

# THE NAME AS A READYMADE

## AN INTERVIEW WITH JANEZ JANŠA, JANEZ JANŠA, AND JANEZ JANŠA

### On the Uncanny and the Sublime

**Lev Kreft** Usually, we use our names to distinguish ourselves from other people. Your names are very clear, yet, they are also indistinct; they cannot be told apart. Alexander Gottlieb Baumgarten defines aesthetics as something that operates in the field of clarity and indistinctness. The clear and indistinct is what appeals to the senses. Do you think this aesthetic effect of indistinctness is important for an (artistic) choice of name?

**Janez Janša** The fact that three people are using the same name, that they have the same name in the same time and space, hacks the analogue mode of the administrative system, for personal names are usually used precisely to distinguish one person from another. In our case, the media, our friends, and even public servants feel the need to add something to our names when they introduce us in public. This means that, in this case, the very concept of the personal name is cracked, that it no longer functions without an addition of some sort. It no longer functions without an addition, such as date of birth, or place of residence, or profession. I find this an important consequence of this virulent gesture. A virus breaks into the system, and the system no longer works. There are no preventive measures already present within the system to prepare it for such cases.

**JJ** What interests me within contemporary art is the question of how to produce a gesture that, in some way, cuts into the regime of comprehension, looking, perception, etc. Such a gesture puts the spectator in a position where he needs to negotiate — above all, with himself — his relationship to this gesture, how to understand it. There is no prior moment of comprehension; the spectator first needs to ask himself, that is, he needs to negotiate with himself, how he is going to understand the gesture. This is what happens if the gesture involves something sublime, which is very close and at the same time very remote. What I find interesting in art is that which draws the spectator radically close and, at the same time, pushes him far away.

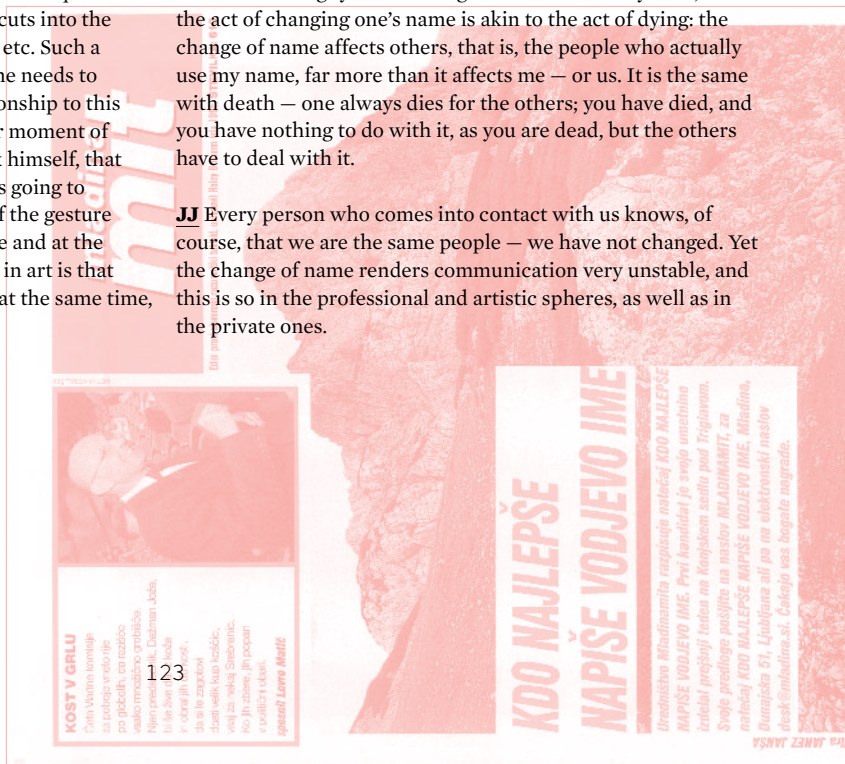
**LK** We are dealing, then, with a relatively clear identity — what becomes indistinct is identification. Now that you have acquired some experience with how this works, and given the contemporary (also artistic) obsession with identity, do you find interesting such an interrogation of identification as the only reliable proof of identity?

**JJ** The personal name is something that puts a person into public circulation. If you enter a certain public situation, you enter it with and through your own name. Since this is so, the question immediately arises: how personal is the personal name if its basic function is, after all, predominantly public? It belongs to you, but others use it in order to distinguish you from other people. If there is confusion regarding the names, there is confusion regarding identities, a case of mistaken identities.

**LK** We'll get back to that issue...

**JJ** What happens is a shock to the system of perception, for others must distinguish you from others by using a new name. But the new name means that they must also distinguish you from yourself. In this sense, it is perhaps possible to talk about the change of projection, the change of the projected part of identity, that is, the part which is projected onto you by the others — they call you neither “Žiga Kariž” nor “Janez Janša,” but rather “the guy who’s changed his name.” In my view, the act of changing one’s name is akin to the act of dying: the change of name affects others, that is, the people who actually use my name, far more than it affects me — or us. It is the same with death — one always dies for the others; you have died, and you have nothing to do with it, as you are dead, but the others have to deal with it.

**JJ** Every person who comes into contact with us knows, of course, that we are the same people — we have not changed. Yet the change of name renders communication very unstable, and this is so in the professional and artistic spheres, as well as in the private ones.



