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TROIKA
In the summer 2007, three artists living in Ljubljana, Emil Hrvatin, Davide Grassi, and Žiga Kariž, changed their names to “Janez Janša”, the name of the Prime Minister of Slovenia and leader of the SDS (Slovenian Democratic Party).  

This incipit, quoted from a text by art critic Amelia Jones, appears in a similar form in almost every essay, review or exhibition caption written since then about the work of the three artists known under the name of Janez Janša. When considering their artistic career, it seems impossible to disregard this particular biographical event. Similarly, it seems extremely hard to consider this event as something other than an art project despite what the artists repeatedly stated, describing the name change as “an intimate, personal decision, which requires no public rationalization”.

But let’s take them seriously. Let’s suppose that, at some point in their life, three individuals from Slovenia decided that they needed to make a big change in their lives. They wanted to leave their identities behind, and start a new identity together. They wanted to set up a difficult situation, start a new life in that situation, and analyze its consequences on their life and work.

Of course, there are many ways to do it. Some people go to live in another country. Some change sex. The three Slovenian artists decided to join a party they presumably didn’t share the ideology of, and take on the name of that party’s leader. They decided to become Janez Janša.

1 Amelia Jones, “Naming Power and the Power of the Name: Janez Janša Performs the Political in/for the Art World”, in VVAA, Name Readymade, Moderna Galerija, Ljubljana 2008, p. 33.
A complete transformation it was, but it didn’t include the rejection of their identity as artists. They kept doing artworks, both individually and together. Most of them – especially the ones they worked on together – are strongly related to their new identity, or to what it means to have an identity in the age of biopolitics. As such, they may be described as “art documentation”, in the sense discussed by Boris Groys in *Art Power*:

> For those who devote themselves to the production of art documentation rather than artworks, art is identical to life, because life is essentially a pure activity that has no end result. [...] Art documentation [...] marks the attempt to use artistic media within art spaces to refer to life itself, that is, to a pure activity, to pure practice, to an artistic life, as it were, without presenting it directly. Art becomes a life form, whereas the artwork becomes non-art, a mere documentation of this life form. One could also say that art becomes biopolitical, because it begins to use artistic means to produce and document life as a pure activity. Indeed, art documentation as an art form could only develop under the conditions of today’s biopolitical age, in which life itself has become the object of technical and artistic intervention.³

This long quotation correctly outlines the conceptual framework in which we can interpret both the name change and the work produced by Janša, Janša

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and Janša in the years that followed. The name change is not an art project, but an event in an artistic life (“for us, there are no boundaries between our work, our art, and our lives”); and the artworks related to the name change are not the documentation of a performance, but the documentation of life as pure activity.

**Troika**

*The dominant medium of modern biopolitics is thus bureaucratic and technological documentation*

After the name change, Janša, Janša and Janša employed different strategies of “art documentation”: they performed in the public arena, sometimes focusing on the act of signing; they exhibited the documentation connected to the name change, including ID cards, passports, their party membership cards, and credit cards; and they recalled the story of the name change, documenting the events and public reactions in narrative form and involving the audience in a public debate. The works developed in the process both fit into and challenge Groys’ notion of art documentation. On one hand, they can be seen as the documentation of the life of the Janšas in the new circumstances introduced

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4 As stated in the letter the three artists wrote to Janez Janša right after the name change, available in VVAA, *Name Readymade*, Moderna Galerija, Ljubljana 2008, p. 9.

5 Boris Groys, “Art in the Age of Biopolitics: From Artwork to Art Documentation”, in *Art Power*, p. 56.
by the name change. On the other hand, most of them go far beyond this very 
simple level. In his essay, Groys goes on to explain that art documentation 
is usually presented in the exhibition space in installation form. Most of 
Janša, Janša and Janša's works fall under different media classifications: 
performances (that were later documented and presented in institutions in 
installation form), books, movies, and even paintings. Furthermore, some 
of them became life events in themselves: so, not only documenting the life 
of the Janšas, but also having an impact on it that is not considered in the 
model described by Groys.

