A Borderline Case – Facial Politics in Kjartan Slettemark’s The Passport

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Abstract

Kjartan Slettemark had been a fierce opponent of Richard Nixon and the war in Vietnam, but when the Watergate scandal culminated in 1974, and Nixon resigned from the White House, this changed to a feeling of empathy with the president, and Slettemark staged the happening later to be known as The Passport. With the help of a professional photographer his passport photograph was manipulated in order for the artist to partially assume the identity of Richard Nixon. Along with the political critique, the performance raises questions about mental and physical borderlines. This theme holds a special place in Slettemark’s biography as well as in his artistic oeuvre.

The Watergate scandal culminated in 1974, when Richard Nixon resigned from the White House (Nylén 1998: 147). The Norwegian/Swedish conceptual artist and “one-man army” Kjartan Slettemark (1932–2008) had positioned himself as a fierce opponent of Nixon and his warfare in Vietnam. Now, however, the artist felt an odd kinship with the dethroned president, or at least so he claimed, on the grounds that they were both “fallen” (Kleivan 2001). In support of Nixon, Slettemark made the happening later to be known as The Passport.

By coincidence, Slettemark had to renew his passport at this point, and with the help of a professional photographer his passport photograph was manipulated in order for the artist to partially assume the identity of Richard Nixon. An iconic portrait from Nixon’s 1972 presidential election campaign that Slettemark had formerly deployed in his work Nixon Visions served as the basis of the identity theft. Morphed with a picture of the artist himself, the fake passport photo shows Nixon’s familiar features framed by Slettemark’s bald head, wispy black hair and untrimmed beard. Along with the artist’s passport application, this photo collage was submitted to the authorities in Stockholm (the Norwegian-born Slettemark had obtained Swedish citizenship in 1966). As a clue that the passport was embedded in a work of art, the artist capitalised the three middle letters in his first name when he signed this official proof of identity.
“KjARTan Slettemark”. Not detecting the forgery, the civil servant issued the passport to the artist. With the so-called “Nixon-passport” as personal identification, the artist travelled from the Basel Art Fair shortly afterwards, but, to his dismay, the passport was not properly inspected at any of the northern European border controls (Petterson 2007: 8). The following year, the artist crossed the Atlantic, where the officials at New York’s Kennedy Airport did not question the validity of the passport either. His hazardous and illegal scam was in fact never detected.

Characteristic of Kjartan Slettemark’s role as an *enfant terrible* of the Swedish and Norwegian art scene, a spectacular stunt goes hand in hand with political critique in *The Passport*. Along with that, the performance raises questions about mental and physical borderlines. This theme holds a special place in Slettemark’s biography as well as in his artistic oeuvre.

“**Borderline** from Diagnosis to Artistic Concept

*The Passport* is one of several works in which Kjartan Slettemark explores his psychiatric diagnosis, “borderline case”. To give a brief account of his personal background, the artist had lived on welfare since 1964. One day in 1968 he attended a meeting at the social services department with red and green teeth caps and dressed in what appeared to the social workers as a most eccentric outfit (regrettably no visual documentation of this is preserved). The artist was referred to a psychiatrist, who tried to admit him to a mental institution, but Slettemark refused to be hospitalised. Another social-services psychiatrist examined Slettemark the following year and diagnosed him as a “borderline case”, somewhere between healthy and sick, normal and deviant.

This clinical label constituted a landmark for Slettemark as an artist and led him to investigate the meaning of being “a borderline case” in a number of works. In 1969 the Observatorium gallery in Stockholm hosted the exhibition *Kjartans psykiska ohälsa – Borderline Case* (Kjartan’s Psychiatric Un-Health – A Borderline Case), in which Slettemark put Hibernal, a strong anti-psychotic drug, and other objects from his encounters with community mental health services on display. Moreover, the invitation cards were printed on the social services department’s welfare application forms, and he passed the bill for the exhibition on to this authority as well. *Dagens Nyheter*, a leading Swedish newspaper, gave a whole page over to Slettemark’s story, and this public attention resulted in his involuntary confinement coming to an end.