

Elisabeth Byre 2004

Poetic and political on our existential conditions, on Bjørg Taranger and her project City Angel

Poetic and political on our existential conditions

Bjørg Taranger's work entitled City Angel is a bold and confrontational project. Bold, because it focuses on significant and serious questions concerning existence, such as compassion, life and death, without lapsing into cliché. Confrontational in its clear and explicit articulation. The works appeal to the public in a very direct and insistent way – regardless of whether they are presented in Oslo Central station, in a gallery space or on a private wall.

The project originated from a personal encounter with the Norwegian health service. Experience, gained from when her mother was a corridor patient at Haukeland hospital in Bergen, became the beginning of a series of exhibitions at home and abroad, with the nurse as axis. The subtitle is “preparing a private space”, and it was precisely this lack of a personal, private space that was the catalyst for the idea and the personal compulsion to highlight the problem in an artistic context.

Taranger uses the nurse (city angel) as a symbol for the humane and the compassionate; she claims that her utopian dream is a society where basic human values have first priority. Historically the figure of the nurse and female carer is eternal. From the Bible's Maria Magdalena to self-sacrificing figures such as Florence Nightingale and Mother Theresa – life-essential and life-giving in their actions.

Taranger highlights contemporary institutionalised care organs like hospitals and health personnel. In the video “Preparing A Private Space” we see two simultaneous images. On the right hand-side we see two nurses making up a bed. Details of bed linen being laboriously applied by experienced hands display a ceremonious character, and initially appear as painterly and dream-like, in substance beautiful. The images are lingeringly slow and share few elements of the institution or sickness. A little later, when the bed stands ready, the camera reveals more and more of the institutionalised room.

In contrast to the poetic scenario is a plastic sheet applied to the middle of the bed (protection against faeces and urine), a confrontation and reminder that the space is public, it is a public bed where hundreds of people have lain and will lie, an impersonal bed pretending something private – a private space. The left hand-side image presents the back of a pair of white, high-heeled shoes bearing red crosses; they run along something one comprehends as a corridor. These impractical heels are a humorous twist with a sharp ironic undertone: High heels are a far cry from the reality of nurses, who depend on sensible, foot-friendly shoes in their daily corridor race. And the presentation of the sexy nurse is a familiar cliché. The visuals are sparse. We see nothing other than the eternally running shoes, with their copious crosses catching our eyes, and the image appears urgent and stressed, insistent in its repetition.

In contrast to the action on the screen the video is a comment on the situation of the vulnerable patient, where the patient must be treated with respect and care, and to the demanding work situation of personnel in hospitals and institutions today. Again this indicates society's negligence of the sick and needy with regard to the allocation of resources and economic means. At the same time the work is a tribute to carers in hospitals and institutions today.

The filming and handling of the nurses actions are reminiscent of one of video's virtuosos – Bill Viola. In the work “The Passing” (1991) Viola films his mother's deathbed in a sublime way, meticulously and gently. Taranger has managed to create a similar solemn atmosphere.

In the project City Angel Taranger uses video, installation, happening, performance and still image. She lets professional nurses prepare a sick bed in a gallery space, with public present, while she herself documents the action on video. This documentation strengthens the work's rhetoric credibility, and introducing the nurse into the gallery space further emphasises the message: This concerns us all, we are all mortal, and we will come to need care and attention sooner or later.

In the 1960s and 70s the international Fluxus movement were initiators of a normalisation of art. With performance and happenings the group worked to remove boundaries between the high and the low, between the art institution and the man in the street. They were innovative in the fusion of different art forms, media and expression.

Taranger's work can be seen as an advancement of a kind of anti – elevation art project, in that she provides us with a similar normalisation of both sickness and art. With the public present at the exhibition opening the nurses actions are applied to aestheticism and the gallery space is normalised to contain hospital function. For a short while the two institutions exchange place.

On today's art scene the Danish-Norwegian art duo Michael Elmgren and Ingar Dragset similarly pull the hospital and institutionalised care into the gallery with their work “Please Keep Quiet!” (2003). In this work the gallery space is turned into a hospital ward with sick-beds, charts and trolleys. In the beds lie patients in the form of very life-like wax figures. “Please Keep Quiet!” is a clearly articulated reminder of our transitory existence.

In Taranger's work it is the absence of the patient that becomes the strength, while the plight of the patient is absolutely present despite the fact that the physical patient is not. The still images of the nurses making the bed work as both supplement to the video and as independent works. The silkscreen print's delicate texture contrasts the hardness of the aluminium plates, just like the softness of the bed linen contra the sickbed's

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metal frame. The theme of the work is emphasised by the still image's clear text, and in this way City Angel can be seen as both a contribution to a steadily on-going health debate, and as an existential work about our fundamental values.

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