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Janez Janša as Media Phenomenon



Janez Janša, Janez Janša, Janez Janša
interviewed by Suzana Lovec, journalist
of the *POP TV*, Ljubljana, 2007
Photo: Borut Peterlin

What is the nature of a media phenomenon? Usually, this is a phenomenon that the media bring into the public and then, over a certain period of time, analyse it from various perspectives, explain it, interpret it, etc.

Two examples of notorious media phenomena are last year's abduction of British girl Madeline McCann and this year's case of Josef Fritzl from Austria, who kept his daughter and their five children locked in a cellar for a quarter of a century. In Slovenia, two such examples are the death of three girls in the throng in front of the discotheque Lipa and the case of the killer Silvo Plut, while in the sphere of art and culture the Janez Janša has emerged as a similar sort of media phenomenon. What we have in mind here are the three Slovenian artists, who changed their names to Janez Janša in June and July 2007.

The print and electronic media in Slovenia and abroad, as well as some more specialized publications, have dedicated a lot of attention to this change – they have dissected it, interpreted it and analysed it. However, while the aforementioned media phenomena, in principle, have an expiry date – they disappear from the front pages and

slide into oblivion after a certain period of time – the three Slovenian artists have kept drawing the attention of the media, in small and large doses, throughout the year. Thus, we can establish that Janez Janša constitutes a media phenomenon and, at the same time, it constitutes a phenomenon among media phenomena, not only because it has kept appearing in various media over the period of an entire year but also because of the following, more complex reason. If the most notorious media phenomena result from the assumption – or rather, the deception – that the phenomenon already exists somewhere out there and that all the media does is mediate it to the public, then the Janez Janša media phenomenon has been a media construction from the very beginning. It does not exist outside the media at all.¹ Lukan takes as his starting point the fact that: the three artists still stick to their new names, that this bureaucratically demanding decision was an intimate act that has nothing to do with art, and the three artists deny that they now constitute a new art collective.² To be able to talk about a project by the three renamed artists, we must first show that the Janez

Janša project constitutes an artistic gesture. Yet, not even this is enough, for the artistic dimension of a project is present or formed in the media. In other words, the existence of this art project – which, according to its authors, does not exist, while Lukan explains why it can be understood as such – depends on its appearance in the media.

The Janez Janša media phenomenon reveals the nature of the Janez Janša art

¹This is the thesis argued in detail in Blaž Lukan's article "The Janez Janša Project" (in the journal *Amfiteater*, July 2008, see also in this book, pp. 11-28).

²Incidentally, the news about their name change was spread in public by word of mouth by their friends and acquaintances, who have attended the wedding of one Janez Janša, where the other two Janez Janšas appeared as best men.



Manipulator / The Fledgling Janez Janšas

»Janez Janša Got Married. The mixed-media artist says "I do", instead of the prime minister«

Article from weekly *Mladina*, Ljubljana,

25th August 2007

phenomenon by parasitically infiltrating the media; the media is the space of artistic performance, that is, the space of the project by the three artists, and they cannot be severed from the artistic creation of the Janez Janša project. The project also reveals the nature of the functioning of the media, which never reports on reality as such, rather, they construct such a reality by reporting about it and by choosing a way of reporting about it. The media, which co-creates the art project, induces a certain split in the journalist who is duty bound to report about the project, and in the process of reporting about the three Janez Janšas, the journalist understands

– at least, instinctively – that s/he is not merely a recorder of a neutral event but that s/he is also dealing with an event that constantly evokes a series of meanings (and their interconnections) that cannot be done away with, regardless of how precisely or dispassionately the journalist treats the event. By inadvertently producing a whole series of meanings or several coexistent semantic fields, the reporting about the Janez Janšas often creates confusion and appears comical. Even though – or, perhaps, precisely because – the journalist as a professional remains faithful to the rules of reporting and commenting, s/he cannot shake the feeling

that s/he participates in the creation of the Janez Janša media phenomenon and, by extension, the Janez Janša art project.

One example which could serve to substantiate this claim is the case of the tabloid newspaper *Direkt* (13th October 2007) which reported about the exhibition *Triglav* at Mala galerija, where the project *Mount Triglav on Mount Triglav* by the three Janšas was also on display. A short article was published in the Back Side column on the last page of the newspaper, which elaborated on the reporting about the Janšas affects journalism. The article reports that the *Direkt* editorial board first assumption was that the project of human cloning has finally succeeded. "So, we were relieved to find out that this was a new enterprise by the artists Davide Grassi, Emil Hrvatini, and Žiga Kariž, who decided to assume the name of our famous Prime Minister", goes on to say. What we have here is the gist of the problem of the Janez Janša media project. The editorial board was alarmed because they saw the name of the Prime Minister – this was the first association upon seeing the name Janez Janša – or, more precisely, they saw the name of the Prime Minister written three times in a row, which surprised and confused them; but then they were relieved to find out that this was "merely" an enterprise by three artists. Yet, even though this is "merely" an art enterprise, the editorial board felt compelled to note the accumulation of Janez Janšas in the newspaper confused and surprised them, and they were counting on the fact that this "piling up" was likely to confuse and attract their attention of their readership, as well.