But paradoxically, the works that are most resistant to Groys’ model are the 
one that make use of that “bureaucratic and technological documentation” 
that Groys describes as “the dominant medium of modern biopolitics”: ID 
cards, passports, credit cards. For Groys, when documentation is presented 
in installation form, it has a mere narrative function: it tells a story not 
by means of an authored narrative, but by means of providing ephemeral 
material related to that story.

But if Janša, Janša and Janša's legal documents only had a narrative function in 
the context of an art installation, they could easily be presented in the form of 
reproductions, whether poor photocopies or high quality photographic prints. 
The artists choose to present them as original, valid documents instead, 
consciously accepting a series of related risks: identity theft, money loss,
damage and even being sued for misusing the documents and leaving them in an “unsafe” place. This makes us forget that they are telling a story, and foregrounds their uncertain status as artworks. What are we confronted with when we meet, say, *Troika* (2013) in an exhibition? It tells a story, of course – a story that could be told just as well, if not better in terms of display options, by using reproductions rather than originals. If the artists are showing the originals, temporarily removing them from their wallets, they probably want to tell us something more. More precisely, they want to make us accept their status as artworks, rather than art documentation. But what kind of artworks?

An official document is something released by a public institution or a private company upon request of the holder. The holder herself has little or no control over what the document displays: the elements related to the institution or company (logo, watermark, hologram, microchip) are controlled by the institution or company; the elements related to the holder (name and surname, personal data, photo portrait) have to be as close as possible to reality, so close to be considered “the truth”. Among the documents included in *Troika*, the only one with some degree of customization is the credit card, which features an artwork by Janša, Janša and Janša as a background image. We will come back to this further on. At this stage we can merely note that official documents are highly codified objects, with little or no room for customization, and that they are functional objects. Their function is to certify something: that Janez Janša – when still Emil Hrvatin, Davide Grassi,
or Žiga Kariž – joined the SDS; that Janez Janša is a male Slovenian citizen who looks like the man pictured on his ID card, that Janez Janša has a bank account at the NLB bank that allows him to be the holder of a credit card, etc. Official documents, however, are not functional forever: they have an expiry date, after which they must be renewed; and they can, under certain circumstances, be revoked.

Just to recap: an official document is a temporarily functional object, made by somebody else (an institution, a company) exclusively for the holder. Janša, Janša and Janša are showing them in art contexts. So, is this an intervention in the long contemporary art tradition of the “readymade”? This might be an appealing hypothesis, but there are several counter-arguments. A readymade is, first of all, the result of an act of choice and selection; these documents have not been chosen: they have been put on display as something that helps tell the story of the three Janez Janša in the framework of the existing political, legal and economic infrastructure. When it’s chosen, a readymade loses its function and becomes the subject of an aesthetic or philosophical investigation; these documents are still valid and functional objects, at least until they expire or are revoked. Also, a readymade is not unique, neither as a mass produced, manufactured object nor as a work of art. Although industrially produced according to a template, these documents are unique, both as documents and as works of art: an ID card cannot be replicated.
without breaking the law, and the artwork Troika cannot be converted into an art edition.

Lastly, with readymades functionality is lost by means of some kind of material or conceptual intervention: selection, display, signature, re-naming, re-framing, assemblage; in Troika, the documents have been selected (among other documents), presented on wall in a perspex frame, in the context of an installation called Troika that also includes a video and a wall painting, and that an exhibition caption certifies as the work of Janša, Janša and Janša: but this isn’t enough to make these documents lose their functional status. They can be “also art”, but they can’t be “just art” – at least, until somebody else – a public official, an authorized employee, but not the artist and definitely not a curator – releases them from their functional status of documents. In other words, the rituals of the art world and its officials can’t change the nature of these objects because they are not plain objects: they are sacred objects belonging to another, stronger ritual, controlled by other officials.

