General

De mythe van het kunstenaarschap
The myth of the artist

Jorinde Seijdel

Review – January 1, 2007

Camiel van Winkel *De mythe van het kunstenaarschap*, Fonds BKVB, Amsterdam, 2007, ISBN 9789076936192, 96 pages

De mythe van het kunstenaarschap (The myth of the artist) is the second instalment in a series of essays initiated by the Fonds BKVB (The Netherlands Foundation for Visual Arts, Design and Architecture, responsible for making grants to individual visual artists), intended to stimulate thinking about art and what it is to be an artist. 'What is an artist, and what is he expected to be able to do?' are the questions Camiel van Winkel was asked. This art historian and theorist, who previously published *Moderne Leegte* (Modern emptiness, 1999) and *Het primaat van de zichtbaarheid* (The regime of visibility, 2005), is a fine arts lecturer at the AKV-St. Joost Art and Design Academy, 's-Hertogenbosch. The subject of his lectureship is 'the changing cultural and societal position of the visual artist'. Van Winkel doesn't consider being an artist as a natural given, but as a cultural construction, which he submits in this essay to a critical analysis as a *myth*.

Van Winkel's premise is that the visual arts as a discipline no longer represent a general expertise upon which artists can rely: the substance of its discipline has become indescribable and general criteria for a successful work of art no longer exist. He blames this on the avant-garde artists of the twentieth century, who systemically rejected the idea that being an artist could be conditioned by a standard of technique, skill and tradition, and who appropriated domains that had hitherto been outside the realm of art. Now, however, there is growing societal and political pressure to submit art to standards of professionalism and competence, says Van Winkel. His essay relates to this development and partly derives its urgency from it.

In order to meet these general demands for professionalism, identification as an artist today feeds on old artist myths and thus manifests itself as a myth also. 'Being an artist is the imaginary centre of a nebulous universe of ideas, fantasies and beliefs. It seems no exaggeration to state that this nebula consists for the most part of clichés that are constantly repeated and reproduced by artists, spectators, fans and other parties involved.' This hybrid and incoherent mix of propositions does, however, have a structural effect, Van Winkel observes, entirely in keeping with Roland Barthes, resulting in that which is historically and ideologically defined, the state of being an artist, being presented as a timeless natural phenomenon.

The idea that identification as an artist is currently deriving its most valid definition and the assumption that the artist is driven by a sovereign drive to create are, according to Van Winkel, the core of the myth of being an artist. The method he uses to dissect this myth is that of research into discourse: what has been thought and written about the modern idea of the artist? He has studied, along various contemporary writings, texts by Mallarmé, Balzac, Sylvester, Merleau-Ponty and Lauwaert, among others. From this he has distilled three historical ideal models, which form the components of the unstable myth of today:

the classical Beaux-Arts model, a romantic model and the avant-garde / modernist model. The artist as a craftsman, inventor, visionary, (unrecognized) genius, autonomous creator, investigator, innovator or businessman – these are old clichés that now exist alongside and are mixed with one another, detached from their historical context.

Although artists have tried to dismantle the myth of the idea of the artist – demystification is part of modern art – they have succeeded only in reaffirming it in a roundabout way. There have been attempts to imbue the condition of the artist with a function and a task, by reformulating it as 'artistic research' for instance, but this cannot hide the fact that the artist, in social terms, is left empty-handed. Individual expertise, a canon or set system of values about technique, skill or mission dissolve in a practice in which art can be anything and in which anything can be art.

The sociological importance of this mythical discourse is that identification as an artist is being assigned a model function. In this context, Van Winkel cites the Flemish essayist Dirk Lauwaert, who argues that the function of being an artist lies in creating an empty zone in society, a place in which nothing is prescribed or established, in which non-artists can find their reflection. Agreeing with Lauwaert, Van Winkel observes that this 'calling', however, has become devoid of content: '*It* must be done, but no one knows *what* must be done anymore.'

Van Winkel also points out signs of an apparently demystified artistic practice: artistic attitudes (such as creativity, imagination, unorthodoxy) are increasingly exploited by business, the media and politics as part of contemporary demands for self-fulfilment. This probably leads to the double phenomenon of 'artwork without an artist' and 'artist without an artwork', he states. The first is a commercial phenomenon in digital culture, in which it is possible 'to obtain an "artwork" without an artist: send a photo to a company and get it back as an artwork in the style and dimensions you want on real painting canvas'. The artist without an artwork is the 'post-artist' whose artistic practice consists mainly of adapting and recycling existing cultural material and imitating all manner of non-artistic activities (therapy, community work, anthropology, teaching), in which the making of a concrete work of art has receded to the background. The 'post-artist' represents the end of the last remnant of the artist's function as a social model. However, Van Winkel concludes that these current developments are probably nothing more than a little chop on the surface of the ocean of cultural history, which scarcely influences the mythical undertow.

This ends this clear and eloquent essay on a somewhat defeatist note: the myth of being an artist can probably be dismantled and reconstructed with elements from the same models ad infinitum, in an almost mechanical way. Who knows, another model may come along in a few years, but it remains a Catch-22. This perception comes from the fact that Van Winkel consistently remains detached in his analyses. He is not out to prove that one myth is sociologically, politically or artistically better than another. Nor does he want to totally demystify the myth in favour of a new proposition – a genuine demystification, according to his reasoning, is virtually impossible – or to radicalize the perspective of the 'post-artist', for instance. Or even to consider the myth itself as the specific expertise of the artist.

Van Winkel's engagement lies primarily with the discourse as a system in itself. While this is legitimate enough, forestalls fashionable twaddle and has a revelatory effect in regard to such hollow concepts as artistic research, its critical potential seems to founder there. He himself concludes that 'the myth of being an artist has grown into a dominant sociological and cultural reality, towards which people direct their lives, for which institutions have been established and which involves a huge quantity of cultural and symbolic capital'. For a genuine understanding of this, exposing the mythical structure of what it is to be an artist seems inescapable, he seems to suggest. But does his reading of the myth politicize this

reality? Or does it add an easily absorbable layer to the myth?

Van Winkel's myth of the artist is of course itself a myth, constructed out of the myths he describes. The premise, for instance – or is it a myth? – that the avant-garde is responsible for the lack of definition of the contemporary idea of the artist comes out of a reductionist modernist philosophy. In it there is little room for less visible forces, representations or counter-myths (sociological, historical or technological) that eat away at dominant paradigms. And yet the 'myth of the myth' should be unravelled – but perhaps this is asking too much of an essay that is part of a research project 'in progress'; we will have to wait for more. It would be nice, though, if Van Winkel would put his own position as a 'mythologist' – however much this, according to Barthes, can be nothing other than that of an outsider – into play, or even at stake.

Jorinde Seijdel is an independent writer, editor and lecturer on subjects concerning art and media in our changing society and the public sphere. She is editor-in-chief of *Open! Platform for Art, Culture & the Public Domain* (formerly known as *Open. Cahier on Art & the Public Domain*). In 2010 she published *De waarde van de amateur* [The Value of the Amateur] (Fonds BKVB, Amsterdam), about the rise of the amateur in digital culture and the notion of amateurism in contemporary art and culture. Currently, she is theory tutor at the Gerrit Rietveld Academie and Head of the Studium Generale Rietveld Academie in Amsterdam. With Open!, she is a partner of the Dutch Art Institute MA Art Praxis in Arnhem.

Tags

Art Discourse

This text was downloaded on November 28, 2026 from
Open! Platform for Art, Culture & the Public Domain
www.onlineopen.org/de-mythe-van-het-kunstenaarschap