Het sculpturale denken. De esthetica van Frans Hemsterhuis

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Summary

Sculptural thinking. The aesthetics of Frans Hemsterhuis.

Peter C. Sonderen

On November 20th 1765 the Dutch philosopher Frans Hemsterhuis (1721-1790) completed a manuscript entitled Lettre sur la Sculpture, dedicating it to the Amsterdam financier and art-collector Theodoor de Smeth (1710-1772). In this work he gave expression to an original and powerful theory of beauty, based on a well-balanced consideration of the essence and the history of three-dimensional art.

The present thesis is an attempt to answer four main questions concerning this truly remarkable philosophical analysis of the sculptor’s art. How are we to account for the theory’s first being formulated during this particular period? What connection did Hemsterhuis see between ideas of beauty and their realisation? What are we to make of his view of perception or vision? What effect did his theory have on the general conception of aesthetics, and more specifically on the beginnings of modern art?

Although this last question is somewhat vague, it can hardly be denied that aesthetics in general changed radically around 1800, and that there are good reasons for regarding this turning-point as the inception of modern art. On the cover of a recent French edition of Lettre sur la Sculpture we find a photograph of a sculpture by Jean Tinguely in rapid motion (1990). This suggests a very specific connection between the ideas of Hemsterhuis and modern art-theory, and gives expression to a challenging and intriguing point of view.

It is not easy to express in written language what has been suggested so vividly and directly by this simple photographic statement, but one of the objectives of this thesis is to attempt to do so. It has to be remembered in this connection that Lettre sur la Sculpture is one of the few philosophical texts on beauty illustrated by the author himself, and that these illustrations provide evidence of extraordinary insight into the relationship between the printed text and the images under consideration. Hemsterhuis’s drawings are not simply the adornments of his book, they have a function of their own. Although many works on visual beauty were published during the eighteenth century, when aesthetics was in the process of establishing itself as a branch of philosophy, Hemsterhuis’s is unique in that it deals with the expression of beauty in a realistic or idealised art-form by actually depicting it visually. What he accomplished in this respect becomes all the more remarkable when one remembers that he was operating during a period when the importance of visualising artistic concepts was being played down. Neo-classicism was intent on emphasising the artistic concept rather than its realisation, on enhancing the philosophical significance rather than the visual presentation of the art-object. It would, however, be wrong to conclude from this that Hemsterhuis
was radically at odds with his contemporaries in this respect, for he sees aesthetic ideas as finding their ultimate fulfilment in the visual simplicity which eventually gave rise to modern art, and his book may therefore be regarded as providing us with a unique insight into one of the many factors contributing to the development of neo-classicism. Nevertheless, it is also an eloquent testimonial of the way in which philosophy itself, on account of its own past, had become preoccupied with aesthetic experience, with the significance of visual art, — hence the choice of *Sculptural thinking* as the main title of my thesis.

Part one is concerned with the general significance of *Sculpture* as such. Hemsterhuis's letter on the subject is shown to be something quite new in The Netherlands, in that it was not simply historical or philological, as were the great majority of its forerunners, but predominantly aesthetic. Among Hemsterhuis's immediate philosophical predecessors, Descartes, Spinoza and Newton had little interest in any form of art, and tended to underrate the significance of aesthetic experience. Spinoza even went out of his way to classify perception by means of conventional signs, random experience and imperfect inference as intrinsically inferior to mathematical and causal insight. It is apparent from Hemsterhuis's correspondence with Princess Amalia von Gallitzin, that Theodoor de Smeth considered himself to be a Spinozist, and that one of the main objects of the *Lettre sur la Sculpture* was to bring out the way in which thoroughgoing Spinozism failed to do justice to the significance of the aesthetic sensibility involved in the collection of art. Its shortcomings in this respect could be traced back to the mistaken belief that mathematical reasoning in itself can provide some sort of automatic access to a well-founded ontology. As Huygens, Nieuwentijt, Newton and 's Gravesande well knew, such an ontology requires that full use should be made of the resources provided by conventional signs, random experience and inadequate inference in developing mathematical insight and carrying out successful experimental work. The meticulous attention Hemsterhuis pays to developing his geometrical exposition of art-forms with reference to carefully arranged and clearly described experimental work, has therefore to be regarded as a very important aspect of his general criticism of Spinozism. It also provides the key to understanding the apparently consequential manner in which he reacted to the diverse ways in which Spinozism was being interpreted by Herder, Goethe, Lessing and Jacobi during the 1780s.

