

The myth of artisthood

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1.

More than any other art form, visual art is plagued by the indetermination of what its practice entails. The specific expertise of the visual artist cannot be defined in general terms; such a definition would more likely form the critical stake of the artistic process, rather than provide an unquestionable foundation for it. General criteria for a successful work of art – in either a technical or an aesthetic sense – no longer exist. We expect furniture makers, for example, to deliver their work neatly finished, but in visual art, determining the degree of finish is just one of the artistic decisions that artists face with each new work.

The fact that the metier of visual art has ceased to be a metier is part of the legacy of the avant-garde. Avant-garde artists have done away not only with the straitjacket of genres and traditions, but also with the conditioning of artisthood through a standard of technique and craftsmanship. Throughout modernity, and particularly in the last fifty years, the idea that artists are capable of things that ordinary people are not has been systematically refuted by artists themselves. Artists have not been knocked from their pedestal, they have stepped down voluntarily. The fact that this applies to visual art in particular is made evident by a comparison with twentieth century composed music. While the work of avant-garde composers is often regarded as a technical tour de force, difficult and sometimes even unplayable, visual artists instead elicit the classic reaction from the general public “Anyone could do that...”. This process of *deskilling* in visual art must be regarded as irreversible, as it is a consequence of the fact that, socially, artisthood has started to float in relation to regular forms of production and productivity.

Although the absence of a specific expertise in visual art stems from the rejection of traditional craftsmanship by the avant-garde of the twentieth century, and thus is more of an attainment than a loss, today this fact is often disputed or denied. In order to meet the social demands of competence and professionalization, many insiders maintain that visual art as a discipline still represents a general expertise, to which artists collectively – as a group – can refer. On the basis of

evidence derived from individual cases, it is claimed in a general sense that visual art is able to accomplish something – for example teaching people to look more closely, or increasing the social cohesion in a disadvantaged neighbourhood. This is a strong case of wishful thinking. Saying that artists *can* accomplish this or that, often implies that they *must* accomplish it.

Of course the trust placed in visual art has never had a purely rational basis. Artisthood goes beyond the actual practice of making art; it is also, or perhaps primarily, an idea, or constellation of ideas, in which people believe. They believe in art because they *want* to believe in it. The belief in art is a belief in the effect that art can have on us, a belief in what it means for culture, what it can stir up in society. Ideas about artisthood imply a belief in the social and cultural importance of art; and conversely, every statement about the importance of art is grounded on a belief in the exceptional nature of artisthood.

The artist is the imaginary centre of a cloud-shaped universe of ideas, fantasies and beliefs. It would not be exaggerated to argue that this cloud consists largely of truisms, which are constantly repeated and reproduced by artists, observers, enthusiasts and other parties involved. An artist who says, “I am not interested in whether what I make is art”¹ is repeating a truism, as is the journalist who notes that “Artists can get away with anything”.² The idea that artists are able to do things that ordinary people are not is expressed time and again in phrases that are variations on a fixed pattern. In an increasingly hectic world that revolves solely around rapid success and material gain, it is artists that allow us to dwell upon the things around us. Artists can make people “look at their surroundings or their life in a different way.”³ They are able to “explore, criticize and change the cultural disciplining of perception in their day; in fact, they have always done so.”⁴ Our perception is becoming increasingly superficial, but artists still provide an intensification of the gaze, a slowing of the act of seeing. They transcend the fragmentary. “An artist looks in order to break free from himself. He wishes to distinguish an endless variety of possibilities and connect them to the whole that we recognize as ‘right’, without being able to put our finger on the reason why.”⁵

¹ Roy Villevoeye, quoted in: Mark Duursma, “Kleur in grote porties. Gesprek met kunstenaar Roy Villevoeye”, *NRC Handelsblad* (3 May 2002), p. 17.

² Maarten Huygen, “Kunstenaars mogen alles”, *NRC Handelsblad* (9 October 2002).

³ “Nieuwe Stroom-directeur Arno van Roosmalen: ‘Kunst moet de mensen anders leren kijken’”, *NRC Handelsblad* (15 January 2005), p. 9.

⁴ Petran Kockelkoren, “Art as Research?”, in: *Mediated Vision* (Enschede: Veenman Publishers and Artez Press, 2004), p. 3.

⁵ Anna Tilroe, “De andere luchtlaag. Nieuwe schilderijen van Kiki Lamers”, *NRC Handelsblad* (15 April 2005), p. 21.

According to another standard idea, art confronts us with our own preconceptions; it holds a mirror before us. In a society in which everything runs according to fixed formulae, it is the artist who introduces an element of surprise and unpredictability. “Art demonstrates that not everything has to follow the beaten tracks.”⁶ “While most professions permit a lack of alertness regarding the necessity of the action, the artist must constantly remain more or less alert in a domain with no solid ground.”⁷ Art represents not only a non-dogmatic way of thinking, but moreover a rejection of dogmas and rules. It is the conscience of society – “a last refuge where there is space for reflection, for tenderness, and where different opinions can coexist.”⁸ But first and foremost, the artist is sovereign – he is the pre-eminent sovereign being. No one can tell him what he can or cannot do. “As an artist you don’t have to make concessions.”⁹ Nor do true artists have to account for their private lives. “As an artist you need to be egocentric, after all you are your own source of inspiration. People think that I have no social sense; that I ‘just fool around’. But I know very well what I do: I choose to be an artist. I lead an autonomous life.”¹⁰

2.

Ideally, a study into the cultural role of the visual artist could dispute these clichés and aim to replace stereotypical notions about artists with more realistic ideas. But that would be a naïve undertaking. Just as the aura of the work of art, which on countless occasions in the twentieth century was razed to the ground, rises repeatedly from the ashes, so too the clichés about the visionary artist and the healing power of art keep returning. Such clichés are the most resilient of all; they have a mythical power. Old myths concerning artists, however regressive they may be, return in a contemporary form.

Artisthood is a myth – even today. Yet to call it a myth is not to say it is a lie. The myth of artisthood is a reality, a social and cultural reality, to which many people devote their lives, for which institutions have been established, and in which a huge amount of cultural and symbolic capital is invested. To directly dispute this myth is

⁶ Lily van Ginneken, quoted in: Rutger Pontzen, “Kunst schrikt nog steeds erg af”, *De Volkskrant* (17 January 2005).

⁷ Press release: *Big Logos Bang. A solo exhibition by Jacobus Kloppenburg*, Amsterdam: W139, July 2006.

⁸ Olafur Eliasson, quoted in: Sandra Smalenburg, “Een droom is geen ontsnapping, maar een microscoop”, *M Magazine / NRC Handelsblad* (31 December 2004), p. 66.

⁹ Jeroen de Rijke, quoted in: Hans den Hartog Jager, “Beter af op de vuilnisbelt. Gesprek met kunstenaarsduo De Rijke/De Rooij”, *NRC Handelsblad* (17 January 2003), p. 21.

¹⁰ Gerti Bierenbroodspot, quoted in: Danielle Pinedo, “Ik leid een autonoom leven”, *NRC Handelsblad* (1 December 2004), p. 18.

futile, because no tenable alternatives seem to exist. Insofar as ideas about artisthood are irrational, this, in fact, is where their rationale lies. A complete demystification, assuming it were possible, would also usher in the end of artisthood – and thus the end of art.

Yet, some points of departure for a critical analysis can be found. It so happens that the mythical substrate of artisthood is not an entirely subconscious phenomenon, but rather an imagined site within the collective consciousness. Furthermore, the dynamic of the new in contemporary art feeds off the myth of artisthood: by exposing and condemning old “outmoded” forms of the myth, people reveal that, in essence, all they are doing is recycling the same myth in a new, adapted form, briefly making it *zeitgemäss* once again.

An examination of the myth of artisthood will need to consider the paradoxical fact that the myth is both discontinuous and structuring. On the one hand, to quote Roland Barthes, the myth is a “phraseology”, a corpus of phrases: a hybrid and incoherent mix of propositions about the essence of artisthood. On the other hand, the myth does indeed produce order and coherence in the discourse; its effect is *a naturalization of artisthood*. That which is the product of social and cultural circumstances, and thus must be connected to the great ideological constructions of the day, is conceived as a timeless and natural phenomenon: art as the archetypal safety valve for the unchanging human psyche. “Artisthood is generally not seen as an activity with its own institutions and history, as a position and a historical possibility, but is ‘naturalized’ time and again as a calling or a fate, and regarded as an elemental characteristic of the human species.”¹¹ In the collective perception artists occupy a stable position outside the dynamics of cultural differences and historical change.

