

Natasa Vilić¹

University of Banja Luka
Faculty of Philosophy
Department Philosophy/Aesthetics
Bulevar vojvode Petra Bojovica 1a
78 000 Banja Luka
e-mail: natasa.vilic@ff.unibl.org

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Bauman's understanding of aesthetic space

Abstract

In this paper we will revise the concept of art as a form that demands a physical space in order to encounter the Other and in doing so we will endorse Zygmunt Bauman's comprehension of aesthetic space. Contemporary artists like Andy Warhol, Jan Fabre and Oliver Stone testify that this physical and aesthetical space represents what Bauman calls the "challenge that labors the knowledge" On that way, contemporary art becomes a "mirror" of life and culture, an image of a "fluid modern era". Only one thing missing in that image is a distance, which enables us to behold a truthfulness and wholeness of a being.

Keywords: *art, space, aesthetics, encounter with other, culture, fluid life*

Art has always set before us the demand to understand a human being and the reality in which he dwells (to which he belongs to). The fundamental question that we have always asked ourselves and we still need to ask, in spite of all accumulated knowledge and modern technology, is the same one that Friedrich Nietzsche posed more than a century ago: "What does a man actually know about himself?"² A man is the cause of Nature, but also the consequence of that what he makes out of himself. "In nature, there is no effect

¹ Associated Professor, PhD in Philosophy

² Friedrich Nietzsche (1991), *Philosophy and truth – selections from Nietzsche's Notebooks of the early 1870's*. London, Humanities Press International, p. 80

without the cause; first understand the cause, and after that you only have to gain an experience”, said famous artist Leonardo da Vinci and added “experience, a mediator between an imaginative nature and the human kind, teaches us that what nature does to ordinary mortals oppressed by necessity it could not have been done any other way than the one governed by the reason.”³ This synthesis is more evident in the creation of the work of art, where it turns out that the artist himself is a “mediator between the imaginative nature and the human kind”. Art as a specific sphere of the spirit belongs to the human kind, it emanates from humans and it is made for them.

Already since Aristotle it is believed that the art belongs to a man, that its source resides in the spirit, and that the spirit has the power to transcend reality. “Nature, like all that exists, is an energy that operates with some purpose ... Nature and art are two most dominant driving forces in the world.”⁴ The world of art has for a goal and purpose a spiritual transformation of human beings, the encounter of a human with himself, with others and with the divine. Encountering the art, we experience something that, though fully evident, is not only rendered through the senses - the Nature. A human being is a part of that same Nature, simultaneously being aware of his finitude as a physical being and his infinity as a divine spirit. “Nature is full of infinite things that experience has never revealed.”⁵ The artist has the “power” to experience these “infinite things” in an artistic way, and a knowledge coming out of them he does not hold only for himself, but shares it and reveals it in and through the artwork by further-giving it to the audience. The artist knows only one Truth, he does not relativize reality in the name of the so-called moral norms, which aim to limit a human nature. Is that possible?! Actually, it's not! Why? Developing individual intellectual abilities without developing a critical thinking and a freedom of creation, aims at that what Nietzsche rightly calls only a means of self-sustainment. “As a means for the preserving of the individual, the intellect unfolds its principle powers in dissimulation, which is the means by which weaker, less robust individuals preserve themselves – since they have been denied the chance to wage the battle for existence with horns or with sharp teeth of beasts of prey. This art of dissimulation reaches its peak in man. Deception, flattering, lying, deluding, talking behind the back, putting up a false front, living in borrowed splendor, wearing a mask, hiding behind convention, playing a role for others and for oneself – in short, a continuous fluttering around the solitary flame of vanity – is so much the rule and the law among the men that there is almost nothing

³ Da Vinči, Leonardo (2011), *Predskazanja*. Beograd: Službeni glasnik, p. 12-13

⁴ Vilić, Nataša (2016) *Uvod u estetiku (sa kratkim pregledom istorije estetike: Antika i Srednji vek)*, Banja Luka: Udruženje za filozofiju i društvenu misao Banja Luka, p.109

