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Article:

Pollock, G orcid.org/0000-0002-6752-2554 (2020) Liquid culture, the art of life and dancing with Tracey Emin: A feminist art historian/cultural analyst's perspective on Bauman's missing cultural hermeneutics. Thesis Eleven, 156 (1). pp. 10-26. ISSN 0725-5136

<https://doi.org/10.1177/0725513619898284>

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Liquid Culture, *The Art of Life* and Dancing with Tracey Emin:

A feminist art historian/cultural analyst's perspective on Bauman's missing cultural hermeneutics

Griselda Pollock

In 1994, I handed Zygmunt a small book I had written titled *Avant-Garde Gambits 1888-93: Gender and the Colour of Art History* (Pollock, 1993). I thought it might interest him, given recent conversations and his evident interest in the cross overs between, art, cultural studies and cultural sociology. It was based on a commissioned lecture to commemorate a European Jewish exile whose work had reshaped British culture: Walter Neurath (1903-67). In 1949, with Eva Urvasi Feuchtwang (1908-1999)—they married in 1953—Neurath had founded one of the leading art historical publishing houses, Thames & Hudson, and had thereby made art history possible and accessible in the UK which was still so backward with regard to art history notably with the World of Art series.

I had opened the lecture-now-book with an image from the film *Lust For Life*, directed by Vincente Minnelli (1903-8) in 1955 and released in 1956. I chose an imagined scene set in the brothel Arles in which the hyper-masculinity and sexual virility of Paul Gauguin (Anthony Quinn) was negatively contrasted with the neurotic, self-destructive, effeminized figure of Vincent van Gogh (Kirk Douglas). Many of Minelli's key films explored the nature of masculine creativity and its deformations, for instance in *The Bad and the Beautiful* (1952) and *Two Weeks in Another Town* (1962). A modernist in his artistic tastes, Minelli represented Van Gogh as a typically tortured but old-fashioned artist who failed to grasp the more radical art and theory represented by Gauguin. (Pollock 1993a) In this scene this difference between the two artists aesthetically was reconfigured through the trope of sexual potency. It served also to elaborate visually an argument I have made about the repeated tropes in modernist art by which white masculinity acted out competition between avant-garde men for artistic leadership

over the representation of the bodies of abjected, often prostitutionalized, and frequently black or brown female bodies (Pollock 1988; 1994; 1996) As a feminist intervening in both the art historical and cinematic fantasy of the white artist-man in colonial modernity, I had to ask the following questions: How does a white European woman position herself, therefore, in relation to this art history made ‘visible’ in Minelli’s figuration? Am I obliged to adopt the forms of professional transvestism normally required of women scholars, and either masochistically identify with the image of my own objectification as a woman subject, mediated through the demonising or envious appropriations of non-European cultures embodied in black women, or displace my attention onto only formal concerns in the paintings, which provide what Freud defined as a bribe of purely formal—that is aesthetic—yield of pleasure’ as compensation? (Freud, ([1908]1990:141) Can I call upon the discourse and politics of international, queer, postcolonial feminism to interrupt these impossible positions, to construct a critical and historical relation to the racist, sexist stories of modern Western art and culture and their multiple sites of disseminations and consumption? (Spivak, [1981]1987); 1985.

One of my specific topics for this analysis in this book was one painting by French-Peruvian artist Paul Gauguin (1848- 1903) titled *Manao Tupapau : Spirit of the Dead Watching* (1892, oil on canvas, 116.05 cm × 134.62 cm, Buffalo: Albright Knox Art Gallery). It was painted in 1892 while he was living in French colonial Tahiti, but exhibited in Paris in 1893, hence in the colonial empire’s capital, by the returning tourist artist. It was painted from a Tahitian woman, Teha’amana, whom, when she was 13-years- old, Gauguin had taken formally as a wife as she and her family understood the legal and religious ceremony by which the syphilitic Frenchman had acquired a sexual and domestic servant for his sojourn in the French colony. At 13, she was close in age as his 16-year-old daughter Aline to whom he frankly described the painting and its sitter in his *Cahier pour Aline* Gauguin ([1893]1981); on this manuscript see also Gamboni (2003).