**JJ** In a way, I am in a permanent reality show of sorts, since the change of name brings with it an additional fictionalization — a parallel reality of sorts. And reality resists the prospect of this parallel reality becoming part of it.

**LK** At the beginning of the interview, Janez mentioned the effect of the “sublime” — safe conditions are required for the “sublime” to manifest itself. In this situation, I think, that the others do not feel quite safe, meaning that the “sublime” is foreclosed here in the sense that it remains — at least, in part — not so much in the domain of horror, but rather in the domain of the uncanny (*Unheimlichkeit*). The response to this uncanniness can, in my opinion, give us insight into the significance of this sort of identification.

**JJ** This uncanniness is obvious. At the beginning, people avoided addressing us with our old names as well as with our new ones — they refrained from using any names at all when they addressed us.

**LK** But, let's not limit the uncanny just to the others. Of course, we can maintain that having a name is a convention. Given what we have talked about thus far, a name is just an externally functioning convention, which has no consequences for the person carrying the name. Yet, the name can also be conceived of in a different way, as something essential, even ritual, this is where the act of naming comes from. If you choose another name you become another person, you become this other name. Don't you find this at least a little bit dangerous?

**JJ** What we are dealing with here is the fact that this gesture actually intervenes into the relationship between art and life; it locates itself at the intersections of the public, the private, the political, the artistic, the administrative, the judicial, the mediated... You cannot avoid the consequences of changing your name in any of these spheres.

**JJ** What is the basic paradox? Why does this gesture produce uncanniness? Precisely because it has *really* taken place: had we used the name as a pseudonym, the whole thing would have been immediately clear, as well as distinct: “Ah well, this is just the name they use in public.” But now the question is: “Why did they do this for real? It would be more or less the same thing [if they only used the pseudonym], and we would understand it.”

**JJ** We also need to point out the difference between this gesture and the existing forms of multiple names. Usually, the latter are collective pseudonyms. The case of one of the most famous multiple names, Luther Blissett, was similar to mine in that it involved the assumption of the name of an actually existing person (Luther Blissett was a black football player with AC Milan); however, I assumed my new name not only as a pseudonym, but also administratively.

### On the Change of Name and Identity

**LK** Well, we have recently seen Mehmed Pasha Aurélio, who plays football for Turkey. He is the Brazilian who changed his name to be able to play for Turkey (he not only became a Turkish citizen, he also changed his name); he retained Aurélio and added Mehmed, which helped, and then the public added Pasha, for he is an excellent player. There are other such examples. Therefore, I suggest that we take this debate further as far as the true effect of the name is concerned.

The *avant-garde* artistic gesture is defined as a descent from art into life (Peter Bürger), but here we are dealing with a descent in the opposite direction: a descent from life into art. We are interested in this irruption of the true in art. If it is true that, in the art world, something — say, Duchamp's *Fountain* — can happen as an artistic act (as Danto claims) only in a certain space, at a certain time, then the change of name of this kind can also happen as an (artistic) act only in a certain space and at a certain time. Not all legislation is the same: the Slovenian legislation is more liberal than many others. We also know why: because there has been the desire to be able to change one's name so as to avoid being identified as non-Slovenian. I was wondering if this — the liberal nature of the Slovenian legislation — was something that you had in mind when you set forth to change your names? This is the post-1991 political context of name changes in Slovenia.

**JJ** We carefully studied the Slovenian legislation as well as the potential reasons why our applications might be rejected. The Personal Name Act was passed by the Parliament on February 1, 2006, that is, during the mandate of the Prime Minister Janša's government. The Act includes two articles on the basis of which an application for the change of name can be rejected: the first article states that the application would be rejected if the applicant is subject to criminal proceedings; and, the second article states that “the right to freely choose one's personal name can only be limited if this is essential for the protection of public safety, morality, or the rights and freedoms of other people.” This is the flexible part of the Act, which made us ponder the possibility of our change of name applications being rejected.

**JJ** We knew that there have been eleven people with this name in Slovenia before the three of us decided to change our names, so we thought, “If they can have it, why couldn’t we?”

**JJ** Our change of name is not a direct reflection or a commentary on the — conditionally speaking — liberal circumstances concerning name changes in Slovenia, although it does entail this dimension.

**LK** So, it has nothing to do with the changes aimed at making the names sound Slovenian?

**JJ** That’s right.

**LK** Didn’t you know that somewhere else this might have been impossible?

**JJ** I did enquire about how these things are done in Italy, because I am also an Italian citizen; the public servant at my Italian municipality told me that I am Davide Grassi for the Italian administration, and that they do not care under what name the Slovenian administration manages my information. At present, I have valid Italian documents issued in the name of Davide Grassi, and equally valid Slovenian documents issued in the name of Janez Janša.

**JJ** The change of last name is not permitted in Italy if the name is historically significant, or if it belongs to a person who is very important, or very famous in the place where the applicant was born, or where he lives at the moment — such a change could create confusion.

**JJ** As a Croatian citizen, my experience is similar to Janez’s in Italy. I am Emil Hrvatin in the Croatian records.

**LK** But probably, in this procedure of applying for the change of name that you have started, there still exists the requirement to state the reason for wanting to change one’s name? Or is the procedure pure formality?

