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The Janez Janša Project

My text is entitled *The Janez Janša Project*, but we need to be aware that the project of this name, needs, first of all, to be proven; we need to prove that there is indeed a “project” deserving this name, that a planned action was carried out, which can be understood as a performative act, and that we are not dealing simply with an intimate, private act, whose motivations and effects are none of our business. There are certainly a handful of signs that point to the latter as the three Slovenian artists who have decided to change their names to Janez Janša have remained silent regarding their decisions and have offered no comments regarding the change, stating that this was an intimate, personal decision, which requires no public rationalization. It was simply a change of name, constituting the individual’s civic right and which, at least in Slovenia, requires no explanation (not even a formal, administrative one).

Nonetheless, in this text, I will challenge this account—which understands the change of name not as a project, but rather as a personal decision of the three artists—on a number of key points. The first counter-argument concerns the public nature of this change. The three individuals who decided to change their name appear regularly in public, in various contexts, mostly to do with art; their name change is thus public not only in the administrative sense (administratively speaking, data such as names belong to the private sphere while being, at the same time publicly accessible, in places like phone books), but also in a broader sense of the public sphere. The decision was made by three artists, not three anonymous individuals, and two of them are active in the field of contemporary performing arts; even more, in their work, these artists often problematize the foundations of contemporary art practices. So we can hypothesize—for now, though we have no proof to claim this—that their name change concerns their art practice and artistic activities.

The second counter-argument concerns the choice of name. The three artists did not pick just any name; they chose Janez Janša—the name of the Slovenian Prime Minister, the president of the centre-right SDS party (Slovenian democratic party/*Slovenska demokratska stranka*), the front man of the Slovenian right wing. No doubt, the choice of name indicates a certain agenda. If we know anything about these three artists’ worldviews—or at least about the worldviews of two of them—we can say with certainty that they are closer to the Left, and that they have been critical of the political stance and policies associated with the best-known

owner of the name Janez Janša (though the Telephone Register of Slovenia lists seven individuals called Janez Janša). We can deduce this conclusion from their artistic actions, manifestoes and performances. Take Janez Janša formerly known as Emil Hrvatin for example; his editorials in *Maska* and his activities as one of the leaders of the Association of Non-Governmental Organisations confirm our assumption.

Since the new name, therefore, cannot be simply the result of a fascination with the most famous authority figure of that name (though this is quite often the motivation for a name change, and obviously many commentators have interpreted the name change in this way)—rather the three artists through their choice of name reach into Žižek’s “traumatic core”. In this case they reach into the traumatic core of the Slovenian state and its transition, and thus the reason for the change must lie somewhere else. We can assume, then, that we are dealing with a conscious, even conceptual decision (at least two of the artists involved are often classified precisely as conceptual artists), for we can discern in this name change an act of a conscious and carefully planned “supra-identification”, which exceeds the personal, intimate character of the decision and which manifests, first and foremost, as its critical point.

The third counter-argument is related to the decision that all three artists assume the same name, that is, the name of Janez Janša. Of course this decision could be simply personal, but it is a fact that the three artists chose the same name and thus achieved a certain degree of identity among themselves, with the best-known Janez Janša, and, after all, with everyone else carrying this name (and there are at least ten of them now). If we try to theorize their act, we could say that they have produced a series. The series and its effects are invoked in an exclamation, which witnesses have attributed to one Janez Janša at his wedding: “*The more of us there are, the faster we can achieve our goal!*” (which, coincidentally, is the motto of the Janez Janša’s political party); they are also hinted at in *We are all Marlene Dietrich FOR* (*Mi vsi smo Marlene Dietrich FOR*), the title of one of the latest performances by another Janez Janša, still known as Emil Hrvatin at the time of the performance; and the series is also confirmed by the joint appearance of the artists collaborating in the current exhibition at Mala galerija in Ljubljana entitled *TRIGLAV – OHO, IRWIN, Janez Janša, Janez Janša and Janez Janša*, whose performer and publicist, visual artist, and intermedia artist are all called Janez Janša.

Let's think about this then, on the one hand, there is the intimate, personal decision, made by three citizens of the Republic of Slovenia, to change their names but on the other hand, there is the decision of three artists, three public figures – at least two of whom are involved in contemporary performing practices – and their decision concerns a charged name, the name of Janez Janša, the Prime Minister and right-wing politician. The three artists have assumed this name and thus produced a series, which points less towards the assumed name as such than towards the meaning and effect of the series itself. “The other hand” of this contemplation, then, seems stronger and it invites the thought that this was a performative project; but to be able to prove this we need to go back to the beginning.

