

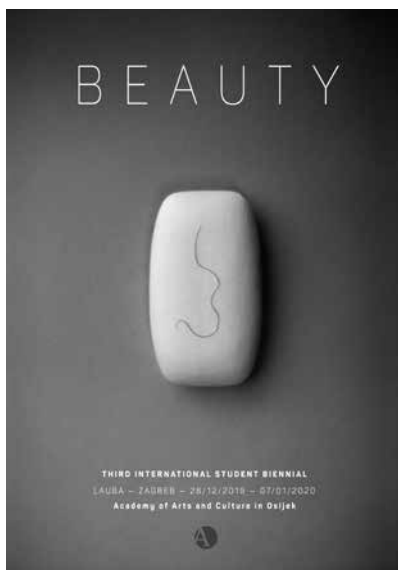
SURVIVING BEAUTY

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“Third International Student Biennial – Beauty”, Academy of Arts and Culture in Osijek and Lauba, Zagreb, 2019/12/8 – 2020/1/7.

Curated by Miran Blažek, Osijek

The Academy of Arts and Culture in Osijek organized for the third time in a row International Student Biennial, an exhibition aimed at connecting, networking and presenting artworks by students enrolled in Academies of fine, performative and media arts throughout the world. After starting with a rather modest ambitions five years ago, the third edition of the ISB featured works by nineteen emerging artists from Germany, Norway, Slovenia, Macedonia, Poland, Serbia, Switzerland, Estonia, Great Britain and Croatia. The central theme of the latest edition was the concept of beauty most broadly conceived. The curator Miran Blažek and his team wanted to investigate how art today and the new generation of artists looked at the notion of beauty; how much beauty is still possible or necessary in art; how we should evaluate it and how to look for it. What ensued from the seemingly banal presuppositions of these questions is that beauty, more than ever before – and certainly more than art itself can disclose in contemporary times – is a complex issue that lacks a firm aesthetic, theoretical and institutional grounding. In order to fully comprehend the ways in which the participants of the exhibition individually answered to the problem of the existence of beauty, we must at least try to delineate the basic contours of the idea of



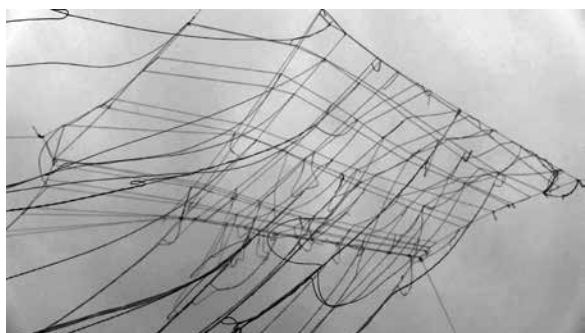
Official poster of the *Third International Student Biennial, 2019-2020*;
photography: Goran Martin Štimac

beauty that every participant was asked to confront.

The concept of beauty is most often associated with two completely different things: art and nature. While the former is entirely dependent on human creativity and intellect, the latter is completely beyond the reach of man's control and comprehension. This conflict was philosophically established as an unbreakable aporia in antiquity through Plato's notion of simulacrum



1st prize: Kelvin Atmadibrata (Royal College of Art, London), *Forcing Hyacinth*; 2019, performance, duration: 2-6 hours, or more. Photo: Ana Petrović



2nd prize: Johanna Locher (State Academy of Fine Arts, Karlsruhe), *Untitled*; 2019, video, duration: 06:48

and Aristotelian principle of mimesis. While the older philosopher believed that imitation of previously existing forms led to the creation of worthless illusions, his disciple in the imitation of nature recognized the way to connect the perfection of nature with catharsis as an expression of human sensibility. Aristotle believed that in this way it was possible to go beyond mere emulation and create an authentic value. Interestingly, neither of the philosophers believed that beauty resided in the very thing, but either in a pure idea or in the freeing of emotions. The difference, however, is in the way we come to beauty – through a purely thought process or with the help of artifact as a kind of material prosthesis of a mind. Many centuries later, in Kant's *Critique of the Power of Judgment*, the attempt has been made to reconcile this antique aporia of art and beauty in such a way that nature is proclaimed the unattainable aesthetic ideal, whereas at the same time the purpose of art is emancipated from nature so that beauty can now arise in the free creation of

the pure mind. However, the problem of beauty has thus not been solved, only a new conflict has emerged – one between beauty and ugliness – which, thanks to Kant, has been established as a central problem in modern and contemporary art.

It is paradoxical that the problem of beauty was banished from theoretical and critical discourse, although it makes the central conflict throughout the history of modernity. Among many examples, works in traditional media of painting, such as those of Francis Bacon, installations and objects by Damien Hirst or the *Cremaster* cycle by Matthew Barney, confirm that the problem of beauty/ugliness has neither disappeared from contemporary artistic reflection nor can it be radically posed as was the case during the early avant-gardist struggle for the autonomy of art during the first decades of the 20th century.

It is our impression that the works presented by this international group of students disclose a sort of paradoxical situation which is not just aestheti-



3rd prize: Rea Vogrinčič (Academy of Fine Arts and Design, Ljubljana), *Destruction*, 2019, video performance, duration: 01:23



Nadia Markiewicz and Julia Dorobinska (Academy of Fine Arts, Warsaw), *It's a Wonderful, Wonderful Life*, 2019, video-performance, duration: 04:47

cally relevant – in terms of lack of any stylistic nomenclature of art – but also philosophically significant, inasmuch as artistic thinking of young artists evidently departs from what we have previously known as “established values”, “common reasoning” or “the idea of progress”. Not only nineteen exhibits partake in the quest for beauty in a highly individual manner, they do so as if that term itself has lost any meaning. In this exhibition we have come to another important insight: not only the youngest generation of artists does not understand the notion of beauty in an aristotelian, kantian or even modernist sense, whether in its historical or ahistorical dimension; far more importantly, for them “beauty” has become an empty signifier to which can be attached any meaning that freely floats in the network of culture, media and politics. Looking at the exhibited works, especially the awarded ones – by Kevin Atmadibrata from the Royal College of Art in London, Jochanna Locher from the Staatliche Akademie der Bildenden Künste in Karlsruhe and Rea Vogrinčič

from the Academy of Fine Arts in Ljubljana – we seem to witness a paradigm shift: in order to produce a new kind of beauty today it is no longer needed to challenge existing ideas or to test them under peculiar conditions of artistic scrutiny. The very process of artistic creation – that which we understood as a mere attempt to transcendental alteration of reality – is sufficient to be considered a legitimate intervention in a “system” of the beautiful. It is art itself (or, an institutional practice of *making art*) that has become beautiful.

Obviously, this does not mean that the reality is mandatory beautiful but that artistic interventions are by definition situated within the aesthetic order of the world. Proponents of politically engaged art are unlikely to agree with this, as their belief is that a real purpose of any meaningful kind of art lies within the order of ideology. Works at the Third International Student Biennial showed that a most imminent threat to ideology is coming from a direction no one expected: the all-encompassing and all-devouring concept of beauty.