**JJ** Not in Slovenia, no, but in Italy and in Croatia you do have to state such a reason. The Slovenian form only requires you to state your former name, and your new name, and to list your family members, but you do not need to state any reasons or rationale for the change.

**LK** The next points of our discussion are the very documents that you have acquired. On the one hand, you have acquired a name, which, in itself, is not a document; it is, however, your identification, just like at the beginning, when we introduced

ourselves. On the other hand, though, the name is a document that authenticates the change. It proves that you are not using a pen name or a pseudonym; if you say, “I am Janez Janša,” this is absolutely accurate, and you can prove it with your identification cards. A name is obviously something that one can pick for oneself: it is not just something that the others choose for you, you do have a say in this. What does this gesture of baptising yourself, so to speak, mean? It is an unusual gesture after all, isn’t it?

**JJ** American artist Kristin Sue Lucas had her name officially changed on October 5th, 2007, to the exact same name — the same as the one that she had had before. This was obviously a matter of agency, the fulfilment of her desire to determine her own first and last name.

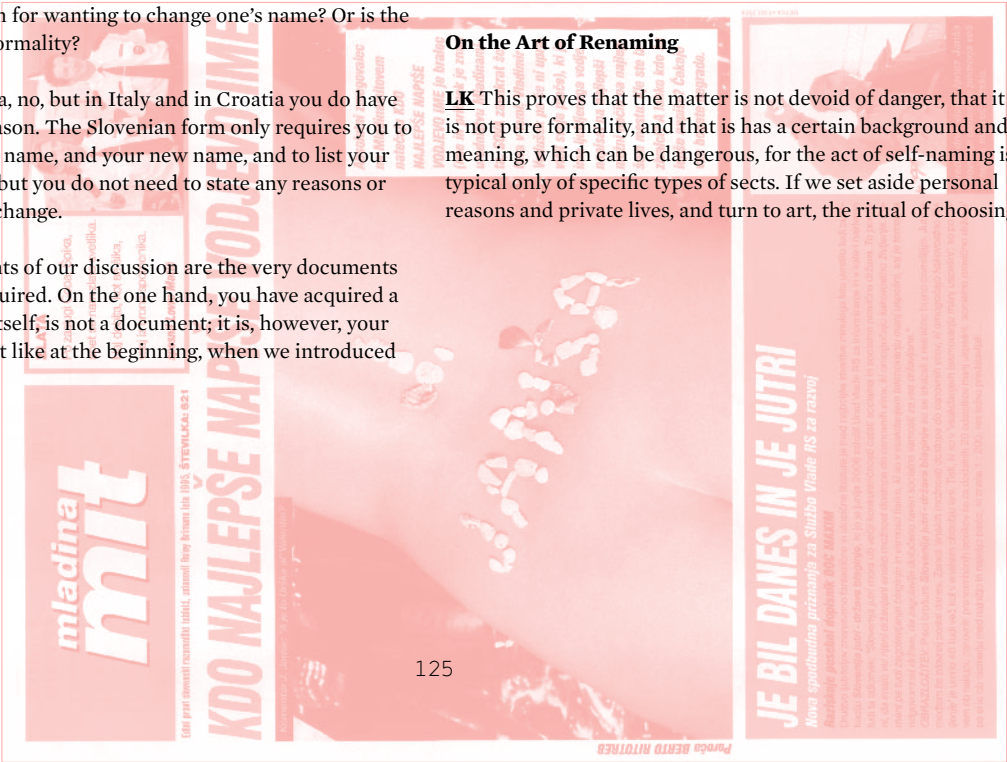
**JJ** I think it is a great statement in terms of understanding a subject in its discontinuity.

**LK** Let me clarify: we have all experienced a stage — perhaps during puberty — when we wanted to change our names because our parents had given us something that we were not pleased with. Some of us pondered this possibility very seriously, and if anyone went ahead and really did it, the first people to be offended by this would be his parents. Which is to say, this act obviously means something more — not only identification and the change of identification; it means a specific personal problem — it is you who has made the decision. How do the people who gave you your former names feel about this change?

**JJ** My father understands the change of name, above all, as a renunciation of the name that he gave me, and which is part of the family tradition. Somewhere deep in his heart he is probably also wondering whether or not I have renounced him, as well. He is very hurt.

**On the Art of Renaming**

**LK** This proves that the matter is not devoid of danger, that it is not pure formality, and that it has a certain background and meaning, which can be dangerous, for the act of self-naming is typical only of specific types of sects. If we set aside personal reasons and private lives, and turn to art, the ritual of choosing



one's own name is probably connected above all with art, because in art — at least metaphorically — one has to make a name for oneself. Is this a *significant* effect of the name change?

**JJ** If we are dealing with a personal name within the art system, this can be read at various levels. One such way is through the conditions under which the artists live, in this case the conditions of neoliberal capitalism where you are what you do, you are your name, you are making a name for yourself, and your name is your work.

**JJ** A brand.

**JJ** That's right, you are a brand, and you are recognised as such, you are creating this brand name...

**JJ** ...and you are doing this slowly, in contrast to the act of renaming...

**JJ** ...you are making a name for yourself slowly and, in the moment when you decide to change your name, you stake...

**JJ** ...your name...

**JJ** Not only do you renounce your name, but also, when several authors with the same name appear, your work is automatically undistinguished. Our change of name is still a novelty, but from a certain distance — particularly in the international context — all our works, individual ones included, will be seen as the works of a collective.

