

DISEASE RELATED TO BODY AND SOUL.
THE SOCIAL STIGMA OF THE MENTAL ILLNESS
IN THE ART OF VANESSA BAIRD

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In this article we will discuss the art of Vanessa Baird and the debate that ensued when a trio of monumental paintings she was commissioned to paint for the city of Oslo was rejected due to provocative images. The debate can be connected to the social stigma of a troubled mind or a sick body.

The article is based on a presentation, which was held at the seminar 'The sick body in art' at the MACRO, the museum of contemporary art in Rome. This was a collaboration between the Università degli Studi di Roma «Tor Vergata» and Oslo Akershus University College.

Vanessa Baird is a Norwegian contemporary artist with art education from both Oslo and London. She specializes in drawing and painting; she often combines several illustrations, which make up a collage of small stories connected to each other. In 2009 she published the book «You can't keep a good rabbit down», which contains various illustrations for adults. In her creations she uses her own experiences and her own under-

standing of the world. The art and the artist are closely connected which makes a point of how the mind and body are inseparable.

The art of Vanessa Baird

Her art addresses topics such as disease, postpartum depression, loneliness, self-pity, self-destruction, depression and mental illness. Maybe Baird is inspired by the Norwegian artist Edvard Munch's gloomy and dramatic motives, but she takes the theme a step further.¹

She explores boundaries and allows her works to be more abstract and grotesque compared to Munch's. Baird's upbringing was marked by frequent visits to the hospital, due to a chronic disease. Her art is inspired by real experiences and feelings, but lies somewhere between reality and fiction. She portrays human decay and waste in caricature-like manner. The disparity and pain that are communicated in her art can be experienced as acute and intrusive. Baird embraces all the emotions, sorrows and faults of human life. We can understand the art of Baird the way we understand the world and the people in it. Baird shows us that the small, seemingly insignificant stories are important to understand the complex world that surrounds us and how to place ourselves in it. She does not avoid the unpleasant and ugly aspects of life in her art, but confronts us with deep unsettling feelings, that are just as provoking as they are uncomfortable.

¹ Edvard Munch (1863-1944) was one of Modernism's most significant artists. He was active throughout more than sixty years; from the time he made his debut in the 1880s, right up to his death in 1944. Munch was part of the Symbolist movement in the 1890s, and a pioneer of expressionist art from the beginning of the 1900s onward. His tenacious experimentation within painting, graphic art, drawing, sculpture, photo and film has given him a unique position in Norwegian as well as international art history. Cfr. THE MUNCH MUSEUM 2015.

The discourse around art in public space connected to the art of Baird

As a respected artist, well known for her expression, in 2010 Baird was commissioned to make three monumental paintings for the department of health in Oslo. She first made «The light disappears- if only we close our eyes» (Lyset forsvinner – bare vi lukker øynene) and «For a long time I went early to bed». In 2013, before the third painting in the series, «To Everything There is a Season», was finished, the department of health declared that the paintings were rejected. This, because the people working in the building felt that the last piece gave strong associations to the terror tragedy of 22nd of July, 2011.²

The rejection of her paintings, resulted in an intense debate in the media concerning art and art's intentions. What right do the people working in the building have to reject the art works? Is the intention of the artist most important or the interpretation of the viewer? During the period of creation Baird never received any objections from the commissioner, KORO.³

She was given total freedom to create what she wanted. She has made it clear that the themes of her paintings are connected to her own experiences in life. She understands that the paintings can be read in different ways, but she questions why the domi-

² Almost four years ago a Norwegian right-wing extremist placed a car bomb in the government quarter in Oslo, before he went out to Utøya, an island where youth members of the social-democratic Labour Party had their annual summer camp. He was dressed as a cop, and was carrying a semi-automatic rifle. All together the terrorist killed 77 people that day, eight people in the government quarter and 69 at the summer camp.

³ KORO's main purpose is to ensure that as many people as possible can experience high quality art in public spaces both indoors and outdoors nationwide. They produce, manage and mediate art projects at schools, universities, political institutions, courtrooms, office buildings. KORO bring outdoor spaces, where the artists' expressions form part of the general exchange of opinion, identity formation and management of memorials. Cfr. KORO 2015.

nating interpretation of the painting is connected to the tragedy of the 22nd of July. Some of the elements could just as well be symbols of bureaucracy, like the papers flying out of the building. The question circled in the media if the trio could rightfully be separated, after the rejection of the paintings. After much debating, Baird agreed that the third piece could hang in Artists House, a public art exhibition space in Oslo.⁴

What made the artwork accepted in this context? The exhibition space represents the art world, and within the white cube people have different understandings of what art could or should be. Problematic themes are therefore more accepted and tolerated. This raises several questions about art's connection to society. If art is autonomous, is it possible to separate it into pieces and take it out of a given context, or should the entity and connections between the works and the link to society define the art?

With regards to what role art should play in relation to the rest of society, one can claim that there has been a development in society regarding art. There is a gap between the art world and the public. The opinions of the art-elite or of the artists themselves are no longer as current, because the interpretations of the majority of the public must be taken into account. People demand to be heard. The discussion regarding Baird's art resulted in a separation of the art works. The first two paintings remained in the department of health and the third painting got a permanent placement in the department of culture.

The last work has been much debated, because of its controversial theme connected to trauma and human suffering. It is questionable if art concerning problematic and difficult themes should be silenced or toned down when it is going to be displayed in public. This can be connected to other aspects of so-

⁴ The Artists House has an interesting history as a central location for presenting Norwegian and international contemporary art. Besides permanent exhibitions and they offer various events both day and night. Kunstnerne Hus 2015.

ciety, where there is a tendency to hide away the uncomfortable elements in life. In this context we can draw parallels between Baird, Munch and the contemporary artist Melgaard⁵, since many of their creations have to do with disease both physical and mental, and the traumas that derive from them which ignite controversies and debates. Are such relationships, so well defined in Thurid Vold's article⁶ on the topic of physical and mental disease and its traumas, today's taboos as tuberculosis was in the last century and AIDS in the 1980's?

The art of Baird portrays how the body is a mere part of the natural cycle and how it contradicts society's ideals of health and normality. Viewers interpret her works through their own experiences, thus possibly recalling personal mental traumas of the beholder. Auto fiction, the combination of autobiographical and fictive elements, in Baird's works shows that the body and the mind are inseparable, as it is in life. One cannot avoid the uncomfortable aspects, and maybe this understanding can create a better connection between art and society.

⁵ b. 1967 in Sydney, Australia. In the heyday of mid-1990s neo-conceptualism, Bjarne Melgaard enters the Norwegian art scene with expressionistic and chaotic paintings, fiction a sculptures and installations full of desire and fearful longings staged somewhere in between fiction and reality. Astrup Fearnley 2015.

⁶ «From Bacteria to Viruses - How Munch and Melgaard express disease in their art», by Thurid Vold.

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