The definition of beauty provided in the letter is probably the best-known feature of the work. It rests on the experimentally verified axiom that: 'it is that of which the soul is able to form an idea in the shortest space of time which it deems to be most beautiful', is developed into the corollary that: 'it is natural for the soul to will a large number of ideas in the shortest space of time', and is finally formulated in the general proposition that: 'beauty in all the arts is that which necessarily yields the greatest possible number of ideas in the shortest possible space of time.'

This was revolutionary not only because it implied that nature in itself is aesthetically neutral, that we only experience it as being beautiful on account of our own artistic perceptiveness, but because it was a definition or theory based predominantly upon concrete and specific experimentation. Just as Newton had based his natural philosophy and his optics upon experimental investigations, so Hemsterhuis was now drawing
general conclusions from the ways in which specific persons react to vases, sculptures and sketches. The inner world of the human mind, man's longings and the search for beauty, were being opened up to rational enquiry by a scientific method which was only to come into its own in the field over a century later, when Fechner embarked on his experimental work in psychology and aesthetics.

Although Hemsterhuis developed his ideas on beauty within the general framework of the classic concept of mimesis or imitation, he transformed it by psychologizing it. The imitation and enhancing of nature are constantly being related back to the perceiving observer. He begins his consideration of enhancement by describing the ways in which children perceive and draw natural objects. His further investigations made him aware of the extent to which our experience of beauty depends upon the amount of time required for responding to a work of art. We have a preference for concentrated and well-circumscribed forms, fluent and easy outlines, because it takes us less time to observe them well. We find it difficult or even impossible to take in certain baroque forms in a comparably short period of time. Working on this aspect of visual reduction by means of certain experiments, he came to the conclusion that the soul is averse to empirical time and longs for an eternal duration, that it has an ineradicable appetite for immediacy.

In order to get a rounded picture of what happens in the mind when an art-object is being observed, Hemsterhuis also investigates the process of artistic production. He imagines Raphael conceiving the idea of painting Venus, of reproducing the immediacy of this inner image through a work of art to which the soul of the observer will respond instantaneously. He maintains that although an eroticizing sculpture such as the Venus de' Medici only arouses a response through the body, this aspect of artistic practice also has to be psychologized. It is therefore by paying attention to artistic practice in general that Hemsterhuis works out the full implications of his theory. He suggests, for example, that in order to teach students how to produce a representation of a wholly sound and purely inward idea, they should be blindfold when they first sketch it.

Although Hemsterhuis formulated his definition of beauty in mathematical terms, using geometry and quantification in order to rationalise the aesthetic feelings aroused, he did not follow Leibniz and the contemporary German school in attempting to reduce aesthetic experience to numbers. His main contribution to art-history consisted in his use of the subsequently very popular widely-used binary stylistic approach, which in the form in which he initiated it investigates the sense of beauty by showing two different drawings of vases to two persons, one educated the other not. The subsequent use of this approach, by Wölfflin for example, can be quite clearly traced back to the influence of Hemsterhuis.

In Hemsterhuis's definition of beauty the quantity of ideas is linked to the space of time, time being intrinsic to his concept of the intensity of ideas. In his analysis of the effects produced by his sketched vases, he draws a distinction between the visible line as an optical datum and as a representative sign. By doing so, he abstracts from and objectifies the art-object in a wholly unprecedented manner. The conclusion he draws is that we have a preference for an art-object which exhibits a minimal form while eli-
citing a maximum of ideas, and this in its turn lends support to his metaphysical conviction that the soul by its very nature desires the maximum of possible ideas in the shortest space of time.