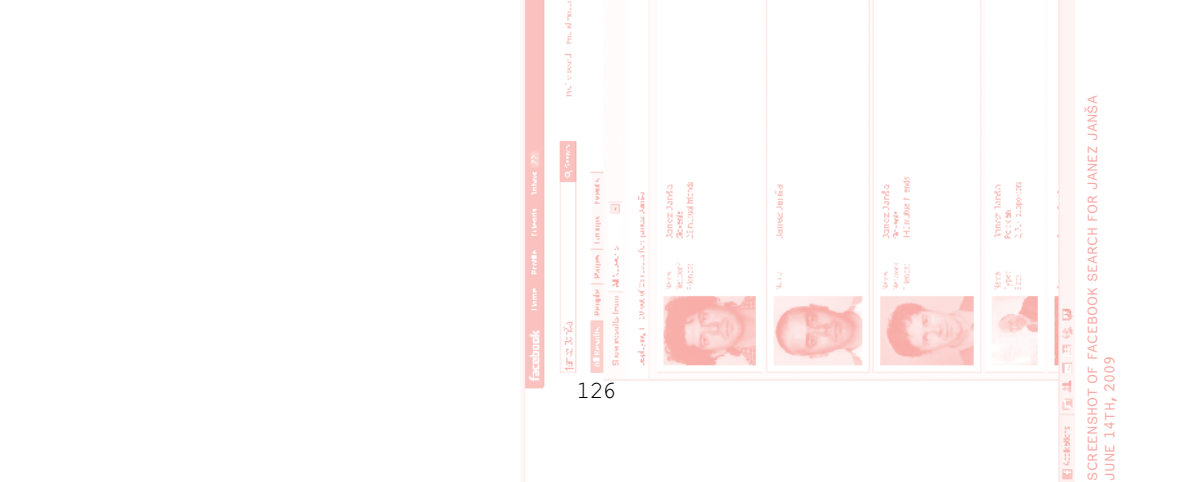
**JJ** However the whole thing figures in the public sphere, it, nevertheless, greatly affects us. This is a gesture that you cannot perform and remain unscathed. What is most painful about the whole business, however, is this: if the public is experiencing a certain uncanniness, the authors are living a certain uncertainty. Yet again, this uncertainty is something conscious. If we were to talk about how much is lost... This is the uncertainty that follows you: "Where is this whole thing going? What can I anticipate?"... We have confronted a lot of precedent-setting situations, where we cannot appeal to any sort of established practice. Uncertainty is part and parcel of this, and it is what renders the whole situation extremely risky.

On Sameness and Difference

**LK** In Slovenia, there exists a group that worked anonymously for years while people kept asking who its members were. I am talking about Laibach/NSK, and their anonymous collective statements, a group of people without personal names — that is extremely difficult in Slovenia, where everybody knows everybody. If I look at your biographies in the past two years, I would say that the change of name has not burdened you, for you are all still doing what you were doing before the change, and you also do things together. Am I wrong? Do you bring your individual projects into line with one another, or do you keep doing your own things — your individual artistic careers — while there is also a space in which you are creating something together?

**JJ** You have already answered your own question; we all changed our names individually. We have not become one person, one group, or one collective. We have not changed our modes of working, we have not changed the ways we function in the society, and we have not changed our interests, views, or strategies. We have created some works together, but we had done so before, as well. I collaborated with Janez on *Miss Mobile*, and he collaborated with Janez on *Problemmarket* and *Kača na nebesnem svodu* (*The Snake in the Sky*). Laibach appeared as a group of anonymous and unknown individuals; in our case, the opposite is the case, we have all been active for more than a decade, we have all established ourselves publicly under our former names, therefore, our change of name has different consequences. We have never concealed our identities, my CV is still the same, only the name has changed, and everybody knows exactly who I am. If we talk about names as brands in the art world, we must see this as a counter-marketing gesture; a brand must be pushed forward, it must become more and more visible, whereas in our case, the appearance of the new name is necessarily connected with the gradual disappearance of the old one.

**JJ** We are dealing with a paradox here, which I would describe as visible disappearance, that is to say, Grassi, Hrvatin, and Kariž have disappeared, but in a visible manner, their disappearance has rendered them even more visible than before. This is the point where we must consider the gesture of renaming in connection with the thesis about withdrawal as a political strategy, that is, withdrawal not as a romantic act of escapism, but rather, as a withdrawal from the logic and pressures of the art market. With Laibach, the assumption of





the name is more important, for the name represents a certain traumatic historical point that was topical at the time; their name hit the traumatic core, and produced uncanniness in the public.

**LK** What about your names, don't they produce uncanniness in the public?

**JJ** I think they produce a lot of uncanniness, but the difference is that, today, you do not need to legally classify someone as the enemy of the state, but you can characterize them as a terrorist in the military sense.

### On the Right to Erase One's Former Name

**LK** Never say never... under the new media law, the safeguarding of the name, and the reputation of the state is considered a good enough reason to interfere with the autonomy of the journalists. Yet again, it is just like during socialism. But what does this safeguarding entail, and does it involve the legal protection of a person who performs a state function? This is a whole new issue, but it is all coming back slowly.

