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Bank Traces on the Identity of Janez Janša

The quality of works of (contemporary) art can be gauged by whether or not, within the framework of banal everyday life, they succeed in opening up a new, as yet unimagined dimension. The triptych [*All About You*](#) by the three Janez Janšas, currently on display at the Tobačna 001 gallery, is one of these works.



In their oeuvres, the artists, who changed their names to Janez Janša in 2007, have established the name – or, more accurately, the gesture of changing one's name – as an art subject and, in so doing, raised numerous questions: What is the relationship between the name and the subject bearing it? And also, what is the relationship between the state and its subjects, particularly with regard to how the authorities identify their taxpayers and rights holders? The social, political, legal and philosophical implications of the name were dealt with by the three artists in the documentary film [*My Name is Janez Janša*](#) (2012).

They have also explored the status of the name in art in numerous exhibitions over the past few years, including [*Name Readymade*](#), [*Mount Triglav on Mount Triglav*](#), [*Troika*](#), [*Signature*](#) etc., in important European and Slovenian venues, from Forum Stadtpark in Graz to the London gallery Calvert 22. This is not only about how, ever since Marcel Duchamp, the artist's name or signature has been able to secure the status of artwork for banal objects, but also about questions such as how a personal identification document can also simultaneously be an art artefact, or how the artist's signature can function as an artwork, or what happens if a valid passport is exhibited or sold at an art auction.

Bank and personality

All About You is situated within the established thematic framework of the name as an art artefact, but it also goes beyond the issues of naming and identification. The exhibited special triptych is comprised of three ID cards of the three artists; however, each of them is a mosaic composed of a hundred bankcards (Visa®, Mastercard®, Maestro®).

In this project the artists exploited the possibility that banks offer their clients the possibility of using so-called personalised cards. Users can apply for bankcards featuring their favourite motif as long as it complies with the bank's regulations and guidelines. The bank does not permit the use of motifs containing controversial words or copyrighted signs and images.

For the *All About You* exhibition, each of the artists first enlarged the image of his ID card, divided it into a hundred sections the size of a bankcard, and then, for the next fifteen months, systematically and repeatedly applied for a new personalised bankcard. Each of the bankcards features one part of the image of the ID card.

The process did not proceed smoothly. Namely, from the bank's perspective, the elements of the Slovenian ID cards are not entirely neutral. There are several words in two languages printed on the cards, including the word *spol* (sex). In accordance with their regulations, bank officials thus often rejected the applications by the three Janšas. Some even considered problematic the word "Janša" adorning the card even though the name of the cardholder Janez Janša is printed on the card. The three mosaics in the exhibition are thus not complete; two of them are missing several parts of the jigsaw puzzle.



The African connection

The artists got the idea for this exhibition in Africa. Namely, in collaboration with the MasterCard Corporation, the Nigerian government is planning to launch the so-called smart multi-purpose card, which will combine an individual's personal, biometric, health, banking and other data. The title of the exhibition was inspired by the United Bank for Africa's campaign announcing the debit MasterCard with the slogan "All About U". This is a personalised debit card which was introduced by the bank's Managing Director as follows: "You do not need a bank logo, but your personal logo or identity." The artists found his words convincing: "Banks often promote this service, saying 'Discover the artist in you and create your unique card from your sofa.' This is precisely what we have done," Janez Janša explains. Precisely in relation to the possibility of personal data being combined in one card in the future, *All About You* raises a number of political questions: What does the linking of the state and corporations in the form of such cards actually mean? How much power is given to private companies if they acquire access to a citizen's personal, health and other data? What is the status of the state if the need to register and identify its subjects is subordinated to the interests of capital? The fact that hundreds of bankcards in the exhibited triptych are combined into the ID cards of the Janez Janšas may be seen as an allegory of the world of corporations eating into the spheres that used to be the prerogative of the state.

Art in time

All About You concerns the sphere of art, too. Philosopher Lev Kreft, who gave a [lecture](#) at the opening of the exhibition on Tuesday, foregrounded the project's temporality in addition to the issues of its aesthetic, conceptual value. Namely, the nature of this artwork is changing in time in relation to the validity of the last three valid bankcards included in the artwork (the other 97 cards expired at the time of a new application being lodged). "The work of art is in a permanent state of decomposition during its lifetime and later on. In the end, only a representation of three ID cards composed of no longer valid bankcards will remain," Kreft said.

"In that moment, anyone can become the owner of this artwork, for it will no longer include any valid documents. Only the artwork will remain, a representation of three ID cards, yet, it will no longer be identical to the work as it was during the process of its production and in the first phase of its existence, when each new part of the composition was alive and valid until

the arrival of the next piece,” Kreft added. The artists are, of course, able to keep the triptych continuously alive by ordering ever new personalised bankcards.

Things also get complicated with regard to authorship. Is the author of the artwork the bank, which is the legitimate owner of the cards and which has also produced all of them? Are the real artists the Janez Janšas, who were the bank clients applying for hundreds of bankcards, and who also paid about eight euros for every new bankcard being issued? Is the only real author Miljenko Licul, who designed the template for the Slovenian ID card? In fact, as merely the users and not the owners of the bankcards, the artists would actually act against the law if they sold their artwork while some of the cards are still valid, Kreft reminded us.

The *All About You* exhibition can be considered in the context of the *Trust* project, in which, about a year ago, the artists made it possible for their audiences to obtain a personalised card with their image of *Mount Triglav on Mount Triglav*, which all three of them also signed and thus transformed a bankcard into an art object. Thus, already with this artwork, they opened up an unusual liminal space in between the world of banking and the world of art, in which issues of the public and the personal, the private and the general interest are thoroughly mixed.

At first sight, it certainly may appear that, by reproducing the documents of their own existence or the existence of their name, the three artists are entirely immersed in, or perhaps even in love with, themselves. Yet, upon closer inspection, it becomes evident that the artists “exhibit” and lay bare that side of privacy which is in direct contact with the state as the representative of the public and the general (interest). Their persistent attempts and experiments with identities thus, paradoxically and continuously, point to that aspect of the subject which is in touch with the general and the public. When this is joined by the question of whether or not corporations are going to invade the individual’s privacy by gaining access to all data, no matter how sensitive it may be, the apparently solipsistic preoccupation with one’s own identity turns out to be serving a perfectly relevant political struggle for the public and the common.

Originally published as “Bančne sledi na identiteti Janeza Janše”, in *Delo*, 1st July 2016

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