It was this metaphysical principle which enabled him to provide an original explanation for such diverse phenomena as the differences between Dutch and Italian historical painting, the nature of the sketch, the use of ornaments. In the thesis I show that in respect of sketching and ornaments, Hemsterhuis's explanations not only foreshadow philosophical statements made subsequently by Kant and Moritz, but that they can also help to clarify various issues in modern art-theory. I do this by analysing not only Hemsterhuis's text, but also his vignettes, which tend to reveal that our sense of beauty is nearly always tinged or contaminated by eroticism. Although it was quite clearly one of his objectives to bring this out, he also attempts to distract attention from more purely sexual matters in order to concentrate as exclusively as possible upon the purity of the form. This is why in his writings he refers so frequently to the outlines and contours of his drawings, and why he had such a lifelong interest in using vase-models in his experimentation. Although such models were asexual, they were also, as he observes, not simply geometrical forms but works of art, the most basic shapes capable of arousing our sense of beauty. This fascination for vases can be related to such contemporary developments as the founding of the Wedgwood factory at Burslem, the earliest industrial production of such art-objects.

Part two is concerned with various aspects of *Form*, with the inter-connections between sculpture and philosophy. Hemsterhuis regarded sculpture as the most enlightened form of art, and since he was first and foremost a philosopher involved in expounding the significance of sculpture in its systematic context, it is essential that attention should be paid to the ways in which his philosophy and his artistic sensibility interrelate in this particular field. I do this not by simply concentrating upon general principles, but by dealing in detail with three concrete instances of Hemsterhuis's aesthetic involvement and allowing my treatment of subsidiary issues to arise in context.

His design for a gold medallion due to be struck for a particular commemoration provides a good illustration of what he regarded as the realisation of *simple beauty*. The severely classical image of a woman's head, executed in fine, simple, fluent lines, is enhanced by the contrast of an allegorical and baroque setting. The extreme simplicity of the central visual statement is further intensified by its contrasting so sharply with the lettering around the edge, for in his view images and words should set one another off and not be allowed to mingle. The medallion is indeed a concrete realisation of his general and abstract definition of simple beauty, its design being the precise fulfilment of his ideas.

Hemsterhuis maintained that both psychologically and historically, imitation based on touch precedes that based on sight, it being through touch that man has his most immediate contact with things. The touch involved in sculpture must therefore have preceded the development of the very abstract idea of a contour. This led him to reject the myth given currency by Pliny and revived during the eighteenth century, that it was the potter Dibutades who had invented drawing. Since architecture could only have come into existence after sculpture and drawing, the idea that sketching had ori-
ginated in the shadow of the profile of the departing warrior on the wall of the building was unacceptably anachronistic. Architecture is to be understood as a second skin or shell, and in working out the implications of this idea Hemsterhuis anticipates certain nineteenth-century conceptions of the difference between structure and ornament. Although he is dissatisfied with traditional explanations of the origin of architectural ornamentation and refuses to regard them as permanent truths, he does accept the three classical Grecian orders as the pillars of his general philosophical standpoint: Doric as the symbol of history, Ionic as that of philosophy, Corinthian as the most perfect, the symbol of poetry. As was always the case with Hemsterhuis, poetic reasoning, strongly associated as it is with feeling, remained the summit of human activity.

Consideration of the medallion makes us aware of the importance Hemsterhuis attached to the realisation of his aesthetic ideas in concrete design and practice. In order to instruct Princess Gallitzin in the drawing of his beloved essentialist line, he developed certain techniques facilitating the execution of this simple contour. These techniques make it evident that his approach was essentially tactile, and in order to contextualize and analyse his methods, some attention is paid to such issues as the Molyneux problem and Herder’s views on sculpture. It is shown that his view of the senses fits in well with the general tradition of empirical epistemology. It also becomes evident, however, that in certain respects his views are original and aesthetically important. It is evident from the artistic use he makes of his own synaesthetic sensations of colour, for example, that he had hit upon what was evidently a new subjective experience of bodily events.

Hemsterhuis also deals with the relationship between touch and sculpture in his dialogue Simon, which he wrote and revised between the autumn of 1779 and the spring of 1783, but which was only published, and in an imperfect form, in 1792. Here he discusses the significance of touch not only in the creation of sculpture, but also in the manner in which we respond to it, bringing out the complementarity of touch and vision, and showing how this gives rise to the contour and to our experience of sculpture as a complex whole. This ushers in the proposition that sculpture is an intensified and more complete way of seeing things, and the conclusion that it is therefore the summit or climax of all visual art. It is therefore the art not of seeming but of being, its subject matter being less important than its purely perceptual qualities. Form is therefore taken to be the essence of art, and sculpture is seen as providing the model for the wider concerns of philosophy as such.