**JJ** I was going to say that the conditions under which we live today demand a certain public trading in names. Our change of name shows how you can step into a certain anonymity precisely by revealing yourself so drastically. The uncanniness emerges in a very broad spectrum: in the political, the collegial-professional, as well as in the private.

**JJ** Let's take Mladinska Knjiga's *Leksikon osebnosti* (*Who's Who* directory), for instance. The editors and the authors insisted — for a very long time — that the three of us should appear as entries under our former names. They rationalised this demand by saying that the public knows us better by our former names than by our new ones.

**JJ** This gesture conceals a certain kind of uncanniness, for everybody who knew me by my former name knows me by my current name as well, and in the meantime, I have been introduced to many other people who did not know me before. This means that the argument conceals another reason, which the editors and the authors did not want to reveal...

**JJ** ...to have four Janez Janšas listed in the directory one after another...

**JJ** ...or something else... Again, this incredulity that has been a constant feature of all reactions: "But this is just a game, while we are serious, we are putting together a directory. This is a lexicographical publication. This is a publication based on facts; we cannot play games here..." It is precisely the fact that we have *really* changed our names that produces incredulity and uncanniness.

**JJ** If we follow the story about the directory to its end, the fact that I have changed my name means that I no longer want to use my former name. This means that I have the right to rename my former works — if copyrighted work is bound to the author as a person, the person is the same, and only the name has changed. If I did a project called X ten years ago, I am still the author of this work; and if my name is now Janez Janša, then Janez Janša is the author of X.

**JJ** Under the Personal Name Act, the citizen is *obliged* to use a personal name.

### On the Personal Document as a Readymade

**LK** Here, I want to reiterate a story recounted by George Dickie in his book, on the institutional theory of art. In a museum, there is an exhibition that features one hundred metal plates. A plumber comes in to fix the toilets — for even museum toilets break down occasionally — and he walks through the museum and straight over the metal plates. Everyone is watching uneasily until someone points out, "Watch out, you are trampling all over a work of art!" He asks, "What work of art, for God's sake? This is where the plumbing needs to be fixed!" An artwork that is a readymade of sorts is quickly confused with an ordinary thing by the uninitiated. The opposite is the case with names: people confuse your readymade, which is a perfectly ordinary name, with an artwork, and then they experience uncanniness when they find out that this is not an artwork, but rather, a perfectly normal real name. The institution of art cannot bear something that is real; for if that is the case, then we must be dealing with a Roman amphitheatre and not fine art. Therefore, I want to end this matter, which concerns the name itself as a readymade, like this. It is obvious that this readymade works. It is obvious that your new name represents no problem for those who do not know that you

are artists. Even the police are fine with it; otherwise your applications would have been rejected. The problems, then, only arise in the world of art. This kind of readymade — one that is real — is, of course, fundamentally different from Duchamp's or Warhol's readymades. If we take *Fountain* as an example, Duchamp's readymade was not an ordinary thing at all, unchanged and merely transported; he signed it, he turned it around. In short, in order to make an ordinary thing a work of art, he transformed it. Andy Warhol actually did not make readymades at all, what he did was paint portraits of ordinary things — commodities, such as Brillo boxes that contained no Brillo soap. You, however, are contained in your name! This “box” contains precisely what it says, and to contemporary art — despite all the changes that occurred throughout the twentieth century — it is still scandalously disturbing that this is real.

I suggest we move on to the other aspect of the readymade. In addition to the personal name being a readymade of sorts — because it can be moved or changed and because, transplanted into the field of art, it appears uncanny to the others — the documents themselves are also ordinary things, readymades. Everybody has identification documents. You have decided to exhibit yours. This is your decision, but it is not a personal matter; you have decided to exhibit your documents as artworks. I believe there are two types of readymades present here: one is the name as a readymade; and, the other are the documents as readymades. The status of the documents is serious. In any given society — not necessarily just contemporary society — these documents prove your identity to everybody with the right to ask for your identification. These documents assume and facilitate certain procedures; in short, they are not just any odd ordinary things — they are not a urinal turned into *Fountain*. How and why have you decided to jointly exhibit your personal documents?

**JJ** In the history of art, such readymades did not exist. Personal documents such as personal identification cards, passports, health insurance cards, credit cards, etc., cannot “simply” be bought in shops, recontextualized, turned around, exhibited, and produced as readymades. To obtain them, you have to initiate a process: you have to initiate an administrative process to obtain them. In our case, all the documents that we have state the same name. For this reason, these documents are unusual and have a different status, even though they are the exact same kind of documents as every other personal identification card issued in Slovenia. We consider them works of art precisely because they contain the procedure through which they were produced.

## On Useful and Useless Readymades

**LK** If we follow the trail of logic: these documents are your personal documents, and also a proof of your change of name — which was done for entirely personal reasons — and this triggers uncanniness in the world of art. This is one level. As the documents confirming your change of name, these documents are not works of art, for the change of name, as such, was not an artwork, either.

There exists a second level, where these documents are already recognised as works of art (at least some of them), for their designers won the Prešernova Award, the highest state award in the field of artistic creation. The documents themselves can thus have the status of artworks from a different perspective than the one you have tackled. The passport, for example, has the status of an artwork; it has been exhibited before, together with coins and a bank note. Yet, it was exhibited anonymously, that is, without the name of the owner of the passport in question, only the name of the designer-author was stated. This is certainly a new situation, which could not have been possible a few decades earlier.