In the light of a court case in Austria in 2011, in which an Austrian woman member of the far-right Freedom for Austria party had been found guilty and fined for raising the issue of the Prophet's marriage to a girl under the age of 13 (she then lost her appeal for Freedom of Speech at the International Court of Human Rights in 2018)¹, these kinds of questions were already troubling me in dealing with this painting. Since my analysis, other art historians have pursued a similarly critical approach to the sexual and racial politics of this painting and Gauguin's work in general (Eisenman (1997); Mathews (2001)). It did so too more recently whilst attending an Opera North performance of Puccini's opera *Madama Butterfly* (1904) and once again realizing the significance of the fact that the young Japanese 'bride' Choi Choi San purchased by American naval Lieutenant Pinkerton is only 15 at the point of the arranged 'marriage'. Puccini's opera was partly based on a novel, *Madame Chrysanthème* (1887) by French author Pierre Loti (1850-1923), whose travels in Japan had inspired Gauguin to go to Oceania and that also influenced Van Gogh's Japonisme and representation of young Arlesian girls in an imagined Japanese mode, *La Mousme* (1888, Washington; National Gallery of Art.) He wrote: A mousmé is a Japanese girl—Provençal in this case—twelve to fourteen years old' (Van Gogh, 29 July 1888; Van Gogh (2009): Vol. 4:199) The Letters

In my theoretical work and writing, the early 1990s were a period of experimentation with transgression against the normal protocols of academic and art historical writing, in part inspired by feminist resistance to the structural abuses of women across class, race and sexuality so folded into images by canonical artists we are taught to admire. I was also challenging the orthodoxies and the related gender and race *indifference* of the Marxist social histories of art, under whose influence, I had already declared a stand-off with official art history of both the academy and the museum by concurrent engagement with Cultural Studies, the foundation of whose Centre in 1981 at Leeds depended on Zygmunt Bauman's advocacy against a university

¹ <https://www.newshub.co.nz/home/world/2018/10/austrian-woman-s-conviction-for-calling-prophet-muhammad-a-paedophile-upheld.html> 29/10/2018

establishment who could not understand the concept of culture as an object of study: was it not already on campus via departments of literature, music and art and art history? Emergent Cultural Studies drew on Raymond Williams' early formulation that 'culture is ordinary':

Culture is ordinary: that is the first fact. Every human society has its own shape, its own purposes, its own meanings. Every human society expresses these, in institutions, and in arts and learning. The making of a society is the finding of common meanings and directions, and its growth is an active debate and amendment under the pressures of experience, contact, and discovery, writing themselves into the land. The growing society is there, yet it is also made and remade in every individual mind. The making of a mind is, first, the slow learning of shapes, purposes, and meanings, so that work, observation and communication are possible. Then, second, but equal in importance, is the testing of these in experience, the making of new observations, comparisons, and meanings. A culture has two aspects: the known meanings and directions, which its members are trained to; the new observations and meanings, which are offered and tested. (Williams, [1958]1989: 4)

Williams' argument that culture is ordinary borrows the anthropological sense of ways of making meaning, thus debunking the Western elevation of its culture as High Culture, *Bildung*: an elevation that is a product of Modernity and the Enlightenment. Sociology, too, was born out of this shift to the study of the human social processes, especially qualitative sociological investigation. What distinguishes Cultural Studies from sociology of culture is spelt out by Williams:

These are the ordinary processes of human societies and human minds, and we see through them the nature of a culture: that it is always both traditional and

creative; that it is both the most ordinary common meanings and the finest individual meanings.

We use the word culture in these two senses: to mean a *whole way of life* – the common meanings; to mean the *arts and learning* - the special processes of discovery and creative effort. (Williams, ([1958] 1989:4) my emphases)

Recognition of the complex and asymmetrical relations between culture as ways of life and the special processes of creative arts and learning sum up the challenges of socializing critical histories of art when canonical art history had isolated the creative arts from ways of life, let alone the materialist processes of production in which such ways of living were formed and embedded even as they were given lived, social and imaginative forms. Marxist histories of art have conceived *life* narrowly in terms of determination by the social relations of production, also embraced by Williams, in his later work *Marxism and Literature* in 1977 (Williams 1977). Like Zygmunt Bauman, Williams, however, modified a classic Marxist sense of the derivation of life and culture from a determining economic base by drawing deeply on the writings of Antonio Gramsci (Williams, 1977; Gramsci, 1971) to mediate the hyper-structuralist moment in Western Marxism in the 1960s.

This term, first coined by Maurice Merleau-Ponty (Merleau-Ponty ([1953] 1973: 581) refers to an attempt, if you remember, to reconfigure the legacies of Marx in the light of the horrors of Stalinist appropriation and distortion. (Jacoby (1991). Western Marxism had to think with Marx while enabling a socialist form of participatory democracy. Here, the cultural field had come into view with its own efficacy modifying any notion of a direct ideological reflex between base and superstructure. In his chapter 'Base and Superstructure in Marxist Theory' in *Problems in Materialism*, Williams (1980) elaborated a specifically materialist cultural theory in

a revision of the classic base and superstructure model to which conventional Marxism remained attached. This enabled Williams to pose the question that resonated for me:

What are the implications of this general analysis for the analysis of particular works of art?

