

Getting Rid of Ourselves

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by Sam Cotter

The shift from physical to service-oriented labour of the post-Fordist economy and the emergence of the “creative class” brings an expectation of round-the-clock engagement with our work lives. We thus become more and more individualized and need to be advancing and networking in all aspects of our lives, constantly blurring boundaries between professional development and leisure. These pressures to perpetually perform begin to replace notions of personhood, converting the individual into a brand or form of living capital.

In *Getting Rid of Ourselves*, curator Helena Reckitt examines models for artistic practice that refuse to engage in the tireless self-promotional cycle common to contemporary artistic labour. The exhibition is not so much an inventory of artistic strategies as a holistic alternative to these systems, functioning more as a model of self-mobilization than a collection of autonomous artworks. The works in *Getting Rid of Ourselves* share a collective sensibility, an imperative to lose individuality not through over-definition of self, but through commitment to collective agendas with a penchant toward radicalization.

Throughout the show, identity is handled as a malleable medium, one that can be positioned in relation to or withdrawn from external forces. In Jesse Darling's karaoke installation, *Darling's Room [Karaoke Vape Version RAW]*, presented as an instrumental music video with karaoke set-up in the gallery, the artist recreates

Drake's “Marvin's Room,” altering the lyrics though keeping the message similar - both follow the story of contacting an ex-lover while drunk and suffering from the burnout of success and the expectation to be “on” around the clock. Darling plays on Drake's signature “soft masculinity,” replacing it with a less directly legible or gendered queerness, one that viewers can adopt while performing the work's karaoke component.

Heath Bunting also creates an identity open for anyone to try on. His *Off the Shelf Identity* (2008) establishes a “transferrable synthetic natural person” of British citizenship. This fictional person, Tony Jack Smith, is exhibited through ephemera, a wallet complete with a credit card and a European Health Insurance Card, as well as numerous loyalty cards, a cell phone, house keys, and plenty of mail. The only thing missing is Smith's face, an intentional absence that invites viewers to assume Smith's identity, leaving their own behind.

For Bunting, assuming a new name and an off-the-shelf identity affords a chance to disappear and circulate freely. But for artists Janez Janša, Janez Janša and Janez Janša, taking a new name becomes something quite different. In 2007 the three artists changed their names to Janez Janša, taking literally Slovenian Prime Minister Janez Janša's rallying cry “The more of us there are, the faster we'll reach our goal.” The artists exhibit a read-along video version of a letter they sent informing Prime Minister Janša that they have joined his forces, as well as their conservative party membership cards, identity cards and credit cards featuring the artists posing atop Mount Triglav — a symbol of Slovenia appearing on the country's flag but also an evocation of important art actions in the former Yugoslavia. The artists' overplayed acceptance of right-wing nationalist propaganda works to question the State's demand for a wholehearted embracing of its ideology. In adopting the name of the prime minister — whose own name mutated from the Russian-sounding Ivan to the Slovenian-sounding Janez — they explore state pressures to break the compartmentalization of life, work, art and politics, making the citizen's body the site for political action.

Janez Janša, Janez Janša,
Janez Janša, *Troika*, 2013
(detail)
PHOTO: JANEZ JANŠA



While the three Janez Janšas work as publically as possible to address state politics, Kajsa Dahlberg's documentary video work *Female Fist* charts the ways in which a radicalized collective becomes stagnant, ineffective and, at times, self-repressive while trying to produce something in secret. Dahlberg interviews an anonymous source about a non-profit lesbian pornographic film they are working on together. For the majority of the video, the lens cap is left on to protect the speaker's identity, though at the beginning and end, the lens cap comes off and we can see that the interview has taken place in a busy public square. The interviewee describes how a group of close to 40 activists decided to make the film as a contribution to lesbian culture, but through disagreements on the form, distribution – which shifted from a simple pass-it-on system to the bureaucracy of making viewers sign a legally binding contract not to sell it, show it to a man or copy it – and many other setbacks, the number of participants shrank to only five. The speaker suggests that many of the film's problems, like many other problems of self-organization, are tied to lingering in a place of opposition instead of creating a place of unity.

The malleability of identity throughout these works positions individuals in relation to the masses, suggesting that one can be productively lost in the crowd or hide in hyperbolic extremes of plain sight while still operating outside the status quo.

However, the exhibition itself is something different than the sum of its parts. Within the physical frame of the show, there is a different kind of radical collectivity, in which artworks and curatorial gestures become indistinct. This confusion is enhanced by Greek art/architecture collective KERNEL's series of steel-mesh partitions that divide the gallery space, limiting circulation but also becoming surfaces from which other artists' work can be hung.

Traversing the gallery space is also altered by Paris-based collective Claire Fontaine who littered the floor with tennis balls, which, though less obtrusive than a partition, give a sense of physical precarity. The balls are slit open and conceal personal items including Q-tips, matches, elastics, tampons, rope, Chapstick

and medicine. Though the work speaks directly to ways basic human necessities are volleyed into prisons from which they are banned, in this context, the balls' meaning becomes unstable; as viewers, we are unsure whether we are being given tools to aid our comrades, armaments for upcoming struggles or if the balls are even intended for us.

The evaporation of the individual that occurs throughout the exhibition also happens to us as viewers. Bunting's collection of personal effects hangs beside an opening in KERNEL's structure, and as we pass through it, we psychologically surrender our own possessions and freedom of circulation. Our individual voices become parrots of others' words, following along with the text of the letter from the three Janez Janšas and performatively using the microphone in Darling's karaoke installation. Claire Fontaine arms us with a keychain containing a set of lock picks, tools that allow us to freely and invisibly navigate space, but their presence makes it uncertain whether KERNEL's structure is a prison or bunker; if we are being kept in or keeping someone out. We are given access to sensitive information through Dahlberg's anonymous interview and an implied community through Adrian Blackwell's mutable sculpture-cum-anarchist-meeting-circle-cum-work-station, *Circles Describing Spheres*. The exhibition gives us many tools, but to really engage, we must first forget ourselves, embrace the exhibition's collective spirit, come together in secret and then take to the streets.

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Claire Fontaine,
Passe Partout, 2009
PHOTO: CLAIRE FONTAINE;
IMAGE COURTESY OF THE ARTIST
AND GALERIE NEU, BERLIN