⁵ Da Vinči, Leonardo (2011), *Predskazanja*. Beograd: Službeni glasnik, p. 12-13

which is less comprehensible than how an honest and pure drive for truth could have arisen among them. They are deeply immersed in illusions and in dream images; their eyes merely glide over the surface of things and see "forms". Their senses nowhere lead to truth; on the contrary, they are content to receive stimuli and, as it were, to engage in a groping game on the backs of things."⁶

It seems like, more than ever before, modern art has a demand for a physical space. Modern art is no longer satisfied with classical analysis and reflections offered by (classical) aesthetics. Such a complex, undefined and incomprehensible art, requires an interdisciplinary approach. This was also confirmed by Zygmunt Bauman, who thinks that art requires a good knowledge of physical space.⁷ One of the reasons for that Bauman sees in the fact that the art can be understood as "an abstraction that cannot be experienced directly."⁸ From the aspect of aesthetics, it is important to ask – how do we understand a physical space as a general category important for art? Conscious of this question Bauman says "we grasp a physical space intellectually, using terms originally made to map the qualitatively different relations with others"⁹. Art as a *sui generis* phenomenon requires a relationship with the Other, which implies "aesthetic space" as one of three equal "but different processes" inside a "social space."¹⁰ Bauman's understanding of an artistic and aesthetic space is very similar: "the aesthetic space arises affectively, with an attention-driven curiosity and a quest for experimental intensity."¹¹ This is proven by the artist Andy Warhol, who in his artworks shows an artistic "play"¹² with reality by creating "new" works of art that are "adapted" for modern times. Warhol is sure that contemporary art testifies to the fact that all of the existence must be gazed upon as a kind of a maze, created through the obscure network made of visible and provable, but also "invisible" and "unprovable" cords, because art, classical and contemporary, always floats between the cult and the secret on the one side, and present existence as understood by Jean-Paul Sartre, on the other.

⁶ Friedrich Nietzsche (1991), *Philosophy and truth – selections from Nietzsche's Notebooks of the early 1870's*. London, Humanities Press International, p. 80

⁷ We want to stress here that Bauman is among first ones to use the concept "physical space" to explain that in exactly this space in which it is possible to understand things that we cannot experience directly.

⁸ Bauman, Zygmunt (2009), *Postmoderna etika*. Zagreb: Biblioteka Sintagma, p. 181

⁹ *Ibid.* p. 181

¹⁰ Bauman thinks that the "social space" should be observed as a specific and complex "interaction between three intertwined and yet different processes – cognitive, esthetical and moral en-spacing – and to them ascribed products"

¹¹ Bauman, Zygmunt (2009), *Postmoderna etika*. Zagreb: Biblioteka Sintagma, p. 182

¹² Warhol claims that an artist is, in the process of creation not only playing with reality by its own will, but it is expected from him to do so.

Here we turn to other concepts by Zygmunt Bauman that are important for us estheticians: “knowing the other” and “knowledge of the other”. Bauman says: “To live is to live with another (other human beings; other beings similar to us) – that is obvious to the point of banality. Less obvious, and not so banal, is the fact that what we call ‘the other’ (to live involves awareness of living with) is actually the ‘knowledge’ about them.”¹³ Andy Warhol aware of the situation in which he finds himself, not only as an artist but above all as a human being, as a subject, believes that we all are (pre)occupied with our own physical survival. In this world, artists occupy an uneasy position because they die of exhaustion, the exhaustion coming from the fact that they are prevented from completing their artistic works (freely). Here we will try to imagine a possible meeting of Warhol and Bauman, and their own way in which they could speak about what it means “to live with another” and how is this living-with helpful in (re)cognizing the Other, and through the other (re)cognizing ourselves. “Each of us ‘constructs’ his or her own assortment of the ‘others’ from a piled, processed memory of past encounters, communications, exchanges, joint ventures or battles.”¹⁴ Warhol, without any hesitation, throws the truth in our face and claims that contemporary art is a prove that today – a lie became the “only” truth. A warning already expressed by Nietzsche: “What then is truth? A movable host of metaphors, metonymies, and anthropomorphisms: in short, a sum of human relations which have been poetically and rhetorically intensified, transferred, and embellished, and which, after long usage, seem to a people to be fixed, canonical, and binding. Truths are illusions which we have forgotten are illusions; they are metaphors that have become worn out and have been drained of sensuous force, coins which have lost their embossing and are now considered as metal and no longer as coins.”¹⁵