The third level, however, involves testing personal documents as readymades, that is, as art works, and this is the level that is probably most interesting here. Readymades are supposedly all about transposition, a gesture (this is another recurring thing in this conversation), namely, the gesture through which an ordinary object becomes a work of art, as Duchamp claims, “I am the author who made the gesture, I have discovered that this is a work of art, because I have chosen this object.” You, of course, chose these documents as documents, and not as art works; but then you have selected them as art works through an additional gesture, by putting them in glass cabinets, even though this second gesture has not stripped them off their status as ordinary things. This is a unique situation: in this case, these documents can be used for their usual purpose at any moment — they remain valid. They are as valid in glass cabinets as anywhere else. If someone had pissed into the urinal labelled *Fountain* at the exhibition, he would have done so wrongly, for the urinal was turned upside down. Things like this have actually happened — albeit not intentionally, but rather as mistakes — but *Fountain* cannot, in fact, be used for the usual purpose as a urinal — it is not even connected with the infrastructure that would enable this. In your case, however, these readymade documents — even when they are placed in the art world — are so strongly “ordinary objects” that they have retained their everyday function even in the world of art. What is interesting here is not the fact that anything can become an object of art — we have known this for a quite a while now, anything can be a work of art — but some things are intruders in the world of art: they become art works, yet, they do not shed their usual function.

JANEZ JANIŠA, JANEZ JANIŠA, JANEZ JANIŠA.  
WEDDING, LJUBLJANA, 11TH AUGUST 2007.  
CEREMONY, FROM LEFT: DANTE GRASSI, NEWLYWEDS/  
SON, MARCELA OKRETIĆ, BRIDE, SOFIA GRASSI,  
NEWLYWEDS/ DAUGHTER, JANEZ JANIŠA, BRIDEGROOM  
PHOTO: MADA ŽGANK/ MEMENTO. COURTESY:  
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LJUBLJANA

**JJ** I believe this is the key thesis here: in contrast to all other readymades, the validity and usefulness of this readymade in the physical reality is bound to only one person, and this is what we call *specificity*. This validity has a clearly stated expiration date. Our gesture is completely driven by reality, and because everything happened in a certain administratively verifiable reality, it seemed logical to exhibit the documents as such — without any further aestheticisation. What emerges here, then, are yet more levels: on the question of the series, the multiple, reproduction. Namely, the works that we are exhibiting here are mostly labelled with numbers; these are the only distinguishing elements. Personal identification cards have the same standard shape, size, design, and — in this case — also name; the only difference between them are the photos, the signatures, and the numbers. Moreover, in a purely administrative sense, it is only the numbers that serve as a criterion of differentiation.

**JJ** This is about the production of a series. The personal document, which we use as a means of differentiation, is part of a certain series, which is what we are underscoring here, that is, we are making the series more explicit by using the same name. The moment of seriality is, in this way, further emphasized. This is an interesting question, and many dystopian scenarios have been written about societies where everyone has the same name, and where only numbers are used to differentiate between people. To conclude on the question of why we selected the documents, this is an example of reality producing something that shakes the foundations of art perception.

**JJ** We are going to live these few weeks of our lives in reality while the documents of these lives — which are also our administrative documents — will be locked up in the gallery.

**JJ** If you have documents but you do not carry them on you, then you cannot function normally. The exhibition places you within the relationship of power between the spheres of art and administration. As a readymade, a personal document is a work of art, but as an administrative document it serves to identify a certain person in public. When these objects become exhibited works of art, you cannot function as a citizen, because you lose certain basic human rights.

**JJ** You are literally *sans papier*.

## On the Alienation Effect and *Sans Papier*

**LK** Now we have come so far that we must give a name to this phenomenon. Brecht uses the term “alienation effect” to express the phenomenon when a personal document becomes almost more important than the person carrying it. Brecht mentions the example of the eviction notice, when the postman delivers the document announcing the cancellation of lease because the rent has not been paid in three months. He says that this seems perfectly normal to everyone nowadays, yet, this scenario has only been possible for the last fifty or sixty years; the post as we know it did not exist before then, and neither did apartments for lease. Documents are similar in this sense, of course. A hundred years ago, even as late as just before the First World War, documents were not as significant as they are today where you are hardly a person without your papers. Borders were not as protected as today, and migration was less of a concern; in short, personal documents have acquired their current level of significance fairly recently. This happened first in the totalitarian regimes, and documents — or rather, the lack thereof — have become generally more important over the past two decades. This fatal significance of documents is what you are challenging here.

**JJ** We are going to be temporarily deprived of our documents; we are going to be *sans papier*. We are aware of the luxury: we are doing this voluntarily while so many people are forced into such a situation. We are also aware of the possibility that the whole thing could turn against us, and that the situation could become subject to legal procedures, and no longer be merely a temporary, socio-political experiment. We do not want to be cynical, and we do not want to exploit the safety of the artistic/academic position by putting ourselves into the position of the subjects *sans papier*, and thus, pointing out the difficulties of the people without personal documents. But we do also want to problematize the so-called “leftist art world,” where there are a lot of projects, debates, and actions happening, exploring the topics of human rights (the problems of migration, the erased, and so on) to no real effect. We are now doing something that can have real effects, and we are doing it by using reality to challenge art. This is the turn that we are making.