At the heart of the myth of artisthood lies a mythical notion of ‘now’. This has remained essentially unchanged throughout all the artistic transformations of the last two hundred years. Art is always seen as being *of the present*. The artist stands in the midst of his time, but is also totally absorbed in the moment. Incorporating the spirit of his age, he has an important role as negotiator of the non-negotiable. Another key element of the myth, the element from which all the material and immaterial conditions of the artist’s existence derive, is the unremitting compulsion to create. This creative urge is the fundamental motivation for artists to break through social barriers and bourgeois conventions. It has nothing to do with professional ambition or career-mindedness, for in his creative urge the artist is, besides completely

¹¹ Bart Verschaffel, “Pygmalion ou Rien. De fotowerken van Jan Vercrusse”, in: *De Witte Raaf* no. 71 (January-February 1998), p. 10.

egocentric, also entirely unselfish. This accounts for the phenomenon of *the unacknowledged artist*, who is the tragic product of two conditions: on the one hand he attaches no importance to social recognition and personal success, while on the other, society is not (yet) able to recognize the genius of his work.¹²

Artists regard their own oeuvre as the summum bonum to which they wish to devote every spare hour. Still they are never satisfied. They *can't* be satisfied because each individual work is by definition only a partial and incomplete representation of their artistic being. Artists give shape to “an artistic biography that has a purely individual character and in the final analysis rests on the riddle of individuality, a rationally never entirely fathomable artistic ‘self’ that is simultaneously objectified and alienated in a series of public acts.”¹³ Every completed work confronts them with their own inability to express themselves adequately, and thus compels them to continue working. The best work is always the next one. Giving up art and choosing another profession would go against their vocation and would retroactively undermine their artistic credibility.

3.

The mythical content of contemporary artishood is neither pure nor stable. It contains ingredients with a romantic signature, others that can be interpreted as modernistic or avant-garde, and others still with roots in the classical or Beaux Arts model of artistic practice. The instability of this heterogeneous mixture is due to the fact that, to a certain degree, the three components contradict and even exclude one another. Detached from the historical practice they once gave meaning to, the three components float through a bleak postmodern universe as half-open containers filled with anachronistic truisms; now and then they collide, and a rearrangement of their unstable content occurs.

That the artist is free, not bound by rules or conventions; that he cannot take anybody's advice but his own on his artistic journey; that he has an artistic vocation that is impossible to ignore, without seriously failing himself – these are important characteristics of the romantic conception of art, which in essence still hold true today. According to this model, the artist and his work converge seamlessly. The work of art functions as a direct reflection of the soul of its maker. The fundamental solitude of the artist arises from the incommunicability of the artistic experience; art

¹² Cf. Franz Roh, *Der verkannte Künstler. Studien zur Geschichte und Theorie des kulturellen Mißverstehens* (Cologne: DuMont, 1993).

¹³ Rudi Laermans, “De draaglijke lichtheid van het kunstenaarsbestaan. Over de onzekerheden van artistieke carrières”, in: *De Witte Raaf* no. 112 (November-December 2004), p. 14.

is detached from the banal world of everyday transactions and communications – it fulfils the highest aspirations of mankind. That is not to say that earthly matters are filtered out of artistic production as something inferior. The romantic model of art is honest, open and universal; due to an unbridled imaginative power, the artist is able to internalise and sublimate even the coarsest material.

The eccentric social position assumed by the romantic artist is transformed into a critical distance in modernist artisthood. According to this model, art is based on a form of negation that is confrontational rather than withdrawn. The artist appears as a self-conscious, independent individual; with his work he consciously positions himself vis-à-vis society and the world. The artist wants to change the world; or perhaps not, for well-considered reasons; but even then the radical nature of the personal artistic *will* is of paramount importance. Artists operate at the vanguard of society; they are the first to sense certain paradigm shifts and transformations in society and to allow for them in their work. With the constant redrawing of their personal boundaries, they break through social taboos as a matter of course; in fact there is no essential difference between these two “projects”. From the romantic point of view, the fact that art is a separate, autonomous domain with its own rules is seen as an emancipation; from the perspective of the modernist avant-garde, however, it is nothing but an exile – an exile that is admittedly necessary, but temporary by definition. The autonomy of art creates the conditions for the development of models for radical action; but the promise that these models contain, implies that at a certain point in the future they will break out of their disciplinary enclosure and, at that moment, their individual character will merge into a collective impulse.

The third component of the artists’ myth goes back to the classical Beaux Arts model. This includes old, not to say archaic notions such as mastery and metier. Artistic practice is (like) a school, a trajectory of learning and growth in which the focus is not on personal inspiration but on the example of historical masters. By studying the fruits of their eminent practice, a novice artist can develop to a similar (or even higher) level. The emphasis is on study and exercise, patient dedication and mastery, on intergenerational transfer, historical continuity and the accumulation of knowledge. Visual art has its own expertise that individual artists can draw on and to which they contribute through the research they carry out. The artist is no antisocial *Schwärmer*, but a business-oriented craftsman, able to excel even in commissioned situations. The Renaissance model of the artist as scholar and inventor has an academic sequel in the Beaux Arts version of artisthood.

Important contradictions that crop up repeatedly in the mythical structure of contemporary artisthood can be traced back to unresolved tensions between the romantic, the modernist and the classical models. Thus, on the one side there is the absolute character of the work of art and the claim of universal truth that emanates from it, and on the other, the ironic self-awareness of the artist, from which even the most “spontaneous” artistic practices are not immune.¹⁴ Another contradiction occurs between the internalised character of artisthood and the desire for social responsibility. The creative imagination is regarded as a matchless and unassailable principle, for which the artist may not be held to account; but at the same time artists wish to be taken seriously as agents in a social context, constantly battling against the marginalization of their position by the outside world. Depending on the circumstances, insiders in the art world will stress the importance of knowledge and skill, education and metier, and the expertise that is inherent in artisthood; or conversely, the freedom of the artist, the futility of past conventions and the revolutionary power of the tabula rasa.

It is important to add that the romantic and modernist versions of artisthood have always been fundamentally unstable in themselves. Their internal dynamics exceed a certain critical limit. The romantic view of the work of art as a direct reflection of the soul of its maker verges on the elimination of artistic will. The relationship between the artist and his work is seen as so intimate and personal that it acquires an organic and quasi-corporeal quality, something like a passive excretion or emanation. Cézanne’s pronouncement that the artist must create work “as an almond tree its blossom or a snail its slime” can be read as a subconscious expression of this.¹⁵ The spiritualization is so extreme that the spirit turns into its own prisoner and becomes a machine – a being with no consciousness, no free will, no capacity for detachment and self-reflection. The highest human aspiration suddenly appears to be at the same level as the most primitive form of life.

The modernist view of art is characterised by a different instability. Modernist artisthood is essentially focused on transcending its own conditions at some undecided but real moment in the future. It strives to generate a boundless creative field, in which there will no longer be any need for individual artistic positions and achievements. In this utopian model, art itself is transcended and ultimately made

¹⁴ See Maarten Doorman, *De Romantische orde* (Amsterdam: Uitgeverij Bert Bakker, 2004), p. 146.

¹⁵ Quoted in: Dore Ashton, *A Fable of Modern Art* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1991), p. 38. Similar statements are attributed to Camille Saint-Saëns (“As an apple tree yields apples, so I produce compositions”) and Lodewijk van Deyssel (“The painting springs from man precisely as the corn-ear springs from the ground”).

redundant – by the activity of artists. The paradox here is that it does so by withdrawing into itself completely.

Modern art looks upon its own historical trajectory as something absolute, yet is implicitly intent on the abolition of history. It projects a radical transition point in the future, while simultaneously claiming to make the future materialise in the present. The transition to an absolute state of being, in which all restrictive and stifling obstructions will be abolished, is prefigured by the art of today.