If we dare to make a possible sublimation of concepts from an aesthetical perspective, we might actually notice - that today a simulation of reality and the virtual world became the only reality without chunk of atavism¹⁶ that we

¹³ Bauman, Zygmunt (2009), *Postmoderna etika*. Zagreb: Biblioteka Sintagma, p.182

¹⁴ Ibid. p. 182

¹⁵ Friedrich Nietzsche (1991), *Philosophy and truth – selections from Nietzsche’s Notebooks of the early 1870’s*. London, Humanities Press International, p.84

¹⁶ Precisely in such a world, where everything is possible, but at the same time unrealistic, a human could realize the Truth. This was also showed by Nietzsche, who claimed that the human being, by going through lies and self-deception could reach the Truth. Nietzsche says: “We still do not yet know where the drive for truth comes from. For so far we have heard only of the duty which society imposes in order to exist: to be truthful means to employ the usual metaphors. Thus, to express it morally, this is the duty to lie according to a fixed convention, to lie with the herd and in manner binding upon everyone. Now man of course forgets that this is the way things stand for him. Thus he lies in manner indicated, unconscious and in accordance

can speak about?! We could even pose a question - is there any point to talk about art today, or, why art in contemporary world at all?

Possible answers we can find by artists themselves. One of the recent examples is a documentary film made by famous and world-renowned artist Oliver Stone "The Putin Interviews."¹⁷ Why can this film be so important for us?! Precisely because of what Bauman calls "a processed memory of past encounters" but also because it deals with the subject of the Other, which Stone treats through a set of questions about the professional and private life of the Russian statesman Vladimir Putin himself. He attempts to answer - how this encounter with the other, which is the same, though completely different, can illuminate the essence of a human being? What is different here, is the encounter between two different individuals, artist Stone and politician Putin; but through the interview we see that below the surface both men are very similar, they feel similar joy, pain, worries, concerns, hopes, anxieties, they have similar relation to the guiding thread of the documentary – the vision of the future – of the politician, a man of action and influence and the artist who grasps it and reveals it in front of other observers. Oliver Stone constantly makes an effort to understand invisible thoughts, desires and feelings of a man sitting across from him. Stone knows how essential it is to understand and to be understood in projecting a vision of a forthcoming future that cannot be pronounced, but it can be prefigured. And this uttering of 'only implied' is possible only through the art. In this regard Bauman says: "Understanding is natural and normal, mis-understanding is un-natural and abnormal. Misunderstanding is the one that requires an explanation, it makes us stop and think, it boosts our minds and triggers the process of conscious building of knowledge."¹⁸

with habits which are centuries old; and precisely *by means of his unconsciousness* and forgetfulness he arrives at his sense of truth." Nietzsche, F. (1991), *Philosophy and truth – selections from Nietzsche's Notebooks of the early 1870's*. London, Humanities Press International, p. 84

¹⁷ Oliver Stone is American film director and three-time Oscar-winner. His documentary "The Putin Interview" was presented at the 23rd Sarajevo Film Festival (2017), where he was awarded the honorary "Heart of Sarajevo". On that occasion, Stone said, "The film about the Russian president is a call for peace, it comes in the peak of the Second Cold War, in terrifying circumstances in which the United States are approaching a possible reaction from Russia. That is exactly what many American neoconservatives and democrats like Hilary Clinton want." Everyone who watched this film had an opportunity to grasp Stone's extraordinary and profound insight into Putin's professional and personal life. Stone re-presents Putin neither particularly, individually, personally nor professionally; he does it in a way of re-presenting the other as a similar but yet different in his calling. With this film, Stone showed us that J.P. Sartre had right when he called upon "engaged literature" and later upon "engaged art". In this way, he made a transfer of art from an artistic-philosophical sphere into a context of sociology, social and cultural reality.

