

# The Imponderability of Life [in Progress]

Amy Bryzgel, a.bryzgel@abdn.ac.uk

**Janez Janša: *Life II [in Progress]*. Ed. Janez Janša, with texts by Mladen Dolar, Tim Etchells, Adrian Heathfield, Amelia Jones, Aldo Milohnić.**

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*Janez Janša: Life II [in Progress]* is a collection of essays that introduces the reader to a range of interpretive lenses and strategies for approaching the long-duration/life-work/performative/photographic piece *Life II [in Progress]* by Janez Janša (né Emil Hrvatin). The essays contained within it are as diverse in their approach as the backgrounds of the authors who penned them, including perspectives from the fields of art history and performance studies, psychoanalysis, artistic production, and law. Despite this array of disciplines, some common threads can be seen among the contributors' views.

*Life II [in Progress]* has (perhaps) at its core an iconic work from performance art history: *Imponderabilia*, performed by Marina Abramović and her (artistic and life) partner at the time, Ulay (Uwe Laysiepen) in 1977, at the entrance to the Galleria Comunale d'Arte Moderna in Bologna, Italy. Standing naked on opposite sides of the entrance to the gallery, Abramović and Ulay forced visitors to make several choices: to enter the gallery or not, to face the naked male, or to face the naked female. Most of the essays in this text touch upon the relation between Janša's 2014 work and the 1977 one. The writers have independently reached a consensus that Janša's piece "explodes" (Heathfield 26) the content of the Abramović and Ulay one, that it problematises the binary relationship posed by the two artists, as well as the triangulation of the relationship between the two artists and the spectator who passes through them.

Janša's *Life II [in Progress]* involves a series of actors and a variety of media. Instead of the singular performance, the artist turns the photograph from a documentary medium into a performative one (Heathfield 26), insofar as the artwork expands on the two solitary, male/female figures in the doorway in Bologna, to include pairs of pregnant women, a pregnant woman and a man (presumably her partner), the pregnant woman no longer pregnant with a child in her arms, and those children running through the gallery space – along with the spectator passing through these figures, as in the 1977 performance. What's more, Janša's work is not just about the

moment of the performance – it is durational, given that the photographs are taken over long periods of time (enough to allow for gestation, birth and growth) – and the photographs of these “doorway performances” are combined with the “live” performances of individuals entering the gallery by passing through these various bodies, while the photographs of earlier (pregnant, youthful) bodies hang on the wall. Furthermore, Jones (102) noted an added complexity: the fact that the authors of the interpretive texts on the piece were also asked to “be available” in 10, 20 or even 30 years’ time to reflect on the performance again, taking into consideration their “progress” through time and life.

The comparison with *Imponderabilia* reveals other transformations that the artworld has undergone in the nearly 40 years of space and time since the event in Bologna. Whereas *Imponderabilia* could be seen as participating in the institutional critique witnessed throughout conceptual art and performance art at the time, with Heathfield noting that the piece “makes physically evident that to enter the art world is to make choices” (25), Janša’s piece, on the other hand, demonstrates a shift from that institutional critique to relational aesthetics – a concept popularised by French curator Nicolas Bourriaud in his 1998 eponymous essay. In fact, Jones’s essay focuses on the relational aspects of Janša’s work, especially in comparison to that of Abramović and Ulay. For her, Janša’s piece highlights our role, as spectators, in subject formation – the piece literalises the fact that we are always perceived of, both by ourselves and by others, in relation to others. For her, Janša’s work demonstrates that both *Imponderabilia* and *Life II [in Progress]* are not just about the doorway.

Tim Etchells, an artist, performance artist, writer, and professor of performance raises the question at the heart of the work: where do *we* fit, as spectators, viewers, participants, etc. As Heathfield points out, in both pieces, the spectator shifts to become spectActor (17): in *Imponderabilia*, s/he is forced to give up her/his voyeuristic position to become momentarily part of the artwork. In *Life II [in Progress]*, this “moment” gets expanded into a lifetime of moments, as the spectActors pass through a range of bodies and witness (through a display of later photographs) the passageway through which they once passed change and shift with the passage of time. Consequently, whereas in *Imponderabilia*, visitors “entered” the gallery, for Heathfield, the focus, in Janša’s work, “is less on entering and more on passing through” (31): passing through the bodies stationed in the doorway, which is at once a metaphor for the passage through various stages of life, and passing through the temporal realm of their own lives, while the bodies in the doorway pass through the temporalities of theirs.

While Jones sees the extended temporality of the piece as a unique aspect of the work of art, it is worth noting that a contemporary of Janša began a similar exploration

almost twenty years prior to *Life II [in Progress]*. Slovenian theater director and artist Dragan Živadinov's 50-year theatre project, *Noordung::1995-2045*, a series of performances that is repeated every ten years; the first performance having taken place on 20 April 1995, with the final instantiation set to take place in 2045. On 1 May of that year, the artist will fly into space and place replicas of the original 14 actors on 14 points around the earth, and effectively end his life by remaining in space. The durational nature of the performance means that the mortality of the performers was a consideration in relation to the piece right from the start, and in fact, each participant who dies will be replaced by a mechanism of her or his choice. For example, when Milena Grm died, she was replaced in the performance by a "syntapiens/umbot" and a melody. Another parallel that is also from Slovenia involves the noted rock group Laibach, which has continued to perform since 1980, with a rotating cast of characters that act and perform according to the "brand" of Laibach. Just as Janša's piece raises the question as to whether it can continue indefinitely, with the children of the artists carrying it on, so, too, do the projects of Laibach and Živadinov. These precedents in no way diminish the contribution of Janša's work, but in fact demonstrate a sustained concern by artists for such issues as the duration of life, the longevity of the artist, not to mention the mortality of all involved in the creative process, from the creator and spectator, to the one documenting the work and interpreting it.