While romantic artisthood threatens to collapse as a result of a lack of form and of free will, modernist artisthood, on the other hand, risks paralysis by an excess of detachment and self-awareness. Thus, the two myths are absolute opposites and simultaneously each other's mirror image. The excess of the one is the deficiency of the other. Both are constantly in danger of toppling over and emptying into their counterpart. Modernist artisthood formulates a historical task for itself, while placing itself at the end of (or even outside) history; and romantic artisthood reveres the individual power of imagination to such an extent that the imagination threatens to become isolated and suffocate. In both cases, the third, classical model offers a way out of the impending crisis. It reminds art of its own craftsmanship, which has a stabilizing effect. It puts the spiritual mission of art into perspective by rehabilitating technique and methodology. It restores the balance between means and ends, and rekindles the faith of the artist in the manageability of the artistic process.

4.

Are all artists trapped by definition in the myth of artisthood? Can this myth be refused or even dismantled? Is any kind of artistic practice conceivable without mystification and without a claim of special status? Such questions cannot be answered easily. The great power of modern art lies in its capacity for demystification; but that capacity is simultaneously part of the myth of modern art. Artists who intentionally aim to break with the established image of the artist, if they succeed, will find that they have only confirmed the myth indirectly. Subversion is seen as inherent in modern art; it is its most praised quality, even if it sometimes leads to accusations of treachery.

Ever since Manet, artists have attempted to eradicate the myth of artisthood. The importance of this could not be overstated. The last hundred and fifty years have seen a continuous series of demystifications, some more successful than others, functioning as the engine of the development of modern art. The reaction of the public to this has not always been the same. Full-blown bourgeois protest against the

moral corruption and anarchy of modern art has subsided, to be replaced by a situation in which the public even takes a certain comfort in the discomfort that art is able to give.¹⁶ We are faced with a mixed pattern of mild excitement, mild boredom and permanent habituation, interspersed with incidents of media rumour about “the emperor’s new clothes”.

Manet, on the other hand, still had to contend with gross insults from critics who found his work barely worth considering; they called him an “apostle of the ugly and repulsive”, who was recognizable for “an almost childish ignorance of the fundamentals of drawing” and “a prejudice in favour of inconceivable vulgarity”.¹⁷ These reactions reflected the incomprehension from the general public, which in those days was fairly sure about what it expected from art: noble depictions of elevating subjects, in keeping with the general norms of decency and taste. When artists like Manet attempted to break out of the tradition of bourgeois representation, the public saw their attempts only as a banal accumulation of obscenities. The public demanded elevation and sublimation, but received exactly the opposite. A complete history of modern art could be written on the basis of this constantly recurring misunderstanding. Art has demystified its own principles by embracing chance, unpredictability and formlessness; or by using mechanical, machine-like techniques. From Seurat’s pointillism to Warhol’s *Piss Paintings*, from Duchamp’s readymades to Manzoni’s *Merda d’artista* – the story of modern art could be written as a long series of rejections of the pompous cult of individual mastery and the mythic urge to create. Contrary to the opinions of Manet’s critics, this is not so much a fascination for the ugly, repulsive and worthless as such, but a search for new forms of visual production that are more in line with the social, cultural and economic conditions of the day. Throughout the entire twentieth century the “desublimation” of art was a means to “debase the false autonomy claims with which modernism has propped up its myths”.¹⁸ Only by rejecting the social conventions of formality, refinement and civilization, did the artist believe he could free art from the false pretensions forced upon it.

In spite of all the scandals initiated time and again by works of art, the general public sees artistic practice as an aristocracy of the mind; it grants the artist an idealised status that is elevated above the ugly, everyday aspects of social intercourse.

¹⁶ Cf. Frank Vande Veire, “Cultuur, kunst, kritiek... Iets over de behaaglijkheid van ons onbehagen”, in: idem, *De geploide voorstelling. Essays over kunst* (Brussels: Yves Gevaert, 1997), pp. 211-219.

¹⁷ Quotes taken from George Heard Hamilton, *Manet and his Critics* (New York: Norton, 1969), pp. 71-72.

¹⁸ Hal Foster et. al., *Art since 1900. Modernism, Antimodernism, Postmodernism* (London: Thames & Hudson, 2004), p. 683.

The modern artist, however, refuses to play this game. He prefers to identify himself with the worker rather than the aristocrat.

In 1876 Stéphane Mallarmé published an article in an English periodical on Edouard Manet and the impressionists, in which he identifies this social affiliation with the working class as an important artistic quality. “At a time when the romantic tradition of the first half of the [nineteenth] only lingers among a few surviving masters of that time, the transition from the old imaginative artist and dreamer to the energetic modern worker is found in impressionism. (...) The noble visionaries of other times, whose works are a semblance of worldly things seen by unworldly eyes, not the actual representations of real objects, appear as kings and gods in the far dream-ages of mankind; recluses who were given the genius of a dominion over an ignorant multitude. But today the multitude demands to see with its own eyes; and if our latter-day art is less glorious, intense and rich, it is not without the compensation of truth, simplicity and child-like charm.”¹⁹

Mallarmé contrasts the fresh artistic practice of Manet and the impressionists with the introspective, infatuated attitude of the romantics. But it is revealing that in his description of Manet’s working method, he still uses comparisons and metaphors that are typically romantic. Although he partly attributes these to the artist himself, it is obvious that for Mallarmé modern artisthood has a deeply romantic colouring. Manet, he says, is like someone teaching himself to swim by jumping in the water unprepared. He regards that which he was once taught as a collection of fallacies. “Each work should be a new creation of the mind,” according to Mallarmé. “The (painter’s) hand, it is true, will conserve some of its acquired secrets of manipulation, but the eye should forget all else it has seen, and learn anew from the lesson before it. It should abstract itself from memory, seeing only that which it looks upon, and that as for the first time; and the hand should become an impersonal abstraction guided only by the will, oblivious of all previous cunning. As for the artist himself, his personal feeling, his peculiar tastes, are for the time absorbed, ignored, or set aside for the enjoyment of his personal life.”²⁰

Mallarmé demystifies art, but is only able to do so by introducing new myths. Personality and originality, he writes, are no longer applicable to the work of Manet and his colleagues. The originality of Manet actually lies in his renouncing originality; in the way in which he allows his personality to be dispersed “in nature herself, or in

¹⁹ Stéphane Mallarmé, “The Impressionists and Edouard Manet” (1876), in: Charles S. Moffett (ed.), *The New Painting. Impressionism 1874-1886* (Oxford: Phaidon Press, 1986), p. 33.

²⁰ *Ibidem*, p. 29.

the gaze of a multitude until then ignorant of her charms.”²¹ According to Mallarmé, this depersonalisation is crucial in order to properly understand the work of the impressionists. The new myth that he thus creates is that *nature expresses itself* in the work of these artists. “At that critical hour for the human race when nature desires to work for herself, she requires certain lovers of hers – new and impersonal men placed directly in communion with the sentiment of their time – to loose the restraint of education, to let the hand and eye do what they will, and thus through them, reveal herself.” (...) “to express herself, calm, naked, habitual, to those newcomers of tomorrow, of which each one will consent to be an unknown unit in the mighty numbers of an universal suffrage, and to place in their power a newer and more succinct means of observing her.”²²

Here, Mallarmé sketches a socialist view of the future, in which the production of art has turned radically democratic and impersonal – that is to say: art is no longer the domain of chosen individuals who are elevated above the masses. In the egalitarian society of tomorrow the old regime of God, monarch and motherland is to be replaced by a new metaphysics – a metaphysics of nature, which expresses its autonomous will via the nameless masses and which uses art in order to capture this expression of will and make it intelligible.

The interpretation of Manet’s work by Mallarmé is just one example out of many. Important here are the general conclusions that can be derived from it. First, romantic notions of art and artisthood are more difficult to eliminate than it seems, presumably because these notions themselves have never been univocal. Second, every attempt to demystify art immediately creates new myths for later generations to reject.

5.

The insight that romantic artisthood shows signs of instability did not appear after the fact. The romantic notion of artistic genius was already problematized by Honoré de Balzac in his legendary novella *Le chef-d’oeuvre inconnu* (1831-1845).

Nonetheless, Balzac himself belonged to the romantic camp around Victor Hugo and Eugène Delacroix. His personal contacts with artists and critics, including Louis Boulanger and Théophile Gautier, kept him well informed on the discussions that were taking place in the art world at that time.

²¹ Ibidem, p. 32.

²² Ibidem, pp. 33-34.