What does a change of name mean in an intimate sense? It is actually a private act, closely connected with the individual's inner motives and, as such, with his or her personality, his or her identity. It entails giving up a part of former identity and personal history as well as one's self-image and the image of oneself as one is seen by the others. This image is closely connected with one's name and the assumption of a new name and therefore new identity has ramifications for it. The change of name then is a peculiar social spectacle. The name, which signifies one's legal, administrative identity as well as one's intimate self—even though it is originally assigned to one arbitrarily, at birth, at christening or when the newborn is registered in the records, but it is then assumed by the individual as his or her own identity—becomes through this change merely representation; the change legalises, or rather, manifests precisely the original randomness of the name. Between the name and identity or (self-) image a gap or a bulge appears, as Foucault would say, a gap which leaves the name on one side and puts the individual's self on the other, and thus throws into relief the arbitrariness of the connection between the two. The name becomes a sliding signifier and thus sheds light on the problematic nature of considering identity as something predetermined or determined once and for all, for suddenly we are forced to notice its multiplicity, as Badiou or Foucault would put it. Furthermore if we are aware that the sphere of identity is one of the primary arenas of contemporary art practices, including performing arts—let's mention Orlan here, the French body artist who has been problematizing the issues of identity and (self-) image through conceptual plastic surgery procedures on her face—we can begin to understand the change of name by the three Slovenian artists in this sense, that is, as a change enacted in the field of Performativity.

An additional confirmation of this thesis comes from the fact that the change was carried out by three artists, two of whom, as already mentioned, have been working in the field of performing arts and expanding the field's thematic and strategic horizons through original and witty projects (such as Emil Hrvatin's *Refugee Camp for First World Citizens* [*Begunsko taborišče za državljane prvega sveta*] or Davide Grassi's *Stock Exchange for Problems* [*Borza problemov*]). It is, also, confirmed by the fact that the three artists, through their name change, have produced a series which is a common phenomenon or concept in contemporary (visual) arts. Moreover if we can understand the change of name in the sense of identity as a body-art event of sorts (by which I mean not only the rupture between the individual and his/her name, that is, a rupture in one's identity, but also the common, albeit pathological bodily changes that a name change triggers), the production of the series is most forcefully inscribed precisely in the fields of the social and the political—in other words, the production of the series becomes an ideological inscription. The series leads to the disappearance of the subject, to its emptying or de-subjectification. The series – with its continuation *ad infinitum* – produces a sequence of empty signifiers, which can then be filled at random with new contents. The series is authorised through absence, the self in the series appears as a “pure void” (Žižek). A causal chain appears between the three artists, that is, between the three Janez Janšas and Janez Janša as Janez Janša; the chain produces a posterior identity, which in turn raises the fundamental question of the referent. What is at stake then is not the disappearance of Emil Hrvatin, Davide Grassi and Žiga Križ as artists, public figures or citizens, but rather the concurrent disappearance of Janez Janša, the name and its owner, that is, the disappearance of the original Janez Janša and his symbolic function. The multiplication of the name as a signifier leads to the disappearance of the referent, and the aforementioned motto of the party now has to be taken literally: the more Janez Janšas there are, the faster we can achieve the goal of the emptying out the subject, its de-subjectification and the establishment of the empty signifier. The goal—more or less de-conceptualized, collateral—of the act of changing one's name, in this case then, is to undermine the real, ideological, economic and political power of the carrier, which entails sacrificing one's own personal or intimate and artistic or public identity. What is crucial here, then, is the offering of the empty space—the void, through which the ideological mechanism, as such, is revealed—for a possible territorialization by a new political subjectivity.

The change of name as non-event, or rather, as an event which does not want to be one in a manifestative sense, exploits a certain unintentional, spontaneous action, triggered by the act

of renaming in the administrative sense. In the sense of identity, the act becomes an event through the staking of one's own personal history, name and identity or self-image, that is, through the indication of their disparity; as an event, it enters the register of contemporary performing arts in the sense of having to do with reality; yet, the act, in the moment when it is carried out by an artist or an actor from the field of contemporary performing arts (the situation is similar to the circumstances created by the appearance of the readymade in a gallery space), becomes an artistic event or a performative project. On the other hand, however, this act becomes an artistic event also through the concept, which is discernible in the choice of name as the target of the renaming and in the production of the series, which triggers a chain of new meanings whose radical implications are politically or ideologically subversive.

