

Space, Perspective and Structure

in Michiel Jansen's *The Cave*

Michiel Jansen's *The Cave* is displayed in the exhibition space in Carl Berner subway station. The station is built within a large natural cave, and the work turns the exhibition space itself into a cave visualizes or reconstructs the natural cave. Jansen fills his cave with 85 differently scaled wooden models of the cave that are arranged and set together in various configurations. These models are connected to and stacked upon one another such that they fill up the entire space, creating a striking montage of shapes and lines. This elegant visual impression is increased by the effect of the lights placed on the floor, which cast shadows of the wooden models onto the wall and create a contrast between the darker, unlit beams and the brightly lit ones. In general, the artwork highlights the relationship between space and form, between original and copy, and between light and shadow. The interplay between caves, copies and spaces invite thinking about the work as in dialogue with Plato's famous allegory of the cave. In the allegory, humans mistake the cave and the shadows on the cave's wall for reality itself, and they need to be educated and made aware of the internal workings of the cave in order to understand that what they see and experience is made possible by and dependent on metaphysical structures that they cannot see or directly experience. In terms of the allegory, one needs to leave the cave in order to really understand the nature of the world. Thus, Jansen's work may be understood as raising for its viewer some philosophical questions about the nature of space, the importance of perspective and the underlying structures of reality.

In the work, each individual cave model is, as it were, a unit of cave space, and the viewer is made to wonder both how each individual unit is related to the others and how each unit is related to the whole(s) in which it is contained. We need to see the work with a certain kind of attention in order to make these reflections possible. In Plato's allegory, the immersion in the cave with its shadow reality confuses people about what is most real; so too a viewer might easily lose sight of the relations amongst the natural cave, the cave space, the models and the shadows, experiencing the work as just an elegant wooden sculpture in a room. Attending to the individual units of the work lets us see the cave spaces as almost floating up from and emerging out of one another, such that each new cave-space is generated from the one below it. The way of seeing the relation is reminiscent of the multiverse hypothesis in physics, which holds that ours is but one universe out of billions. Thinking about how each unit of cave space relates to the whole cave space elicits different reflections, forcing us to think about how the macro-units of spatiality—what we can see—are repeated at micro-levels beyond what is accessible to the unaided human eye. From outside the exhibition, we can see the boundaries of the cave space and of the model cave-spaces, but we are constantly reminded of what we cannot see, namely the natural cave; by making the boundaries of these worlds visible and referring to what is unseen, the work reminds us that we do not see or experience the boundary of our own world.

These reflections about space also make inevitable questions about perspective and how this influences what we experience and can know. We view the installation—the interplay between the cave space, the model spaces and the shadows—from outside the cave, as neutral, ‘objective’ or at least privileged observers. But the work invites its viewers inside the exhibition space, and forces us to consider where we are and whether what we see is all there is to the world. Indeed, viewers are already inside the natural cave that cannot be seen from within the station. It is in the course of these reflections that Plato’s allegory of the cave is especially relevant. The shadows appear to be an integral part of the experience of the work. Are the shadows on the wall as real as the beams of which they are shadows? If the natural cave is the original, the exhibition space is an imitation, and the models are copies of this imitation, are the shadows three times removed from the natural cave? Interestingly, the shadows extend outside the installation space. Thus, they reach the audience in a way that the wooden models, for example, could never do, making the walls of the station a part of the exhibition as well.

These questions of perspective lead us to think about the underlying structures holding the world together. One interesting aspect of the installation is the artist’s decision to allow the twist-ties connecting the models to be visible. Thus, the work draws our attention to the physicality of the construction, allowing us to see how these cave spaces are bound to one another. On the other hand the work presents to us ‘pure’ geometrical figures whose various sizes stand in precise mathematical ratios to one another. This too brings out an interesting parallel with Plato: for him, the world is both inescapably physical, messy and in constant motion, but it is simultaneously elegantly structured in ways that can be expressed mathematically. These elegant mathematical structures can easily be missed when we focus on the concrete particular in front of us, and Jansen’s geometric figures show us both of these dimensions at once.

Franco V. Trivigno
Professor of Philosophy
University of Oslo