

REVIEW ESSAY

**Gretchen Bakke.** *The Likeness: Semblance and Self in Slovene Society.* University of California Press, 2020. xvii + 196 pp. \$85 (hardcover) ISBN 9780520320031, \$29.95 (pbk.) 9780520320048, \$29.95 (e-book) 9780520974173

*The Likeness* is a noteworthy exercise in anthropological imagination that develops a singular story drawing upon what appear, at first sight, to be incompatible sources. Far from a classic monograph about a people and a place, this book addresses a wider audience attracted to new forms of ethnographic presentation, to the interface of art and politics in contemporary society. We encounter here a unique and provocative twist in the quest to depict Slovenia and the Slovenes.

*The Likeness* is an ethnography of subjectivity; it develops the idea that self-representation among Slovenes is uniquely devoid of reference to the inner-self. Rather, it proposes that self-expression finds its nuance on the surfaces of bodies and things. Semblance—understood as duplication, the reproduction of sameness, and creation of copies (likenesses)—becomes a vehicle of self-representation, carefully avoiding reflection over a hidden inner-self. This is what sets Slovenes apart from others; it challenges understandings of the self, found in other places, where differences are played up and conformity frowned on.

The author of this text, Gretchen Bakke, was attracted to Slovenia for field research<sup>1</sup> because it stood out among its post-socialist counterparts.

---

<sup>1</sup> Bakke's field research was initially focused on contemporary art in Slovenia, and led to her dissertation at the University of Chicago, "Contemporary

Slovenia's secession from the Yugoslav federation was far less bloody and turbulent than that of other republics. Its transition from state socialism to a capitalist social democracy was effective and pragmatic. Bakke was not only fascinated by Slovenia's exceptional functionality in the face of radical change. She was "piqued by a more pointed weirdness" (5). At the time of her fieldwork (2001–2003),

Slovenia's single most important exports (after refrigerators) were a seemingly neo-fascist punkish band and a sort of crazed Lacanian philosopher. Both Laibach (the band) and Žižek (the philosopher) commanded devoted followings—in Slovenia and beyond—but neither could really be said to be a "normal" sort of harbinger for a functional nation-state. (5)

Bakke turns to art, contemporary Slovene philosophic writing, public acts of self-representation, interviews, lexical and grammatical systems, and local and European history to develop what Stefan Helmreich has called a "Möbius strip ethnography."<sup>2</sup> The reader is challenged to discover what is "double" along this twisting and endless narrative plane. Is it merely "art and politics," as implied by Helmreich?

Skimming across the surface of *The Likeness*, without claiming to fathom its many nuances, this reviewer summarizes below, chapter by chapter, a few of the themes and arguments covered in the course of a narrative that associates punctuation marks with a competition between Roman painters, distinguishes historic lectures, and art exhibits as they were replicated in 1980s Ljubljana, connects the *Laibach* punk band with politics, fanaticism, and *Neue Slowenische Kunst*, finds equivalent the public performance of Slavoj Žižek and Melania Trump, and considers as one Janez Janša, Janez Janša, and Janez Janša.

The story begins with its preface. Here, a punctuation mark, the ampersand, comes into play. Before we know it, we are confronted by the "andandpersand," a floret indicating moments of aesthetic thickness. (This mark & punctuates the conclusion of each chapter to follow.) This vision of "thickness" is then compounded by a parable about deception in art as interpreted by the Slovene philosopher Mladen Dolar. For Bakke, this exposition illustrates "the simultaneity of doubleness" that renders this book with "its form and purpose" (xiv). Perhaps it is this that is at play along the Möbius strip?

---

Slovene Art and Artifice" (2007). Out of this engagement with Slovene artists and other local cognoscenti Bakke developed a fascination for what she designates as the "culturally particular nature of interiority—or, the inner-self" (<http://www.bakkeconsolidated.org/>). This short book, ten years in the making, is the result.

<sup>2</sup> <https://www.ucpress.edu/book/9780520320048/the-likeness>

The stage is set to consider *semblance* and *self*.