When talking about the subversive nature of this project, we need to be aware that the path that these artists have chosen is one of subversive affirmation. While , we know what this strategy means, and we note that it is certainly at work in *The Janez Janša Project*, the three Slovenian artists have also added an original dimension. We could designate their act a subversive re-nomination or de-nomination, with the latter being a more appropriate term, for it implies the object's loss of value. Furthermore, we note that the artists achieve this effect in an almost passive manner, for the plan carries itself out by itself, by producing new meanings solely by appearing spontaneously in the media, with no additional special or planned activities. Since the name change, all three artists have been doing what they have always done, in the same way and there is no evidence – at least no official evidence – to the contrary. While their new names, in connection with their actions, produce new meanings. The following is important when considering this conclusion: if we ask ourselves how *The Janez Janša Project* is functioning, where its author is to be situated, we note that it is not to be found in any planned activities of the three artists (a plan or a concept can only be detected in their simultaneous decision to change their names into Janez Janša), but rather in the media following their actions. The media are following the project mostly out of some sort of automatism, in agreement with their stated aim of reporting objectively about various events, including those in which the three Janez Janšas appear. It is to the artists' advantage that the media coverage produces a certain buzz, which the artists might have even counted on and which stems from the undeniable subservience with which the media follow the figure and actions of prime minister Janez Janša. However, there have been no noticeable attempts to problematize the artists' act in the media, and this is the whole point, of course; the act of

changing one's name becomes an event through the production of media collisions, which are triggered precisely by the appearance of the name Janez Janša in new, completely unexpected contexts, such as "*Janša dances in Berlin*". *The Janez Janša Project* then tactically exploits the media reality even though it enters this reality quite spontaneously and, at first sight, with no subversive intention (or, at least, in a significantly different way from the one deployed by, say, the guerrilla media projects by Joey Skaggs and the Critical Art Ensemble); it only becomes subversive through the collisions brought about by the appearances and actions of the three Janezes Janšas. In so doing, the project undermines the real as well as the symbolic value of the name and its original owner on the one hand, imbuing the name with spontaneous and critical irony; and on the other hand, it enables unexpected reactions (uncertainty, outrage, fear) and, perhaps most importantly, it divests the name of its symbolic power to such an extent that it can offer this newly established void for someone else to fill it up with new—political, ideological—content...

Let's conclude with two pitfalls of *The Janez Janša Project*. First the media decided to boycott the coverage of the activities of the three Janezes Janšas, say, for ideological reasons, the project would probably undergo its factual eclipse, at least in the public eye, and would continue to operate on a purely intimate level of personal identity, as an invisible that, in this case, the motivation for the project would gradually fade out. The second pitfall is the possibility of a planned, orchestrated functioning, which would try to direct the project from without: this would entail the loss of spontaneity, which is currently driving the project and triggering those unexpected collisions and meanings. However, we have no way of knowing which direction the project will actually take, for it resembles the throw of a dice; we cannot imagine, for instance, what the ramifications of the impending parliamentary election will be for the project, where unplanned media coincidences could produce politically provocative (let's refrain from predicting fatal) meanings and effects...

The Janez Janša Project is thus, in addition to its physical dimensions, also a media event, or rather, a mediated event *par excellence*, for it is only through various forms of media representation that the project is fully realised. All three of its manifestations—that is, the intimate manifestation at the level of identity, the political and performative manifestation in the public sphere, and the media or mediated manifestation—can be best understood in the field of contemporary bio-politics, where this introduction could be productively built upon. The self is the performance of interiority, a form of bio-political self-representation. *The*

Janez Janša Project undermines the structure of power from a position within, a goal achieved through sacrifice and (where it persists) with extraordinary resistance; it is, however, more or less utopian to speak about the project as a real political alternative to the current powers that be. Nevertheless, *The Janez Janša Project* is a political project, whose original strategy subverts the dominant, “obscene”, political discourse; the project, thus, writes itself into the field of representational politics, and in so doing it interrogates the foundations of representation.

October 2007

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Proofread by Camile Acey