

SUBVERSION AND SIMILITUDE IN THE JANEZ JANŠA PROJECT

by Marisa Jahn

The namesake draws comparison between the respective contexts of the persons or objects in question. By drawing attention to likeness, what is instead foregrounded is difference. In 2007, embodying this paradox of similitude as a form of subversive appropriation, three artists — formerly known as Davide Grassi, Emil Hrvatin, and Žiga Kariž — each changed their name to Janez Janša, the name of the Slovenia's conservative Prime Minister at the time. Unfolding around this central gesture, a series of events played on the ensuing confusion over whether the name “Janez Janša,” when seen in print or heard over the news media, was referring to the Slovenian Prime Minister or to the artists.

Under the political tenure of the Prime Minister Janez Janša, mounting journalistic censorship was evidenced in July 5, 2007, when journalist Natasa Stefe announced on a national radio program (Val 202) that if you type in the words “Janez Janša” on YouTube, the first hits show up as images of pet dogs by the same name. Stefe was fired soon after. Adapting to this constraint, the popular uptake of the *Janez Janša* project is due to its capacity to use double entendres to launch veiled critique. For example, early on in the *Janez Janša* project, a well-known journalist published an article in a Slovenian weekly with a heading that translated in English to, “Is Janez Janša an Idiot?” By ambiguating the name's referent, the article exploited the confusion to make indirect polemical jabs. Continuing this artistic gesture, the article was published under the name Ivo Sanader, the name of the right-of-centre Prime Minister of Croatia. Addressing the reader, the author of the article closes by delivering a jubilant critique: “Of course, if you disagree with me, you can always say: ‘What a cardinal idiot this Ivo Sanader is!’”

In another example, a political weekly magazine entitled, *Mag*, published interviews with all leaders of the parliamentary parties just before Slovenia's parliamentary elections in 2008. When Janez Janša, leader of the Social Democratic Party (SDS), refused the interview, the three artists were invited instead. This proved to be a rare and exclusive situation when

an interview with contemporary artists was published on the political pages of a magazine.

Strategically timing their gestures according to the rhythm of electoral cycles, the three artists were able to anticipate and take advantage of substantial news coverage. The book, *Janez Janša: Biography*, written by renowned film critic and publicist Marcel Štefančič Jr., was published on the fiftieth birthday of the Prime Minister — just four days before the election. The media ignored the event until it became official that Janša's SDS party had lost the elections. Only then did the media report on the biography of Janez Janša, which narrated the lives of the three artists. The book, which flits between referencing any one of the three artists, reads like a nostalgic memoir structurally interrupted by the absence of a stable referent.

To explain their multiplication of Janezes, the artists cite the party rhetoric of the Prime Minister's own party, the SDS: “The more of us there are, the faster we reach our goal.” The literalist multiplication of the name, of course, did not accelerate the party's success, but instead weakened the name's signifying force. In other words, once the name did not exclusively refer to a single public figure, its social and political collateral was lessened.

Aside from the rationale they offered as a conceptual genesis for the project, when asked to explain why they changed their name, the artists responded, “For personal reasons.” By deferring, the public and the media were forced to actively interpret the artists' intention. Some suggested the artists were trying to tarnish or “cheapen” the Prime Minister's name. The artists' Facebook profiles revealing whom Janez Janša had recently befriended, and what groups and causes Janez Janša supported, portrayed the life of an ordinary Slovene. Published in a weekly newspaper widely circulated throughout Slovenia, a series of correspondences between the three artists described their trips to the beach, details about their children, their thoughts and ruminations, which portrayed Janez Janša at leisure and engaged in contemplative activities.

While some saw the artists' gesture as a form of reducing the Prime Minister's stature to an ordinary level, some saw it

Slovenija, moj deželinič.

Ali je Janez Janša kretelj?



Ivo Sanader

Umetnika je – za razliko od politikov – poročel 120 imenovani bodak, njegovo idejo pa trasarijo. Umetniki so nenevarna bilja in nimajo močnih odvernikov.

Veliko ljudi se sprašuje, ali je Janez Janša kretelj. To vprašanje je bilo postavljeno v okviru projekta Janez Janša, ki je bil namenjen raziskovanju politične in kulturne podobe Janeza Janševca. Projekt je bil del večletne raziskave, ki jo je vodil Ivo Sanader. V okviru projekta so bili organizirani številni dogodki, med drugim tudi razstave in predavanja. Vsebinsko so se ti dogodki osredotočali na raziskovanje politične in kulturne podobe Janeza Janševca, ki je bil v Sloveniji dolgoletni predsednik vlade. Projekt je bil namenjen tudi raziskovanju vpliva Janeza Janševca na slovensko kulturo in politiko. V okviru projekta so bili organizirani številni dogodki, med drugim tudi razstave in predavanja. Vsebinsko so se ti dogodki osredotočali na raziskovanje politične in kulturne podobe Janeza Janševca, ki je bil v Sloveniji dolgoletni predsednik vlade. Projekt je bil namenjen tudi raziskovanju vpliva Janeza Janševca na slovensko kulturo in politiko.