Dismissing most art and literary analysis as basically a theory of consumption Williams argued that such approaches not only ignored ‘the practices of production’ that were then overlooked, but real social conditions of production were believed to be secondary. Williams redefines art as *an activity and a practice*, and, ‘in its accessible forms, although it may in some arts have the character of a singular object, it is still only accessible through active perception’ and we have to ‘to discover the nature of practice and its conditions’. This is not the same as the Marxist sociological emphasis on the components: economic, social and cultural. ‘I am saying that we should not look for the components of the practice but for the conditions of the practice’(Williams 1980:48). How do particular works of art function if they are not symptomatic inscriptions, yet are shaped by the conditions of production?

As we consider the nature of particular practice and the nature of the relation between an *individual project* and a *collective mode* we find that we are analysing, as two forms of the same process, both its active composition and its conditions of composition, and in either direction *this is a complex of extended active relationship*. This means, of course, that we have no built-in procedure of the kind which is indicated by the fixed character of an object. We have the principles of the relations of practices within a discoverably intentional organisation and we have the available hypotheses of dominant, residual and emergent [*forces in culture at any one time*]. (Williams 1980:48-9)

There is no cultural unity of an epoch.

What we are actively seeking is the true practice which has been alienated to an object, and the true conditions of practice —whether as literary conventions or social relationships— which have been alienated to components or to the background.
(Williams 1980:49)

Now I have quoted from Williams as just one example of a certain kind of cultural theory emerging from with the arts, attending, however, to the relations with and in the socio-cultural frame which was important for those of us in cultural analysis, trying to bridge art history and cultural studies while exploring this larger concept of the social and the cultural for which Williams then provided remarkable resources. Williams provided a means to understand practice and its social conditions *as well as what the practice made us understand about processes of those conditions by demanding analysis of the modes of transformation and mediation.* This would align with T.J. Clark's insistence on the *work* a work of art does with the ideological materials it inevitably deploys and reconfigures, and the *working* is what analysis must read. ' [Art] works that material; it gives it a new form, and at certain moments that new form is in itself a subversion of ideology'(Clark, 1973:13). This raises the question of form, the conventional modernist art historian's concern, and *formulation*, my specific concern drawing from an earlier cultural analysis of the image as socio-cultural index developed by Aby Warburg (Pollock, 2013).

In my book that I gave to Zygmunt Bauman, I was continuing my long-term exploration of the phenomenon that is the name ' Van Gogh'. My project has been to elaborate a complex Marxist and feminist understanding of the dynamics of his failed modernist project in the late 19th century in terms of the encounter with, and his response to, the disruptions and anxieties created by industrial capitalism in both urban and agricultural society. Far from exemplifying the progressivist thesis articulated by modernist art history's notion of the avant-garde, Van Gogh and his peers represent a deeply conservative reaction to, not a progressive

socialist or anarchist recoil from capitalist modernity (as in the case of Camille Pissarro), of the kind that, however, becomes the ground bed for nationalism and fascism and was complicit with colonialism. (Pollock, 1998)

As a Marxist social historian, T.J. Clark had taken on the analysis of this moment of art's relation to the consolidation of industrial and metropolitan capitalism in the 19th century and given it a severe shaking by indicating that artists of the modernist tendency were seeking, but ultimately failing, to penetrate the illusory veil of appearances—the fetishism of the commodity—with which capitalism warps our understanding of its own real relations and processes. Aligned politically in the 1960s with the Situationist International, Clark retrospectively traced the genealogy of 'the society of the spectacle' (Debord, [1967] 1970) to Paris in the 1860-90s to his own post-war present, registering modernist attempts to inscribe aspects of lived modernity into art while failing to find the means to signify its capitalist character, thus becoming complicit with its spectacularization and their own aestheticization.

My intervention involved looking at the 1880s generation of Gauguin and Van Gogh that followed Clark's topic – namely Edouard Manet and the Impressionists in the 1870s. I identified a deeply conservative reaction against capitalism that was inscribed by those artists such as Gauguin and Van Gogh whom art historians treat as the heroic continuation of a visually inventive avant-garde initiated by Manet. Clark argued that what has been hailed as modern art can be shown to have failed its engagement with capitalist modernity and, in my case-study, we see how Gauguin, the artist withdrew to what he imagined were pre-capitalist societies in Brittany and then a colonized Tahiti. Van Gogh's nostalgia extended to his art historicist and imaginative entry into the world of mercantilist capitalism of the 17th century in Holland by identifying with the art of that century. (Pollock, 1998)

This is getting too art historical. So why have I had to tell you all this?

