

Henk Visch's Sculptures Don't Lie



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[INGEBOURG WALINGA]

Henk Visch (born 1950) makes drawings and graphic art, writes texts and poems and teaches at several art academies. He is however primarily known as a sculptor. Many of his works are to be found in public places, in the Netherlands but also elsewhere: for instance, in Canada, China and Germany. From his poetic, introverted works one would expect a somewhat retiring artist. But Henk Visch is international in outlook and extremely active and enterprising. He studied at the Royal Academy of Fine Arts and Design in Den Bosch and did not decide to concentrate mainly on sculpture until some years later. As he tells it, he took this decision in New York, the city that inspired him with the desire to involve himself intensely in reality. He decided to make sculptures in order *'to report on his presence in the world'*. Let's see how he does that. We'll start in the north of the Netherlands, in Groningen where I live, continue on our way through the pictures in a children's book, travel on to China and return via his weekly contribution to one of the big Dutch newspapers.

Secret life in a public body

Every time I cycle home after work, I see him. I turn the corner, let my eyes stray across the water, and yes, there he is. He stays there as tranquil as always, on his hands and knees, that larger than life-size sculpture by Henk Visch. Reaching in front of him with both arms, his right index finger extended. It is reassuring to see him there every time. Sometimes accompanied by a couple of bicycles or a ship moored at the quay, other times quite content by himself on this semicircular end of the harbour with its grey cobble-stone paving. It's as if this spot was made for him, he fits in so well here.

Evidently he feels at home in all kinds of places. For this work, entitled *'Secret Life in a Public Body'*, was first seen on the roof of a multistorey car park in Arnhem in 2001. That was during an art exhibition that took place mainly in the large expanse of Sonsbeek Park, but also in the centre of town. Although his sculpture would not have been out of place amidst the greenery, in this bare, windy spot Henk Visch created a much more exciting environment. He lured the visitors upwards in search of his crouching figure, and his sculpture ousted the car from its place.



Two years later the Centre for Fine Arts in Groningen bought the work and – in the spirit of Sonsbeek – placed it on one of the lower floors of a multi-storey car park for five years. There too it exactly occupied a parking space and contrasted brilliantly with the shiny metal surrounding it. For the long term, though, the work deserved a more public location and also a friendlier environment. In early 2009 the search for a suitable location began, and the 530-kilo bronze sculpture was moved to various temporary homes. Anyone in the city could offer a location, as long as it was public and they gave a good reason for choosing it. One person who would have liked to put it in his back garden, wrote: *'In my garden the sculpture would feel more like a sculpture. His bronze skin could oxidise further without shiny cars laughing at him or running into him. He might suddenly stand up in my garden and tell me what is going on in that enormous skull of his - it may be teeming with stories. (...)'*

But that back garden wasn't public, so the statue moved temporarily to the front gardens of two other townspeople, then to the parking slot of a school principal and after that to a neighbourhood park. Only then did it arrive at the place where it now stands: a splendid sculpture in a splendid location.

Secret life in a public body,
Arnhem 2001.

Titles that go with the story.

It is amazing how attached you can become to such a simplified human form, neither man nor woman, without clothes and yet not naked. This androgynous presence exhibits hardly any detail - only that large skull, his marvelously shaped hands and the two eyes which are the only things painted onto the bronze. The title *'Secret Life in a Public Body'* refers to a secret life or to a secret that lives in a public body. Just what that secret is, Henk Visch is not saying. He often gives his works English titles, mostly short, evocative sentences like *'Grief has gone public'* or *'Don't wait for me in a borrowed home'*, or *'One world leads to another'*. Visch says about this: *'Foreign languages stimulate me to think in a new and unfamiliar way, because I don't understand the words yet. You are never quite at home in a foreign language. The sound of the words does often more to trigger my imagination than their exact meaning.'* The titles hardly ever literally describe what we see. They aren't explanations to help us understand the sculpture better. They are words with their own associations that go with the story of the sculpture. They send your thoughts about the work in a certain direction, without being over-insistent about it.

Secret life in a public body.
Groningen 2009.



