

Zdenka Badovinac

JANŠA FOR PERSONAL REASONS

After three Slovene artists changed their names to Janez Janša, the name of the Slovene Primer Minister, nothing special or eventful seemed to happen. The Prime Minister did not react in any way, the three new Janezes were not excluded from his political party, the Slovenian Democratic Party, which they had joined just prior to their name change, the grants awarded to them by the Ministry of Culture were not withdrawn, and the three artists were able to stage quite a few collective and individual presentations. Fairly soon they were even rewarded for their collective gesture with the group exhibition Triglav, staged at the Mala galerija, an exhibition venue of the central national institution for modern and contemporary art. The media followed the entire affair with pronounced interest, verging on sympathy. There were a number of critical comments, too, claiming that the artists had failed in their intended political provocation but succeeded in attracting great media attention, which had, ostensibly, been their main goal in the first place.

What happened, actually? We can say that, at least in our part of the world, the times when governments came close to falling as a result of political provocations are definitely over. Likewise, the era of censoring socially critical artists is evidently over too. But it is also true that neither of the above is entirely true. There are many reasons to criticize the Slovene cultural policy. In recent years the control of public space has increased, which has particularly impacted the media, and contemporary art has been marginalized even more than before, to the benefit of time-proven traditional values. But – at least in terms of contemporary art – there has been only one instance of censorship, and it triggered a public outcry. At the demand of the Ministry of Culture, the portrait head of Jože Pučnik was removed from the exhibition United in Victory, staged by the National Museum of Contemporary History to commemorate the 15th anniversary of Slovenia's independence; the reason: the portrait's face was "clawed out." The sculptor Metod Frlic explained that this was how the incessant struggles had marked the face of this dissident who, upon his return to Slovenia, greatly contributed to the processes of democratization and a greater sense of nation-state. The Minister of Culture stated publicly that the sculpture had been removed because portraits of this type should be executed in a realistic manner. Interestingly, the deformed face of Slovenia's right-wing ideologist upset the Prime Minister more than the fact that three artists had officially assumed his name.

Parallel to the history of that art which saw itself as autonomous creative production, there existed throughout the 20th century a line of doubt concerning such authorship, propagated mostly by collectives or groups of artists. Starting with the historical avant-gardes, numerous groups of artists were critical of manipulations with public space, be it by politics, ideology, or capital. Some examples are the Russian revolutionary artists' collectives, the Dada, CoBrA, Lettrism, Situationist International, and many other movements, and they have served as inexhaustible sources of inspiration for countless collective, socially critical actions to this day.

With their show Triglav at the Mala galerija, the three Janezes drew attention to the local tradition of collective practices. They presented the 1968 performance *Mt Triglav* by the group OHO and its two reenactments: the one by the group Irwin in 2004 and their own in 2007. Crucial to all three groups of artists was the significance of Mt Triglav (meaning the “three-headed” mountain) as a Slovene national symbol. Three members of the OHO group “enacted” Mt Triglav by draping black fabric over their bodies so that only their heads jutted out. Just as is the case with the three peaks of the mountain, the middle head was higher up than the lateral two, which were more or less level. The action was carried out in the center of Ljubljana, and affected the passersby primarily with its absurdity in comparison to ordinary day-to-day socialist life. The group Irwin chose the same location for their reenactment of the performance, but intended it primarily for the lens of the camera: crucial in their case was the artifact – a good-quality, nicely framed photograph. The material dimension of the work underscored the underrated status of the neo-avant-garde line in the history of Slovene art, and the absence of a developed art market and related interest in a professional and standardized presentation of art. In his text in the exhibition leaflet, Miško Šuvakovič described the final reenactment of *Mt Triglav* by the three Janezes as a tragic gesture. He sees their official name change as a sacrifice of a part of their personal lives.

When asked why they'd officially changed their names, each of the three artists answered in the same way: for personal reasons. Despite the fact that we virtually cannot but interpret their act as a critical stand to Janez Janša's administration, the artists themselves have not publicly confirmed this even once. At the beginning of this year the trio opened a public correspondence in the Saturday supplement of the weekly paper *Dnevnik*. This section of the newspaper is otherwise reserved for correspondence between pairs of Slovene public figures; now it is occupied by the three Janezes, who address benign personal epistles to one another, interlarding casual information about their work with travel impressions, culinary advice, their children's adventures, and the like. Essentially, the whole Janez Janša project is

based on the artists toying with their privacy. What will remain after this joint project, and may end up exhibited in the museum of contemporary art, will be largely composed of documents, testifying not only to the official change of the artists' names, of their membership in the Slovenian Democratic Party, but also to Janez Janša being present at the birth of his child, of Janez Janša paying insurance and household bills, of Janez Janša having a contract with the Ministry of Culture, etc. The boundary between art and life has in their case been lost in advance.