Bakke discovered in Slovene statecraft the importance of **semblance**. “Slovenes did so well in their transition from communism because they looked to systems that functioned well and *copied* them” (5). But copying extends beyond state-making; it reflects in Slovenia a “cultural care for resemblances and what they are good for” (6). Bakke is especially interested to identify semblance in art and performance. This we discover in an apt rendition of the 1913 Amory Show held in New York as it was replicated as “The International Exhibition of Modern Art” in Ljubljana in 1986. A richly documented and insightful account of the *Laibach* band further verifies the political power of copying, as does a discussion of *Neue Slowenische Kunst*. These and other cases illustrate the relevance of making copies, understood as copies, a vehicle for self-recognition without revealing an inner-self. “The play in Slovenia as the nation tipped toward the EU was with resemblances, while care for the true essences of being rather than pretending at being someone or something was purposefully underdetermined” (18–19).

**Self** is performed, rather than professed or extrapolated from some mysterious depth. Late in fieldwork, Bakke discovered that a local cultural model for mental illness<sup>3</sup> is grounded in Slovenes’ closedness, preoccupation with image management, and self-control. This insight is then coupled with Slavoj Žižek’s disdain for the idea of an inner-self and Melania Trump’s carefully managed public presence as “first lady.” Bakke argues that among Slovenes “(o)pening oneself is enjoined against, self-expression maligned, while what is given—that is, what is available to the immediacy of the senses—is posited as the correct place to seek to know someone or something for what it, or he, or she really is” (30). Referring to Erwin Goffman, Bakke confirms “(i)dentitity is wrought, it’s in play. Identity is, in other words, something one does or deploys every bit as much as something that one is” (Goffman 1959).

Stepping aside from the themes of “semblance” and “self,” Bakke concludes the introduction by clarifying her intentions with this book. She notes the decade taken to write this text “happened in parallel to a heartening move in anthropology toward experimentation in writing, not just crazy fonts or spitting and swearing (lots of this though, in chapter 4),

---

<sup>3</sup> Bakke was puzzled by the lack of public displays of derangement in Slovenia, something she associated with mental illness. A discussion with Špela Zgonc near the conclusion of fieldwork challenged this assumption. It had not occurred to Bakke that in Slovenia “everyone struggled, at all costs, to maintain the appearance of normalcy, to not attract attention to themselves, and to not publicly manifest their differences” (24–26). Mental illness is very much confined behind closed doors, only subtly detectable in public behaviors.

but also attempts to knit the formal qualities of a written work to its argument and its point” (37).

Bakke is critical of anthropology’s penchant to treat the people they study as a source of data and then apply the academic debates of European and American academies as the “analytic mangle” through which to wring this data (38). Consequently, Slovene thinkers, with few exceptions, drive her analysis. She is convinced that “a local point of view, or stance, emerges much more forcefully by these means” (39). Bakke nevertheless develops her locally inspired analysis with extensive reference to anthropological literature. This is particularly true for her consideration of subjectivity and conceptualization of self, where she finds substantial affirmation and elaboration in ethnographies centered outside the West.

Chapter 1 begins with a lecture by Walter Benjamin on the art of Piet Mondrian held in Ljubljana in 1986, forty-six years after Benjamin’s death. This leads to other tingling examples of replication drawn from the local art scene. Bakke uses this material to demonstrate the complexity of self-representation—copies are made of copies, two Benjamins speaking from the mouth of one are understood as two, minimal differences separating the copier from originator are dismissed (Župančič 2003). These plays with subjectivity “distance the individual from him or herself by multiplying surface-level complexity while simultaneously voiding the center of any positive content” (56).

Chapter 2. Facing EU membership Slovenes were profoundly confronted with the question of who they were. When non-Slovene visitors from the West asked Slovene artists to self-represent publicly the latter engaged all sorts of avoidance strategies. They hid, shirked, and slouched. Such behavior is richly illustrated in this chapter as “technologies of self-protection.” Drawing on Marko Pelhan’s<sup>4</sup> cloistered self-presentation in a public lecture (62), Bakke embroiders a host of presenter strategies for avoiding personal and visual contact with audiences.