Zygmunt's response to my book was: 'I didn't understand a word of it.' Now, I am prepared to admit to a certain complexity in my sentence structure which good editors and long-suffering collaborators have the wit to shorten and simplify. I do think that vocabularies of different disciplines can become specialized and the arguments over-intimate with internal debates. Cultural Studies was, however, a critical interdisciplinary project. I do not think his response was just that.

His word blindness before my text went much deeper into one of the questions for this issue. We are exploring interdisciplinary legacies of the thought, work and writings of Zygmunt Bauman as one of the major cultural sociologists of the late 20th and early 21st-century, and I seek to do so for the arts and humanities as well as for the larger sociological project of cultural hermeneutics². As I have described in my own academic biography, I overlapped with Zygmunt Bauman and Janet Wolff in Sociology and art historian T.J. Clark—he was the Professor of Fine Art between 1974 and 1979 with whom I came to Leeds to work in 1977—in the later 1970s as we were all trying to produce social and cultural analyses of all forms of culture including the arts and humanities, drawing on what might be called the structural theories of social formations but not necessarily holding systematically to sociological models. (Wolff 1993) There should have been common ground.

In 1989, Zygmunt Bauman made academic history with his book *Modernity and the Holocaust*. (Bauman, 1989) What makes it important in this context is that he focussed on a *historical* event but created for it a sociological analysis, thereby demanding sociology's recognition that *history* changes its, Sociology's, own terms of practice and fields. In passing Bauman's linking of his long-view of the rationality of modernity and racialized industrial genocide revealed another dimension in the critical re-conceptualisation of the modernity thesis and the undermining of its progressivist fantasy with which we, in social, feminist and

² See the paper by Mark Davis included in this collection.

postcolonial histories of art and cultural studies were deeply engaged. The related project, *Modernity and Ambivalence* (Bauman, 1991) moved from an ethnic or racializing concept of the Jewish condition to casting the Jew as the critical figure of the stranger and the outsider, the stranger being, in this Jewish case, the other who has come to stay (Bauman, 1991:59)³. In Bauman's novel analysis of the dynamics of racism and toleration, assimilation and its failure in *Modernity and Ambivalence*, I immediately perceived a structure through which to theorize the condition of the Woman, women, or if you prefer, femininity in patriarchal society as well as more extended theories of migrancy and racism. Trapped in ambivalence, the stranger seeks to fit in with what the presence of the resident stranger effectively produces as the insider, whose desirable qualities inspire the incomer to mimic the ways of the insider, who then turn into gatekeepers because inclusion cannot be permitted; it would efface the envied privilege that draws the stranger to attempt assimilation. Thus, as Bauman so memorably put it, 'When, at least, it[assimilation] seems to be within their grasp, a dagger of racism is flung from beneath the liberal cloak'. (Bauman, 1991:71). Violence is ever present, imminent and, it seems, structural.

From this arcane domain, I want to track the cultural sociologist, the sociologist of culture, back to art and the artworld, which is to be read as the site of the social and life processes of liquid modernity as symptomatic in his book *The Art of Life* (Bauman, 2008). I focus on a chapter called 'We, the artists of life'. Bauman there explores the proposition that, in this current generation, life is no longer a Sartrean project, as it was for Bauman's generation. It is lived as a work of art. The kind of art, however, is determined by the kind of liquid modernity that conditions life (Bauman, 1990).

The proposition life as a work of art is not a postulate or an admonition (of the 'try to make your life beautiful, harmonious, sensible and full of meaning — just as the painters try to

³ See the papers by Bryan Cheyette and Matt Dawson included in this collection.

make their paintings or musicians their compositions kind'), but a statement of fact life cannot **not be** a work of art if this is a human life, the life of being endowed with will and freedom of choice. Being an individual (that is being responsible for your choice of life, your choice among choices, and the consequences of the choices you choose) is not a matter of choice but a decree. (Bauman, 2008: 52-3)

Liquid modernity produces a generational division in ideologies (Mannheim 1952) but here Bauman uses art as metaphor:

Those of the past generations would probably have been thinking of something of lasting value, imperishable, resistant to the flow of time and caprices of fate. Following the habits of the Old Masters they would meticulously prime their canvases before applying the first brushstroke, and equally select the solvents to make sure the layers of paint would not crumble as they dried and would retain their freshness of colour over many years to come if not for eternity... The younger generation though would seek the skills and patterns to imitate the practices of currently celebrated artists—the 'happenings' and 'installations'. (Bauman, 2008: 54-5)

He continues:

Both generations (past and 'new') imagine works of art in the likeness of the particular world whose true nature and meaning the arts presumed and hoped to lay bare and make available to scrutiny. That world is expected to be made more intelligible perhaps even more fully understood thanks to the labour of artists; (Bauman, 2008: 55)

Digressing into a fascinating study of the sociology of generations (Mannheim, 1952), Zygmunt Bauman, admitting his generational perspective, places the old myth of the discovery of the unknown genius and the rise to fame and fortune—see the famous book by Ernst Kris and

Otto Kurz on the legends and myths of the artist (Kris & Kurz 1979) — in his liquified generational schema.

