

Matthias Sperling

On 'My name is Janez Janša', a provocation for What Remains...

Siobhan Davies Studios, London

May 21, 2016

This text was written as part of my contribution to the festival What Remains..., presented by Independent Dance and Siobhan Davies Dance, which invited proposals exploring the idea of 'the anatomy of an artist'. I took this opportunity to pursue and share my interest in the work of the Slovenian multi-media artists Janez Janša, Janez Janša and Janez Janša, who all legally changed their names in 2007 to the name of the then Slovenian president. My proposal took the form of a screening of the documentary film about their name change 'My name is Janez Janša' (2012, dir. Janez Janša), followed by a discussion which began with my presentation of this short provocation, articulating some of the reasons for my interest as a choreographer in the Janez Janšas' name change. I accompanied the spoken text with a slide presentation accumulating a visual map of these thoughts, included below. I then invited three other choreographers presenting work in the festival (Colin Poole, Rosanna Irvine and Simon Ellis) to join me in discussing the film and my provocation, and then invited audience members to share their comments and questions.

1. Choreography as an intervention in the real

I'd like to start from an especially joyful moment of the film: when the Janez Janšas are dancing at the SDS conservative party festival.

What I love about this moment is how clearly it's about opening up room for manoeuvre within social and political systems that might seem rigidly fixed. Their action of entering into a dominant social power structure and transforming its potential for themselves reveals that these structures are not necessarily inaccessible nor immobile. There is mobility in the *use* of the system itself, and that use opens up potential for ranges of motion that didn't previously exist in those places.

I love that their action creates the possibility of laughing, of taking pleasure in living within a particular social structure, of having hope in the possibility of being able to exist in a way that one can believe in, rather than assuming that the only option we have is to accept the conditions and limitations imposed by systems that we don't believe in. I find it such a heartening gesture, in the face of social and political structures that can be so disheartening.

I like to think of choreography in this way as well: by virtue of being something that is embodied, all choreography (in fact all performance) always already manifests a way of being in the world. A choreography is never apart from the lived world, but is an intervention in the real.

So, any choreography that I make is already interacting with social and political systems, and I can look for potentials within those interactions to embody a way of being that I believe in and take pleasure in. Even if it's manifested temporarily or locally, it's still actually embodied, and I think that has power and also carries responsibility.

So the first question that I'd like to propose for us to talk about together has two parts: What do you think about the notion of choreography as an intervention in the real? And how might choreography's intervention in the real be foregrounded in practice?

2. Anatomy of a person

The second thing that I'd like to bring in begins with the subtitle of this year's festival: 'anatomy of an artist'. For me, something that is important about the Janez Janšas' name change is that, although it is a manipulation of the identity of 3 artists, it doesn't only address questions of the anatomy of an artist, but it extends to questions of the anatomy of a person, and these are questions that I'm very interested in thinking about in relation to choreography.

When I say the anatomy of a person, what I'm talking about is the question of how personhood is embodied; how is it that we are at once biological creatures and cultural persons? I'm thinking of the biological and the cultural very much in terms of evolution: on an evolutionary timescale, biological life arises, organisms become more and more complex over time, then at some point some organisms begin to evolve a cultural dimension and begin to become persons; they become not only a bodily 'it' but also a cultural 'I', a conscious self that exchanges cultural information with others, and exists in and through social structures.

In our existence as creature-persons, a name is a particularly precise point of interaction between the biological and the cultural: it acts as a bridge between a biological human body and the world of human culture. Thinking on the developmental timescale of the individual human, we are born as small biological miracles and by being given a name, we gain the capacity to grow into legal subjects, persons within a society. The name is given to a biological organism, but the name acts as the conduit for that organism's cultural being.

The Janez Janšas' act of the name change strikes me as a very focused intervention in this interaction between the biological and the cultural, and I'm drawn to it by the feeling that their project might help me to work something out about a perspective that I am very interested in taking on choreography: that is to see choreography as (like a name) being about the relationship between the biological body and the cultural person, and to see choreography as a tool through which we might collectively learn something more about how personhood is embodied.

Somehow, part of the reason why I have this interest in the particular potential of choreography to reveal something about the nature of personhood, is through an appreciation that both choreographies and persons are in fact similar kinds of things: they are both embodied cultural entities. Perhaps the process through which a choreographic entity arises from bodies can reveal something about the process through which persons or selves come into being.

A second question that we could draw from this to discuss might be: How do you feel about considering choreography as an investigation of the anatomy of personhood?

3. Unnameable behaviour

The third thing that feels important to mention is that one of the ways I make sense of the Janez Janšas' name change in relation to choreographic practice is by looking at it through Deborah Hay's choreographic thinking. (For anyone who doesn't know her work, Deborah Hay is an American choreographer who has been developing a radical approach to choreography since the 1960's. Like lots of other people, I've been very engaged with her practice for a long time and my work continues to be really nourished by that.)