In the same spirit, the Back Side column also reported the news that Janša was dancing in Berlin; again, the article started by saying that the editors first thought that Urška (the Prime Minister's partner) could do

wonders, that is, that she had persuaded the Prime Minister to dance. But then the editors found out that the news referred to the artist performing in Berlin. Nonetheless, the column featured a photograph of the Prime Minister Janez Janša.

The journalist who reports about the Janšas always gets the feeling that s/he is somehow, willingly or inadvertently, of service to the Janez Janša project; because the author of the present discussion has often

found herself in the role of the reporter, the commentator, or the interviewer of the three Janez Janšas she finds that she must reflect upon this split position for the present text to retain its credibility. Further more, even in the current piece, whose purpose is an analysis of this media phenomenon, she will not be able to avoid the emergence of a whole palette

of meanings and their interconnections and nor will she be able to avoid participating or being of service to this art project.

Incidentally, the journalist always co-creates the event about which s/he reports, however, while this aspect of the journalist's creativity usually remains hidden and unthematized, it becomes explicit in the case of the Janšas' project.³

THE CHRONOLOGY AND MEDIA GENRES

The media dimension of the project by Janez Janšas also requires reflection, that is, it

³ On a purely personal level, my experience of the effects of co-creating the Janez Janša project was most immediate when I interviewed the three artists and asked them about the meaning of the statement "The more we are, the faster we will reach the goal!", which was allegedly uttered somewhere by one of the Janšas. Because I thought this was one of the most striking statements in the entire interview, I chose it as the title of the text. Rok Vevar chose the same title for his article in the daily newspaper *Večer* (1 September 2007). It was only later that I found out that Janez Janša, the president of the Slovenian Democratic Party (SDS), ends his letter to every new member of his party with this uplifting sentence.





Janez Janša, Janez Janša, Janez Janša
Wedding, Ljubljana, 11th August 2007
Ceremony

From left: Janez Janša, best man, Marcela Okretič,
bride, Janez Janša, bridegroom, Janez Janša, best man
Photo: Nada Žgank/Memento
Courtesy: Aksioma

needs to be shown how the Janez Janša art project appears in the media and what kinds of effects it produces; how these appearances create the art project and how they affect the broader socio-political space.

A survey of the media texts concerning the Janez Janšas firstly indicates that they received most attention on two occasions: first in August of last year, when the news about their change of name spread, and then secondly at the beginning of 2008, when their performance *Signature Event Context* was banned from the international festival Transmediale in Berlin. A fair share of attention was also given to the exhibition *Triglav* at Mala galerija, which opened in October last year and where their project *Mount Triglav on Mount Triglav* was also on display.

However, as already mentioned, the Janez Janša project remained on the pages of newspapers throughout the year mainly through the texts about the individual artistic activities of each Janša; the majority of these texts are reports and news announcements. Even though it was precisely these articles that kept the Janšas' project in the public eye – in fact, every single piece of information about their artistic activities generated questions about which Janša we were dealing with and stirred up imagination (with titles such as “Janša dances in Berlin” or “Janša shakes hands with Helga”) – we are going to put these texts aside.

We will, rather, be interested in those texts and the appearances of the Janšas in the media (in various columns), which thematize and comment upon the three artists' change of name in a broader context. Academic texts will be of interest mainly from the point of view of how they relate the Janšas' phenomenon to the artists' appearances in the media. We will also be interested in what

we could tentatively call the “exceptional cases” of the three Janšas appearing in the media, that is, in those appearances in which art and politics or art and media genres interconnected in interesting ways.

THE FIRST RESPONSES IN NEWSPAPER COLUMNS

If we start with the commentaries and columns concerning the Janez Janšas during the first appearance of the news about their name change, we can identify at least two serious articles dealing with this topic: the famous columnists of the two most important daily newspapers, *Delo's* Peter Kolšek and *Dnevnik's* Tanja Lesničar Pučko, both attempted to elucidate the phenomenon. What is significant about these columns is, above all, the fact that the name change prompted such an immediate response, an attempt to reflect upon and locate this gesture, which is unique and appears highly unusual.

Both columnists thought about the change of name in the context of art. In the column titled “Is Being Janez Janša an Art Form?” (28th August 2007), Tanja Lesničar Pučko lists various examples of art which, at first, do not appear to be works of art, and some even seem to make a departure from art to show that these examples do concern the sphere of art. She draws on Nicolas Bourriaud's thesis that art constitutes an activity in which relations to the world are forged. It is precisely in this sense, in the sense of forging relations to the world, that Lesničar Pučko understands the name change. In turn, Kolšek's text “The Multiplication of Janez Janšas” (15th September 2007) is concerned predominantly with the inflation of the name Janez Janša. The accumulation renders the name Janez Janša profane, which, for Kolšek,

constitutes an attempt to undermine the authority of the leader. He considers the multiplication of the Janšas important, for it is a rare example of an artist's attempt to forge a more active relation to politics.