True, it is mostly the practitioners of fine arts, (or more precisely those not too numerous lucky people whose practices courtesy of a sudden award of *celebrity status* have been classified as ‘fine arts’ with no further argument) whose fables of a miraculous rise from *rags to riches* are bathed in *limelight* and publicly applauded and admired. For instance, the story of a *girl* who used to sell for two pounds apiece glass ashtrays worth 50p, adorned with photographs of pop idols cut out pell-mell from newspapers and glued to the bottom in a slapdash manner... A *girl* biding her time in a drab little shop on a drab little street in East London – until one day a limousine stopped in front of that shop carrying a great art patron destined to transform her unmade bed into a priceless work of high art in the manner of the fairy godmother of Cinderella-story same, fable to conjure up carriage dripping with gold out of the pumpkin...(Bauman, 2008: 69)

This passage is the heart of my paper. It jumped out at me, distracting me from the flow of the argument. I recognized the artist in question: Tracey Emin. I have *coded* some of its phrases, including the use of the term *girl* and the sharp if not sarcastic tone linking a degraded fine arts based on luck to celebrity culture. The ‘girl’ in in this story was 30 years-old at the time of the episode to which Bauman is referring. I was distressed at Bauman’s terms and the implications: A girl in a drab shop in a drab street selling things she made badly, suddenly raised to wealth and celebrity by the rich man in tan executive limousine – gender switching the fairy godmother and industrializing the magically transformed pumpkin carriage – who then made an artwork out of her own grubby bed and sordid bedroom. Surely this is the stuff of Tory newspaper despair at the death of real art.

‘Tracey, you go on and on in an endlessly solipsistic, self-regarding homage to yourself ... Tracey, you are a bore.... This tortured nonsense can't go on. It isn't my job to criticise you as a person, but to comment on the art you make. But you leave no space for that. There's nothing to see in your work but you, your mood swings, your sentimentality and your nostalgia. It's all so mawkish, so cloying. You set us all up to put you down. You put yourself down so we'll set you up. And you pre-empt all this in your sessions with yourself on the sofa, to make us love you all the more. I'm not playing any more. (Adrian Searle *The Guardian* 19 October 1999)

‘*My Bed* is probably the most notorious work in the oeuvre of British artist Tracey Emin (b1963). First shown in 1998 at the Toyko's Sagacho Exhibition Space, and in New York's Lehmann Maupin gallery the subsequent year, *My Bed* became best known through an exhibition at Tate Modern in 1999 as one of the shortlisted works for the Turner Prize. Because of its appearance, the work immediately gained much media attention and caused a lot of debate.’ (Georgina Adam *The Art Newspaper* 6 May 2017)

Tracey Emin was part of a loosely associated group formed in art in London in 1990s labelled in the press the YBAs: Young British Artists.⁴ The cultural sociology of their formation is a topic for serious cultural analysis, by doing which we could come to appreciate the strategic moves of a group of mostly working class artists who have indeed made good as a result of critical changes to the economy and structures of artistic production in the wake of

⁴ The first use of the term ‘young British artists’ to describe the work of Hirst and these other young artists was by Michael Corris in *Artforum*, May 1992. The acronym ‘YBA’ was then introduced in 1996 in *Art Monthly* magazine. <https://www.tate.org.uk/art/art-terms/y/young-british-artists-ybas>. For a very critical reading of this group see Stallybrass (1999) ; feminist art historian Alison Rowley has developed a very different reading in relation to class in British culture. Rowley, (2104; 2015)

Thatcherism and what we now name the neoliberal marketization of culture. There is a case study for Williams' *conditions of practice*, for sure.

Far from being mythic in the Cinderella sense, Emin's dedicated work and self-fashioned outsider persona *figure* for us issues of class, migration, difference, and gender that could be studied in relation to both Bauman's formal sociology and what is increasingly emerging from the use of his own approaches in the exploration of his experiences of forced migration and racial exclusion as affective and biographical linings to his analytical sociological studies of ambivalence and the stranger. (Isabella Wagner-Safray; Cheyette) This group of artists were the product of the progressive effects of once free access to art education. Their work demands understanding of the emergence of conceptual art practices that changed the materiality of art and opened it to engagement with lived experience and social processes. Conceptual art was deeply invested with new possibilities for both social critique and narratives of lived experiences, *ways of life*, we might say in Williams' terms, even bringing into our analysis Raymond Williams' fine reading of the democratization of culture effected unexpectedly and dialectically by a once new technology such as television. It was a technology invented without a presumed content that became a cultural form in the dialectic of disseminatory technology and both borrowed and invented forms of cultural practice and expression. Williams makes his case by pointing to the role of TV drama (and its expanded stories) in changing the hitherto limited class exposure to theatre. (Williams 1974)

