Lev Kreft

MANIFOLD TRIPTYCH
Three persons (Janez Janša, who used to be Davide Grassi; Janez Janša, who used to be Emil Hrvatin; Žiga Kariž, who used to be Janez Janša, who used to be Žiga Kariž) exhibit a triptych consisting of reproductions of their identity cards composed as a puzzle – a construction of one hundred Visa, MasterCard and Maestro cards, issued in accordance with the personalization project of NLB bank, each representing one piece of an identity card. The construction contains some blank spaces representing the cards that could not be obtained from NLB because the request did not fit the rules. NLB is one of the banks worldwide that offers customization of the cards owned by MasterCard Incorporated. The rules were made for people who would like to personalize their cards to enable them to become extensions of their personality, use them with self-assured subjectivity and present them as symbolic representations which they have chosen by themselves. When you get a personalized bank card, the previous non-personalized card expires, and you get a new one together with a new code. Simple. But the Janšas did not want three new personalized cards (Maestro, Visa and MasterCard) but one hundred of each of them. After they received the first three of them, they had to apply for another triptych, and when or if all three were approved and produced by NLB, their previously personalized cards automatically expired. It must have been a strange experience for the bank to issue one personalized card after another to the same three persons, deactivating the previous ones. The only valid personalized bank cards are those which were approved last, so that each of the three units of the triptych has three valid bank cards.

What is this triptych? Is it a ready-made, because ordinary things (credit and debit cards) are used to produce a reproduction of another ordinary thing – an identity card? No, it is certainly not ready-made according to Marcel Duchamp, who choses ordinary things like a pissoir and turns them into works of art with the intention of murdering art’s inclination towards aesthetics and
contemplation. His Fountain served this purpose well, but being turned into a fountain it could not serve its original and ordinary function: it became a work of art by losing its status as an ordinary thing. This triptych is made from bank cards which, although all or at least nearly all of them lost their function, remain what they are, namely, bank cards, and at the same time construct another document which has the same dimensions in reality, but is here ten times bigger than a bank card. No, it is certainly not a ready-made according to Andy Warhol, who admired the aesthetic attractiveness of commodities and portrayed their aesthetic appeal, like the Brillo boxes which, however, were empty and contained no Brillo soap at all. Warhol used to order his artworks by phone, and his collaborators in The Factory executed it following his instructions. To request one hundred bank cards to be delivered by your bank, and to order one’s artwork to be executed by and in your workshop are two different things, because in the case of the bank card, the bank is the master and maestro and not the artists. Warhol did not order his boxes from the Brillo Company. This work is neither ready-made in Duchamp’s sense nor in Warhol’s sense because its constructive elements are alive and well: credit or debit cards
remain what they are – a document or a document of an expired document, while at the same time constructing parts of an artwork. An ordinary thing remains an ordinary thing, but it figures as an artwork (a representation of the identity cards of each of the Janšas) as well. And this final artwork is a representation of another document as well. If not similar to Duchamp’s or Warhol’s procedure, it is surprisingly equivalent to Picasso’s Guernica. If the president of the board of Nova Ljubljanska Banka (NLB) were here, or even a high ranking executive from MasterCard Worldwide, he or she may look at the triptych and ask Janez Janša, Janez Janša and Žiga Kariž: “Did you do that?”, and they would answer: “No, You did.” The same goes for the empty spaces where the cards are missing: they are missing because their production was denied by NLB in accordance with the corporation’s rules. These rules forbid the use of celebrities, any images which by copyright belong to somebody else, names and brands, reproductions of money, Olympic symbols, foreign language or letters, barcodes and other legally protected elements. On the other hand, there are moral majority rules which forbid the appearance of offending pictures and messages of any kind (sexual, religious, racist, hateful,
violent or political). Nudity, even partial, is not acceptable. Of course, swearing and defamation is not allowed. The first group of rules is legally logical; what about the morally binding ones in the second group? It resembles the “do’s and don’ts” of early Hollywood movie production so much that it installs personalized bank card design in a kind of new media art; from the aspect of the modernist notion of art, however, the rules eliminate art understood as a morally irresponsible activity. Consequently, it can only be an artwork which belongs to popular art, to mass media and to new media art. Being valid bank cards and artworks at the same time, it is fair and understandable that in both their functions they belong to the same field of new media, but to its different aspects (financial and aesthetic communication). While these bank cards are applicable as personalized bank cards and artworks at the same time, they construct another card, i.e. a reproduction of the identity card of each of the three persons. This reproduced image is not valid as an identity card. It could be useful as a copy of an authentic document which allows us to keep the original in a safe place, but it is ten times larger than an ordinary identity card, can’t be folded and can hardly be carried around instead of a
valid ID. Propositions of this triptych are therefore not just different from Duchamp’s and Warhol’s ready-mades; they are different from the Janšas’ previous exhibition of their personal valid documents as well.

