

Janez Janša, Janez Janša, Janez Janša
Mount Triglav on Mount Triglav

“The more we are, the faster we will reach the goal!”¹
JANEZ JANŠA

One of the most interesting aspects of re-enactment, in whatever form, is its capacity to interfere with, or rather to become an active part of the history of a symbol, event, social construct, or work of art. Re-enactment arises when a symbol (or event, etc.) evolves, and the re-enactment ends up conditioning that evolution in one way or another. Alongside the many possible definitions of re-enactment it might be worth including another: re-enactment as a tool for the construction, and why not, the manipulation of memory.

This prerogative of re-enactment emerges explicitly in the Triglav cycle. To understand this series of works, created in different periods by different artists, we should distinguish between two different levels right from the start: the history of the symbol in the context of the collective perception and memory of a population; and the history of repeated attempts to appropriate this symbol, against the background of an artistic history as particular as that of Slovenia.

The symbol in question is Mount Triglav, which, standing at 2,864 metres, is the highest mountain in Slovenia and the Julian Alps. The name (“tri”, three and “glave”, heads) would appear to derive from its characteristic three-pointed shape, though some link it to a three-headed divinity from Slavic mythology. Traditionally the mountain is one of the symbols of Slovenia, though it took some time to become an official icon. Mentioned in one of the most popular patriotic songs (*Oj, Triglav, moj dom* by Jakob Aljaž), Triglav only appeared on the Slovenian flag in 1991², in place of the red socialist star, when the country left the Socialist Federal Republic of Yugoslavia. It did, however, appear in military insignia as of the post war period. Around 2003 the design of the flag, too similar to the Slovakian flag, was called into question; nothing was done, but it is significant that the winning sketch was based entirely on the stylized outline of the mountain. In January 2007, Mount Triglav put in an appearance on Slovenia’s 50 euro cents coin.

We are therefore dealing with a national symbol, but that of a nation whose recent history is considerably tormented.

One of the first provinces of the Austro-Hungarian Empire to have its flag recognized, after the First World War Slovenia became part of the newly-formed Kingdom of Serbs, Croats and Slovenes. During

the Second World War parts of the country were variously occupied by Italy, Germany and Hungary, then in the post-war period it became part of the Socialist Federal Republic of Yugoslavia. On 25 June 1991 Slovenia declared independence from Yugoslavia, obtaining it after a brief conflict known as the “Ten-Day War”. The stability it subsequently achieved, both politically and economically, led to it being the first Balkan nation to enter the European Union, in 2004.

On 30 December 1968, at the Zvezda Park in Ljubljana, three members of the group **OHO** (Milenko Matanović, David Nez, and Drago Dellabernardina) donned a heavy black sheet which reached down to their feet, leaving only their faces visible. The performance – in actual fact little more than a tableau-vivant – was entitled *Mount Triglav*. The newly-founded group was set to become one of the most interesting players in the brief season of the Slovenian artistic neo-avantgarde. Having started life with an open artistic identity, as an interdisciplinary context hosting different practices, in 1969 OHO set about forming a genuine artistic collective, working on the confines between conceptual art, performance and process art. An anti-art stance soon began to predominate, and between 1970 and 1971 OHO evolved into a kind of hippy commune, in an attempt to take the fusion of art and life to extremes. The OHO story is emblematic of a very particular phase in Slovenian art, in which protests against the art market and the work of art as object, and the anarchist, libertarian stance of the international neo-avantgarde movements, were expressed in a particularly extreme way, something that enabled the art scene in Slovenia, unlike in other contexts, to avoid being integrated into the system. *Mount Triglav* is emblematic of this attitude: OHO takes on the task of “embodying” a national symbol, at a time in which the nation’s dream of self-determination appears painfully subjugated to a utopia under threat. And even though the long hippy hair of the performers does introduce a note of parody, the members of OHO are careful not to give their performance any specific ideological connotations. *Mount Triglav* still appears as impenetrable as the rock face of the symbol it incarnates. As Katie Kitamura writes, “OHO’s performance seemed both to inhabit the national symbol and to claim it for itself, replacing the anonymous peaks of the mountain with the faces of 1960s’ counterculture.”³ Beyond other more historic connotations, like their conceptual aptitude for working with language, as noted by Miško Šuvaković⁴, and the “objectification of the human”, highlighted by Kitamura⁵, what strikes us about this work, and justifies the subsequent re-enactments, is the deconstruction and reconstruction of the symbol. The performance interferes with a symbol, and creates another: the tiny blurred photos of the event are an emblem of performance art in the sixties and seventies – more interested in the process than the object – and in the construction of an event more than its duration over time; they are also artistic fetish objects. Precisely in view of their neglected,

anti-aesthetic feel and non-mediated character, these objects are ideal witnesses to the authenticity of an event that, at a distance, has acquired an almost sacred status. These images, like many others which document early performances, are like the relics of saints: their aura is not self-made, but acquired, independently of the intentions of those who produced them.

