Goodyear, who first met the artist in 2010 as prints and drawings curator at the National Portrait Gallery in Washington, is "impressed and intrigued by Luke's ability, both poignant and humorous, to grapple with the question of how we make sense out of disorder." (She also finds it "marvelous" that somewhere near Brunswick, Maine, where she lives, online daters believe themselves "Incorrigible.")



Source: Kevin Allen, Courtesy of National Academy of Sciences

Katy Börner, a distinguished professor of engineering and information science at Indiana University Bloomington, says DuBois' work is "a lovely exhibit that charts human desires for being wanted and loved." Just as the knowledge that exercise makes one healthier and happier doesn't lead everyone to flock to the gym, data visualization designers must touch people emotionally, or else they can't expect those people to change their behavior, Börner says.

DuBois pulled 20,262 unique words from 19,095,414 dating profiles and created a kind of national portrait. One that is worth seeing not just for its inventiveness and statistical legwork, but also for the rare opportunity to see our deepest desires and fears within a broader, unifying context — all mapped out.

Love in the Time of Data is showing at the National Academy of Sciences in Washington, D.C., until August 15.