The co-existence, and occasional clash, of these two levels in the works of Janša, Janša and Janša that are based on official documents is not a side element in a practice of “art documentation”, in Groys’ terms: it is exactly what makes them something more than simple documentation of a live event. For the duration of their existence as valid documents, they will be living
contradictions, ambiguous artifacts hovering between the realms of life and art, and proving the impossibility of inhabiting both contexts simultaneously. When they expire as official documents, they will not lose their status as artworks, but will join a more stable, common status of artwork: the one enjoyed by both readymades and plain art documentation. The entities that issued them will lose their power and control over them, and they will be ready to be collected and museified.

Credits

This status is already enjoyed by those documents that have already expired or that have been revoked. Short term expiry also underpins the Credits project (2013), which exploits the recently introduced option of producing customized credit card designs. The artists were attracted, on one hand, by the rhetorical use of concepts like freedom, creativity, personality, uniqueness (“Make your card as unique as you are”) in the advertisements for these services. On the other hand, the artists are attracted to the enormous potential that the coexistence and clash between different signifiers – their name, the codified elements of a credit card and the image they choose as a background – combined in a single, miniaturized image, can produce. Furthermore, this project brings collaboration and complicity with institutions and companies.
to a new level, especially when the image they want to use as the background of their credit cards doesn’t comply with the conventional protocol. Lastly, *Credits* is another layer of Janša, Janša and Janša’s investigation of the double nature of their “artifacts”, their ability to exist in two different contexts. As they explain in the project statement:

*Banks understand debit cards as an instrument for making payments; as soon as they land in a museum, however, they start functioning as artworks. As with other objects that characterise the work of Janša, Janša and Janša, the artistry of debit cards is temporally limited, for they are no longer interesting as living art objects after they have passed their expiry date (their artistry is constituted precisely by this double status); they turn into museum exhibits, documents of something that has already happened, remnants, relics.*

This brings us back to our starting point. Although credit cards have an expiry date, when you order a new credit card connected to the same account, the previous card is deactivated. While this should, as the artists say, turn them into relics, this does not actually happen. When confronted with these works, we are still uncomfortable with them and their presence in the gallery or the museum - and we will continue to feel slightly awkward about it even when the expiry date printed on them becomes a thing of the past. It’s hard to see

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them as “documents of something that has already happened”. A rose is a rose and a credit card is a credit card, even when it expires. The card might not work anymore, but the MasterCard and Maestro symbols are still there, with all their “aura”. Credit cards have enormous symbolic power. By putting them on show, the artists are infringing the pact of trust they made with their bank, and violating the only sacred thing that our godless age has left: Money. This is why, even once they have expired, they will continue to be insidious, two-faced artifacts for a long time.

On the other hand, Credits questions the museum as another space of trust, both sanctioning the artistic value of the artwork and increasing it. In Janša, Janša and Janša’s words:

In the Credits series, two institutions of trust are thus put on the same level: the banks create the conditions for production, produce debit and credit cards and look after the money deposited in the accounts associated with these cards, while the museum ensures that the public has access to these objects and, at the same time, that these objects remain safe and intact. The artwork consists not in the bank cards as such but rather in the parallelism of double trust. Credits = trust in the bank + trust in the museum.7

Wedged between two institutional frameworks and two different value systems the Credits series undermines both, while at the same time being indebted to both for its very existence. As Janša, Janša and Janša effectively put it in their notes on collateral art, institutional critique has turned into institutional complicity.

7 Ibidem.
Conclusions

[...] life turns living situations into work. In that sense, life becomes work [...] We see the works produced as product of circumstances⁸

When they changed their names, Janša, Janša and Janša set up a situation that allows them to blur the dividing line between art and life to the point of no return. Since then their art has been a consequence of their attempts to live their own lives as simply as possible. As they pointed out in the title of a recent exhibition⁹, there are no longer “works” of art, just “work”: a continuum that is sometimes generated by companies and institutions as a reaction to their lives, and sometimes by isolating and documenting specific episodes in their lives. A continuum that exists because their name is Janez Janša.

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⁸ Janez Janša, Personal communication, November 20, 2013.
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