This latter aspect is decisive for the comprehension of *Like to Like* (2003-2004), a project by the group **Irwin**, which takes the form of six large format prints of some of the historic works by OHO, including *Mount Triglav*. On one level, the entire operation can be interpreted as a reflection on performance art and its ability to give rise to iconic images. In *Like to Like*, Irwin appropriates some projects (performance art, but also installations, environmental art, etc.), and transforms them into images. The performance aspect of the various projects is lost, and what is highlighted is their ability to give rise to images that lodge in the memory, both individually and collectively, withstanding the test of time, becoming part of history and manipulating an identity. The painstaking philology with which Irwin stages the OHO performance is at odds with its betrayal of the initial premise of the original work: performance as bringing an end to the artistic object. This basically means two things: on one hand Irwin operates in an entirely different artistic context, where performance art exists in virtue of the media it generates; while on the other hand, the group is performing an operation of historiography. This operation resembles that implemented, in a different way, in *East Art Map*, the volume that reconstructs “the missing history of contemporary art, art networks, and art conditions in Eastern Europe from the East European perspective”⁶: in *Like to Like* Irwin manipulates memory, and writes the history of Slovenian art. To quote the statement that introduces the “texts” section of their website: “There is Greek art; there is German art and there is French art. But there is no art as such. The more Slovene our art is, the better.”

At this point we should consider the artistic intentions of the Irwin group. Founded in 1984, Irwin represents the “visual arts” division of the Neue Slowenische Kunst, an ambitious collective project that consists in reliving the trauma experienced by the avant-garde movements when they witnessed totalitarian regimes appropriating their utopian impetus. As Eda Kufer and Irwin write: “Retro avant-garde is the basic artistic procedure of Neue Slowenische Kunst, based on the premise that traumas from the past affecting the present and the future can be healed only by returning to the initial conflicts. Modern art has not yet overcome the conflict brought about by the rapid and efficient assimilation of historical avant-garde movements in the systems of totalitarian states.”⁷ In other words, NSK could be described as the most colossal re-enactment in the history of contemporary art: that of the avant-garde

and its trauma.

In Irwin's artistic programme, this concept is declined into three main principles: the "retro-principle", based on decoding and re-coding the art of the past; emphatic eclecticism, and asserting the Slovenian nationality and national culture⁸. This can be seen, for example, in their famous *Icons*, paintings that use collage to mingle avant-garde art with totalitarian propaganda, sacred iconography and the formal characteristics of tradition. The symbols of totalitarian power are demolished not through criticism or parody, but by means of a much more subtle process of over-identification, also termed "subversive affirmation"⁹. The ideology of the NSK oeuvre is not explicitly stated, and this very semantic ambiguity was its strong point in the eighties and nineties. Avant-garde art is not challenged or glorified: it is rewritten.

Nowadays, after the collapse of the totalitarian regimes, and in a context that Vladimir P. Štefanec, playing with the language of government propaganda, has dubbed "relaxed capitalism"¹⁰, it is not clear whether the avant-garde trauma has been overcome or not. One thing for sure is that Irwin has become a definitive point of reference for the new generation of artists, Slovenian and otherwise; and that the relationship between art and the political establishment is a lot more ambiguous and stratified than it was in the days of the avant-garde movements.

In this context **Janez Janša, Janez Janša and Janez Janša** appear. On 6 August 2007 they staged a performance entitled *Mount Triglav on Mount Triglav*, which provisionally closes this matrioska-style story initiated by OHO in 1968. Slovenia has found itself a place in the new world order, and Mount Triglav has survived the transition intact, taking pride of place on one of the coins that symbolizes the victory of capitalism. In recent years cracks have begun to show in the latter, but capitalist democracy seems to be the only available model, the model which countries recovering from the collapse of the great narrations attempt to evolve towards. The powers that be have developed such a strong resistance to criticism, that not only parody, but also over-identification, appear weak strategies.

When they staged *Mount Triglav on Mount Triglav*, the three Janšas had just completed a long bureaucratic procedure enabling them all to take the same name: a name that also happened to belong to the then Prime Minister of Slovenia. While the three artists have always attempted not to reduce this operation to its purely political significance, claiming "personal reasons" for the change of identity, it becomes very difficult to exclude the political element when we see *Mount Triglav on Mount Triglav*. When "Janez Janša" tackles the ascent of Mount Triglav (a sort of rite for Slovenians, something like

Muslims going to Mecca) to re-stage the work of a hippy collective in the sixties, they create a kind of short circuit that nothing and no-one seems to come out of unscathed. With Janez Janša we are beyond over-identification as a performance strategy and resistance tactic; what we have here is an oblique attack which functions by annihilating the identity of the symbol: this affirms on one hand the power of the symbol itself, and on the other our resistance to its magnetism.