In respect of the physics of light and colours, Hemsterhuis was an orthodox Newtonian. He had a lifelong interest in the working of the eyes in insects, animals and men, however, and like so many others at the time he was therefore led on from ordinary Newtonian physics into considering the extremely complex issues raised by the perception of light and colours. In his evaluation of the sketch he stresses the importance of the mind in co-ordinating and completing the raw material of optical perception. Throughout his writings on the subject he emphasises time and again that without the correcting qualities of the soul, we would be unable to see things clearly and distinctly. It was partly as a result of his experiments with the spontaneous synthesising brought about by the soul that he was led to reject the idea that it is simply
a passive *camera obscura*, devoid of human content. Just as the full three-dimensionality of sculpture makes it the model for the mature comprehensiveness of philosophy, so the soul’s multifaceted view of the world, by absorbing into itself the two-dimensionality of mere picturing, provides the broad basis for aesthetic creativeness. Within this general scheme of things, Diderot’s notion of connections finds its place as a purely subject-related element.

Hemsterhuis’s design for the medallion is neo-classical, and can be related to the linear purism of David, Humbert de Superville and Cozens. His conception of purity of line, which he regarded as being essentially sculptural, led him on into developing the influential idea, taken up among others by Schlegel, that Greek culture as a whole may be regarded as essentially sculptural, just as that of modern times may be regarded as essentially pictorial. When we compare the basic aesthetic ideas embodied in Hemsterhuis’s design with those expressed in Cozens’ *Simple Beauty*, it becomes clear that they are indeed highly condensed and essential generalisations, extracted from the concrete artistic activities of his age. The use Schlegel made of these ideas in elucidating Flaxman’s graphical abstractions bears out this point, for it was only by referring specifically to the *Lettre sur la Sculpture* that he was able to explain the unprecedented reductiveness of these visual forms.

In the second section of part two I focus on the conception of the *passions* apparent in Hemsterhuis’s assessment of the famous Laocoön group. In his view, the visual unity of the group is disrupted by the display of fear, anguish and terror. Distinct outlines are disturbed and distorted by passion, so that the subject matter is more suitable for painting than sculpture. This central judgement leads on to the drawing of certain distinctions between the two visual arts and poetry, – pure sculpture is essentially a matter of form and is passionless, pure poetry conveys passions and activity, painting is essentially impure, since it mixes the characteristics of the other two. In this respect Hemsterhuis’s thought therefore differs radically from that of Winckelmann and Lessing, who set the highest value on the Laocoön group, mainly because they were primarily concerned with its literary and symbolic significance. Hemsterhuis saw the moral essence of Laocoön as a matter of tactile and visual form. He took it to be an incongruously pictorial sculpture, and as is apparent from the judgement of Von Ramdohr (1787), the point he had made did not go unnoticed.

Hemsterhuis’s view of the passions is based on a general conception of psychology and a critical attitude to social conventions. In his dialogue *Simon* he takes as his starting-point a fictitious sculpture in which the passions are veiled, and proceeds to demonstrate that they are also obscured when expressed through the body. It is only the images of the child which express the inner self in a transparent manner. In his *Lettre sur l’Homme* he maintains that natural signs have been divorced from their true and original meanings by art and usage, that words and gestures are no longer the immediate outcome of the ideas from which they originate. The outward signs of inner passions have been veiled and corrupted. Sculpture has had to find its own mode of expression by leaving behind all obscured attitudes and signs. It is this point which enabled Hemsterhuis to pass judgement on Diderot’s imagination. Once Hemsterhuis
had convinced him of the validity of this sign-theory, Diderot became sculpturized so to speak by the compelling logic of its implications.