¹⁸ Bauman, Zygmunt (2009), *Postmoderna etika*. Zagreb: Biblioteka Sintagma, p. 183

Therefore, art can be understood as “the challenge that labors the knowledge.”¹⁹ That challenge as Bauman claims, has become a part of our reality, the one which is most explicitly realized through the (contemporary) art. A good example of it is also a theatre performance *Mount Olympus – to glorify the cult of tragedy*, created by Belgian director Jan Fabre and performed on 51st Bitez in Belgrade. *Mount Olympus* is a performance based on ancient Greek tragedies²⁰, and built through very subtle and sublimated messages that point toward a true being of the modern man, which threatens to be emptied (or stripped naked) of any (possible) content. This performance has not only an artistic, aesthetic and cultural value, but is also very important from a sociological point of view. Why? The performance is conceived in such a way that ‘mostly naked people’²¹, men and woman inhabit a theatrical space, implicit and explicit they are part of a ‘naked community’, they show they intimate parts, they simulate or have real sex scenes, they dance to the rhythm of Sirtaki and they strip themselves to the bone. Even in intellectual circles many wondered – what exactly this setting for the show?! Precisely through that ‘well-known’ nakedness Fabre un-covers the un-known in a man. “Similar to the employment of pleasure, the art of dealing with pain in a mindful life includes a whole range of mastery: not only by accepting and integrating, enduring and outliving pain, but also ascetically withstanding it and finally converting and sublimating it into serenity and optimism, once personified in Epicurus who, even from the experience of pain, was able to extract life’s joy... Even the artistic expressions of pain are, in fact, the question of choice, because it is not prewritten that the cultural representations of pain, which only vaguely daggles through the selfhood, have to be accepted, felt, expresses and named on the particular way.”²² These words of Wilhelm Schmid describe best the artist need to address his contemporariness.

¹⁹ Ibid. p.184

²⁰ The show is loosely based on ancient Greek mythology, the one adapted in Homer, and further articulated by Aeschylus, Euripides and Sophocles. “The most important source of inspiration for this production is Greek mythology. But in this instance the Greeks are stripped of their explanatory mode, of excessive understanding humanism, and are reduced to primal matters, cruel and shocking. It is the indecipherable Greeks that interest Fabre, heroes and heroines such as Medea, Antigone, Prometheus, Oedipus and Elektra, before they were check-mated by psychoanalysis.” <http://mountolympus.be/about>

²¹ The actors and dancers are shifting between being naked and being wrapped up in white sheets. Precisely this nakedness is expression of the director’s vision of an ancient Dionysian cult.

²² Šmid, Vilhelm (2001), *Lep život!? Uvod u životnu umetnost*. Novi Sad: Svetovi, p. 66 But he says that this is not the only choice put in front of the self: “the self can choose silence, so it could stay alone with its pain and not scatter it around as he likes: this is a preservation of the communicative border, since what plays out in the deepest corner of the soul is inexplicable. Dignity makes out of selfhood a need for self-preservation of the inner most being, the one that is not ought to be touched by the hand of anyone other.”