The romantics around him rejected academic rules and prescriptions. They believed passionately in the idea that true artistic genius is “uncultivated, violent and tempestuous.”²³ Great value was attached to the role of intuition in the artistic process, and to the creative potential of the sketch and the sketchy. Following Delacroix the romantics believed that an artist could spoil his work by spending too much time on it; he could make no greater mistake than to continue scraping away at a work already laid out, thus striving to achieve a level of refinement that would make him popular to a large audience. It was exactly the openness of an unfinished work that created space for the imagination.²⁴

Frenhofer, the fictional artist whose tragic demise is the story of *Le chef-d'oeuvre inconnu*, has been identified as a prototype of the modern artist – “existing in a constant state of anxiety, plagued by metaphysical doubt”.²⁵ However, it would be more accurate to say that he embodies the instability of romantic artisthood, which makes him a transitional figure between the classical and the modern type of artist. Yet the fact that he is gravely entangled in his own contradictory opinions and ambitions, which eventually lead to his downfall, suggests that this transition is an impossible one to make.

Initially Frenhofer seems like an artist of the intuitive, Delacroix variety. The statements that Balzac has him utter point in that direction. The old master says that it is the aim of art not to copy nature, but to express it. “It’s our task to seize the physiognomy, the spirit, the soul of our models, whether objects or living beings.”²⁶ Painters should desire to penetrate “into the intimacies of form”, and search for the idea that expresses that form. Form is whimsical, intangible and inconstant; the imitation of exterior effects leads nowhere. “The victorious painter is never deceived by all those subterfuges, he perseveres until nature’s forced to show herself stark naked, in her true spirit.”²⁷

For Frenhofer however this “perseverance” takes on such vast proportions that it blocks his production. It emerges that, in the isolation of his studio, he has been working for ten years on a magnum opus, a portrait of a woman called Catherine Lescault, which he is simply unable to complete. Time and again he thinks he has applied the final brushstroke, only to discover new imperfections the following day. “ ‘Show you my work!’ the old man exclaimed, suddenly upset. ‘No, no, it must

²³ Théophile Gautier, quoted in Ashton, op cit, p. 17.

²⁴ Ibidem, p. 19.

²⁵ Ibidem, p. 29.

²⁶ Honoré de Balzac, *The unknown masterpiece*, tr. Richard Howard (New York: New York Review Books, 2001), p. 14.

²⁷ Ibidem, p. 14-15.

still be brought to perfection. Yesterday, toward evening, I thought I was done. Her eyes seemed moist to me, her flesh was alive, the locks of her hair stirred... She breathed! Though I thought I'd learned how to render nature's depth and solidity on a flat canvas, this morning, by daylight, I discovered my mistake.'²⁸ Frenhofer's permanent doubt deprives him of the ability to complete his work. He reveals to Frans Pourbus and Nicolas Poussin, two painter colleagues who would do anything to be allowed a glance of the supposed masterpiece, that he is on the verge of despair. Pourbus believes that his problem is that he thinks about his work too much: "Frenhofer's a man in love with our art, a man who sees higher and farther than other painters. He's meditated on the nature of color, on the absolute truth of line; but by dint of so much research, he has come to doubt the very object of his investigations." He warns the young Poussin against making the same mistake: "Don't do that to yourself! Work while you can! A painter should philosophize only with a brush in his hand."²⁹

Frenhofer becomes increasingly entangled in the strands of his own thoughts. He believes that he can break the impasse by comparing his canvas to a woman of staggering beauty, a living beauty without the slightest blemish – "that complete, that divine nature."³⁰ Apparently without realizing it, he is thus reverting to the mimetic conception of art of the *Beaux Arts*; a view he had previously denounced so fervently.

The young Poussin, in search of a role model, sees in Frenhofer the ultimate, deified figure of the artist – "the imperial mastery of one of the princes of art" that "transcend[s] the limits of human nature." Frenhofer evokes in him "a consummate image of the artist's nature, that wild nature to which so many powers are entrusted, and which all too often abuses them, leading cold reason, the bourgeois public, and even some connoisseurs down a myriad barren paths, precisely where this capricious white-winged sprite discovers castles, epics, works of art."³¹ When the old master finally agrees to show them his secret masterpiece, Pourbus and Poussin discern nothing but the painterly equivalent of a "a myriad barren paths" on the canvas they are shown, namely "colors daubed one on top of the other and contained by a mass of strange lines forming a wall of paint."³² This "incoherent mist" is the result of "the layers of color the old painter had superimposed, imagining he was perfecting his art", resulting in a "an incredible, slow, and advancing destruction."³³ There is

²⁸ Ibidem, p. 22.

²⁹ Ibidem, p. 27.

³⁰ Ibidem, p. 26.

³¹ Ibidem, pp. 25.

³² Ibidem, p. 40.

³³ Ibidem, p. 41.

absolutely no woman to be seen on the canvas, apart from a single painted foot emerging from the mass of paint. Is Frenhofer a visionary genius – someone who perceives more than ordinary people can see, with their limited abilities? Or is he a madman, who sees things that are simply not there? Bewildered, Poussin lets slip that there is “nothing” on the canvas, which sends Frenhofer into a fit. He throws his guests out, and the following day they learn that he died during the night, after having burned his paintings.

The instability of Frenhofer’s artisthood can be inferred from the way he speaks about his masterpiece. He is unable to overcome the double nature of Catherine Lescault, both living woman and painted portrait. “Aha! You weren’t expecting such perfection, were you? You’re in the presence of a woman, and you’re still looking for a picture. There’s such depth on this canvas, the air is so real you can no longer distinguish it from the air around yourselves. Where’s the art? Gone, vanished! Here’s true form – the very form of a girl.”³⁴ The artist derives his supernatural status from his ability to create an object of love for himself – a *living* object of love. “She has a soul, I tell you, the soul I’ve endowed her with.”³⁵ The paradox is that this “woman” owes her independent existence as living creature to the divine genius of her maker – on whom she is thus entirely dependent.³⁶

Balzac and his contemporaries discovered that the aesthetic experience is structured like a desire.³⁷ This, in fact, is the issue that Frenhofer is struggling with – and the deeper meaning of his confusion between a painted portrait and a living woman. Just as with a worldly love, he can never actually possess the object of his desire, as it continually changes in reaction to the expression of his desire. With his endless additions and corrections, Frenhofer transfers this dialectic – the dialectic of desire – to his artistic creation. “Hasn’t she smiled at me with each brushstroke I’ve given her?”³⁸ With this, he exceeds the classical conception of art, according to which the aesthetic experience exists solely by virtue of an unambiguous separation between reality and illusion. Even in the case of an absolute likeness, the classical work can be compared but never confused with nature’s example. In Frenhofer’s experience, however, this aesthetic rule is no longer self-evident, due to the insight

³⁴ Ibidem, p. 39.

³⁵ Ibidem, p. 33.

³⁶ Eric Gans, “Balzac’s Unknowable Masterpiece and the Limits of the Classical Esthetic”, in: *Modern Language Notes* nr. 4 (May 1975), pp. 508-509.

³⁷ Here I follow the argument of Eric Gans, op cit, p. 511 et seq.

³⁸ Balzac, op cit, p. 33.

that mimesis has become a “second nature”, with the artist assuming the role of divine creator.³⁹

Balzac’s fictional artist breaks through the barrier of aesthetic form, without being entirely aware of this transgression. The paradox of Frenhofer’s position is that he represents a post-classical aesthetic, the products of which he is only able to judge with the classical mimetic criteria. He stands on the threshold of “(...) the modern conception of an art whose content is no longer the image of the ideal, but the sensuous record of its pursuit.”⁴⁰ The modern artistic practice is no longer concerned with the perfect expression of an ideal, but with the process of expression itself. In the modern context the insight that there can be no absolute masterpieces does not form an impediment to a productive artistic career – on the contrary, it makes it ever more essential to continue producing work. “Every individual work, after all, is a necessarily incomplete expression of the underlying artistic ‘self’, and thus always requires a following work. (...) Unsurprisingly, the impossibility of a complete self-realization in one single artistic artefact is, according to the prevailing artistic credo, the engine of any successful oeuvre (...).”⁴¹ This makes clear the nature of Frenhofer’s main shortcoming: he still has to learn to regard his work “as the sign of his search, rather than its fulfilment”.⁴²

6.

But to what extent can such a thing truly be learnt? The dilemma for the modern artist is that all his actions must be taken *consciously*, in awareness of the context, situation and the process of his work; without losing faith in the significance of the expressive gesture. What is left of the meaning of artistic expression, when it always goes accompanied by its intellectual shadow – the artist’s consciousness and permanent self-reflection? How authentic and heart-felt is it then?