THE RESPONSES IN SPECIALIZED PUBLICATIONS

The three artists have received more detailed treatment in specialized publications. The majority of the authors swear by the thesis that the change of name constitutes an artistic gesture, and, as already mentioned, Lukan's text offers the most comprehensive analysis and reflection in this regard.⁴ Lukan

⁴ While Lukan's text does offer the most comprehensive analysis of the Janez Janša project, another text needs to be mentioned, at least in a footnote. In his article "The more of us there are, the faster we can achieve the goal!", which represents one of the first critical responses to the artists' change of name, Rok Vevar defines the action of Janša, Janša, and Janša as an act of subversive affirmation. This is a concept developed by the German author Inke Arns in her analysis of some contemporary art practices observable in the countries of the former Yugoslavia and the Soviet Union. It is based on the concept of over-identification, which was developed by Slavoj Žižek in his analysis of the work of the group Laibach, where Žižek shows that excessive identification with something or someone does not produce an affirmation of the latter but rather a radical critique of it.

contemporary multimedia scene, which draws on conceptual art. The fact that we are dealing with three artists produces a series out of the name Janez Janša. The production of the series is inscribed into the

sphere of the social and the political, and it implies the disappearance of the subject – the disappearance of the artists as well as the referent itself, that is, the Prime Minister. This is the so-called subversive affirmation, the re-nomination.

Lukan's central insight is, "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 to the contrary; mean, while their new names, in connection with their actions, produce new meanings."

At this point, it is worth mentioning two other texts that assume a more critical stance towards the Janez Janšas. The criticisms are based on the assumption that the gesture of changing one's name operates within the sphere of art, and the key question concerns the real subversive political effect of this gesture. In her text "The Construction and Re-Staging of (the) Slovenian(-ness of) Art: The Endless Triglav", which was published in *Reartikulacija* (No. 2, December–January 2007/2008), Petra Kapš also describes the media as central to the Janšas project, however, she is critical of both the project itself and its appearance in the media. Her critique of this project is part of her critique of the exhibition *Triglav* at Mala galerija. She discusses OHO's action *Triglav* and its reappropriations by the group Irwin and the three Janšas. While the original action constituted a daring artistic and political gesture related to the national identity as it is constructed against the symbol of Triglav, highest Slovenian mountain, the other two actions have failed. If we simplify the

argument a bit, Irwin failed because they manipulated the original phenomenon, whereas the Janšas' action represents an initiation into the Slovenian-ness of art.⁵ Even more: "The next step was to trigger media frenzy. Considering the usual protocols, the expert public responded quickly and offered commentaries, analyses, contextualizations, and theorizations of the artists' renaming as well as of their 'three-headed' act on top of Triglav. (The swiftness of this interaction partly clouded the issue of who is producing whom.)"

In Kapš's opinion, due to the absence of the artists' commentaries or interpretations

⁵ The purpose and scope of this text do not allow a detailed discussion of the exhibition *Triglav*. Hence, we are merely referring to the article by Katia Kitamura in the British journal of visual arts *Frieze*, which offers a perspective on the exhibition that is entirely different from Kapš's text. The closing statement of the article illustrates this, "'Triglav' presented a repeated attempt, across three artistic generations, at undermining a single stratified emblem. It also revealed the possibility that the simple task of subversion was never at the core of OHO's original performance, but rather the proving of a national symbol's robustness, in different hands and through different times." (*Frieze Magazine*, 1s. 113, March 2008)

of their own actions, the Janšas project produces the impression that it is "essentially a politically subversive and critical response to the state of affairs in a specific *milieu*; yet, it is also perfectly and precisely aware of the fact that it is constructed in such a way that it neither disturbs nor threatens anyone. It amounts solely to the solicitation of (media) attention." The project

only appears subversive, while in fact it subverts nothing and nobody.

Kapš also writes that the project exposes the reality of Slovenian media, while at the same time it does not critique this reality but rather exploits it for profit, "The project is an insult to the spirit and the inspiration of the avant-garde through a media sale." The latter can be understood as a statement that

the continuing appearance of the three Janšas in the media is not based on the journalists' opinion that the artists' actions are something worth thinking about but rather on the journalists' perception of this media project as something sensationalist that might increase the paper's sales. The Janšas, however, have not seized the opportunity to use the media space to bring it to self-reflection; rather, they have exploited it for self-promotion and profit.

Even harsher about the project by Janez Janšas is Marina Gržinić in her text "On The Dark Side of the Alps" (*Maska*, Nos 113–114, Spring 2008).⁶ The text is dedicated

to the analysis of a special issue of *ČKZ* [Journal for Critique of Science, Imagination and

⁶ Let me mention that the most critical text was published in the journal *Maska*, where Janez Janša is director of the organization.