When the three artists changed their names to Janez Janša, they in fact adopted a critical stand to the state. To the Slovene government, in which until recently all posts seemed occupied as it were by a single person – Janez Janša. For a while, the fear was rife that our young democracy would slide back into one of the harsher forms of government. But about the time when Janša's name appeared also on the art scene, the power of capital became more manifest in our country, and in the last six months, capital has subjugated even those media that had been perceived as being in Janša's hands. The countries in transition have seen quite a few situations where social anachronisms of various types seemed to jeopardize their budding contemporary democracies. It is now becoming increasingly obvious that the neo-liberalist processes predominate, that the market mechanisms are de-centering the positions of power, and that the state is growing weaker. Michel Foucault wrote that “the state may be nothing more than an imagined reality, mystified abstraction, whose importance is much more limited than many of us think.” The state is becoming only one of the agents of governmentality, which Foucault describes as a contemporary form of the “art of government,” no longer limited to state politics and applying to the control of others and one's control of the self. The various positions of power, which are not only concentrated in politics and capital, but also in knowledge produced by the various systems of social life, have long colonized the private sphere. The three Janezes have in effect established a situation which makes evident the fact that a part of the government of the society is also based on the construction of auto-regulating and auto-correcting selves. It only seems that our names, together with our documents and our fingerprints, are proof of our individuality. Through the multiplication of Janez Janša's name, the function of the prime minister has assumed, within this specific artistic action, a similar position as the Campbell soup cans in Andy Warhol's works.

The fact that no eyebrow was publicly raised at this artistic appropriation of Janez Janša's name also tells us that art is less and less able to serve as a representation of the state. The images of politicians are now shaped by the media, and the goal is a polished look. It is a

rare occurrence in Western democracies that the abuse of the name or the image of a politician should have serious consequences. Understandably so: the space of contemporary art is in the hands of the market, rather than any one ideology. In those countries, however, where neo-liberalism has not yet occupied all pores of public life, art is still subject to state monopoly. Not surprisingly, our artists still deal with the questions of their own creativity in the context of the nation-state and its phenomena. And it is also understandable that the most socially conscious artists strive to make contemporary art and its tradition an equal part of national history. Slovenia's politics with all its parties and protocols is unjustified in pushing contemporary art to the margins. The official cultural program for the period of the Slovenian presidency of the EU Council is based on national tradition, rather than on contemporary art or even projects focusing on intercultural dialogue. Recently, the Prime Minister Janez Janša, who will now head the EU Council presidency for half a year, delivered a politically correct speech on intercultural dialogue representing one of the fundamental EU values. None of the renowned Slovene and foreign guests speakers at the official ceremony gave emphasis to the fact that every dialogue is controlled by the relative positions of power and that in reality we can never speak of a dialogue between equal partners. With the Schengen border, also culture will now be more easily divided into European and non-European culture. Engaged contemporary art has long been trying to get the message across that intercultural dialogue also has a dark side, the game of inclusion and exclusion. Our contemporary society could almost be described as divided into larger or smaller collectives of different cultures. On the one hand we see numerous anachronisms triggered by, say, a caricature of Mohamed with a bomb, which is ostensibly offensive to the entire Muslim world, while on the other hand the Western world is full of distorted figures of American and European politicians circulating in the art market without causing any problems. In the face of such phenomena of the neo-liberal world there still exist various anachronisms on the global and local levels, and artists deal with them in one way or another. The Janša project proves that artists are nowadays forced to function in different spaces, where the same rules do not apply. Thus the three Janezes function on the one hand as artists of a nation-state, which is on its way out and which has long ceased to represent the plurality of various interests, and on the other, they work in the international context, where they are already established and where a new name nobody is familiar with is only a drawback. In Berlin one of them was even asked to revert to his old name. The three artists are thus trying out first-hand how the two spaces function, the one still controlled by traditional national values and the other one exposed to international market

mechanisms. The Janša project is caught between various contexts and differing strategies as well.

Throughout history, socially critical collectives have employed adopting roles from formal societal life as their approach. In this way artists create situations that trigger a variety of – also uncontrolled – responses. Artistic projects serve as social laboratories of sorts, where some kind of new, not yet instrumentalized knowledge is being produced. Assessing the Janša project by the success or failure of the provocation would be senseless, since the provocation was just one of the strategies in the process of various experimenting. The measure of quality of the artists' work is their search for truth that has not been classified yet. It does make a difference if the media report on the wedding of Janša the Primer Minister or Janša the artist; the former would be plain news with probably some political PR thrown in, and the latter a contemporary art strategy in its incessant search for its true frame of work. The three artists absolutely legitimately explore strategies that suit their context, and measure the artistic provocation of the government with carefully thought-out public relations actions, aimed at conveying the message that Janša is in all of us. Collective gestures of artists can no longer be focused on a single possibility, but must be structured around de-centered forms of government and identities. We can definitely say that the three Janezes have constructed a framework for exploring new forms of resisting the enemy, though the latter is no longer clear-cut.

January 2008

Translated from Slovenian by Tamara Soban