East London, before the 2012 London Olympics regeneration, was an abandoned area of cheap studios and cheap living where, for six months in 1993, Sarah Lucas (b. 1962 in Holloway, London), fine art graduate of the Working Men's College (1982-83), the London College of Printing (1983-84) and Goldsmiths College (1984-87) and Tracey Emin (b. 1963) in Margate to Romnichal-descended and Turkish Cypriot parents, studied Fashion at Medway College of Fashion (1980-82), fine art at Maidstone Art College (1984-87) and gained an MA

in Painting from the Royal College of Art, (1987-89), set up shop. *The Shop* was an example of the same kind of enterprise that had led Lucas's fellow student at Goldsmiths, Damien Hirst, to bypass the system and exhibit his fellow Goldsmiths fine art students in an empty Port Authority building in the Surrey Docks, East London under the title *Freeze* (1988). The conceptual artist and tutor at Goldsmiths College, Michael Craig-Martin wrote of this event:

I had always tried to help my students in any way I could, particularly in those first years after art school. I knew from personal experience how difficult it was—I never had things come easy. I did the same with Damien and Freeze. I encouraged people to go and see the work. I would never have done this if I hadn't believed the show was of exceptional interest—why waste people's time? It amuses me that so many people think what happened was calculated and cleverly manipulated whereas in fact it was a combination of youthful bravado, innocence, fortunate timing, good luck, and, of course, good work. (Brian Sherwin 'Artspace Talk: Interview with 16.08.2007) no longer available)

Hirst had got sponsorship from both London Docklands Development Corporation and a major developer Olympia and York, all indicative of changes to this area to come and the increasing financialization of the artworld.

This clearly exhibits Bauman's thesis in one sense that, even in the 1990s, Generation X took on the *conditions of their practice* and created a new model that might be considered an instance of classic liquid modernity: an enterprise-led, capitalist speculative project with signs already of the coming gig economy as the *conditions of life*.⁵ It was their way of finding access to a means to make a living as an artist but their art was not without content. The irony, of course, is that within those conditions of practice there existed advertising magnate and art collector Charles Saatchi's whose own enterprise, his collection and gallery with its distinctive

⁵ See Bryant in this volume

buying policy, took up the *Freeze* artists and catapulted several of them (but significantly not all) to rapid notoriety and financial security. Six of the sixteen were women: Angela Bulloch, Anya Gallaccio, Abigail Lane, Sarah Lucas, Lala Meredith-Lula, Fiona Rae and all have remained practising artists with the majority becoming well-respected and well-known.

So, I have to come now to the work Bauman's was disparaging in the citation above: Tracey Emin's *My Bed*, 1998 that first exhibited in the Tate Gallery, London in 1998 when Emin was shortlisted for the Turner Prize.⁶ The understanding and analysis of this work, which was met with much negative comment at the time and an ironic performance intervention by two Chinese artists who jumped on the bed and had a pillow fight, has been radically revised. It has now been acknowledged by critical feminist studies of the narratives of women's extreme experiences (Merck & Townsend, 2002) while also being appraised in the context of questions of migration, race and nationalism. (Cherry 2002), Recent exhibitions of *My Bed* at the Turner Contemporary in Margate *My Bed/JMW Turner* (October 2017-January 2018) highlighted its presence as a sculptural object, while Emin also placed the work and herself in conversation with other working class British artists such as William Blake (1757-1827) and specifically the Romantic drama and enlivened paint surfaces of also working class J.M.W Turner (1775-1851).⁷ Interviewed about the making of *My Bed* for that installation in

⁶ It was bought for £150,000 by Charles Saatchi and was auctioned in 2014 by Christie's for £2.5 million.

⁷ For deep critical social and feminist art historical reading of this work see Cherry (2002). The abstract of this article on UAL Research reads: 'The essay innovatively contended that, despite the artist's distinctive anti-intellectual stance and the themes of much critical writing, her works are embedded in wider issues of migration, cultural transmission, and diaspora, and that they engage in complex questions of cultural difference. It departed from the populist and biographical readings of Emin's art and of this particular piece. The essay demonstrated how, at the Turner installation, 'My Bed' was accompanied by works that highlighted these issues of migration: a textile piece with its imagery of the Union flag drew attention to contemporary debates about national identity. Adjacent video pieces highlighted and projected the artist's ethnicity, her divided and doubled familial and cultural background. The essay located 'My Bed' within debates about Britain's social fabric and relations, notably sleeping rough in public spaces, which has subsequently all but disappeared. It also contextualised 'My Bed' within the debates about what was perceived as rising migration into Britain. Setting a historical frame for the work of the debates of the mid-late 1990s about 'fortress Europe', the borders of Europe, and Turkey's admission to the European Union, the essay argued that the Turner installation equally engaged with questions of European identity, mapping a contested space of complex identities from its western border to its east-most extension.'

