

Face Value

On seeing this collection of Greek identity cards, one cannot help but reflect on what kind of person collects ephemera. The collection of ephemera would seem to be an eccentric activity presumably performed by disciplined individuals who are singularly passionate about the object of their collection. They may share an affinity with others who collect a single category of kitsch, whether it be ceramic pigs or teaspoons, they may be neurotic nonetheless and try as they might, just cannot help themselves. Irrespective of whether a collection is a manifestation of an obsessive-compulsive disorder, a significant difference between a junk figurine collector and an ephemera collector may be that the latter is driven by a sharp sense of history. He or she may collect from the suspicion that histories while containing some truth are manufactured like any other fiction. Histories are written and rewritten depending on who are the social or political victors; nonetheless histories function within society along Freudian lines as a source of censorship for the superego. Collections of political ephemera, including materials such as pamphlets, posters and newsletters perform a service in the hope that histories maybe written with more objectivity. These personal collections end up in state libraries, universities and museums, as has this collection of ID cards. The motivation, psychological or other, of the individual who amassed so many ID cards from a specific period of time, remains unclear. He may resemble the neurotic figurine collector and the historicizing political ephemera collector, however the ID collector's intentions remain a mystery. Thanks to the arrangement by George Alamidis, the collection rings of melancholy and poetry giving some clue to the collector's motivation.

Even though Australians rejected the concept of the ID card, we understand the desire of the state and corporate business to monitor us with or without a standardised card. Here is a collection of Identity cards, from a country whose people had no choice, all are Greek and all originate from the same period, the late 1940's and early 1950's. Post war Greece was in turmoil; as if its poverty was not enough the political nightmare of civil war heightened government determination to control its people. The ID card signified captivity. Greeks were living in a military state where all activity and movement was controlled and regulated. You could not travel from one village to another without your ID card. Long before the invention of the barcode, the invention of photography marked the threshold into the modern bureaucratic state. With its earliest application in the penitentiary as the mug shot, keeping record of the face had come to picture every citizen as an incarcerated criminal. If the id, as described by Freud, desires to have every drive and urge immediately satisfied regardless of undesirable effects, then the state enforces the ID card to keep the id in check. Like an externalised superego the ID card keeps the self captive, regulated and under control.

ID cards that have survived from the 1940's and 1950's belong to those who made the great escape from Greece. The renewal of these cards meant the destruction of the old one, there could only be one ID to each person. This would point to the most likely possibility that these cards were accumulated outside of Greece from those who immigrated to places such as Australia and the USA before the conversion to the plastic covered card.

Representing the many lives displaced by immigration, these worn and tattered ID cards, living in pockets for years evoke melancholy. They suggest the order of things and the struggle that went with knowing your place in society. Without being able to read Greek, it is not difficult to make out to whom respective signatures belong in the ID. The illiterate scrawl of the peasant, and the calligraphic hand of the government official, speak. On a metaphoric level, the ID speaks of the construction of identity. It asks, what is in a name? What is in a face? Can a name alone call you out of crowd? What connects a name to a face? Who joins a name to a face? The ID card represents identity as a layered series of counter signatures. The face, the name, the parentage, the personal signature, the bureaucrat's signature, the stamp and seal of the state. The photo of the face and a name are countersigned by the cardholder's signature, the cardholder's signature is countersigned by the government official and all lay under the seal of the state. The value of the face is only valid if it be sealed and countersigned. In a society such as post war Greece, the state acted in a leading part in the construction of personal and societal identity by creating a fictitious national image picturing Greeks as an essentially homogeneous people of one tongue and one religion.

The refugee, the immigrant, the displaced, on stepping off at Station Pier or Ellis Island finds the ID now idle and falls into a crisis of identity. I think here we may be close to the motivation behind the collector of these identities. He must have been one amongst the estranged, joining with others by collecting their ID'S. For, if anything is clear, melancholy is here. Alamidis' installation of these borrowed ready-mades and the photographic enlargements resemble rows of gravestones with the face of each soul cast out to the oblivion of the new.

Evangelos Sakaris, June 2001