The triptych, being another kind of ready-made, encompasses several social and subject–object relations: money, personhood, artwork, identification and citizenship.

Initially, money used to be any object in exchange which got the function of equivalent, i.e. which was used as a mirror in which the commodity in exchange could express the quantity of its exchange value. Later, a more practical solution produced the universal equivalent, usually as gold from which coins were made, and should ideally be worth as much in gold as in the function of the universal equivalent. When trade spread over the European continent and further, carrying large amounts of gold money represented a serious risk. To overcome it, a network was built of those who could vouch for your financial credibility after you opened an account with them. This network, then, would
issue a document saying that it is worth a certain amount in gold. Such a document is a banknote. This practice was stabilized when national banks took over issuing banknotes, a reform introduced when the Bank of England was established in the 17th century. During a long period, banknotes still looked very similar to their initial appearance, consisting of state symbols and an assurance that the national bank was ready to exchange the banknote for an equivalent amount of gold. After the Second World War, gold was no longer used as the universal equivalent. When banknotes themselves became the
universal equivalent and its representation in one, it took just a few decades to promote banknotes as works of art. This happened when the German Mark was designed to represent the mighty force uniting the whole of Europe in 1989. This aesthetization of banknotes was at the same time a decisive step towards the euro, and all new currencies of the East followed this German example. In Slovenia, this was executed by Miljenko Licul. In the meantime, however, more and more exchange transactions by individuals were realized through bank cards: those who still carry a large number of banknotes are
becoming an endangered species. Purses developed many compartments with brackets for cards. Bank cards are representations of the universal equivalent - money, but at the same time they are money because what is money but just another representation of the universal equivalent? And now, bank cards can be personalized. These cards already have the holder’s name on them and are in that way personalized, together with a code which belongs to an individual person or business only. Now, they can be designed by personal whim or taste. Personalization rules, besides being a combination of legal and moralistic demands, confirm that a bank card is owned by a bank or a corporation and possessed by a person who opened an account with it. It belongs to a person no more than a name given at birth and can be changed only with the approval of state authorities according to law. No personalization can change that relationship. What we can do now is to put some personal flavour on a bank card, which represents aestheticized banknotes, which represent a universal equivalent without any underlying real value: value appears only when the card is used. Aesthetization and personalization are procedures which invest some artistic and personal value in these things which represent human social relations in exchange. This aestheticized and personalized addition to the original function of bank card gets mixed with the original power of the universal equivalent.