Margate, Tracey Emin explained to the question: *Was there a decisive moment when you came to the idea that it was an art work?*

No, it was immediate. I got out of bed and I looked at it and I just thought, “Wow.” I just saw it in a white space, I saw it out of that environment and, subconsciously, I saw myself out of that environment, and I saw a way for my future that wasn’t a failure, that wasn’t desperate. One that wasn’t suicidal, that wasn’t losing, that wasn’t alcoholic, anorexic, unloved.

Interview 2017 Turner Contemporary, Margate

<https://www.turnercontemporary.org/exhibitions/my-bed>

With *My Bed*, Tracey Emin turned one of her life’s great low points, a bedbound drinking spree, into a theatrical arrangement worthy of Jacobean tragedy: a violent mess of sex and death. Amid the yellowing sheets there are condoms, a tampon, a pregnancy test, discarded knickers and a lot of vodka bottles. It’s also very kitchen sink. That blue slab of carpet speaks of lonely rented rooms.

(Sherwin, Skye, (2017)

Art historically, and culturally, Emin’s *My Bed* has a place in a genealogy which brings me back to the 13-year-old Teha-amana, Gauguin, itself a knowing reference to the vast bed in Edouard Manet’s painting of a white and a black women in a prostitutional scene: *Olympia* (1863, Paris, Musées D’Orsay), that both eroticised the white body and denied any but servant status to the brown/black body, and so we can work backwards down a chain of images in Western art where we encounter repeatedly the raced and gendered other – the topic of the book I gave to Zygmunt Bauman. Emin’s work also articulates the specificity of gender, age,

<http://ualresearchonline.arts.ac.uk/1391/> accessed 4 January 2019. See also Merck and Townsend (2002 for a wide range of studies of Emin’s works.

and sexual vulnerability of young women that is overdetermined by class/race/age positioning. Emin herself inhabits a culturally othered space alongside those of class and gender. More importantly, she *formulates* a image for this social and psychological space and its postional vulnerabilities in a post-conceptual art practice as well as affecting drawings and prints.

This brings me to a film work by Emin that I would have loved to explore with Zygmunt Bauman in precisely the terms of his cultural sociology. In an oral presentation of this article as a lecture, I could simply now show a video recording of the 6.34 minute super8 film made by Tracey Emin in 1995, now in the collection of the Tate (film, super8, shown as a video projection, colour and sound, 6'32") In a sense, just showing/seeing/witnessing it did the work.

It was self-explanatory in terms of the themes and threads I have so far drawn together. In written form the direct moment of seeing and hearing, and slowly coming to grasp the affective freight of the filmed video over its six minutes is not possible. If the reader has access to the internet, I would encourage her/him/them to stop and watch it for themselves. It is titled 'Why I never became as dancer.'⁸

Silent and grainy, *Why I Never Became a Dancer* (1995) visually returns us to the Kent seaside town of Margate in 1976-78. The sound of running and heavy breathing accompanies the camera's unsteady move into an image of an old school. Overlaid is the voice of the artist telling us, she hated school and left at thirteen. What follows is a traverse of the town by means of the increasingly visual poignant evocation of a once much frequented and important port at the mouth of the Thames that was in radical decline and desolation during the 1970s. Across this hand-filmed landscape, Tracey Emin tells of her teenage years that culminates in a moment of potential success in a disco dancing competition, the winning of which might have been her passport out of Margate. That dream is brutally crushed by a circle of men in their

⁸ <https://vimeo.com/79687251>; or, <https://www.artforum.com/video/tracey-emin-why-i-never-became-a-dancer-1995-49262>.

twenties chanting the ugly words men use for the women they freely sexually abuse and then publicly shame for having been their sexual partners. What lies behind this hateful scene, and is revealed by Emin's deadpan Kent-accented delivery, is the vulnerability of a working class teenage girl who explored the world freely, enjoying her discovery of sex, sharing fish and chips on the beach, and dancing. Emin's experience is not that of the groomed and bribed and then abused the young women of Rochdale (2008-09) and Rotherham (late 1980s to 2010s) and many other cities of Britain (Newcastle, Keighley, Huddersfield, Oxford, Peterborough, Aylesbury, Bristol) in sex abuse rings that have been scandalously revealed and prosecuted since 2010. (Dearden, 2017; See House of Commons, 2013) Dyslexic, failed by education in an impoverished and neglected small town environment, Emin had made herself a life and dreamed of a future through her skill and joy in dancing. What came back to 'violate' her was the men's double standard, the naked brutality of their desire to hurt her through the sexist hate speech. 'Slag! Slag! Slag!' they chanted and these words destroyed her concentration and her dream. The word is defined as 'a lewd or promiscuous woman'. There is no corresponding term of abuse that women can utter against young straight men taking their casual sexual pleasure with underage girls.