JANEZ JANŠA, JANEZ JANŠA, JANEZ JANŠA.
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PUBLISHED AS “ALI JE JANEZ JANŠA KRETELJ?”
IN DNEVNIKOV OBJEKTIV, 1ST SEPTEMBER 2007.
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AKSIOMA – INSTITUTE FOR CONTEMPORARY ART,
LJUBLJANA

as an attempt to elevate or recuperate the Prime Minister from his dastardly political positions. For example, when one of the artists married his girlfriend, a professional involved in the arts, the wedding produced an uncanny ripple as the public saw photographs of one Janez being wed to an agreeable and sympathetic-looking woman at a modest ceremony.

Others still perceived the artists' work as a way to promote the name of the Prime Minister. As Petra Kapš wrote: "The person whose name has been assumed by the artists has not responded to their acts; his silence and non-responsiveness signal his tacit support for them, for the artists have not caused him any harm; in fact, they have added extra value to his name, and are actively promoting it."³

The enormity of press coverage about the *Janez Janša* project demonstrates the currency of the artistic gesture within a mainstream audience. One day in 2007, the artists collectively "signed" their name by arranging rocks in the shape of letters near Mount Triglav — a Slovenian national symbol iconized on the coat of arm, flag, fifty-cent Euro coins, and other items of institutionally conferred stature.

After a photograph documenting the "signature" was published in a weekly paper, the newspaper editors initiated a contest for the person who could most creatively "sign" the name Janez Janša. Hundreds responded. The winning photograph: a woman on the beach with seashells outlining the letters of the Prime Minister's name on her lower back.

Besides its popular and humorous appeal, the virulence of the project in the news was directly related to the journalistic mandate to cover the entire spectrum of positions around a certain issue or event. Delo Jela Krečič, a writer for a daily newspaper in Slovenia, commented on the way that the imperative to uphold a position of putative journalistic objectivity, in fact, cast the journalists and the media as partial producers of the artwork:

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. ...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.⁵

Positioned between roles as neutral observer and active creator, Krečič's ethical split illustrates the very constitutive nature of interpretation and the fallacy of journalistic objectivity.

Further exemplifying the *Janez Janša* project's destabilizing nature is the way it calls to question the identity of the Prime Minister in the present and past tense. Specifically, the artistic gesture interrogates how and why the Prime Minister assumed the name "Janez Janša" himself. After the dissolution of Yugoslavia in the late 1980s and culminating in 1991, a leftist by the name of Ivan Janša positioned himself as a democratic reformer and leader. Taking the name "Janez Janša" at the debut of his political career, his leanings became increasingly conservative as he ascended from the role of Defense Minister in Lojze Peterle's Democratic government, to the leading member of the centre-right Slovenian Democratic Party (SDS), and finally, to Prime Minister of a Slovenian parliamentary from 2004 to 2008. Amelia Jones points towards the Prime Minister's name change as a signal of his political performance: "Janša, in his transition from Ivan to Janez, from radical young activist to right-wing leader, performs — signs — himself via the name as the embodiment of the newly "democratic" nation of Slovenia."⁶ Describing the desire to conflate the name "Janez Janša" with the constitution of Slovenian nationhood in the public imaginary, Jones remarks:

In a sense, Janez Janša "is" contemporary Slovenia — or would, at least, like to be seen as such. As cited above, [the Prime Minister's] autobiography, The Making of the Slovenian State 1988–1992: The Collapse of Yugoslavia, which poses as a history of modern Slovenia via his own diary entries and descriptions (thus, to some extent, collapsing Slovenia into Janez Janša), makes this much clearer. As Janša retells the history of contemporary Slovenia as the history of his heroic participation in the events resulting in the overthrow of the former Yugoslavia, and the repulsion of Serbian aggression, his project raises the question of how histories are written, and how they — seemingly inevitably — get attached to "great names" (usually those of men who have access to the public visibility and agency that allows them

to determine shifts in national or international affairs, and then to ensure the documentation of these shifts in history).⁷

By pointing out the theatrics of history, the *Janez Janša* project points towards the possibilities when it is performatively re-appropriated and enacted anew.

Embedded between electoral, mediatic, and quotidian events, and shaped by manifold interpreters, receivers, and producers, the *Janez Janša* project exists as one that eludes containment. Destabilizing, the artwork unravels certain givens as it produces meaning through time, shifting the context's entire set of relations. ●

JANEZ JANŠA



JANEZ JANŠA, JANEZ JANŠA, JANEZ JANŠA.
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