

Janez Janša®

Proximity as a dramaturgical operation, in three parts

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For us, there are no boundaries between our work, our art, and our lives, and, in this respect, we believe we are no different from you. (Janez Janša qtd in Lukan 2008:9)

It is now more than ten years ago that three artists previously called Emil Hrvatin, Davide Grassi and Žiga Kariž, living in Ljubljana, Slovenia, changed their names to that of the right-wing politician Janez Janša. In the summer of 2007, shortly after becoming members of the Slovenian right-wing democratic SDS party that Janez Janša was leading, they changed their name following a thorough legal procedure. In the letter they wrote to inform the then Prime Minister, Janez Janša, they described the reasons that led them to this decision as personal ones and they have continued giving the same enigmatic answer since then, in this way deliberately creating ambiguity as to why they made this change. Stressing in that same letter that there are no boundaries between their work as artists and their personal lives, they seem to on the one hand suggest that there is no difference between art and politics, and on the other to proudly embrace the fusion between work and life that is so characteristic of today's neoliberal ideology.

The exhibition 'Janez Janša®', which was launched at the Museum of Contemporary Art Metelkova (+MSUM) in Ljubljana in October 2017, presents a wide selection of works and projects that have been produced by Janez Janša, Janez Janša and Janez Janša in these last ten years. Many of these works evoke an intense proximity between the artists' work and life, especially the videos that were made with the family members of the artists. In effect, the first time that the name change was made public was during the wedding of Janez Janša, where Janez Janša and Janez Janša were the best men of the bride and of the groom respectively. This private event

has somewhat turned into a public performance since it was announced in the media, and later on a video recording of it became part of the documentary film called *My Name is Janez Janša* (2012). In the exhibition the wedding album is also on display, and visitors are invited to look into the pages that are filled with pictures of family and friends of the married couple. Not far from the wedding album, one can also find videos in which the parents of the three artists comment on their sons' name change while photos from the artists' childhood slide alongside. Aspects of their private lives and intimate relationships are turned into public art objects that arguably evoke for the visitors an experience of peeking into someone else's personal life.

The fusion between work and personal life as well as between political and private life has often been discussed in critical ways in recent years (see Lazzarato 1997; Agamben 2000; Virno 2004). Feminist theorist Kathi Weeks has even claimed that we continually fail to imagine the end of work in our lives (2016:253) and has critically interrogated existing nonwork strategies that are 'too locked under the orbit of work as we now

■ Janez Janša, Janez Janša, Janez Janša Marcela in Janez. Installation, Poroka, 2017. Photo Miha Fras, courtesy Aksioma - Institute for Contemporary Art, Ljubljana



know it' (258). Alluding to the Krisis-Group and to Fredric Jameson, she has explained how every human action is nowadays analogous to work because there is such an intimate relationship between human life and work. Contemporary subjectivity, Weeks has argued, is constructed through work and the anxiety about losing the 'individual selves' in the case of nonwork is extreme (252, 260). However, one should confront this incapacity of imagining nonwork and seek to understand the conditions that provoke it, according to Weeks.

At first glance, the artistic work of the three Janez Janšas seems to be uncritically engaging with this problematic merging between work and life. Instead of configuring the separation between the two domains, they bring them into closer proximity, even to the degree of fusion. However, through this tactical dramaturgy of proximity, the exhibition potentially evokes a distressing experience of the (possibility of) transformation of life into (art)work. The attendants are in this sense invited to critically consider the disappearance of private life in view of the overwhelming self-identification through (art-)work. At the same time, however, these exhibits identify with the proclaimed impossibility of separating life from work, and seek for new possibilities and imaginings of (non) work from *within* this fusion rather than outside of it.

¹ One of the first personalized products were ID and passports. These are serial products with identical graphic design featuring personal data that relate to a single person.

■ Janez Janša, Janez Janša, Janez Janša, 350 Janez Janša Bottles, 2017. Photo Dejan Habicht, courtesy Aksioma - Institute for Contemporary Art, Ljubljana

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Another dramaturgy of proximity that can be detected operating in the exhibition 'Janez Janša®' is that between art and capitalism. This is manifested in the customized bank cards (the *Credits* series) that feature the artists' other artworks printed on them, and it is particularly evident in the work *350 Janez Janša Bottles*, an installation that consisted of 350 bottles of Coca-Cola customized with the name of the artists. On the one hand, this work acts like a readymade, where commercial mass production is presented as artwork. On the other hand, however, it specifically emphasizes the recent trend of personalized products and self-celebration.¹ As explained by the curator, Domenico Quaranta, in the exhibition catalogue:

As a readymade, its peculiarity lies in the fact that it's not a mass-produced item turned into an artwork by an individual act of signing, repurposing or displacement, but the output of a process which is totally embedded in the current means of production and distribution. (2018: 112)

In other words, the particular shifts in the capitalist modes of production towards more personalized and intimate products are heightened by being on display. The name change that was initially evidenced in the birth certificates and new identification cards – which are also part of the exhibits – here turns into one



In the case of the exhibition 'Janez Janša®', the sense of proximity between art and capitalism that Kunst has critically highlighted takes a rather particular form: that of customized mass production. The personification and exclusivity of the products as well as the registering of the name as trademark underscore the essence of today's capitalist modes of production. Returning to Weeks' argument, the name change has even created a state of non-stop work because of the overexposure that it has caused in the artists' lives. 'When someone calls us Janez, we don't hear just our name, but we hear a name change and we also hear the negotiations of those people



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■ Janez Janša, Janez Janša, Janez Janša, *Passports*, 2007 ongoing. Photo Dejan Habicht, courtesy Aksioma - Institute for Contemporary Art, Ljubljana

⁴ Reading Aristotle, Agamben has distinguished between two terms that mean 'life' in Greek: *zoē*, which expresses the mere fact of life, common to all living beings, and *bios*, which refers to a way of living that is particular to an individual or a group. Agamben acknowledges that Hannah Arendt was the first to detect how biological life (*zoē*) has been rendered essential for political action. Later on Foucault, without reference to Arendt's work, showed that natural life has been included in the modern State's calculations and mechanisms, transforming politics into *biopolitics*. Agamben (1998) has shown that the concentration camp is the exemplary case of modern biopolitics. The politicization of life as such is what has caused the concealment of political thought and action.