It is hardly surprising, therefore, that Hemsterhuis should also have criticised the then popular science of physiognomy. In his analysis of Lavater's work he makes it clear that he doubts whether the inner qualities of an individual always find a fixed expression in the outer appearance of the body. In the art-theory of eighteenth-century France the expression of the passions became a matter of central concern, and an analyst of the literature makes it clear that as the century progressed the issues at stake became increasingly problematic. The neo-classicist painter David, for example, finally decided that there was no point in attempting to express the complex inner states of individuals, and turned his attention to working out an entirely new pictorial language. Although Winckelmann and Lessing had already tend to this view, it was Hemsterhuis who first developed a clear theory concerning simplicity of form and took an uncompromisingly firm line on the marginalizing of unreadable passion. In this connection, David's dead hero Marat is probably the best-known example of the intermingling of classical form and modern ideas, and since it was Hemsterhuis who first maintained that the true relationship between inner self and outer appearance is evident only in the innocence of the child and the mien of the recently deceased, it was in his work that David's creation found its clearest theoretical justification. It should not be forgotten, moreover, that it was this marginalizing of the passions in art and theory which made possible the abstract sign-system of Humbert de Superville.

In the third section of part two I explore the implications of the fact that Hemsterhuis's idea of beauty is based on the concept of unity in diversity, a general principle which is also central to the importance he attaches to desire and his view of the sublime. Although the main body of the section is concerned with a detailed analysis of a letter he wrote to a friend concerning a trip to Germany during the course of which he visited various art-galleries, I also take into consideration his Lettre sur les Désirs (1770), which he wrote as a sequel to Lettre sur la Sculpture.

In his Lettre sur les Désirs Hemsterhuis distinguishes between bodily and spiritual union and goes on to deal with the ways in which they interrelate. Spinoza had attempted something similar in his Ethics, in which he begins with an exposition of God, proceeds to equate God with nature, and concludes with a meditation on the restraining of lust and the blessedness accruing from man's love of God. In Hemsterhuis work, however, the beginning is made with man, and more particularly with man aware of his limitations and imperfections and therefore motivated by the desire to overcome them. Art is therefore to be seen as one of the means enabling man to surmount the restrictions of his material context, heighten and enhance the immaterial aspect of his soul.

Hemsterhuis's conception of the sublime is different from that of Burke and Kant in that he regards it as the ultimate form of beauty. It has to be felt rather than understood, although it is certainly intellectually assessable. It can never be hideous, ominous or fearsome. In its broadest significance it is worthily prefigured in the tactile quality of sculptural creation and takes up into itself every aspect of our aesthetic sensibility.
Consideration of Hemsterhuis's reaction to various art-collections provides an opportunity for discussing his classification of the arts, the general principles he employed in unifying the immense diversity of artistic creation. He is in fact inconsistent in his terminology, referring seemingly at random to the fine and the liberal arts, refusing to draw any rigid distinction between the arts and the sciences, and therefore flying in the face of much of what was then regarded as progressive work in the field. To some extent this was due to his conviction that a fundamentally poetic approach is as important in the sciences as it is in the arts, and that genuine progress, in any field is impossible without it. He was also convinced that all souls are driven by a constant preoccupation with coition, an essentially unbridled desire to be constantly fertilised, and that it is the pervasiveness of this propensity which gives birth to the arts and sciences, be they Dionysian or Apollinian. Hemsterhuis, like Goethe, was of the opinion that artists should be provided in advance with fitting themes, in order to avoid bad art and encourage what is truly worthwhile.

In Hemsterhuis's view an art-object is to some extent ambiguous on account of its imperfection in respect of a natural object. It is, however, its very imperfection which makes it a worthy expression of man's desires, — hence Pygmalion's aversion to being transformed into stone, his desire for a living goddess. It is here that we see the genuine philosophical significance of a work of art, — on account of its essential duality it ought at least to be unequivocal, to approach as near as possible to the perfection of sculpture.

Part three is concerned with Development or the future of art, and opens with a discussion of Hemsterhuis's conception of space, basic as this is to all sculpture. He requires in general that a sculpture should give more pleasure when viewed from a distance than when scrutinised at close quarters, for it is then that its form rather than its subject matter comes into prominence. This requirement is also justified by stressing the three-dimensionality of the art, and more particularly by exploring the characteristics of the serpentine. The great advantage of this structural form is that it provides perception with the optimum experience of spatial continuity, and, therefore, with the fullest possible representation of diversity in unity. Hogarth had also noticed the way in which the serpentine brings out the multilateral quality or multifocality of sculpture, so that he and Hemsterhuis may be regarded as the founding fathers of formalistic art, in so far as it developed out of this observation.

