

The illusion and the reality of the cave

There are more questions than answers regarding Michiel Jansen's sculptural installation "The Cave". One of them is: "What is reality, and what is just an illusion of reality?"

One *might* say that Michiel Jansen's "The Cave" is placed in a cave. Most people would say that it is. That is because his sculptural installation is made for, inspired by, shaped after, placed and exhibited in the project space of Norsk Billedhoggerforening (i.e. Norwegian Sculptors Society). And – no doubt about it – that project space lies in a cave: The "Project space Carl Berner" is situated in an underground station on Oslo's "T-bane"-net. The station is placed in an actual cave in the mountain next to Carl Berners plass, a square and traffic hub on the outskirts of downtown Oslo.

The station is placed in an actual cave. But Michiel Jansen's sculptural installation "The Cave" has very little to do with this natural cave. The fact is that the project space is housed in a former shop in the station's entrance hall. And the installation, "The Cave", uses the form of the shop, the man-made, architectural space, as its sculptural subject. And an architectural space has very little to do with an organic, natural space like a cave.

At the same time, the sculptural starting point is a combination of the two: At an early stage Michiel Jansen made a model of the sculpture that resembles the outline of the shop. He turned it into a multiple where he combined the architectural grid with a blackened form in paper. It fills the space created by the wooden frame, and it is shaped in an organic way that is inspired by the natural cave at Carl Berner.

The sculpture that is multiplied in "The Cave" is a scale model of the former shop. It is made in wood, and it comes in three different sizes. 85 different models are stripped together and placed around in the former shop, in a way that makes it look like a sculpted labyrinth. You can watch it from the outside because the former shop has huge windows on one side.

Passers-by could watch the installation through the windows. You could order a private viewing and enter the space. Michiel Jansen invited me in, and the experience of being within the installation was very different from watching it from the outside. The main reason for this is my (and other visitors') relation to light: Seen from the outside the light sources are only visible when you come up close to the windows. Experienced from inside, the lamps were very present. And more important, they made the main theme of "The Cave" (which might be pinpointed as "What is reality, and what is just a model of the same?") more present. And even more, being inside make you more aware of the importance of the shadows that is cast on the walls. It makes you wonder, what is more real? Is it the project space itself? Or is it the models of the space that together make the installation, "The Cave"? Or is it the projections of the light, the shadows of the sculptures, that are most real? Would "The Cave" be anything without light?

This brings my thoughts to the famous allegory of the cave, written by the ancient Greek philosopher Plato. That is better explained by the philosopher Franco Trivigno in another text in this catalogue. But in my context, it widens my perspective: Normally shadows remind us about the passing of time. As the sun moves through the sky, the shadows shift through the day. But in the project space the shadows remain the same. Regardless of the time of day you pass by, the "picture" frozen in the installation remains the same.

That brings me back to the initial questions posed in the introduction to this article. There is no doubt that most art deals with illusion. With the initial question, "What is reality, and what is just an illusion of reality?", the different layers of Michiel Jansen's "The Cave" becomes more visible. His installation is both an illusion *and* a reality. Through its comment on and replication of an actual space, you might say that it is more real than the project space itself. That is because "The Cave" (as an artistic installation) resembles the experience of a natural cave better than the project space – or the structure of the original shop, which is artificial in every meaning of the word.

My initial scepticism changes into a combination of an acceptance of the artistic illusion, and an understanding of what it does to my understanding of the world. Michiel Jansen's installation is, in my opinion, closer to reality and the original form and meaning of the cave it is placed within, than the space itself. The station, as it is experienced, has very little to do with the original cave. But "The Cave", the sculptural installation, is all about the cave as a natural form: Our relation to the natural cave is related to the shifting of light. That shapes your experience of the space, and when you add a campfire at night, (as in Plato's allegory), it becomes like a labyrinth. That is closer to the artistic interpretation in Michiel Jansen's "The Cave", than the reality of the architectural space that makes up the underground station.

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