From the sociological point of view, contemporary man is a 'bare-naked tragic hero without a sense' that creates himself (and others). The performance Mount Olympus on provocative way puts a challenge before a contemporary man, the "challenge that labors the knowledge."²³ But what is this knowledge good for?! The goal of artists such as Fabre is to offer us a provocative, but also absolutely tempting and seductive re-embodiment of the (almost forgotten) Dionysus. He is conjured through the set of individual scenes that overlap each other like in hallucination, orgy, ecstasy and an ancient but still present poesis. What attracts our further attention are the actuality of our time, the ubiquitous presence of a being, the audience reactions and that what Bauman in his work *Fluid life* calls "unrestrained and uncontrolled culture". "At the threshold of the modern era, human beings are no longer perceived as 'pre-given, without problems', as pre-arranged links in the chain of divine creation ('divine' meaning without negotiation or interference), as unavoidable, even though evil, insignificant and flawed, there are now observed as beings that are subjects to influences, having a great need for self-improvement."²⁴ Does contemporary culture cry for "more and new" knowledge?! It certainly offers new insights, apoetical ones, most obvious in the field of art. Mount Olympus could therefore be understood as an artist's attempt to make us aware of the knowledge that "grows from a point of fracture, a quake and non-understanding"²⁵, by consequentially employing different symbols. Mount Olympus, to use the language of Zygmunt Bauman is a reflection of the "fluid modern era"²⁶ while the artists such as Fabre are the ones "that with their works reproduce the main lines of a new fluid experience."²⁷ This "new experience" is actually something so far unseen; the show that lasted for 24 hours and was broadcasted live on the national television (RTS 3)²⁸. It is important to say that the performance left almost none of audience members indifferent; instead it caused a storm of reaction, especially on social networks. Why? Contemporary man recognized himself in Mount Olympus. He idolizes himself and he is afraid of himself – simultaneously – because he knows that both creative and destructive will lose in the battle of the ego against itself and the world around it. "Rejecting the contradiction between creative and destructive act, learning and entertaining, stepping back and stepping

²³ Bauman, Zygmunt (2009), *Postmoderna etika*. Zagreb: Biblioteka Sintagma, p. 184

²⁴ Bauman, Zygmunt (2009), *Fluidni život*. Novi Sad: Mediteran Publishing, p. 65

²⁵ Bauman, Zygmunt (2009), *Postmoderna etika*. Zagreb: Biblioteka Sintagma, p.184

²⁶ Bauman, Zygmunt (2009), *Fluidni život*. Novi Sad: Mediteran Publishing, p. 82

²⁷ Ibid. p. 83

²⁸ 51st Belgrade theatre festival – Bitef was opened on the 23.09.2017 with the *Mount Olympus – to glorify the cult of tragedy*, directed by Jan Fabre. The show lasted for 24h and was broadcasted live without interruption.

forth, as well as cutting off time pointers: these are signs of life reality...the processing of these new qualities...and the articulation of experiences may be the main preoccupation of art in modern world without any support, a world that cannot be trusted to sit still enough for the artist to finish his painting.²⁹

At the end, we can summarize Bauman's understanding of the aesthetic space by saying that contemporary situations demand an interdisciplinary research, and not only that but we can conclude that a man has not yet said everything about himself and the world around him. That same man that is in the 21st century slowly replaced by artificial intelligence, hasn't given up on art brought forth by his spirit; the art – new and different, that sets before us only one requirement – not dive into the world, but in ourselves. Live art gives us hope that a man can still have the strength to fulfill the “mission” given by the universe - to be a creative and humane at the same time. A hard challenge in front of the man, because today everything is offered but nothing is given! “Everything which distinguishes a man from the animals depends upon this ability to volatize perceptual metaphors in a schema, and thus to dissolve an image into a concept.”³⁰ This could be also applied on the distinction between a man and artificial intelligence (AI), which makes a man forget “that he himself is an artistically creating subject.”³¹ Contemporary man, swirling in a whirlpool of time, misses the distance that would enable him to discover how things actually look and what they bring in the future. “I would like” says Umberto Eco “to look at things with distance. Certain ethical problems became clearer to me on considering some problems in semantics – and please don't worry if some people say that we are talking in a complicated way: they may have been encouraged to think too simply by mass-media “revelations”, predictable by definition. Let them instead learn to “think complicated”, because neither the mystery nor the evidence is simple.”³²

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²⁹ Ibid. p. 83

³⁰ Friedrich Nietzsche (1991), *Philosophy and truth – selections from Nietzsche's Notebooks of the early 1870's*. London, Humanities Press International, p.84

³¹ Ibid. p. 85

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