Emin's teenage years coincided with slow but rapidly accelerating changes to attitudes towards women as sexually active and the sexual mores of women in Western Europe and North America for which the contraceptive pill first released in 1960 in the USA and then in 1962 (for married women only) has been considered a precipitating and facilitating factor. While she personally symptomized an attitude on the part of women that we have the right to our sexualities, the cultural attitudes of a small town in Britain were clearly not at the forefront of the sexual revolution. Thus, Emin's six-minute video contains sociologically rich material for research into the uneven process of cultural transformation of gender and sexuality, not all of which has been imbued with feminist concerns. For instance, I would argue

strongly that the increasing pressure on women for compulsory sexual availability and intensifying self-sexualization which darkly lines the sexual revolution is not to be confused with feminist analysis and politics of sexuality, gender, and embodiment and rights to control over our bodies and desires. The rights to determine one's desire and one's body are, however, complex and hotly debated even in feminist theory and politics. (Vance, 1984; MacKinnon)

Feminist strategies do not aim at the current misnomer 'empowerment' for women when it so often means exposure to 'slaggification'. The teenage Emin did not have feminist theory or politics as a resource. Looking back from the mid 1990s to retell the tale of 'why she did not become a dancer', her audio-visual narrative becomes a sociological jewel as well as a profoundly affecting work of art. The mature Tracey Emin can condemn the men for their willingness to have sex with an underage girl and then publicly shame her at the point of her own *jouissant* display as *Terpsichore* (the muse of dance and music). She says she left Margate. The rest is her history.

In *Why I Never Became a Dancer*, with the almost two-minute ending sequence of the film, however, Emin shares her bittersweet and very real personal triumph over the callous boys of Margate she then names one by one; 'this is for you'. Now, she is a Royal Academician and Professor of Drawing at the Royal Academy Schools, an internationally recognized artist who has represented Britain at the prestigious Venice Biennale in 2007. In the mid 1990s when she concludes her video, she is in her own large and airy studio space, dancing alone and joyously to *You Made Me feel Mighty Real* (1978) sung by American disco/R&B singer Sylvester before a shot of a bird winging its way across the sky. Look at me now, free, myself and dancing.

I conclude with this video by Tracey Emin – an artist so clearly the target of his passing remark quoted above – because it explains why Zygmunt Bauman did not understand a word of my book. It was because of its focus on the problematic of gender, of sexual difference and its complex articulations of class and racialized difference that placed a politics of sexuality and

sexual abuse at the heart of culture as both *ways of life* and of *the arts and learning* defined by Williams and *the art of life* defined by Bauman. These still remains vivid life issues on campus and in society.

Tracey Emin's video is neither trite nor banal. It speaks its lived truth in a deceptively direct but knowing art practice she created using vernacular materials in a skilfully deskilled formulation. In its structuring of image, voice and narrative timing, it also effects a transformation of the social conditions of her life and its production. Hers is an art of her life that achieves a gravity and grace.

My feminist work as an art historian and cultural theorist was, it seems, forever a closed book to Zygmunt Bauman. I say it here with regret, even as I find myself, deeply indebted in my work to the extraordinary depth and breadth of his work, and specifically to his clarification of modernity and its structural racialized violence towards the stranger, to his revelation of the ambivalence at the heart of modernity so rich for feminist thought about the place of women in universalizingly masculinist patriarchal cultures, and, above all for the diagnostic concept of liquid modernity, which I introduce constantly to art historians still ignorant of Bauman's resource for going beyond Walter Benjamin and Georg Simmel or Jameson.

I would, however, have loved the space to argue the Emin case, and share what feminist, queer and postcolonial art history has made of its differenced and differencing (Pollock, 1999) concept of 'art' in its conditions of practice in the contemporary, liquid, social ways of living, conditions of living that critical artistic practices so often seek to make intelligible to us through formulation and affectivity. With Emin's work, we might even dare to say that these share with Zygmunt Bauman's later prose style, a vividness drawn from the colloquial every day. Culture is both ordinary and extraordinary.

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