In the twentieth century, artists have indeed learnt from the tragic case of Frenhofer, but the result is that they have cut themselves off from the sources of artistic creation. The extent to which these two aspects are interconnected becomes apparent in a conversation between Francis Bacon and David Sylvester. In it, Bacon says that he has given up his obsessive pursuit of the one perfect image; he wants to continue painting until he dies, and what was he supposed to do after the ultimate

³⁹ Gans, op cit, p. 513.

⁴⁰ Ibidem, p. 515.

⁴¹ Laermans, op cit, p. 14.

⁴² Gans, op cit, p. 515.

work had been realized?⁴³ When asked, he admits that he used to ruin paintings by working on them too long. That doesn't happen any more, he says, because technically he has become a better painter: "I can manipulate the paint now in a way that I don't have to get into the kind of marshland which I can't extricate myself from."⁴⁴ But the interview also reveals a certain unease about his own prosaic attitude. Sometimes, he admits, he throws a daub of paint on an almost finished canvas, in order to achieve a result that he could not foresee. The technical control that keeps him from self-destructing à la Frenhofer, does not directly lead to the desired intensity; it is for this reason that the painter builds in a resistance for himself. "Half my painting activity is disrupting what I can do with ease."⁴⁵

Bacon says that the artistic interaction between chance and intuition, between the planned and the unplanned, can be neither described nor analysed. He speaks about his work process as if he himself is not personally involved. "I don't know what it's about myself. I don't really know how these particular forms come about. I'm not by that suggesting that I'm inspired or gifted. I just don't know. I look at them – I look at them, probably, from an aesthetic point of view. I know what I want to do, but I don't know how to do it. And I look at them almost like a stranger, not knowing how these things have come about and why have these marks that have happened on the canvas evolved into these particular forms."⁴⁶ The artist places himself outside his work. He steps back and creates a distance – that is to say: not a distance to his work, but a distance *to himself*. Introspection and self-analysis are insufficient means to understand how the art is created. Bacon speaks as a passive witness, as someone who registers his own actions without having access to the underlying mechanisms. This dissociation helps him solve the problem that self-control and relativization, while necessary, also constitute a threat to the myth of artisthood. The conscious half of the artist's psyche stands on the sidelines, observing what the unconscious half is doing.

The persistence with which twentieth century artists' statements have minimised the role of the conscious in the artistic process, focusing instead on the intuition, is illustrative of the extent to which they are prisoners of their own self-awareness. They envisage a spontaneous and intuitive artisthood that in reality is no longer conceivable – and that has probably never even existed. In this respect there is

⁴³ David Sylvester, *Interviews with Francis Bacon [1962-1979]*, (London/New York: Thames and Hudson, 1993), p. 107.

⁴⁴ *Ibidem*, p. 90.

⁴⁵ *Ibidem*, p. 91.

⁴⁶ *Ibidem*, p. 100.

scarcely any difference between a pictorial artist such as Francis Bacon and the proto-conceptualist Marcel Duchamp. In a lecture from 1957 entitled *The Creative Act*, Duchamp describes the artist as a gateway, a medium, a body for the subconscious transfer of signals. “If we give the attributes of a medium to the artist, we must then deny him the state of consciousness on the aesthetic plane about what he is doing or why he is doing it. All his decisions in the artistic execution of the work rest with pure intuition and cannot be translated into a self-analysis, spoken or written, or even thought out.”⁴⁷ For Duchamp, the artist’s inability to analyse his artistic process also implies that the result of that process can never be determined in advance. But, he claims, it is precisely there, when the artist fails to realize his intentions, that the personal “art coefficient” is created. This failure must be seen as a necessary precondition for the creation of a work of art. The struggle to achieve a good result can never be entirely conscious. “In the creative act, the artist goes from intention to realization through a chain of totally subjective reactions. His struggle towards the realization is a series of efforts, pains, satisfactions, refusals, decisions, which also cannot and must not be fully self-conscious, at least on the aesthetic plane. The result of his struggle is a difference between the intention and its realization, a difference which the artist is not aware of. (...) this difference between what he intended to realize and did realize, is the personal ‘art coefficient’ contained in the work.”⁴⁸

If Frenhofer is the artist in half-sleep, busy awakening from a mythical state of oneness with his creative impulse, then the modern artist is a fully conscious individual, who longs to regain the spontaneity that he has, in reality, never known. He can no longer escape the aspect of critical detachment and self-observation – it is the *raison d’être* of his practice. The modern artist struggles to preserve his belief in the meaning of the expressive gesture, and to accommodate it. He must reconcile his belief with his disbelief. In the art of the twentieth century, the separation that Bacon and Duchamp make between the conscious decision and the artistic result has been an important way of achieving that.

7.

Implied in the myth of artisthood is the idea that artists have access to an exceptional form of knowledge. Their inability to comprehend what they do – Francis Bacon’s “I just don’t know” – does not contradict this. In this case, not knowing is actually a

⁴⁷ Marcel Duchamp, “The Creative Act”, in: Kristine Stiles and Peter Selz (ed.), *Theories and Documents of Contemporary Art* (Berkeley/Los Angeles/London: University of California Press, 1996), p. 818. This text, incidentally, is mentioned in the cited conversation between David Sylvester and Francis Bacon.

⁴⁸ *Ibidem*, p. 819.

higher form of knowledge. Art counts as the domain of implied, embodied knowledge. With their tentative actions artists intuitively capture certain moments of understanding which escape the sciences, trapped in a system of protocols, almost by definition.

In his essay *Eye and Mind* (1964), Maurice Merleau-Ponty presents an image of the artist as someone who, in a certain sense, is more knowledgeable than the scientist. Scientific knowledge is dry and thin. Scientists see the contingencies of their knowledge production as absolutes; they produce knowledge without grounding, without physical embedding in the experiential world. The artist by contrast – and particularly the painter – “in full innocence” draws on a fabric of “brute meaning” that goes much deeper.⁴⁹ The knowledge of the artist is a “secret science”, for which he uses his own body as a medium.⁵⁰ Merleau-Ponty believes that the exceptional status of painting has to do with what he regards as the riddle of visibility. All the paradoxical features of vision come together in the complex qualities of painting. “Painting awakens and carries to its highest pitch a delirium which is vision itself, for to see is *to have at a distance*; painting spreads this strange possession to all aspects of Being, which must in some fashion become visible in order to enter into the work of art.”⁵¹ The world has engraved “the ciphers of the visible” into the painter. With this, the painter makes visible that which remains invisible to the untrained eye, so that we might gain possession of “the voluminosity of the world”; he lays bare the “texture of Being” without actually touching the objects.⁵²

The painter differs not only from the scientist, but also from other artists, such as the writer and the composer. The composer is without the privileges of the visual sense; moreover, music is too much a stream of direct manifestations of Being. The writer and the philosopher make statements and adopt positions; they are bound by “the responsibilities of men who speak”. It is the painter alone who has the right to silence – who is “entitled to look at everything without being obliged to appraise what he sees. For the painter, we might say, the watchwords of knowledge and action lose their meaning and force.”⁵³ The intuitive knowledge of the painter is purely materialised; the painter is indeed a philosopher, but only when he is painting.⁵⁴ We therefore do not blame him when, as a citizen, he makes a moral or political slip; and

⁴⁹ Maurice Merleau-Ponty, “Eye and Mind”, in: *The Primacy of Perception* (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1964), p. 161.

⁵⁰ *Ibidem*, p. 161.

⁵¹ *Ibidem*, p. 166.

⁵² *Ibidem*.

⁵³ *Ibidem*, p. 161.