## On the State and Authenticity

**LK** But, this is the authenticity owned by the state. You are not the owners of this authenticity. This is where a problem occurs: what should the art collectors do? If I were a curator in Graz, I would say, “We would like to buy this piece. For that one, we can put you in touch with a bank that wants to buy it,





and a furniture company wants that personal identification card, and so on.” But they can’t! Regardless of your position that what happens here constitutes a gesture, this is in fact a “gesture on display” — this is ultimately the true work of art, that which cannot be collected. One of the main goals of the *avant-garde* artists was to produce something that could not be collected by the museums. Everybody can see the documents at the exhibition, but they cannot make them part of a collection; in fact, no one but you can claim these documents without stealing them or rendering them invalid. If you sold them, you would be taken to court, and if the state nullified them, the collectors would be left empty-handed — they would not get the authentic documents, but merely a document of an art project that took place once upon a time. Duchamp’s passport could also be exhibited in this manner — so we could see whether he was really Marcel Duchamp, or maybe R. Mutt, or Rose Sélavy. This, then, is a historical document, but it is no longer an artwork or an authentic valid personal document.

**JJ** That same document, that same readymade, will change with time, and it will change its relationship to the circumstances. For me, this is an additional advantage of the new readymade that we are creating, an “authenticational” readymade.

**JJ** It seems to me that another paradox has become apparent here. On the one hand, Lev is saying that, once the validity of the document expires, its authenticity ceases. On the other hand, this object will absorb its former story, the story of it being an authentic document, once it becomes a document of a document, and changes its status. I argue that something is indeed lost, that something has changed, but something has also been gained: the object contains the history of its former and present shape, and I can only consider that an advantage.

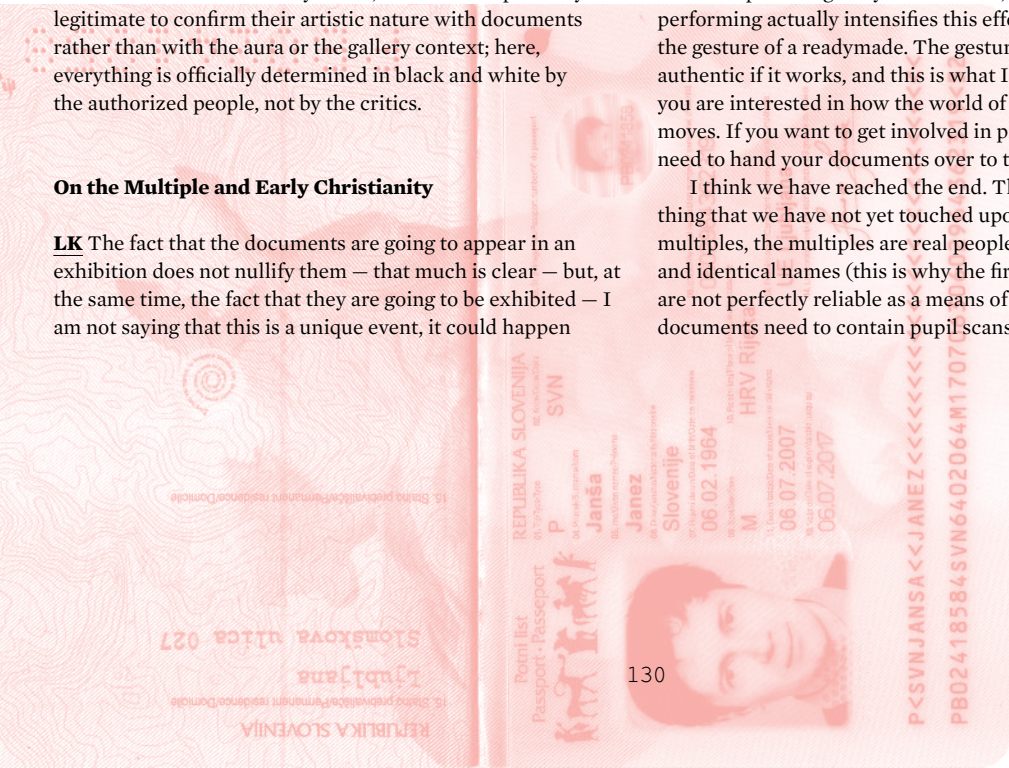
**JJ** I cannot see anything contradictory here; if an exhibition features documents as readymades, I believe it is perfectly legitimate to confirm their artistic nature with documents rather than with the aura or the gallery context; here, everything is officially determined in black and white by the authorized people, not by the critics.