New Anthropology] The Story of an Erasure as a Bright Light on the Otherwise Dark Side of the Alps. Before clarifying what constitutes the subversive power of this issue, Gržinić singles out two foreclosures, two recent acts that simultaneously occurred in the artistic and political context. These acts, which signalled an attempt to cloud the situation in the sphere of contemporary art and culture, were completely at odds with the "expectations of vitality and prosperity in the art and cultural environment in Slovenia". The first foreclosure was the act when three artists changed their names to Janez Janša and the second one was the production of mythologies following the death of the former President of Slovenia Janez Drnovšek. Here, we are only interested in the first foreclosure and the arguments that have led Gržinić to such an understanding. In her opinion, the name changing of Janšas clouds the current socio-political situation in Slovenia, that is, it clouds the right-

wing capital power of the Slovenian Prime Minister Janez Janša. In contrast to Laibach who, twenty years ago, used the method of over-identification to destabilize the hegemonic discourse of socialism, a similar gesture by the three Janšas today appears as parodic exhibitionism. Not unlike Madonna, the artists sell their own brand and make money. Gržinič also finds it objectionable that the Janšas are wasting money on new and legal identification documents at a time when there are thousands of “erased” in Slovenia, who have been left with no documents at all.

Gržinič also addresses the issue of the artists’ appearances in the media. The frequency of these appearances raises the question of the support that they are getting from the government and the ministry. She mentions the fact that all three artists have been given financial support by Slovene Ministry of Culture for nearly all projects. According to Gržinič, the change of name, which resulted in the increase in the frequency of their appearances in the media, has yielded results – in the form of state money.

An even greater sin, according to Gržinič, is the fact that the three Janšas have been invited to contribute to the *Epistles* column in the weekly supplement of *Dnevnik* newspaper, “For a few weeks, the three Janez Janšas used a very important public space to amuse the readers. The ‘Janšas’ did not give any criticism of the present state of things, just their speculations on their travelling and the reminiscent sentimentalism about their different places of birth and origins. Today in Slovenia, the most fearful censorship is conducted through mass media, journals, and television therefore there is no place for a relevant, critical analysis to be published.” She continues, “Why the opportunity of

getting access to the public and the possibility to argue publicly on topics of control, overt disrespect of human rights, fascistic biopolitics, laws against asylum seeking and migration, and many other issues was not used?” What we can extrapolate from this is that, if the three Janšas are so spendthrift as to change their names and receive the tax payers’ money for their project, they should at least use the media space that they have been given to offer a critique of the hardly idyllic situation in Slovenia. In contrast, Gržinič concludes, the right-wing option needs such a spectacular, multiplied branding of nothing as it is the same nothing that is being produced by the government and the ruling parties.

If we leave aside the question of whether or not the spendthrift associated with the change of name should be justified by the authors’ artistic activities or critique, and the question of whether or not the fact that they have received state funding – it would be fair to point out that two of Janez Janšas received no funding for their projects from the Ministry of Culture in 2008 – means that their art is worthless and uncritical, another question arises, namely, should the artists use the space that they are given in the media to mount a critique of the government, media censorship, politics, etc.? And what kind of critique should this be? Would it have to point explicitly to the concrete mistakes made by the government? Both Kapš and Gržinič see the Janšas’ appearances in the media as an apology of the existing situation and a sign of the artists’ political conformism.

As we have already attempted to show, the Janša project is more complex precisely because it emerges and is maintained in various media to a large extent without the intention of the artists themselves, which means that its effects in the socio-political

spheres are varied and can also be subversive. The “media sale” that Kapš writes about and the inefficient use of the media that Gržinič comments upon are part and parcel of these effects and responses; they are part of the artists’ media appearances and thus also a creation (albeit a negative one) of the project by Janez Janša. It seems, then, that the Janša project and their media presence cannot be reduced to one single interpretation. In the remainder of this text, we will attempt to show that the media sale of the Janšas is much more complex than it seems and that it does have sufficiently subversive – albeit often very subtle – (socio-political) effects.

THE ART OF THE MEDIUM: DEŽULOVIČ

Among the more exceptional cases of the Janšas’ appearances in the media, the article “Is Janez Janša an Idiot?” by the columnist of *Dnevnikov objektiv*⁷ Boris Dežulović (1st

⁷ *Dnevnikov objektiv* is a weekly supplement of the national daily newspapers *Dnevnik*

September 2007, see also in the book, pages 172-173) should be singled out.

The article starts with the statement that, in normal circumstances, the author of the article would think twice before choosing such a provocative title, for he – as well as the newspaper – would fear the possibility of being sued by Prime Minister Janša. The writer then goes on to say explicitly that the first association upon seeing the name Janez Janša is the Slovenian Prime Minister. And then he abruptly proclaims that Janša is an idiot, which he justifies by saying that the Prime Minister’s understanding of borders is idiotic. This argument then leads us to a discussion of tensions at the Slovenian-Croatian border(s). Dežulović gradually goes on to explain that Janša is actually a Croat, even worse, that he is an artist, and therefore,

it is much easier to call him an idiot. It is then that the writer reveals that he is talking about the former Emil Hrvatin, conceptual artist, director and the editor of *Maska*, who’d recently changed his name to Janez Janša and appeared as such at the Berlin festival Tanz im August. In Janša’s performance, he interrogated the relationship between liberal capitalism and the concepts of border and border-crossing.

