The handle [http://hdl.handle.net/1887/18698](http://hdl.handle.net/1887/18698) holds various files of this Leiden University dissertation.

**Author:** Damen, Jeroen J.C.M.

**Title:** Het Woord is aan het beeld: vijf Nederlandse beelden na 1960

**Issue Date:** 2012-04-19
SUMMARY

SCULPTURE IN ITS OWN WORDS
Five Dutch Sculptures from after 1960

Jeroen Damen

This thesis is about the special relationship that the spectator enters into with sculpture. ‘Sculpture’ here means: immobile objects or three-dimensional bodies in one or more parts, deliberately made inside the domain of the visual arts.

This thesis argues how sculpture, in the first moment, makes the spectator speechless. When thereafter the spectator opens himself up to the sculpture, he feels invited by the work to fully apply his language skills. He finds meaning by repeatedly and precisely describing all he sees in the sculpture. By researching critically how he came to create his interpretation, the interpretation becomes a reading that transcends the private interpretation of the spectator. Perhaps this way of perceiving is applicable to all sorts of artworks, but in the case of sculpture it is particularised in the relations with the sculpture, due to the continued presence of the sculpture as a body. The meeting with the statue is experienced bodily and the being together in the world stimulates the research in a way that is comparable to the meeting of human beings.

The most important quality of each artwork is its uniqueness, made to stand out by its form, content and function. A sculpture being a work of art, in the first place seeks attention by its thingliness, - by the material, the form, the content and the awakened emotion - just because it is a thing and not an illusion. A thing with its own value. A sculpture is more than the mere bearer of a message. The intention of this thesis is to research how interpretation can be grounded in the sculpture itself, and how this grounding can be made transparent to the viewer.

The structure of the thesis is meant to clarify the interaction between perception and experience. Content, meaning and interpretation of the sculpture are interpreted in such a way that it makes clear that all of these are invoked by the sculpture itself and controlled by its presence. By describing the visible thing that has an impact on the spectator, the quality of the sculpture becomes measurable.

This precise describing and researching brings to light how the unique sculpture stands out from every predefined relation, whether it be style, subject, oeuvre or history. The researcher adds feeling to the perception of eye and brain, as first step into the ongoing process of meeting, perceiving and denotation. This research is based on a particular choice within the field of art history. Tentatively put, it is formalistic-phenomenological. It researches how, - stimulated by feeling - by repeatedly and precisely looking, and describing what there is to be seen in a sculpture, words are being evoked that lead to a transsubjective interpretation. Its demonstration follows a personal and dedicated hermeneutics. The result is that it becomes possible to assign meaning to sculpture, without prior knowledge about the sculptor and without knowledge of the context in which the sculpture originated, by concise description of what is visible.
Tradition: Formalism and Phenomenology

Perception is phenomenologically conceived as ‘being-in-the-world’. The presence of the sculpture is experienced bodily. This bodily meeting encourages our search for meaning, that is, why the artist felt the need to make an object or body, rather than a painted suggestion of an image. Phenomenology searches for the meaning of things inside our being bodily present with those things in reality: not ‘that chair over there as a thing’ but ‘the chair is majestic’. The chair is the thing and the phenomenologist investigates what else comes to mind by dint of its presence: the phenomenon ‘majesty’.

Being-in-the-world postpones all knowledge that may disturb this awareness of being in the world. It is not about ‘I am here and there is a thing that could be a chair’ but a living through the fact that the chair and I are together bodily and at the same time. In order to apprehend this, there is no need of a comprehensive theoretical knowledge of chairs. Sculptures are present bodily. They stand out by means of their uniqueness. To perceive this quality and derive an interpretation from it, precise - formal- description is necessary.

The meeting with a sculpture always bears a personal component, in spite of the sculpture’s search for general validity. That is the reason why the words have to denote as precisely as possibly what there is to be seen, to prevent that this personal component gives rise to a floating ‘hineininterpretieren’ or ascribing of solely personal sentiments. The logical consequence is that many things will be said about the artwork, but nothing about the intentions of the artist and nothing about the knowledge that the spectator possesses. The spectator holds his knowledge in abeyance in favour of the purely formal and phenomenological examination.

Structure of the thesis

In a short introduction, the researcher describes his personal fascination with sculpture, how it was evoked and how he handles it today. Then comes a search for what literature is at hand about Henry Moore’s sculpture Two piece Reclining Figure version II. The literature found serves as an example for the present state of affairs in literature about sculpture.

In the next chapter ‘Literature as framework’, the positioning of this thesis is determined: the specific tradition within the literature about sculpture which serves as inspiration and of which this thesis is written to become a part. The descriptions of the five sculptures after the literature chapter are inspired by the book of sculptor Rémy Zaugg: Die List der Unschuld (1982). The book serves as an example for the innocent look and the postponing of (contextual) knowledge. Background for Zaugg’s text is formed by French philosopher Merleau-Ponty, on whose citations Rémy Zaugg bases himself. To establish the sculptures described as true works of art, an appeal is made on a model of interpretation of the art historian from Leiden, Henri van de Waal, as described and explained by Hans Locher. The latter defines in an insightful way the terms ‘form’, ‘subject’ and ‘function’ and considers the overlap of those three terms as benchmark attributes of the artwork.

What is not included in the model is what else is experienced in the meeting with the sculpture: the undergoing of the sculpture as a thing, the undergoing of one’s own life sensation and the meaning that springs forth from that experience. Convinced of the importance of those experiences as the researcher is, he brings them into this thesis.

In the next five chapters, the abovementioned step by step and experimental description of five sculptures is developed. This approach should be equally applicable to André Voltens H-Balken, Rodin’s Le bourgeois à la clé, Michelangelo’s Schiavi, or indeed, to sculptures yet
to come. It is self-evident that the attempt being made here is described in such a manner that it will be clear to every academic what exactly is described and how this theoretical framework is applicable for everyone, according to the scientific norm.

Fig. 237. Five sculptures in order of appearance: H-Balken - Zonder Titel - Dier - Anita - Man van Hazendans