**On the Multiple and Early Christianity**

**LK** The fact that the documents are going to appear in an exhibition does not nullify them — that much is clear — but, at the same time, the fact that they are going to be exhibited — I am not saying that this is a unique event, it could happen

again somewhere else — this is unique in that all these kinds of authenticity converge here. A classical authentic work is authentic only in a certain environment. Once it becomes part of a museum collection, it loses its authenticity; this is the first phase. Once it can be reproduced, its authenticity is lost even further; this is the second phase. These kinds of documents, the substitutes that would be issued to you to enable you to go about your business as usual, and which you would have to return once you had your old ones back after the exhibition, can basically be reproduced, but yet, they are authentic as long as they are issued by the state: they are not copies, you are not asking for duplicates because you have lost the originals, for a duplicate is not a copy, it is a duplicate, it is always authentic. This is where the authenticity of a work of art, and the authenticity of a document converge. If you are granted permission for this, if your application is accepted, then it is a unique experience to go to the exhibition, and see this double authenticity, which is in fact just a readymade. This is truly an absolute paradox. One of the objections expressed by one of the jurors of the Association of the Independent Artists of New York immediately after Duchamp had submitted *Fountain*, under the pseudonym R. Mutt, was that this was not an original artwork. Yet, this was precisely Duchamp’s ploy: not to prove that he had or had not made *Fountain*, but rather, to show that there is no such thing as independent art or independent artists, that what the *avant-garde* claims is bullshit. Not even the *avant-garde* allows an individual gesture; such a gesture unsettles the *avant-garde*. This is what Duchamp wanted to prove, and he succeeded. The main argument against *Fountain*, however, was that the item was obscene (we, here in the art world, are not going to address the question of whether or not the name Janez Janša may be obscene), while the other key argument was that it was not original. We know what Duchamp’s response was: what could possibly be more original than to dismantle something that is a true original product of American art, for there are no other arts in America apart from the art of plumbing? In your situation, the gesture that you are performing actually intensifies this effect: the authenticity of the gesture of a readymade. The gesture of a readymade is truly authentic if it works, and this is what I find crucial. Obviously, you are interested in how the world of art reacts to all these moves. If you want to get involved in prostitution, they say, you need to hand your documents over to the pimps.

I think we have reached the end. The multiples are the only thing that we have not yet touched upon. Pseudonyms are not multiples, the multiples are real people with different identities and identical names (this is why the first and the last name are not perfectly reliable as a means of identification, and the documents need to contain pupil scans and DNA records, for



JANEZ JANŠA, JANEZ JANŠA, JANEZ JANŠA  
PB0241858 (PASSPORT), LJUBLJANA, 2007  
BOOKLET, SPREAD 17,5 X 12,5 CM  
COURTESY: AKSIOMA – INSTITUTE FOR  
CONTEMPORARY ART, LJUBLJANA



instance); multiples happen when it becomes fashionable to be called Iosef Vissarionovich, or Stalin, and then there are masses of Stalins, or masses of Jovankas. When Jovanka married Tito, people wanted to be Titos as well, of course, but the name was protected, or else there would have been hundreds of thousands of Titos in Yugoslavia — everybody would have changed their name. These are multiple names. As for multiple names and last names, now this creates an additional problem, for what emerges here is the problem of identification. There are many Janez Novaks in Slovenia, but this is a different case, which results from the fact that there are a lot of Novaks here, and that many children are called Janez. You, however, have chosen a multiple name, and you have made it multiple by choosing it. I cannot think of an appropriate comparison.

**JJ** We have chosen a name that already exists, a name which is a readymade, and we have thus, of course, raised the following question: what is the difference between what we have done, and the scenario in which one assumes a certain name, say Luther Blissett, in the public artistic life, while in one's private life one is still called Lev Kreft? In my view, the difference can be explained as such: if a sculptor in 1917 made a cast of a urinal, and exhibited it as a classical sculpture called *Fountain*, this would appear somewhat problematic and obscene, but it would not constitute the gesture of a readymade, which really is a gesture, the gesture of interrogating the status of the object in the artistic context. We have transposed the urinal, while Luther Blissett has merely made a cast of it.

**LK** Well, the fact that this is not a pen name or a pseudonym is crucial for multiples. This is why this is a readymade, for it enters art from life. A pen name exists, at first, only in art, and then becomes part of life, for in the end no one remembers the real name. This is a common situation, there are plenty of examples like this — Andy Warhol is not Andy Warhol.

**JJ** Madonna is not just Madonna, and not even the Primer Minister Janez Janša is really Janez Janša.

**On the Romantic**

**LK** This is rather romantic, isn't it — to risk your life to create a work of art?

**JJ** The truth about the majority of politically engaged contemporary art is that it entails challenging reality through artistic measures. In contrast, we are using the real, or more precisely, the administrative, the legal, something that transpires in the sphere of law, to provoke art itself, like you said before. Art finds it difficult to accept something that is real, and today the real resides in the sphere of law, which

deals with facts. We are today prepared to accept something as real only if it is backed up by facts. This is an additional reason for our use of documents — they are judicially verified.

**LK** I was thinking about the fact that people are ready to support human rights (since we have already mentioned the supporters of human rights) as long as this support does not entail any risks. People are happy to worship art, do art, and be known as artists, as long as this does not require taking any risks. The artistic situation, as I know it, is such that people are not willing to risk anything for their art. You, however, are risking something for art, which is why, in this sense; I can see this as a “romantic gesture.” Being prepared to take risks as an artist — I find this exceptional nowadays, and this is what, I think, the art world will not appreciate at all.

**JJ** I would, nevertheless, like to emphasize that this is not an act motivated by any kind of sacrifice; this is an interrogation of some fundamental questions: the status of fact, the status of truth, the status of perception, the status of the political in art... ●

*This interview excerpted from the essay by the same name first published in Name Readymade (Ljubljana, Slovenia: Moderna galerija, 2008).*