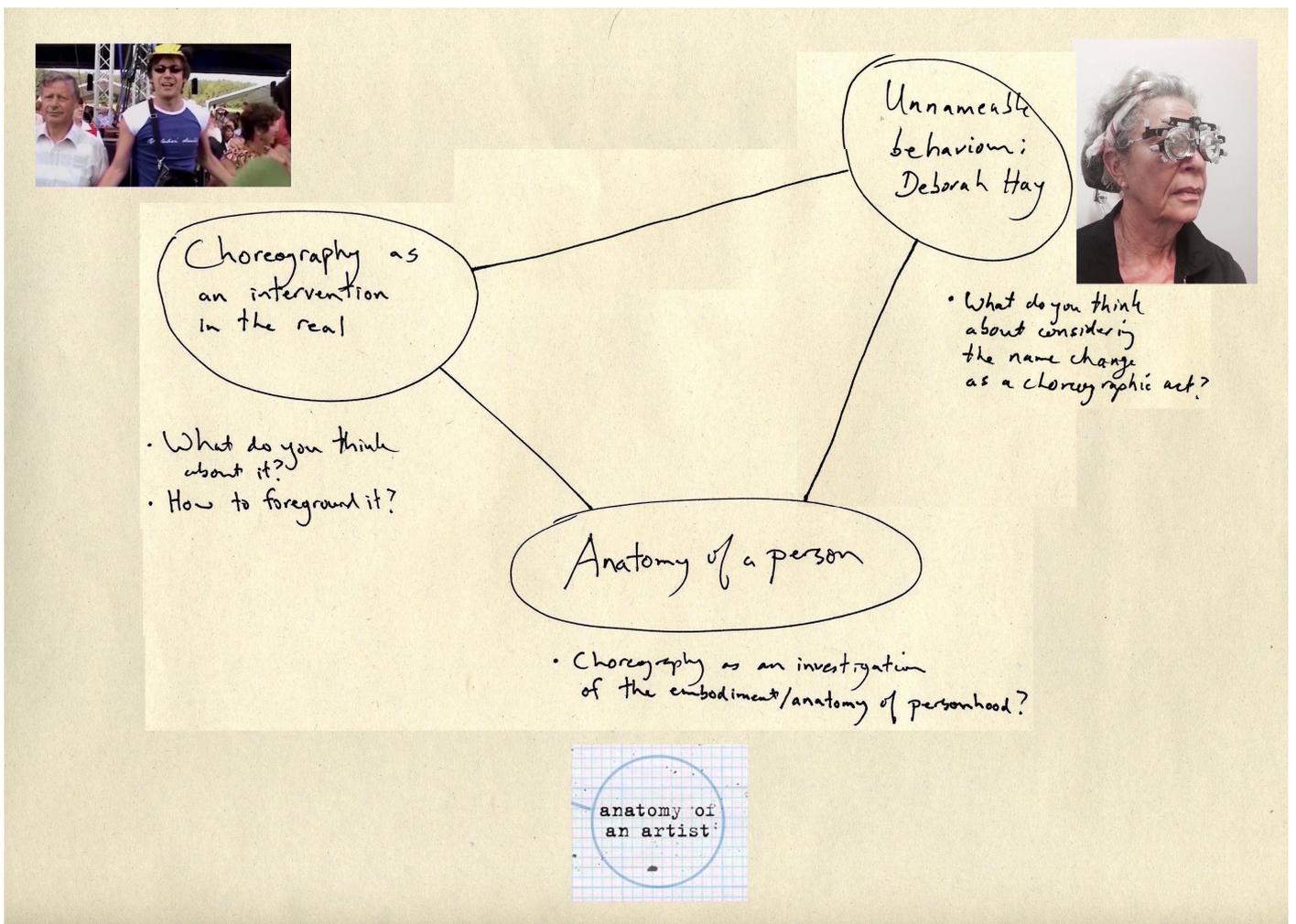
The connection that perhaps stands out the most strongly for me with the film is Deborah Hay's concept of unnameable behaviour in her choreographic practice. I associate this notion most clearly with my experience as an audience member the first time that I saw her work performed: it was very evident to me that something specific and actual was happening, it was clear that the performers' attention was fully engaged in doing something, but I was so completely unable to figure out what they were doing and how they were doing it, that I couldn't stop thinking about it for weeks after. My ability to fix on any singular understanding of what I was seeing was constantly being destabilised - the specific behaviour that I was seeing was unnameable.

This concept is one that has really settled in me, but I realised in preparing this talk that I can't actually pinpoint anymore where and when I first heard Deborah say it, nor exactly how she expressed it. But I feel certain that it did come from her and I'm not just making it up, although I am sure to be using it in ways that differ from her.

For me, Deborah Hay's practice of unnameable behaviour has a strong relationship to the ambiguity of identity and the ambiguity of meanings that the Janez Janšas' name change produces. Like Deborah Hay, their action works against the possibility of a singular understanding: it creates situations that confound the individuality of their identities, and any singular interpretation of the meaning of the name change is confounded by their choice to describe it as something that they did 'for personal reasons'. I really like this combination of specificity and ambiguity: I like it in an aesthetic sense because it reminds me that there can be *more* meaning in ambiguous work, not less; but I also like what this ambiguity embodies in a political sense. I can see both the Janez Janšas' act and Deborah Hay's unnameable behaviour as embodied practices of a specific ambiguity. And I see both of them as politically radical practices in that they directly embody the continual potential for being otherwise - in oneself and in the systems that one lives within. The ambiguity or the unnameability is a practical means of setting into motion identities, systems and perceptions that appear fixed.

So, although I want to respect the ambiguity of the Janez Janšas' act, which they certainly don't describe as choreography, it definitely has strong connections for me with ways that I am interested in practicing choreography, drawing from Deborah Hay.

So perhaps the third question that can give us to discuss is: What do you think about considering this name-change as a choreographic act?



Visual map of On 'My name is Janez Janša', a provocation for What Remains...
Matthias Sperling, 2016