Hemsterhuis's conception of space, of the relationship between distance and the perception of unity, was revived during the nineteenth century in the influential theory of Hildebrand. He promulgated it in conjunction with a different view of history, however, and concentrated on the relief rather than the three-dimensionality of the statue. It is worth noting, moreover, that the way in which Hemsterhuis's theorising involves the combining of the serpentine with desire finds a perfect embodiment in Canova's Amor and Psyche.

The most influential aspect of Hemsterhuis's conception of time is the way in which it brings together the sculptural nature of the Greek view with the pictorial nature of its modern counterpart. At first sight this might appear to be merely another eighteenth-century instance of the drawing of such parallels. When examined more clo-
sely, however, it can be seen as the use of an old concept in order to create a new one, the objective being the future synthesis of the two cultures. In order to grasp the signification of this we have to take into consideration Hemsterhuis’s very specific view of the human mind’s historical development. He is not simply thinking in terms of the traditional cyclical model, but of an elliptical variation of it drawn from Keplerian cosmology. As he conceives of human history, the essentially ethical culture of the Greeks and the predominantly scientific culture of modern times, both of them in one way or the other one-sided, each with its own focus, are revolving in ellipses around perfection. The historical culture of the Greeks can never return, however, and modern culture lacks sculptural unity. Unlike Winckelmann Hemsterhuis does not mourn the irrevocable passing of Greece, since he sees the ultimate resolution as a matter of the future rather than the past.

It is Hemsterhuis’s design for the so-called Boerhaave monument in Leiden which provides us with the most convenient insight into his view of the relationship between Greek and modern culture, the future of art, the nature of this ultimate resolution. The natural science of the moderns is to be integrated into a Greek-style culture of the mind, the pictorial approach of modern times is to find its place within an all-embracing sculptural manner of thinking, the flourishing of the Socratic method is to bring forth a new philosophy of nature.

Hemsterhuis’s view of feeling and morality comes into its own in his conception of the golden age, which is to be realised not by dwelling upon the past but by developing into the future. In the magnificent dialogue he devoted to this subject (Alexis I, 1787) he transposes his ideas on ideal sculpture onto society and culture as a whole, picturing a comprehensive state of higher harmony in which art and beauty will no longer constitute the pinacles of human achievement.

Although Hemsterhuis sees the duality of body and soul as duplicated in the differences between the sexes, his general view of the soul is that it is essentially hermaphroditic. As we have seen, this preoccupation with sexual neutrality is also apparent in the use he makes of the asexuality of vases in developing his conception of the ideal sculpture. He is of the opinion that it is mankind in general who longs for unification with the object of desire, that a thorough analysis of desires will always bring to light the universal equality and sameness of humankind. Herder maintained that this emphasis upon desire rather than love resulted in an unwarranted downgrading of individuality, but Hemsterhuis never abandoned the view that although historical circumstances do indeed create particular differences, philosophical insight will always reveal the underlying uniformity, that in the long-run sexual and aesthetic neutrality, art, poetry and philosophy will resolve all differences.

In the Epilogue I survey the manner in which Hemsterhuis’s aesthetic ideas permeate his general philosophy as well as the way in which his philosophical principles pervade his aesthetics. The Lettre sur la Sculpture can be read as a sketch of the whole philosophical architectonic, which takes up into itself not only the age-old problems concerning the nature of knowledge but also the modern problems concerning a new human order. His ideas on the perception of time, the desired minimisation of empirical time in aesthetic experience, are certainly to be seen as an anticipation of the
modernist concept of instantaneity, which could only have been formulated once perceptual time had been established as a factor in aesthetic appreciation.

Hemsterhuis's aesthetics do indeed throw a very special light on the development of modern art and the emergence of modern times. It is, moreover, a matter of no small significance that the ideas of both Spinoza and Hemsterhuis should have played such a central role in the fusing of romanticism and modernism which took place during the closing decades of the eighteenth century.