This evolves into philosophical discourse. Mladen Dolar raises issues “linked to the intense bodily discomfort displayed by Slovene artists when asked to speak for, and as, themselves” (70). Drawing on his work, *A Voice and Nothing More* (2006), Bakke argues “that though the voice may come from inside the body, it is not proof in the least of a quintessential innerness linkable to special-flower subjectivity” (39).

\* \* \*

---

<sup>4</sup> A similar aversion to personal contact is also emphasized in Pelhan’s *Makrolab*, a mobile artwork-research laboratory (Pelhan 2003). Skype via satellite enables communication between co-workers seated side by side in this cramped research chamber.

At this point the text is broken, but not the narrative. Readers are forced to peruse *three* images (photographs) of a preeminent symbol of the Slovene nation, Triglav—the *three* headed mountain. We have already seen the *Laibach* band photographed in full uniform on Triglav peak (12). Here the exposed heads of *three* members of the artists' collective OHO twice replicate, under an appropriately draped dark mantle, a reproduction of Triglav in central Ljubljana. We view the original (1968) and its remake (2004). Finally, in 2007, the three heads of Janez Janša, Janez Janša, and Janez Janša, poking out of a similarly draped mantle, replicate Mount Triglav on Mount Triglav. Three times three and we arrive at chapter 3.

\* \* \*

Chapter 3 presents an art project called Name Readymade by Janez Janša, Janez Janša, and Janez Janša. Beginning in 2007, three artists—Emil Hrvatin, Žiga Kariž, and Davide Grassi—all changed their names to Janez Janša. They adopted the name of a renowned Slovene politician, but continued to live their normal lives producing acts of art along the way. One of them married as Janez Janša with the other two officially witnessing the marriage with their signatures—Janez Janša & Janez Janša. The matter of changing names but not identity is taken around the block several times. Before it is over identities do become complex. The individual gets lost in some kind of twoness. The audience is amused and bemused. Political statements abound. This playful presentation leads to a more serious discussion of “doubleness as a comfortable category,” (39) where Slovene philosophers enter the stage. Along the way, Bakke cautiously turns to the “dual” in Slovene grammar as an embellishment of “doubleness,” and to distinctions in Slovene lexicon distinguishing two from the many.<sup>5</sup>

Chapter 4 begins with an account of various scholars' response to the question: Is Slavoj Žižek full of shit? Many agree, including Noam Chomsky. Ultimately Žižek does as well. These affirmations combined with the rendition of Žižek's participation in and usurpation of a panel on the death of God held in Montreal, 8 November 2009, lead to an initial conclusion that Žižek's popularity and enthusiastic following should be attributed more to his performance than the substance of his message.

But the matter is not so simple. Bakke unpacks Harry Frankfurt's treatise, *On Bullshit* (2005), and tantalizingly accounts for what she calls “the history of the Western self” (39). With pointed reference to the foregoing Bakke concludes:

Žižek makes himself not by attending to inner truths or by splitting into self-examining, self-improving subjectivity, but rather by maintaining a distastefully intimate relationship with

---

<sup>5</sup> Človek, človeka, ljudje

the world. He is of it, he makes himself of it, and then he forces this subjective blending, as a sort of human-environmental chimera, upon the rest of us. His mode of being a subject is aggressive: he wants us too to live in a world not of the self, but of and with the intensity of context. (126)

Chapter 5 returns to art under the rubric “Inside the Body is Blood and Bone.” Surgical performances contesting entry into the European Union are the topic. For example, at the time of Slovenia’s accession to the EU (2004) Ive Tabar performed *Evropa III*<sup>6</sup> whereby “he slowly separated his fingernail, with a Slovene flag (depicting Triglav) painted upon it, from the flesh of his finger. He then affixed the nail to a plastic *Proteus anguinus*—a local, pale skinned newt often used in Slovenia as a national totem” (129). These performances are yet another twist in a narrative on self-representation. “Tabar literalizes the call for self-examination and self-knowledge; he takes the Delphic imperative to heart. He looks inside himself and shows us what can be found there and, in an elegant twist, he turns all of this into a politics of resistance” (124).