If we summarize the course of the column thus far: the writer starts with a speech about Janša and his politics as regards Croatia, while at the same time he hints at the possibility of this not concerning the Prime Minister Janša but rather someone else, and then he eventually reveals that his text is actually about the artist Hrvatin, who had recently explored some other borders and boundaries. Concurrently with this series of associations, however, another boundary becomes visible and is then blurred through Dežulović’s constant evocation and transgression, namely, the boundary between the genre of the newspaper column and the spaces of art and politics. The columnist sees the artist’s decision to change his name to Janša as an artistic act and, at the same time, as an invitation to the journalist to participate in it – precisely by way of publishing a column in one of the more prestigious print media sources. He understands this act as “an opportunity to respond to the artist’s call, to publicly cross the imagined borders in a newspaper, and to write that Janez Janša is a common fool”.

There is no danger either, he writes, that the artist might sue him, for he has no resources for this. Besides, artists do everything publicly and they offer their work to be judged by the public. Politicians, on the other hand, have our mandate and yet, they do not display their achievements publicly,

say, at an exhibition or a festival. This is what Janša destroyed when he offered the public an insight into everything that Janša does; he raised the question of boundaries – this time, those boundaries that are regularly transgressed by art. The writer adds, “In everyday life, borders and boundaries are not a challenge, rather, they are an administrative fact. Just like, for instance, the name Janez Janša is an administrative fact.” The thesis of the text, then, is that the Janšas’ artistic act of changing their names has raised questions that are not commonly asked in everyday life, for we consider them self-evident administrative facts. The article thus interrogates these commonly accepted boundaries.

The author then reiterates his statement that Janez Janša is an idiot and he adds that, if for no other reason, because it is impossible to tell who we have in mind when we mention his name. In other words, Dežulović can say this because the label can refer to any of the Janšas – not just the Prime Minister. He reminds us that the Prime Minister himself has changed his name, for he was born as Ivan, while there are also two other artists called Janša. It is also confusing if we say that three Janšas are geniuses while the fourth one is an idiot. Dežulović also refers to the affair of “Janša” the dog: in July 2007, a radio journalist and host reported that the first hit on You Tube, if one types in “Janša”, is a dog that goes by that name. The journalist got suspended for commenting upon this. Dežulović concludes that, since this incident, it has not been clear who is a genius, an idiot, or a scoundrel. Again, there is no way of telling which Janša we have in mind, since obviously Janša is also a dog.

In the next paragraph, the writer introduces Ivo Sanader, the Croatian Prime Minister, into his discussion, stating that,

from now on, Sanader will have to deal with not one but four Janez Janšas. Not only Janša the artist but also Janša the politician will be unable to avoid being confused with one of the artists. And then follows the spectacular twist: “I have thus been inspired to use a pen name for this issue of Dnevnik. No, not Janez Janša. As we can see, everybody is called Janez Janša these days. I could be called, say, Ivo Sanader.” Thus, Sanader can now discuss with Janša the issue of borders without involving the International Court of Justice in The Hague. They can debate the boundaries that exist only in human minds, the transgression of boundaries, such as the boundaries of decency – say, the line separating an acceptable way of saying “Janša is an idiot” from an unacceptable one. “Of course, if you disagree with me, you can always say: what a cardinal idiot this Ivo Sanader is!”

In the final part of the column, Dežulović, as the person who has accepted the artistic challenge and got involved in the Janšas’ performance, renames himself and now, as Sanader, addresses other border disputes he has with Janša - the boundaries that constitute a certain social community. These boundaries, however, are transgressed precisely by being discussed by Sanader the columnist and Janša the artist. In other words, the column “Is Janez Janša an Idiot?” was written by Ivo Sanader, which reinforces the political dimension of the column. A whole new spectrum of meanings and readings emerges here, from those that see the column as Sanader’s way of settling accounts with Janša the idiot, to those that read it as a polemic between Ivo Sanader and Janša about the boundaries (of art). With the act of assuming the name of Ivo Sanader, Dežulović performs what he discusses. This could be summarised as follows. The

boundaries that are discussed in the column and which, first and foremost, concern the boundaries of the socially acceptable or desirable, are usually not interrogated. But the column in which the writer plays with the meanings of Janez Janša as well as Sanader ultimately shows that these boundaries are in fact very porous and that they cannot be drawn once and for all. When Dežulović assumes the name Sanader, he further blurs the boundaries – all meanings become slippery. We can see this as an artistic gesture which is supported by the relatively free genre of the newspaper column, while at the same time Dežulović's act also offers a sophisticated political critique of the two leading Slovenian and Croatian politicians. With the multiplication of the identities of both, the writer questions their status as referents – as the authorities that cannot be appealed to – which is only a step away from interrogating the boundaries raised by the two politicians, in both the literal as well as metaphorical sense.

Yet, the story of Dežulović's column is not over yet. Its artistic potential becomes apparent with Janez Janša's response entitled "I'm Neither an Idiot nor a Common Fool" (8th September 2007). Janša claims that none of the accusations – that he is an idiot and a fool – are based on facts, therefore, he demands an apology from Mr Sanader, or else, he will sue him. If this response is read against Dežulović's column, we can see how the Janez Janša media phenomenon is being reproduced. We should not miss the fact that such a response, which appears comical, relativizes the status of the Letters to the Editor column. The latter is a serious feature of a newspaper, where people concerned about serious issues can start a polemic or enter into a debate. Due to the artist's offence, Janša's response to Sanader – even if it is

meant to be utterly serious – establishes a certain distance towards this column. In other words, it could be argued that Janša abuses the space not only to initiate a polemic with Sanader but also to continue the artistic performance, which Dežulović with his text has become part of. Political connotations remain present all along.