⁵⁴ *Ibidem*, p. 178.

conversely, totalitarian regimes destroy the books but rarely the paintings that they claim to condemn; “one never knows” whether the works might not embody some higher truth after all.⁵⁵

The painter does not doubt the reality of the visible world. The lessons of Descartes – “that the only light is that of the mind”⁵⁶ – are lost on him. For the painter, the reality of the subject is always entwined with the reality of the world. This is “the magical theory of vision” that the painter puts into practice.⁵⁷ Thanks to painting, we are open to that which vision teaches us: “that through it we come in contact with the sun and stars, that we are everywhere all at once, (...) Vision alone makes us learn that beings that are different, ‘exterior’, foreign to one another, are yet absolutely *together* (...).”⁵⁸

Yet the painter is not without doubt. Merleau-Ponty devoted an essay to Cézanne, for him a paradigmatic painter, entitled *Cézanne’s Doubt*. The painter doubted his calling, his ability, even his eyes, but this permanent uncertainty is an essential feature of his medium, not a psychological aberration. “Cézanne’s difficulties are those of the first word”, writes Merleau-Ponty.⁵⁹ Cézanne is not satisfied with the safe domain of culture and civilization, where one can survive by “linking old ideas in a new way and by presenting forms that have been seen before.” He returns to the inception of culture and “founds it anew: he speaks as the first man spoke and paints as if no one had ever painted before.” This is more than a random metaphor. In his work the painter cannot fall back on any certainties; he doesn’t have a single indication of whether he is on the right track. “What he expresses cannot, therefore, be the translation of a clearly defined thought, since such clear thoughts are those that have already been said within ourselves or by others. “Conception’ cannot precede ‘execution’. There is nothing but a vague fever before the act of artistic expression, and only the work itself, completed and understood, is proof that there was *something* rather than *nothing* to be said.” The painter “launches his work just as a man once launched the first word, not knowing whether it will be anything more than a shout, whether it can detach itself from the flow of individual life in which it originates (...).”⁶⁰

⁵⁵ Ibidem, p. 161.

⁵⁶ Ibidem, p. 186.

⁵⁷ Ibidem, p. 166 ??

⁵⁸ Ibidem, p. 187.

⁵⁹ Merleau-Ponty, “Cézanne’s Doubt”, in: *Sense and Non-Sense* (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1964), p. 19.

⁶⁰ Ibidem, p. 19.

According to Merleau-Ponty, Cézanne has always refused to choose between working after nature and abstract composition. He attempts to unite both poles in his work, by transcending the categorical separation between matter and perception: he “wrote in painting what had never yet been painted, and turned it into painting once and for all.”⁶¹ Cézanne paints an original world, with a spontaneously established order; not the scientific order of the human world. The knowledge this generates goes back to the fundamental indivisibility of the sensory perception. “These distinctions between touch and sight are unknown in primordial perception. (...) The lived object is not rediscovered or constructed on the basis of the contributions of the senses; rather, it presents itself to us from the start as the centre from which these contributions radiate. We see the depth, the smoothness, the softness, the hardness of objects; Cézanne even claimed that we see their odour.”⁶² The aim of the painter is to express this “indivisible whole”; to present objects “in the imperious unity, the presence, the unsurpassable plenitude which is for us the definition of the real.”⁶³

Merleau-Ponty’s ideas on the exceptional form of knowledge that works of art embody are consistent with his version of phenomenological philosophy. It is striking that a derivative of these ideas, stripped down and sterilized, appears in the early twenty-first century, in the context of art education and “artistic research”. In this contemporary discourse the philosophical background is silently replaced by a didactic, methodological atmosphere, which has a primarily legitimising aim.⁶⁴ In the texts of the theorists concerned one finds only snippets of an integrated phenomenological worldview. The direct aim of these authors is to prove that art involves a form of research; that the activities of the artist, in all their singularity, can be positively compared to those of the scientific researcher; and that the knowledge this produces is unique and exclusive. Unlike the regular sciences, with their standardized and controllable methods, the work of the artist-researcher is characterized by openness, flexibility and unpredictability. Here one finds the myth of artishood confirmed and celebrated in all its glory.

In order to firmly position artistic practice in the domain of research and knowledge, the similarities to regular scholarly or scientific work need to be emphasized, but also the differences. This rhetorical path begins with the exceptional type of knowledge that is supposed to materialize in works of art. It concerns

⁶¹ Ibidem, p. 17.

⁶² Ibidem, p. 15.

⁶³ Ibidem, p. 15.

⁶⁴ See Camiel van Winkel, “Flexibele multipliciteiten. Het discours over onderzoek in de kunst”, in: *De Witte Raaf* no. 122 (July-August 2006), pp. 2-3.

knowledge with a singular character: “(...) the research that artists carry out is not characterized by an objective, empirical approach, as art, by definition, does not strive for generalization, reproducibility and quantification. Instead it concerns itself with unique, personal, local knowledge.”⁶⁵ “Art practice – both the art object and the creative process – embodies situated, tacit knowledge that can be revealed and articulated by means of experimentation and interpretation.”⁶⁶ The academic duty to pursue more or less objective and verifiable research data does not apply to the artist-researcher. Research in art is closely linked to personal experience; the knowledge it produces can be described as “experiential knowledge” instead of specific “expert knowledge.”⁶⁷ The fact that this knowledge has a personal character is not a weakness but a strength, when compared to the rigidity and one-dimensionality inherent in scientific research. “The *a priori* of the body assumes the place of the *a priori* of intellectual knowledge, making the prereflexive bodily intimacy with the world around us into the foundation of our thinking, acting and feeling.”⁶⁸

As regards the research methods and techniques that artists employ; on the one hand there is clearly a scientific mind: “(...) for the creation, execution and presentation, the same methods and working practices are applied as those used in studying the sciences: formulation and selection of the research questions, approach to the definition of the problem on the basis of various analyses and diagnoses, experimentation with solutions and argumentation of the results, doubt, consideration and eventually a reasoned choice for a solution, a result that will be recognized by peers and experts as being at least plausible, and preferably of high quality.”⁶⁹ On the other hand, the dangers of routine and tunnel vision inherent in the protocols of science do not threaten artistic research. Research by artists is by definition tailor-made, driven by an urge to constantly redefine priorities and procedures. “There is, after all, no well-defined paradigm available for artistic research. The method must be formulated anew per research project, whereby the only criteria are critical openness and transparency.”⁷⁰ Unlike a regular scientific or scholarly approach, there is a constant feedback with the local environment in which the research issues first materialized. The impossibility of a pure scientific approach

⁶⁵ Henk Slager, “Kunst en methode”, in: *Boekman* no. 58/59 (2004), p. 199.

⁶⁶ Henk Borgdorff, *The Debate on Research in the Arts*, Sensuous Knowledge vol. 2, (Bergen: Bergen National Academy of the Art, 2006).

⁶⁷ Slager, op cit, pp. 199-200.

⁶⁸ Borgdorff, op cit.

⁶⁹ Frans de Ruiter, “In de Faculteit der Kunsten herleeft de homo universalis”, in: *Boekman* no. 58/59 (2004), p. 207.

⁷⁰ Henk Slager, “Artistic Research: Theories, Methods and Practices”, in: *Metropolis M* no. 1 (2006), p. 93.

is included, as it were, and taken into account in the research process. “What makes artistic research so special is precisely the fact that it can never be presented as just an illustration of previously conceived ideas, but looks into friction between word and image on its own terms.”⁷¹

What could explain the success of this quasi-phenomenological discourse? What is it that triggers this tendency to speak of “embodied knowledge” in relation to contemporary artistic practice?

In a social context that increasingly revolves around strictly formulated, general standards of professionalism and competence, the visual artist risks being left empty-handed. Francis Bacon’s “I just don’t know” no longer counts as a strong recommendation. Just like other professionals, the artist is expected to balance the means and aims of his professional practice, to operate in a businesslike and strategic fashion, to be familiar with market mechanisms and to effectively communicate with customers and clients. There is increasing social and political pressure on artists to bring their practice into line with other forms of (cultural) entrepreneurship. The discourse of embodied knowledge appears to be an acceptable response to this pressure, as it leaves the uniqueness of artisthood intact. This discourse combines the Beaux Arts model of artisthood – grounded in expertise, mastery and training – with the romantic belief in intuition and direct action. Although in socio-economic terms artisthood is increasingly seen as a “regular” profession, the theorists of artistic research assign it a cultural role that is aimed at countering this perception. It consists of the abolition of the ancient dichotomies of emotion and reason, knowledge and imagination, truth and illusion, object and subject. This is supposed to prepare the artistic profession for the twenty-first century.

8.

The persistence of the myth of artisthood is an indication that it serves a social purpose or interest. What is this interest? What is the function of the mythical discourse concerning artists and art?