Sculptures don't lie

Henk Visch's artworks are unique, one of a kind, and can't be confused with anyone else's. This is not to say that they bear much resemblance to each other. His oeuvre can be roughly divided into four groups: the drawings, the massive sculptures, the open string or wire sculptures and the characteristic – and best-known – abstracted human figures. His work seems to be a single story that comes in various forms. In his children's book *Sculptures Don't Lie* (Beelden

One World leads to Another.
Beijing 2008.



liegen niet), he himself writes: *'Works of art tell us stories in their own language - the language of images. It's a language that keeps on growing. Each new sculpture adds something to it. Not words or sentences, but thoughts and associations.'*

This children's book, produced in collaboration with the Kunsthall in Rotterdam, appeared in 2006 and sets out his view of sculpture in clear language and very personal terms. He describes the first large piece he ever saw as a child, holding his mother's hand, in Eindhoven, the town where he was born. He also includes a photo of his own first sculpture, a doll, made in 1979 when he was twenty-nine. He talks about all kinds of things that can be important when looking at sculpture, about scale and balance, Rodin, pyramids, gravity, Babylon and Pinocchio. His explanations to the children are educational, he takes them into his associative mental world, which is poetic and sometimes light-footed, but never, never light-minded. An example of a poetic list that ends with a serious observation, is his characterisation of public space: *'[...] squares and streets in cities, parks and train stations, highways, rivers and woodland paths, post offices and the Dutch Parliament, museums and the internet, airports, lakes, seas, the clouds and the sky, all that is public space. [...] Public space is everywhere where people can get together without an invitation: to play, talk, demonstrate or just do nothing. That's in the constitution and every new law takes it into account. Sculptures are part of this enormous and complicated public life.'* There. Then you know this is important. That's apparent, too, from the rather moralistic title of the book, that comes from a comparison with the story of Pinocchio: people can tell lies (lies with long noses!), but sculpture can't. Sculpture is what you see.

One World leads to another

Henk Visch was commissioned by the China Sculpture Institute to create a work that was placed in Beijing in 2008, when the Olympic Games were held there. This sculpture now has as its background the *'Bird's Nest'*, the Olympic Stadium designed by the Swiss architectural firm of Herzog and De Meuron. From a Chinese perspective the sculpture and the building are two strange European birds that have flown in as part of the Olympic festivities and the associated

Ptolomeus 1980.



Wooden Leg 1979.

Touching awkwardness

The figure's gravity-defying posture is a feature common to nearly all Henk Visch's human figures. True, he does also create figures that stand solidly on their two legs, but much more often their posture is indicative of tension or is totally unnatural. In the centre of Almere for example, a bronze man walks straight ahead among the shoppers, with his head turned to look back and one leg dragging behind him. There are also figures that stand on their heads or lean over at a dangerous angle, while sometimes the body or legs are elongated and often there are no arms. Strangely enough, this lack of anatomical correctness is not disturbing or off-putting but often looks very graceful. The invariably bald head, the lack of sexual features and the presence of only a few details make the figures easy to take in. Combined with a certain awkwardness of form, they come across as sympathetic. In their isolated state they are touching, but evoke no pity. In all their incompleteness they exude a great certainty, which was the artist's intention. They are forces which have been brought into balance.

Taken from life but timeless

Besides making sculptures, Henk Visch has always continued to draw. His expertise is apparent in the brushwork of his black ink and coloured drawings; he is clearly at ease in this field. His drawing style too uses relatively simple forms, and the same familiar figures populate this two-dimensional universe. Sometimes we clearly have a large main figure and a number of smaller background figures that are no more than silhouettes. The environment is evoked with minimal means: a wavy line for a road, two small trees to denote the landscape and the perspective. The grouping of the figures always suggests a story that seems to have been taken from life, but shows nothing typical of our own day and age. The figures are often unclothed and their attributes are timeless: a book, a hat, an umbrella. The stories, like the sculptures, can be interpreted in more than one way, you can flesh them out with your own associations. Look at several drawings in succession on Henk Visch's website and you become enraptured by the magical way he has drawn the situations, which may have a sombre undertone or by contrast, be light and comical.

Mirza. *de Volkskrant*



Mirza

In a category of their own are the drawings which until recently Henk Visch made every week for the Monday morning edition of *de Volkskrant*. Each Sunday he received a written column by Kader Abdolah, the Iranian-born writer who has a flamboyant style in Dutch and has recently translated the Koran. He then read Abdolah's personal commentary on a private event or on world politics or on a mixture of both. Sometimes the column would be ablaze with anger, at other times subdued and poetical. Henk Visch would then make a drawing that was related to the text, but could also stand on its own. The title of the combined text and drawing was *Mirza*, which is Persian for chronicler. When you asked people if they could see the connection between the two, their answers varied widely. One needed an associative mind to see the drawing as an illustration of or commentary on the written text. Abdolah was involved in the choice of an illustrator for his columns and he deliberately chose Visch because of his characteristic story-telling, timeless style. He has said, though this may just have been the generous comment of a colleague, that Visch captured the essence of his stories and therefore understood them, sometimes better than he did himself. Be that as it may, his drawings for *De Volkskrant* again illustrate Henk Visch's strengths: his rich associative imagery, his intimate relationship with the written word and his need to report on his presence in the world, preferably to a large audience. ■