EPISTLES

In a similar vein, the column *Epistles* in *Dnevnikov objektiv* also becomes the space of artistic performance. The column is usually used for correspondence between two known Slovenians, but this time, the three Janšas exchange letters among each other. As Gržinič observes, this can be a space for famous people to criticize current affairs or to draw attention to other problems. As far as the Janšas' correspondence is concerned, two things need to be mentioned: first, the newspaper itself, by having invited three artists with the same name to correspond with each other, has created a media space where the artistic project by the three Janšas unfolds (incidentally, the three Janšas can be told apart solely on the basis of their photographs and signatures). Secondly, the artists, in their letters, create the impression that they do not notice this public media dimension of their correspondence and they write to one another purely as friends, completely immersed in their own artistic and domestic pursuits.

In the letters, we thus encounter details from their family lives, above all, descriptions of where they have been with their wives and children. They describe the cities they have visited, their specificities, sights, etc. In his very first letter, Janša recounts how he visited Italy, including his hometown, with his family, and Janša responds with a

letter about Istanbul. In one of the letters, for instance, Janša reflects upon why the people in Vienna's art circles always seem to take their guests to a sushi place or another exotic restaurant, even though all he wants is a Wienerschnitzel. The Janšas talk about their change of name and joint projects, mainly from an intimate perspective. In a letter dated 2nd February 2008, Janša ruminates about his signature, the old and the new one. When they were signing catalogues at the Transmediale festival, he had to sign his name numerous times and in the letter he describes how he felt during this endless repetition. The other Janša then responds by describing his experience of repeating mantras. He used mantras in his performance *Slovene National Theatre*, in which he critically explored the case of the Strojjan's family eviction from Ambrus⁸,

⁸ In the fall 2006 the Roma family Strojjan has been deported from there living site after the preasure of local population and after the decision of Janša's governement.

as well as in the joint performance *Signature Event Context*, in which all three artists walked

among the concrete slabs of Peter Eisenman's Holocaust Memorial in Berlin repeating the sentence "I am Janez Janša." There are numerous artistic references in the Janšas' correspondence, from literary ones (such as Pamuk, whom Janša was reading before he went to Istanbul) to filmic ones (in Vienna, Janša remembers a controversial film of Liliana Cavani's *The Night Porter* to which other Janša responds with an association of Visconti's provocative film *Death in Venice*).

Janša's reflection about Marcel Duchamp's *Fountain* is significant (2nd February 2008). Tate Modern decided to put the *Fountain* in a glass case to prevent people from using it as a urinal. Janša relates this to his thoughts about comic books featuring Donald Duck where there are no toilets. In this letter, we

can discern a critique of the institution of contemporary art, which does not shy away from fetishizing those objects that attempted to destroy fetishistic approach to works of art.

Another interesting critical reflection is offered in Janša's letter dated 9th February 2008, where the writer points to the prominence of art in contemporary economic theories, in which they consider art an important trigger of economic growth, whereas Slovenian, economic theorists like Mičo Mrkaič understand art in a very stiff, pre-modern way. In a letter dated 22nd February 2008, the same Janša develops his own – we could say "utopian" – idea of a just society based on the establishment of a new royalism. We can see here a critique of social inequalities, which are the necessary corollary of the logic of the capital.

Marina Gržinič is right to claim that the Janšas, in their correspondence, do not show an explicit political engagement. But does this mean that they have not produced any broader socio-political effect? My thesis is that the Janšas have more effectively contributed to their project and its outcome precisely by assuming a passive role in their correspondence, that is, by creating the impression that they are not aware of the fact that medium has offered them a perfect platform for actively developing their joint project. To use Lukan, what distinguishes the project is precisely the inability to determine the limits of artistic intention or purpose and to tell where the spontaneous functioning of the project, which co-exists with the logic of the functioning of a certain medium, begins. In other words, the subversive gesture of this correspondence lies precisely in this apparent or real passivity. If this were not the case, the project would lose its openness (to various meanings, understandings and

interpretations) and could risk operating as a trivial, current-affairs kind of criticism.

POLITICS AND JANEZ JANŠA

Another important element of the media phenomenon Janez Janša is the way that the three Janez Janšas entered the Slovenian sphere of current affairs. As soon as the news about their change of name appeared, there was also a rumour that all three of them became members of Janez Janša's party SDS. To this day, the artists have not confirmed this piece of information, but it has been given attention in various media. It is even mentioned in Herwig G. Höller's article "We Are the Best Model" in the Vienna weekly *Falter*. Moreover, Höller understands the change of name as an artistic symptom that testifies to the fact that there is something seriously wrong in Slovenia. In the text, Höller problematizes the main events and affairs that happened during the mandate of Janša's government, from the eviction of the Strojjan family to media pressures and censorship, to the tapping affair, and the arrogance of the current government.