While the essays in this collection draw out a number of important points with regard to performance, re-staging, re-enactment, documentation of performance, etc., one notable absence from the discussion is the manner in which Janša nuances Abramović's and Ulay's work by in fact minimising the role of the viewer/spectator/participant. In many of the staged scenarios from *Life II [in Progress]*, the so-called non-artist/spectator is entirely removed from the equation, as it is either other artists or children who pass through the bodies in the doorway, and sometimes it is simply the figures in the doorway who are present, without anyone seen to be passing through. To my mind, this further strengthens the arguments about the fact that the doorway itself is a highly potent symbol that doesn't even require the act of passing through to convey the message about life and mortality with regard to the piece. Of course, the viewers do still pass through the doorways during the "performances" of the piece, but in many of the staged photographs that are exhibited in conjunction with further instantiations of the performance, the viewer is entirely absent – or simply implied to be the viewer of the photograph, as opposed to the performance.

Aldo Milohnić's very interesting essay about the interactions between art and law throughout the ages touches on *Life II [in Progress]*, but takes as its focus one element of the precursor to this piece, *Life [in Progress]*. In this 2008 piece, Janša takes the very compelling approach of scoring works of performance art from the proverbial canon of performance art history – such notable works as Yoko Ono's *Cut Piece* or

Carolee Schneemann's *Interior Scroll*. Working backward from the memory and documentation of the pieces themselves, the artist "scored" them, turning them into a series of Fluxus-like instructions that the visitors to the gallery could choose to follow or not. Although Heathfield has drawn a parallel between this scoring and Fluxus, it actually bears more similarities to the manner in which Polish theatre director Tadeusz Kantor worked – usually scoring pieces based on the performance or after they were performed, rather than before.

One of the instructions in *Life [in Progress]* was to cut up the national flag of whichever country the piece was on display in. In Croatia, this was met with serious consequences when one spectator, an artist himself, brought this to the attention of the authorities, who were forced to investigate, based on the work's potential violation of Article 151 of the Croatian penal code, which prohibits the "ridicule, contempt or severe disdain" of the flag (or other symbols) of the Republic of Croatia. Janša was found to have committed no crime for several reasons – among which was the fact that, in the moment of acting, the real people (spectators) were turned into fictitious actors (or spectActors, to use Heathfield's term), as participants in a work of art.

While Milohnić's essay is somewhat incongruous to the rest of the essays, which are devoted to *Life II [in Progress]* and its relation to, or development from, *Imponderabilia*, it highlights the importance of laws and rules to both society and art, and in a work of art that deals with social relations, the rules of behavior between and among people in civil society become foregrounded and paramount. For example, Heathfield mentions the fact that, in many cases, the "laws of instruction" in both *Life [in Progress]* and *Life II [in Progress]* run counter to "tacit and agreed social law" (20). In polite society, we don't rub up against naked people, nor do naked people appear before us on the streets. Milohnić points out that whereas Abramović's and Ulay's performance was interrupted by police after one hour, Janša's remained undisturbed in all of its instantiations, despite the rampant nudity. While he attributes this to the increasing ease with which we witness performance art and artistic acts in contemporary society, what his essay also highlights are the differences in both law and attitude toward art and artists in society, not only from the 1970s until today, but also across different national lines – from Slovenia to Croatia and Brazil. These negotiations that take place between artists and their audiences, art and the law, artists and society, are perpetual and ongoing, continually *in progress*.

Just as Janša's piece takes us on a trajectory toward the future in time and space, Mladen Dolar's essay takes us back centuries, to the fundamental myths underpinning human existence – most notably, Sophocles's *Oedipus Rex* and its modern contextualisation by Sigmund Freud. Focusing on the prominence of children in *Life II [in Progress]*, and the process of birth implicit therein, Dolar's text builds to a climax on Lacan's

statement from Seminar II: “best is not to be born,” with the implication that “being is a failed non-being” (86). For Dolar, it is that “negation that fuels becoming in the midst of life” (90–93). It is becoming that is at the heart of Janša’s *Life II [in Progress]* and all that it implies.

This series of five essays and illuminating and beautiful photographs by Nada Žgank serve to encapsulate what is, at the outset, a seemingly simple (though not simplistic) photographic or performative project, quite possibly a re-enactment, but not entirely. In fact, many of Janša’s projects have a similar outward appearance of simplicity. But examining the piece through the lens of art, performance, documentation, philosophy, psychology and law, as the authors in this essay do, demonstrates how the very simple act of two people standing in a doorway becomes so much more in the hands of Janez Janša.