Davide Grassi, Žiga Kariž and Emil Hrvatin have cancelled themselves out to become Janez Janša, a living, transitory symbol of political power; and Janez Janša nullifies himself in Triglav, the eternal symbol of a nation. The work on the name of the mountain continues, and the “three heads” of OHO become one: that of Janez Janša, which is both single and trinity. This does not however imply that each renounces his own artistic¹¹ and national individuality. Like the three members of OHO who staged the original performance, the three Janezs are of different nationalities. In *Mount Triglav on Mount Triglav*, this fact is ironically underlined by the position of the three heads and the direction of their gazes: the artist formerly known as Davide Grassi looks towards Italy, and the Croat Hrvatin towards Croatia, while the Slovenian Janez appears to look generally around.

The troubled relationship with a symbol that stands the test of time thanks to a series of adaptations and variations, which at times are imperceptible, is evident in the numerous anniversaries that occasion the performance, according to the statement given by the three Janšas: “Janez Janša, Janez Janša and Janez Janša performed the action entitled *Mount Triglav on Mount Triglav*, in order to commemorate the 80th anniversary of the death of Jakob Aljaž; the 33rd anniversary of the Footpath from Vrhnika to Mount Triglav; the 5th anniversary of the Footpath from the Wörthersee Lake across Mount Triglav to the Bohinj Lake; the 25th anniversary of the publication of Nova Revija magazine and the 20th anniversary of the 57th issue of Nova Revija, the premiere publication of the Slovenian Spring; and the 16th anniversary of the independent state of Slovenia.”

It would almost appear that Janez Janša, Janez Janša and Janez Janša are celebrating a country full of anniversaries yet without an identity, unable to comprehend the meaning of its own festivities. Yet, like in the two previous cases, the ambiguity persists: are we sure they are striking a blow on the symbolic meaning of Mount Triglav, or are they actually trying to rid it of all its accumulated dross in an attempt to restore its original identity?

As for formal strategies, it is significant that Janez Janša, Janez Janša and Janez Janša, who asked Irwin to loan them the canvas used three years previously in *Like to Like*, abandon the vertical format used by

both OHO and Irwin, which was clearly inspired by the stylized outline of the mountain (as it appears on the flag and coat of arms). They chose to adopt a horizontal angle, which is less recognizable but more similar to the real shape of the mountain. Here once again there appears to be an attempt to return to the origins, aware of all the symbolic encrustations, but at the same time determined to do away with them.

Triglav, the national symbol of Slovenia, which thanks to OHO and Irwin, has also become an emblem of Slovenian art, has completed its process of monumentalization: from object to symbol, from symbol to reinterpreted, subverted icon, to image, to monument. In the golden sculpture entitled *Monument to the National Contemporary Art (Golden Triglav)* created by Janez Janša, Janez Janša and Janez Janša, the mountain is once more an object, not merely a linguistic construct. In *Mount Triglav on Mount Triglav*, the symbols explode due to their very accumulation. But what emerges at the end, under all the layers, is not a meaningless fetish object, but the hard rock of the mountain.

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¹ Janez Janša, the president of the Slovenian Democratic Party (SDS), ends his letter to every new member of his party with this uplifting sentence.

² On this occasion, the symbol on the flag was redesigned by Marko Pogačnik, none other than a member of the OHO group: a curious intersection between the collective history and artistic history of the symbol, which acquires further meaning in the light of what follows.

³ Katie Kitamura, "Triglav", in *Frieze Magazine*, Issue 113, March 2008.

⁴ "The artistic work, which models a mountain, showed the relationship between 'mountain as material' and 'name as label'. Three real human hippie heads were similar to the three peaks of the mountain." In Miško Šuvaković, "3 x Triglav: controversies and problems regarding Mount Triglav", in Janez Janša, Janez Janša, Janez Janša (eds), *NAME Readymade*, Moderna galerija / Museum of Modern Art, Ljubljana 2008, p. 70.

⁵ Katie Kitamura, quoted.

⁶ Irwin (eds), *East Art Map: Contemporary Art and Eastern Europe*, Afterall Books 2006.

⁷ Eda Cufer & Irwin, "NSK State in Time", 1993. Available online at <http://www.nskstate.com/irwin/texts/nsk-state-in-time.php>

⁸ From “The Program of Irwin Group”, April 1984, <http://www.nskstate.com/irwin/texts/irwin-pro-uk.php>.

⁹ In this regard see the special edition of the journal *Maska* edited by Inke Arns and Sylvia Sasse (*Maska*, vol. XXI, n° 98-99, Spring 2006).

¹⁰ Vladimir P. Štefanec, “Evolucija motiva”, in *DELO*, October 20, 2007. Štefanec uses the word “sproščen” which means “relaxed”: a key term in the right-wing political propaganda used by Janša to emphasize how idyllic, easy and tension-free everything is.

¹¹ For an analysis of the continuity between the work of the three artists before their name change, and their joint work as Janez Janša, see Zdenka Badovinac, “What is the importance of being Janez?”, in Janez Janša, Janez Janša, Janez Janša (eds), *NAME Readymade*, Moderna galerija / Museum of Modern Art, Ljubljana 2008, pp. 51 - 65.