■ (right) Janez Janša, Janez Janša, Janez Janša, *Evzoni on Visa*, 2013. I ♥ Germany series. Credits series, courtesy: Aksioma - Institute for Contemporary Art, Ljubljana

for this exchange is that the Moderna Galerija has been trying to purchase the ID cards, to which the respective Ministries are objecting by bringing up issues around copyright, the ontology of the artwork and artistic authorship.⁵

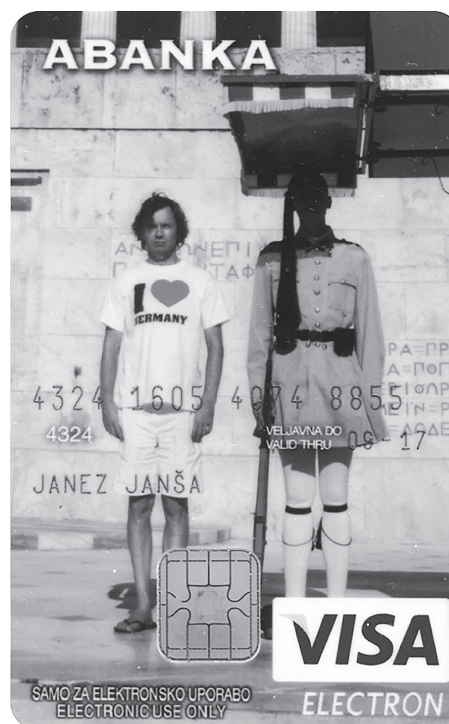
Bojana Cvejić and Ana Vujanović have argued that we live in 'the Century of the Self'. In a century that celebrates the individual, artists' subjectivities, private feelings, self-determination and self-expression are produced and promoted by means of images and trends, as if they were the artworks. They have specifically written that

in the art field, the artistic aura has shifted from artworks – which since then have been produced both as unique objects and reproduced copies – toward artists themselves, who are assigned the social role of being authentic, different, outstanding, and above all, non-conformist personalities. (2012: 138)

In light of this claim, it can be argued that in several cases an artist's personality can have more of an impact in the capitalist economy than their artwork. The exhibited documents administratively certify the synchronous legal, political and economic existence of three people with the same name, and inevitably allude to a fourth one. The conception of personal authorized official documents as artworks, such as the past and present IDs with the artists' photos and their changing names, evokes a sense of paranoia when they are displayed inside the art gallery because of the various contradictory significations. The gallery is

suddenly transformed into a place in which a perplexing and diffused notion of the 'self' is constructed and evidenced through issued and legal documentation. In this way, straightforward distinctions between 'self' and 'other' are disrupted and the logic of artistic individualism is undermined.

The principal function of such documents is to validate and codify the existence and state of a citizen, to index them biopolitically. Following Michel Foucault, Giorgio Agamben has written extensively on the study of biopolitics, which marks the 'growing inclusion of man's [sic] natural life in the mechanisms and calculations of power' (1998: 119). Foucault's enquiry into the subject of biopolitics was mainly situated in hospitals and prisons. For Agamben, the enquiry focuses on the analysis of concentration camps and biometric technologies (i.e. fingerprints, identity cards photographs, optical scanners, etc.). As he explains, in the previous century biometric technologies were meant for specific groups (e.g. animals, Jews, criminals) and today under the guise of security apparatuses they are applied to all citizens. In this sense, according to Agamben, biopower plays a major role in increasing the State's control over the people, while substituting political and social identity with the biological one.⁴



The personal documents and bank cards displayed in the gallery produce a proliferation of (mis)matching connotations between the artists and the artworks in ways that implicate the State and the banks as the governmental and financial players that define and mark one's identity and existence. Although the focus is not on the complex biometric technologies used nowadays, the choice of presenting the artists' documents as artworks operates with the logic of close proximity between the artists' distributed biological existence and governmental evidence of it, raising critical questions about what an artwork is today, whom it belongs to and how one can determine its value.

The above three detected dramaturgies of proximity operate between different domains of life, work and art in overlapping and entangled ways, generating an enigmatic sense of intimacy and pleasure but also confusion and disorientation among the visitors to the exhibition 'Janez Janša®'. Such bodily impact triggered by the dramaturgical logic of proximity arguably adds another layer to the critical discussion on proximity that takes place in the *Performance Research* issue 'On Proximity', which, by proposing this concept, has contested the prevalence of the terms 'immersion, participation, network, connection and interaction' in contemporary theatre discourse and practice (Cranfield and Owen 2017:2).

It can even be argued that in the course of time, artists have been attempting to instigate different sort of proximities through their work, such as between humans and gods, reality and representation, life and death, music and body, and so on. More recently, these proximities have been between everyday life and art, society and art, politics and theatre. Perhaps the most significant concern for proximity since Bertolt Brecht and Antonin Artaud has been that between audience and performers, which the 'On Proximity' issue of *Performance Research* put under scrutiny. The work of the three Janšas, however, underpins yet another dimension of close proximity that is at the core of today's neoliberal ideology – that of life, work and art – not merely by echoing it but even more so by delving into it, identifying with it and activating puzzling ways of sensing and confronting it.

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