Until a few decades ago, neo-Marxist art historians had no trouble answering these questions. With a pen dipped in the blood of the class struggle, they described artisthood as an ideological construction intended to disguise social discrepancies. The representation of the artist as a sovereign being – *the universal human being* – would affirm the bourgeois ideal of expression and creativity as the foremost human

⁷¹ Petran Kockelkoren, op cit, p. 17.

qualities. This in fact detaches the production of art from its social context and neutralizes it politically. The mythical image of artisthood is meant to convey the message that the social and historical aspects of the work of art are not fundamental. Art is portrayed as an essential human need, which not only transcends material conditions but also, for this very reason, forms the core of humanity and civilization.⁷²

According to neo-Marxist theory, the work of art historians is entirely devoted to supporting this ideological project. By means of catalogues and monographic publications, art historians mould the production of an artist into a homogenous oeuvre with an unmistakable authorship. They construct the linear development of an artistic career according to an organic model of growth, maturity and decline. Together they work towards a general image of artisthood as a purely subjective truth, an image from which all traces of class differences and social-economic imperatives have been carefully removed. The artist's life is presented as a continuous succession of "signifiers of artistness" – a seamless unity of life and work, production and personality.⁷³

The problem with the neo-Marxist critique of the myth of artisthood is that it ignores most of the discrepancies inherent in the myth. For example, Griselda Pollock suggests on the one hand that artists are confined to a domain of "difference" and "otherness", to which art historians and other specialists claim to have exclusive access, while elsewhere in her text we read that the bourgeois ideology of a "unifying classless subjectivity" communicates the message that art is accessible to all.⁷⁴ She leaves this ideological contradiction unresolved. Moreover, her proposition that the myth of artisthood is entirely the work of a small circle of art historians offers no satisfying explanation for the countless popular manifestations of that myth in the mass media.

Now that the glory-days of neo-Marxist critique are over, the problem of the social purpose of the myth of the artist must be tackled once again. A possible answer comes from the French sociologist Nathalie Heinich. In her book *L'élite artiste*, Heinich argues that artists in the Western democracy constitute an important elite, a kind of alternative aristocracy. The function of this elite is to bring the potential conflict between freedom and equality to a head, but also to suggest a solution for that conflict. It is through the institution of artisthood that a legitimised form of exceptionality and excellence is introduced in society, a form which to a certain

⁷² See e.g. Griselda Pollock, "Artists, Mythologies and Media. Genius, Madness and History", in: *Screen*, vol. 21 (1980) no. 3, pp. 57-96.

⁷³ *Ibidem*, p. 63.

⁷⁴ *Ibidem*, pp. 64-65.

extent shuns democratic mechanisms, but which nevertheless is acceptable, as art is seen to contribute to “the common good”. In the modern democratic system, individual success is no longer determined by family and class background, but by talent and hard work; by effort, competence and motivation. Although artists share this fate with every other individual, they are exceptional because – just like the nobility in the *ancien régime* – they are born with a certain *gift* or privilege: namely their creative talent. From the day of their birth they have an advantage over the rest of humanity. If they handle this well, they can pluck the fruits of both the democratic and the aristocratic regimes. In theory the wealth of the “aristocracy” of artisthood benefits the whole of society, and thus forms a contribution to democracy. According to Heinich, the modern concept of the artist is therefore a mixture of aristocracy, democracy and meritocracy, namely: inherited excellence, individual merit and the common good.⁷⁵ In this line of reasoning, artists have an important exemplary role to play in modern Western democracies. This explains why they are repeatedly driven back into the corner of an “aristocracy of the mind” – the corner from which artists have always attempted to escape.

The question, however, is whether this theory of the artistic “exception” allows for a recognition of its mythical character. Heinich affirms the content of the myth of artisthood without reflecting on the fact that it concerns a myth. This is not the case with Dirk Lauwaert, who assigns a similar exemplary role to the visual artist in an essay published in 2004.

For Lauwaert, the function of artisthood lies in the introduction of an empty zone into society, a place where nothing is fixed or prescribed. Other people can identify with this. “The role of the artist is crucial; not so much the individual artist, but the idea of artisthood as a structuring myth. This myth is not untrue, but effective, perhaps more effective than any individual artist. The artist is expected to do something that is not prescribed, in contrast to his fellow men, who are all too aware of what each day will bring them – which is simultaneously a curse and a comfort. In the overcrowded and compact mass of modern everyday life, without religion, transcendence, or ‘dogma’ (...) it is the artist who introduces a void. Without such a void or empty space there can be no transactions, no movement. Without the counterbalance that an empty space provides, everything is radically, obscenely and relentlessly positive, in a suffocating triumph of reality.”⁷⁶

⁷⁵ Nathalie Heinich, *L'élite artiste. Excellence et singularité en régime démocratique* (Paris: Éditions Gallimard, 2005), pp. 266-275.

⁷⁶ Dirk Lauwaert, “De roeping, de kunstenaar en hun carrière”, in: *De Witte Raaf* no. 112 (September-October 2004), p. 2.

For Lauwaert, artisthood is not just a profession. It is a vocation – the pre-eminent modern vocation, yet also an intrinsically empty vocation. “Despite its urgency, art is completely free. After all, the artist no longer has a task to perform. (...) *It* may be imperative, but we no longer know *what* the imperative is. (...) Artisthood is all the more respectable a vocation as it can no longer be formulated. It is exactly this impossible vocation that mirrors the impossibility of democracy. How can artists – having the ultimate vocation – give shape to that vocation, without knowing exactly what it entails?” In the fate of the artist, the public recognizes the problem of individual freedom that everybody struggles with: “What would a modern biography be like, in which nobody has a vocation anymore, except to be him- or herself.” Contemporary artisthood is an illustrative model of this paradoxical “unassigned task”. This explains the ambivalent attitude of the public with respect to artists. “We use the artist as a guinea-pig, to see how well he performs. We are grateful to him for adopting that impossible position for us. Yet we despise him for making nothing of it and for confronting us with an exasperating reflection of our own confused state.”⁷⁷

Lauwaert laments the demise of the idea of a vocation in contemporary art. He acknowledges the fact that artisthood is a myth, but regrets its having been unmasked: “The artist is called by a transcendental principle of art. This vocation generates a number of positions and dynamics, a number of concepts and orientations, which have an extremely rich potential. Artists with a vocation are called to testify to a tradition, its professed qualities and ambitions. But to consider life as a vocation is an increasingly unpopular exercise. The alternative of our time is patently obvious: flexible employment. The benefits are considerable (the umpteenth mythical obligation to be abolished), but so too is the loss (what should I do with my life without a vocation?). The loss seems immense, the benefit illusory. The question, however, is whether we can still do without this dubious benefit.”⁷⁸

9.

When speculating about an exemplary role for the visual artist in Western society, one must follow Dirk Lauwaert in acknowledging that this role is under pressure. As general standards of competence, professionalism and service are increasingly applied to the realm of art, it becomes ever more difficult to maintain the “empty space” of an autonomous artistic practice. The developments in art education, aimed

⁷⁷ Ibid.

⁷⁸ Ibid.

at the acquisition by the student of a number of specific competencies, equally reinforce the tendency to determine what the expertise of visual artists is or should be. The singularity of artisthood, instead of being maintained, is lost, as it lies precisely in the fact that nothing is predetermined or fixed.

At the same time, the exemplary role of artisthood has been undermined by its own success. In recent decades the ideas and values of the avant-garde have increasingly gained widespread popularity. Artistic attitudes that were once socially undesirable have trickled through from the fringes into mainstream society. The media, as well as corporations and politicians have discovered the appeal of transgressive and nonconformist behaviour, radical self-expression, and a well-proportioned contempt for tradition and authority. In the age of *Big Brother* and Benetton, the commercial sector has successfully exploited typical artist's virtues – virtues such as creativity and unbounded imagination, unorthodoxy, and the desire to go to extremes. The corporate world now selects young managers with the same heterodox qualities. For the sake of self-development, all conventions may be swept aside. Not just the artist, but every emancipated, self-confident individual is now like a little God in his or her own world.⁷⁹

Where these developments will eventually lead is not easy to predict. Perhaps we will one day experience a complete split between the artist and the work of art, resulting in the twin phenomena of the *work of art without artist* and *the artist without work of art*. Signs of this schism can already be perceived today.