Money is very personal: it is a person's mask which can turn any negative feature into a positive one. But what is a person in itself? The expression comes from the Latin word for theatrical mask; another Latin word for theatrical impersonation is representation. Persona and representatio denote a situation of a living body and its mask put in front of the visual field of others. What, then, is persona: a mask, or its living body vehicle? Both of them together. And where is the self then? Is it behind all the different masks or hats one has to wear in different roles? No, it is not somewhere behind as an intimate secure site of authenticity. The self is a product of the interplay with different masks in different roles and positions. Representation says even more about this relationship. Representation as a theatrical situation of everyday life means a thing which does not necessarily resemble what it represents; it is a sign for something and not its mimesis. A person is lost
and found in-between the exchange of one mask for another. The Holy Trinity consists of three persons who are one, so that person is equal to hypostasis, which means the underlying state or substance: the substance of the three persons is one and the same, but there is no personal substance underlying these three persons – the so-called substantial or real Janez Janša. Janez Janša is a product of his three or more hypostasis-persons. But they are not there in person. They are somewhere among us here in person. And being in person they are not artworks. The person of the artist to appear as an artwork is the embodiment of the modernist idea of art. No, their personal life did not become an artwork after they changed their names. As an artwork they are hanging there – a triptych. One can compare their life presence and their appearance represented in the triptych and look for similarity, as we usually do when confronted with official photographs: they always somehow escape the image we have of a person, but, as a signature, they are used as an identification tool. Being alive means moving. For the sake of identification, a person is forbidden to move when taking a photograph, and the proverbial photo bird which should trigger a smile represents the soul which is leaving the body, so that an identifiable photograph could be taken. A person has to be as much as dead if identification is to be successful. Images used for identification are a kind of nature morte (dead nature), or, if you want a less ominous expression, still life. In the case of bank cards, the identification of a person by a bank is done without photography because what has to be checked is the account balance. In the case of national identity documents, there has to be, besides numbers and other data, a photo as well. The state needs a still life of a person to put it where it belongs in the state’s classification of its population. The history of personal documents is quite short: up to the First World War people did not have personal documents. This did not mean that the state did not check its flock from time to time using different ways for taking census. But 99% of persons had to live without having their picture taken and a lucky 1% got their portraits, starting from sovereigns whose images confirmed the value of coins and their own sovereign value. The democratization of the personal image being taken started with photography only. But when everybody has the right to be represented in a portrait, the authorities get the right to keep an identifiable image of each person on
record and put it on a personal identity document. Such is the story of a subject: to be promoted into a subject, a person has to be free, but the ritual of promotion is at the same time a ritual which subordinates it under one or another sovereign body politic.