Within a broader frame, this chapter is about resistance to diverse forms of domination, particularly free market driven capitalism. Addressing ways domination manipulates self-conception, Bakke turns to Elizabeth Dunn’s book, *Privatizing Poland* (2004) to illustrate how the expectations and operations of a transplanted American corporation—Gerber Baby Foods—conflicted with local self-understandings.

In conclusion Bakke returns to Tabar:

Resistance... causes “distant” power to do “local” work. The free market would come to Slovenia, it’s there now, a decade after the last of Tabar’s *Evropas*. But Tabar and the others in their multifaceted refusal of a particular mode of subjectivity have slowed it down; simmering and at times boiling, they resist this one overwhelming underpinning of a true capitalist conversion. (145)

In an afterword, Bakke redeems Melania Trump (née Melanija Knavs) from harsh treatment in American media that has followed her as first lady. She has been accused of plagiarism, copying others (especially Michele Obama) and demonstrates “a legible lack of enthusiasm” in performing the first lady role. All of this belies an American sense of self, demanding originality and projection of one’s inner uniqueness.

Bakke notes Melania has done “her subjectivity exactly right, albeit only if you take the Slovene view on things. She ha(s) shown herself

---

<sup>6</sup> One of a series of surgical performances, entitled *Evropa* (I-V), conducted by Ive Tabar between 1999 and 2008.

to subsist in a world beyond, rather than inside, her skin. She ha(s) tied herself to an awkward chain of social relations, multiplying and rendering more complex her person by means of the external world that it reflects (and which is reflected in it); she ha(s)done this without opening herself and in such a way that there can be no accidental mistaking of her voice as the sound of “what has a soul in it” (yep, Dolar 2006 again)” (145).



*The Likeness* is experimental ethnography, both puzzling and refreshing. And without doubt it provides a unique looking glass through which to examine Slovene society, especially in the tumultuous times of secession, independence and “Europeanization.”

Bakke’s skill at juxtaposing ever new sets of cases and analytical takes creates a tension driving the reader forward. As she describes in a recent interview with Krisztina Fehérváry,<sup>7</sup> the book itself is structured to emphasize doubleness. Each chapter is presented in two juxtaposed parts. And Bakke’s extensive footnotes—largely avoided in this review—are explicitly designed as a parallel narrative (a double). Doubleness prevails in the book’s structure and narrative.

Firmly grounded in social and cultural anthropology of the past, this reviewer was drawn to *The Likeness* because it challenged his understanding of ethnographic writing. Ultimately it widened his vision. Perhaps other readers of other backgrounds will find their challenge, as well. A skillful pen, evoking deadly sincerity and a chuckle with the same stroke, is an invitation to explore this unconventional narrative.

*Robert Gary Minnich, professor emeritus, University of Bergen, Norway*

#### Works Cited

- Bakke, Gretchen. 2007. Contemporary slovene art and artifice. Ph.D. dissertation, Department of Anthropology, University of Chicago.
- Dolar, Mladen. 2006. *A voice and nothing more*. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press.
- Dunn, Elizabeth. 2004. *Privatizing Poland: Baby food, big business, and the remaking of labor*. Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press.
- Frankfurt, Harry. 2005. *On bullshit*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.
- Goffman, Erving. 1990 [1959]. *The presentation of self in everyday life*. New York: Penguin Books.

<sup>7</sup> <https://campanthropology.org/2020/07/27/gretchen-bakke-the-likeness/>

- Peljhan, Marko, and Projekt Atol Institute. 2003. Makrolab: North 0560 48' 182" west 0030 58' 299" elevation 1276ft. Edited by R. La Frenais, G. Dickie and P. Khera. London: The Arts Catalyst.
- Župančič, Alenka. 2003. *The shortest shadow: Nietzsche's philosophy of the two*. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press.