The artists' "current-affairs baptism" of sorts happened in the POP TV's show *Presidential Elections* on the day of the first round of presidential elections in Slovenia (21st October 2007). On the show, the journalists Darja Zgonc discussed with her guests in detail the first unofficial results of the election, and the experts in the studio commented upon them as well as on the responses by some key politicians. The show made sure that the reporters were calling in directly from all election headquarters and the media centre, and they broadcast the interviews with all key players: presidential candidates, their wives, party leaders, the Prime Minister Janša, etc. When the show

reached the end, Darja Zgonc announced a surprise, "And now, back to Lojze Peterle's headquarters where, apparently, there are some interesting guests. Suzana." "Yes, Darja," the journalist Suzana Lovc replied, "yet another surprise of this year's election. Three multimedia artists have just entered Lojze Peterle's headquarters; all three of them have recently changed their names to Janez Janša." The reporter then turned towards the artists, "Why are you here today?" Janez Janša responded, "Well, like everybody else, we assume, we are here to congratulate Lojze Peterle and to toast to the good results." Janša replied to the journalist's question whether this was an art action with, "It might be, if you say so." The journalist then tried to ask if this was some kind of a protest, to which Janša replied, "There is nothing to add here. We are actually here to congratulate Mr Peterle. That is all."

Those who followed the show carefully would have noticed the three artists in Lojze Peterle's headquarters even before the interview, they were wearing green T-shirts featuring the logo of Lojze Peterle, keeping themselves to themselves and sipping wine. Even this seemed a bit unusual and – to those who know the artists – comical, but for this type of show, the interview with them was an event without precedent. It was unprecedented not only because commercial television makes no room for contemporary art but also because the presence of the three Janez Janšas on the show (as well as in Peterle's headquarters) was like an unidentifiable foreign object. The members of Slovenian contemporary art scene are usually reserved as regards current affairs and they hardly ever appear in the vicinity of the politicians, but this was precisely what happened, and even though the three artists publicly declared their support for Peterle,

their affirmative stance appeared more like a critique or subversion of the public image of this presidential candidate. Even more, their presence worked like an idiosyncratic interrogation of the entire Slovenian political scene and its established rules of functioning.

The role of the televisual medium was also crucial here. Of course, POP TV swallowed the bait offered by the Janšas; the phenomenon was interesting, amusing, and unusual enough to increase the number of viewers. On the other hand, however, the Janez Janša project thus appropriated a minute or two of prime time commercial television as a space of artistic activity.

ON TO THE PARLIAMENTARY ELECTIONS

Vesna R. Bernard and Meta Roglič's article "The May Hit: The pensioners party" in *Dnevnik* (16th May 2008) testifies to the fact that all Janez Janšas have a certain status in the Slovenian political sphere, that is, that they are recognised as at least interesting personalities. The piece offers information about where a specific politician is going to run for the parliament and it features the details about each party's list of candidates. In this perfectly serious article, there is a section titled "Janez Janša against Janez Janša in Grosuplje", where the authors report that the Social Democrats (SD), the main opposition party, allegedly wants Janez Janša to appear on their list. "Of course, they are not counting on the president of SDS but rather on one of the artists who assumed this name."

This is one of the quality newspaper articles dedicated to current affairs that refers to the three Janez Janšas. Yet, the scope of this article becomes apparent in the responses to it in the letters to the editor. There Sebastjan Jeretič from the SD's public relations office explains that the information

in the article is incorrect, or rather, that this is merely a witty "rumour that has been circulating in the party for the last few days."

All three Janšas also sent their letters to the newspaper. The first, for instance, states, "I declare that I have never participated in any discussion with any representatives of the SD party about a possible candidature on their list; I have no knowledge whatsoever of any such candidature." The second Janša writes, "I declare that I have no intention of standing as candidate for the SD party." And the third: "This is the first time that I hear about this and I strongly deny that anyone from the SD has contacted me about standing as candidate on their list in Grosuplje." Yet again, this is the case of the letters to the editor suddenly becoming not only the site of serious responses to the article (although they do function as such) but also the space of the three Janšas' artistic performance. If we sum up, Sebastjan Jeretič admits that his party toyed with the amusing idea of Janez Janša standing as their candidate; no doubt, Janša standing against Janša in a certain electoral district could confuse the voters, it could undermine both the authority of the Prime Minister as well as the credibility of the election. The Janšas' responses can be read as assurance that they persist in the sphere of art, yet, with their letters to the editor, they have also entered the voters' consciousness, that is, the sphere of daily politics.

A MEDIA CONSPIRACY

At the end of January, more precisely, on 29th January 2008, the news spread that the opening performance *Signature Event Context* by the three Janez Janšas at the Transmediale festival had been banned. According to the statements by the festival

epistole Oploditev z loterijo



Janez Janša

Ko sem najprej pogledal v pečico, sem pomislil, da si nenamerno zgrešil stran kuharske knjige.