As an artwork, however, the triptych still presents some problems. The least significant one relates to authorship. The bank cards were made by the bank, and the personalized design the Janšas requested is a representation of an already personalized identity card. The design was done by the legendary Miljenko Licul as well, and each of three is personally specific not just with regard to the photo but also the identity numbers. The representation of IDs is a portrait of an ID similar to Warhol’s portraits of aesthetic appeal of commodities – it is a portrait of the political appeal of citizenship; to execute such a representation using bank cards turns the tables a little bit, because the artists are in the position of customers and the bank in the position of creator/producer. More ambiguities appear if we involve the artistic market and institutions of art. The triptych can be sold as an artwork which
is currently owned and possessed by the artists, but speaking in the ordinary language of financial legalese, the artists are just card holders and not owners: the documents belong to the corporation and to the bank with which they have their personal accounts, and until at least the last three are valid, it is against the law to sell them to anybody else as such. As potentially invalid, however, they belong to nobody and represent just trash and potentially dangerous trash at that. That is why the holder is expected to follow the bank instructions which were received by all three authors at each occasion when they got a new series of personalized bank cards: make sure to destroy your previous cards and sign new ones. By the way, all three Janšas signed each of the bank cards included in the triptych. On the other hand, as the validity of the bank cards expires one after another, and because even those which are valid expire in the future anyway, the artwork is in a permanent state of decomposition during its creation and after. At the end, it will be just a representation of three identity cards made from out-of-use bank cards. In such a state, it may be owned and possessed by any buyer because it does not consist of any valid document, and it will continue to be an artwork – a
representation of three IDs, but not the same artwork as it was during the
process of production and the first phase of existence when each new element
of construction was alive and valid until next set arrived. Now, when exhibited,
perhaps one last part of it is still alive and well. One of more troubling problems
with contemporary art which is constantly discussed by its artistic institutions
is proper musealization. There are artworks still done as artefacts, and they
can be kept and maintained as artworks. And then there are artworks which
are events and performances which can be kept and maintained only in the
form of documentation of the artwork. It seems that the triptych is not an
event but just an artefact ready-made to be possessed by any other person
or institution as any canvass or sculpture could be. This triptych here, it
seems, can be kept and maintained by an art institution in its archives, but
if this is to be a fair-trade transaction, the artists would have to fill in new
and valid bank cards on a regular basis to keep the work alive, or, declare it
to be finalized with all its parts expired. Even if it can be agreed that this will
still be the same work of art, it is obvious that all extensions and changes will
stop when the authors die. This is an artwork which decomposes itself if its
invalid parts are not switched with new, valid ones, and which dies with each
one of its authors, and turns itself from a representation of bank and state
document done as an artwork into a document of an artwork only, and finally,
to a document testifying to Janšas’ existence. With so many bank cards
available, the triptych could attract thieves, and I hope that Tobačna is well
insured against them. The Janšas might get in trouble if just one still valid
bank card of the nine were stolen because the bank could adopt the position
that they asked for it, and were handling bank documents improperly. Their
best defence against theft and accusations of improper handling would be
that they are artists: to the bank, they would defend their position as artists
claiming that as artists they are bound to be irresponsible, and against thieves
I can say in their name that their accounts are not worth stealing from, so if it
is stolen, the triptych it is worth much more as an artwork than as a source of
universal equivalent. Or perhaps art is a universal equivalent itself? All these
are not just circumstances but the very substance of this artwork which still
belongs to a certain genre, and that genre is self-portrait.
Bakhtin says that the author of an artwork is not the living person of the author but his image in the artwork which appears to the beholder. Still, to have an authentic image of the artist’s person is very important. An identification kit is very helpful here. Slovene cultural history has big problems with the missing portrait of the national poet France Prešeren. There were many portraits squeezed from descriptions of his contemporaries and finalized in accordance with the troubled romantic image of him which appears to the reader from his work. The Janšas did not want to risk that, so they exposed their triptych as a triple self-portrait. To really do a self-portrait, one has to use a mirror. Here, the front side of the identity card is used as a mirror and at the same time as the self-portrait itself. Its front side contains a photo of a person (in Slovene, an identity card is called a personal card), surname and given name, sex, citizenship, date of birth, date of expiry (of the identity card, not of the person), characteristic number and the holder’s signature. This is what is specific for each person; then, there are signs which characterize the Republic of Slovenia, which is the issuer of the identity card. While bank cards are real and valid, this self-portrait is a representation of each of the three person’s identity cards, which is a personal document proving the identity and citizenship of each person. We could say it represents a self-portrait of a person wearing a mask of a citizen with the Republic of Slovenia used as a mirror: it is how the state portrays each of its citizens in a formal personal document. In a half-century-long dispute with Heidegger’s representation of van Gogh’s shoes, Meyer Shapiro claimed that it represents a personal object as a still life. He forgot to add that it represents a self-portrait of a painter in the form of an object which symbolizes the wandering path of his life (Wanderwege). Here, in the case of the Janšas, we have an object too, but a very special one: a personal document for identification of a person which contains the basic elements of a person so that he can be identified correctly any time such identification is needed. The data and photo on the ID are basic signs of identity serving for identification. It seems that this self-portrait claims: My identity is in the identification, and my identification is what the state needs to identify me as a citizen. The state has to manage three kinds of persons: those who are temporary residents but not citizens, those who are permanent residents but not citizens, and those who are citizens.
The state should guarantee equal human rights to all three, and even to the fourth category of persons: those without any citizenship at all. But it does not. The post-modern state hardly guarantees anything to anybody. The main difference between the citizens and all the others are political rights. Some political rights belong to permanent residents as well, mostly on the local political level, but the real political rights belong to citizens only. As a bank card gives you access to your personal account for transactions which involve the universal equivalent, with an identity card confirming your citizenship – nationality gives you access to active (to vote) and passive (to run for public office) political rights. However, political rights do not guarantee anything today. States do not do as they please, and they do not do as citizens please, they do as the banks please. The three Janšas are citizens of the Republic of Slovenia and clients of NLB bank. As political beings, they are politically emancipated subjects who belong to this state. As real life beings, they live their free lives using bank cards as persons with a bank account. They are politically emancipated members of a bank republic. Are they emancipated really?

You can personalize your answers.

Watch Lev Kreft's lecture on Vimeo.
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