A work of art without aura, authorship, or personal signature can, by definition, not be produced by an artist. As the history of modern art has shown, artists are unable to break with the myth of artisthood. They can only provide the initial impetus, develop the methods and techniques for the demystification of artisthood. It is subsequently left to the impersonal forces of the market to finish the job. Commercial service providers such as Foto op Canvas, Yorart, Born to Create and Canvas Online, are now already supplying the demystified work of art.⁸⁰ The service they provide is summarized by the equally clear and simple motto “Turn your favourite photo into a work of art!” The client sends a photo of a cherished family member, landscape or pet and after several weeks this is returned, printed on “real artist's linen” and mounted in a neat frame. The client chooses the desired style of the work of art – often derived from Pop Art: Warhol's *Marilyn* with the face of your own wife or girlfriend. For this, the tried and tested painting techniques of famous artists

⁷⁹ Cf. Dieter Lesage, “Art after the end of history”, in: *New commitment. In architecture, art and design*, ed. Els Brinkman (Rotterdam: NAI Uitgevers, 2003), pp. 80-92.

⁸⁰ www.fotoopcanvas.nl, www.yorart.nl, www.borntocreate.nl, www.canvasonline.nl.

have been standardized, digitised and trivialized, into a simple formula for the treatment of arbitrary photos (“the Roy Lichtenstein effect”). Different colour combinations are available for each style. The production is quick, easy and cheap. Thus, the utopian ideal of artists such as Joseph Beuys (“Every man is an artist”) or Lawrence Weiner (who is happy to leave the production of his concepts to their recipients) appears to have been realized after all, forty years on and via the digital revolution. And the term “work of art” is not avoided in this, even though no artist is involved in the production. “Still looking for that one original gift? Or do you yourself have an empty wall? Send us a photo of your friend, your granny or your goldfish and we’ll make it into a magnificent work of art.”⁸¹

The commercial phenomenon of the work of art without artist has no avant-garde pretension whatsoever. It takes place entirely outside the scope of the official, institutional art world. The art world itself, however, has for some time been fascinated by the opposite phenomenon: the artist without work of art. With mixed feelings, observers have characterized this figure as a “post-artist”.⁸² The post-artist has crossed a final border; making art has lost all importance to him, and aesthetic questions fail to stir his interest. But the post-artist also looks with pity at the militant attitude of the avant-garde, aimed at the disruption and eventual destruction of the autonomy of art. He responds with irony to many of the dilemmas of artistic engagement. It would appear that this decolonised artist has permanently abandoned his belief in the myth of artisthood, were it not for the fact that he is unable or unwilling to give up the institutional and social privileges that it offers.

The production of the post-artist is aptly presented under the name “postproduction”. This artistic practice consists primarily of the manipulation of existing cultural material produced by others. The post-artist has elevated the recycling of forms, objects and concepts to a collective art, in which there is no longer room for a solitary approach. Ideally, he or she works with like-minded colleagues, in a practice that is cheerfully described as “formal communism” – a succession of varying, collective appropriations. Post-artists sample, edit and compile. Intervening in many different existing production lines, the focus of their attention shifts from one place to another. A work produced is never a definitive end product, just a new beginning for subsequent manipulations, either by the artist himself or by others. The post-artist recognizes the character of contemporary culture as user-oriented, in

⁸¹ www.fotoopcanvas.nl.

⁸² Donald Kuspit, *The End of Art* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004). Peter Plagens, “At the Crossroads”, in: *Artforum* (February 2005), pp. 61-62. Jeff Wall, *Depiction, Object, Event. Hermeslezing 2006* (’s-Hertogenbosch: Stichting Hermeslezing, 2006).

which the utopian equality between maker and user, producer and consumer, is already a reality.⁸³

The practice of the post-artist is entirely detached and dematerialised – something atmospheric. Post-artists re-enact, as it were, the avant-garde project of the merging of art and life. They are not troubled by the autonomy of art simply because they ignore the problem. The merging of art and life is not realized but simulated, again and again. According to Jeff Wall this involves a mimetic operation: following Warhol's imitation of a media conglomerate (the *Factory*), artists now imitate all kinds of non-artistic activities and occupations, "without thereby having to renounce the making of works and abandon the art world and its patronage." Social phenomena such as "therapy, communitarianism, anthropology or radical pedagogy (...) make their own second appearance within, and therefore as, art. Within the domain of second appearance, artists are able to try out this or that mimesis of extra-artistic creative experimentation."⁸⁴ The result is an increasingly mannerist circus of "prototypes of situations" doing the rounds of biennales and grand exhibitions.⁸⁵

Thus the separation between the artist and the work of art, through the parallel appearance of the work of art without artist and the artist without work of art, does not mean that art and life converge. The gap remains, though shifted to a different level.

For the general public, unaware of the doctrines of postproduction, a work of art is still just a work of art – that is to say, an object that displays all the characteristics of a painting: a colourful rectangular surface on the wall. This notion has gradually become absolute and free from the authorship of a "recognized" artist. The artist loses the last remnant of his exemplary role in society. While the public demand a decorative value from visual art, the artist refuses to supply it. In itself that's nothing new, but in the postproduction era, the making of an art object has so little importance that any ordinary citizen can take the initiative with impunity. The academically supported idea of the expertise of artisthood does not carry enough weight to convince the emancipated and developed citizen of his own incompetence in this field. At that moment the populist cry "Anyone could do that..." in reaction to a modern, de-sublimated work of art, loses its negative ring, thus creating space for practical solutions in the realm of DIY: *Turn your favourite photo into a work of art... Anyone can do it...*

⁸³ Nicolas Bourriaud, *Postproduction* (Dijon: Les presses du réel, 2003), pp. 3-13.

⁸⁴ Jeff Wall, op cit, p. 24.

⁸⁵ Ibidem, p. 25.

But let us not lose all sense of proportion. It is quite conceivable that these contemporary developments are no more than ripples on the ocean of cultural history – a superficial turbulence that barely affects the continuity of the great mythical undercurrents. How much of the following passage by Rilke from 1902 – in which he describes his admiration for Rodin – would an average reader today not recognize?

“Rodin had several studios, some that are well-known in which visitors and letters found him. There were others in out-of-the-way, secluded places of which no one knew. These rooms were like cells, bare, poor, grey with dust, but their poverty was like the great, grey poverty of God out of which trees bud in March. Something of the Spring was in each of these rooms, a silent promise and deep seriousness. (...) The body of work here manifests itself, as did formerly the body of love: - it is a new revelation of life. This creator lived so completely in his conceptions, so entirely in the depths of his work, that inspiration or revelation came to him only through the medium of his art. New life in the ultimate sense meant to him new surfaces, new gestures. Thus to him the meaning of life became simple, he could err no more. With his own development Rodin has given an impetus to all the arts in this confused age. Some time it will be realized what has made this great artist so supreme. He was a worker whose only desire was to penetrate with all his forces into the humble and difficult significance of his tools. Therein lay a certain renunciation of Life, but in just this renunciation lay his triumph, for life entered into his work.”⁸⁶

Just as Mallarmé did in his article on Manet, here Rilke offers a mythical representation of the artist as a worker – grand in his modesty, human-inhuman in his self-denial, godlike in his relationship to the act of creation.

Rilke describes Rodin’s development as a slow and cautious one. “He advanced from surface to surface following Nature’s laws. Nature herself pointed out to him , as it were, the places in which he saw more than was visible. He evolved one great simplification out of many confusions as Christ brought unity into the confusion of a guilty people by the revelation of a sublime parable. He fulfilled an intention of nature, completed something that was helpless in its growth. He disclosed the coherences as a clear evening following a misty day unveils the mountains which rise in great waves out of the far distance.”⁸⁷

Precisely a hundred years after Rilke wrote these words, Markus Lüpertz, born in 1941, lives and works in Düsseldorf and Karlsruhe, told his interviewer the

⁸⁶ Rainer Maria Rilke, *Rodin*, tr. Jessie Lemont & Hans Trausil (Grey Walls Press, 1946), pp. 61-62.

⁸⁷ *Ibidem*, p. 41.

following: “The artists have created God in order to receive from him, from their own creation, the task of revealing the world.” And: “There is no way to capture the eternal, other than through the gifts of artists. Art has taught us everything we know about the past; that which the future holds has (already) been imagined and seen by artists. Their gifts are not intended for anyone in particular, but they are linked to the aspiration expressed in our idea of God as the sum of the representation of the most beautiful and finest that mankind thinks of itself. The gifts of artists carry this desire.”⁸⁸

⁸⁸ Markus Lüpertz, *Der Kunst die Regeln geben. Ein Gespräch mit Heinrich Heil* (Zürich: Ammann Verlag, 2005), p. 45 and 99.