

DE BERG, DE GROET EN DE LEEUWENFLUISTERAAR
THE MOUNTAIN, THE CAVE AND THE LION WHISPERER

Kunst en mythe van ver voor nul tot nu
Art And Myth Through The Ages

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Thesis written in Dutch. English summary:

This thesis consists of personal analysis and reflection on the Gordian Knot of art and myth. The Belgian-Mexican artist Francis Alÿs puts it this way: 'Only by being repeated and passed through, the work will be realized. In this sense, art can never detach itself from myth. Moreover: in modern as well as in pre modern societies, art is moving in the space of myth.'

With this quote of Alÿs as a starting point and a motto, the thesis contains five chapters, in which I try to get a sharper look at this mythological space, loosely drawing conclusions based on scientific, historical and philosophical sources, combined with personal observations.

The first chapter focuses on the work of Francis Alÿs himself: does he himself apply the principle? It turns out that Alÿs explores the space of myth in such a way that he touches on 'the zoology of the self', revitalising the oldest forms of communication between man and animals.

This takes me to the caves of prehistoric times, in the second chapter. With Werner Herzog as a guide, we enter a French cave that was rediscovered relatively recently, the oldest treasure of human culture. As a true myth maker Werner Herzog recognizes the first author in a crooked finger, but the only right conclusion is that art and myth were totally entangled at this stage. Art was serving mythology, and there was no myth apart from religion and rite.

Only during the life and times of Giorgio Vasari (1511-1574) the great switch could be made – as described in the third chapter. Vasari, a Renaissance 'uomo universalis' working in Florence, wrote the first successful book about the lives and works of the famous artists of his time. From now on, artists themselves became myth.

This mythology gave artists freedom, prestige and a clear goal for centuries to come. Only with the beginning of modern art, artists started to destroy their own myth, as is shown by theoretician Camiel van Winkel. At the same time, this destruction or self-criticism became part of modern and postmodern art. In the fourth chapter, I focus on this problem, analyzing a recent project of the Dutch artist Arnoud Holleman, who changes the context of existing sculptures instead of making new ones.

In the fifth chapter, I conclude that artists can escape the prison of the myths about their own (dis)abilities and limitations by returning to their core business in an earnest way, and taking the myths they create seriously.