Lottery fertilisation

When I looked into the oven, it crossed my mind that you might have inadvertently missed a page of the cookbook.

Janez Janša in fotografirani avtorji.

Dragi Janez,

Prava je bila ta zabava, da si predložil recept za izdelavo sladkega kruha. Če bi bil to recept, bi bil to recept za izdelavo sladkega kruha. Če bi bil to recept, bi bil to recept za izdelavo sladkega kruha.

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epistole Kako ekonomija in vojska ljubita umetnost



Janez Janša

Ko si obiskovalec umetniških dogodkov, ti je umetnost bog iz realnosti, ko si umetnik, ti je realnost bog iz umetnosti.

How economy and the army love art

When you are a visitor of art events, art means to you an escape from reality; when you are an artist, reality provides you with an escape from art.

Dragi Janez,

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epistole Se še spominjaš Triglava?



Janez Janša

Iščem tiste gore, do katerih se da preplezati z avtom, da lahko na vhu uživam, ne pa da krčkam od izčrpanosti.

Do you remember Triglav?

I am looking for mountains that can be climbed in a car, so I can enjoy being on top of them, instead of dying of exhaustion.

Dragi Janez,

Prava je bila ta zabava, da si predložil recept za izdelavo sladkega kruha. Če bi bil to recept, bi bil to recept za izdelavo sladkega kruha. Če bi bil to recept, bi bil to recept za izdelavo sladkega kruha.

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Janez Janša

Janez Janša

Janez Janša

director Stephen Kovats and the curator Nataša Petrešin Bachelez, the performance that included the walk of the artists through the Berlin moment commemorating the victims of the Holocaust, where they inscribed themselves into the virtual Google Map via satellite connection while chanting "I am Janez Janša", was banned because of "legal and judicial issues" and because of the curator's "personal ethical position". The performance was eventually included in the festival, in the exhibition section, only two days after the opening.

The news about the censorship received a lot of attention in the Slovenian as well as international media. Mostly the news was simply reported, but some authors discussed the concept of the performance (*Libération*), while others (for instance the reporter for the newspaper *L'Unità*) believed this was a case of political censorship. Apparently, the organisers were upset about the fact that the artists had the same name as the Slovenian Prime Minister. Among the most interesting perspectives appearing in the media were the ones offered by the journalist of the internet news site Vest (*Vest.si*) in an interview with the Janšas (9th February 2008) and the one offered by Domenico Quaranta in *Flash Art* (No. 269, April–May 2008), who discusses the question of (relativizing) the identity of the artist. Both journalists pointed out the fact that the ban appeared staged, particularly in light of the theme of this year's Transmediale: *Conspire*. The latter has several implications: first, in contemporary art, banning of any kind seems impossible. Art, or so it seems, is the space of absolute freedom, where subversive acts are allowed or even desired; this is why the ban was perceived as an artistically constructed conspiracy. When it became clear that the ban was genuine, many people thought that the reason for it

could only be political. Furthermore, the thought that this was a staged conspiracy as an art event seemed plausible precisely because it relied on immediate and mass media response. In other words, given that the Janez Janša art project exists in media space, it would be logical that its continuation or development would be the banning of the event as an art event, which exists again only insofar as it is present in the media.

CONCLUSION

The first conclusion we can draw on the basis of our analysis is that the nature of the Janez Janša project is parasitic. It is sustained by being able to enter every pore of the media space, be it media columns such as letters to the editor or serious specialized texts that criticise the change of name or the Janez Janša art project. Second, the media-supported art project not only parasitically inhabits the media space but also, in so doing, probes the boundaries between both spheres and transgresses the boundaries between art and politics. The constant allusion to the Prime Minister renders unstable both the sphere of art and the sphere of politics in the narrower sense of the word, that is, it renders their boundaries fragile and unstable. However, if we say that the Janez Janša art project is political, we do not intend to say that it represents a critique of the ruling powers in the sphere of daily politics but rather that it is political in that it moves between spheres and questions them all.

The project is kept alive by media coverage, yet, it is not an exclusively media-based phenomenon. In art, it manifests itself only in the rare instances of collaboration between the three artists in joint projects, which do not concern directly the Janez Janša project, whereas in (daily) politics, it is present

as an (unbecoming?) prank as well as an unpleasant shadow, cast over the identity of the Prime Minister.

To say that the Janez Janša project is a media phenomenon, then, is not enough. After one year of its existence, we can see that this is a phenomenon that relies constitutively on all possible media, yet, at the same time, it touches and enters other social subsystems and subverts them with its fairly simple operational logic. For the critics, it is a challenge, not only because they are always – willingly or unwittingly – at its service, but also because it is difficult to grasp its artistic and even emancipatory

power; it is difficult to ascribe it the ultimate meaning and interpretation, for it is in the nature of this project that it can produce, at any moment, a new (artistic) or social effect and thus acquire a new dimension. This is why it is impossible to predict the future of this project; all unpredictable effects of this art project would be produced and would become manifest, for instance, if someone decided to take on the topic of the Janez Janša Media Phenomenon, wherein they would explore the media treatment and appearances of the Slovenian Prime Minister.

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Translated by Polona Petek