

Endless touching: Herder and sculpture

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«Die Bildnerei ist Wahrheit, die Malerei Traum».
Herder, *Plastik*.

«Pour s'assurer, par le toucher, de l'existence et de la figure des objets, il n'est pas nécessaire de voir, pourquoi faudrait-il toucher, pour s'assurer des mêmes choses par la vue?»

Diderot, *Lettre sur les aveugles*

The relationship between the hand and the eye and thus between touch and sight is the mark of a founding instability; an instability, it can be argued that accompanies the history of aesthetics. Integral to that history is the attempt to control, or at the very least to assert control over that which is inherently unstable namely the domain of sensation¹. This is a state of affairs that accompanies the emergence of aesthetics and which finds its most exact formulation in the distinction between sensation and cognition. The relationship between hands and eyes needs to be situated, in the first instance, within that history. Here, however, by using Herder's *Plastik* as a point of orientation, eyes and hands will have a different presence, one which while acknowledging that history then attempts to reposition the distinction between the hand and the eye such that it is no longer held by the inherent structure at work within the differing versions of its founding formulation². Hence, another argument is needed. More is wanted than would have emerged from a simple counter positioning of eye and hand. The traditional hold on the way that opposition is understood must be loosened. The hand, though this will be equally true for the eye, can be opened up. The opening and the loosening will allow both the hand and the eye another possibility in which neither hand nor eye are defined

¹ Poulakos (2007) has provided an excellent survey on the relationship between aesthetics and rhetoric that indicates that what is at stake within the emergence of the aesthetic can be characterised in terms of an engagement with a founding instability.

² For a recent discussion of Herder's writings on sculpture within the history of a more general concern with sculpture see Goslee (1978): 201-203.

by their literal presence. The instability that characterises the aesthetic results, in the first instance, from the equation of sight and touch with their literal presence and then from the subsequent “need” to control sensation by repositioning the eye (and sight) beyond the literal whilst leaving sensation identical with its literal presence. Reworking both touch and sight involves a break with their original positioning³. Sight and touch therefore will always need to be more than their literal presence⁴. Only within such a setting can touch become another modality of seeing. What is needed is the *douceur* of the lover. A positioning arrived at for Diderot, in the *Lettre sur les aveugles* when the lover can «promener ses mains sur des charmes qu’il reconnaitrait» (Diderot [1749 (1992)]: 116). This recognition, of course, belongs to the hand. Hence, its intensity may be greater if the lover were actually blind. Even though the literal may have exerted a controlling influence, allowing for its abeyance, it can be argued, is to open up the possibility of an aesthetics – perhaps even an erotics – of the blind hand and hence a blind hand seeing; i.e. touching.

As a beginning it is vital to stay with the hand. What is it that the hand does? If the answer lies in touch, then there needs to be an additional question. When does the hand stop touching? The force of the question is found firstly in the evocation of the object. The material object, matter as skin or stone, for example, is that on which the hand alights. In addition to the centrality of matter there is the structure within which touch is to be understood. Asking the question – when does the touching stop? – is to locate matter, the work of materiality and the placing of the hand within time. In addition, it allows matter to become a locus of activity. In the move from the literal there is an accompanying transformation in how the object is understood. Touching takes place over time. Touching is timed. And yet, it should not be thought that seeing is other than timed. There is however another sense of time that is already at work in the way seeing is classically portrayed and thus touching, as a consequence of this portrayal, is understood. Within that formulation seeing becomes linked to a specific conception both of

³ There is therefore an affinity between this project and work of John Sallis. Sallis is also concerned rethink the project of a philosophy of art beyond the structures of the opposition between the sensible and the intelligible. See in this regard Sallis (2008): 74-105. Nonetheless, the argument developed in this interpretation of Herder goes in a different direction.

⁴ Robert Hopkins has provided an important philosophical engagement with the relationship between sight and touch. See Hopkins (2004). Nonetheless, despite the sensitivity of Hopkins details his concerns in this regard, his analysis remains essentially limited because he fails to note that what touch opens up – once it is no longer taken as identical with literal touch – is a possible transformation of what is understood by seeing and thus touching.

the moment and the singularity of the object. The *locus classicus* of such a conception is of course Descartes. It is not just the Cartesian conception of «clear and distinct perception» that is fundamental (Cfr Descartes [1996], vol. VIII: 21-22). Inherent within the Cartesian argument concerning perception – not the eye’s perception in any straightforward sense but the perception occasioned by the attention of an inner light, a light that pierces the perennial gloom of ignorance, defining ignorance therefore in terms of gloom and thus a type of enduring darkness that a lighting up will have overcome – is a positioning of matter in terms of timed presence. (Attesting thereby to the already present interarticulation of matter and time. Differing accounts of matter are always deployed within their own accompanying conception of time.)

Descartes, Diderot

When Descartes turns to matter, it is to matter’s problematic status. In the *Second Meditation* the problem posed by the ever-changing piece of wax, a piece freshly cut from within the hive, is its intrinsic capacity to change and modify; in other words, the instability within sensation’s object. The link between matter and an ineliminable fluidity, a fluidity that may allow potentiality to define substance rather than the solidity of a form defined by an empirical singularity, means that matter must overcome its reduction to mere material presence, i.e. to simple empirical presence, and be rearticulated in terms of extension (Cfr. Benjamin [2004, 2009a, 2010]). The wax is however still seen, touched and imagined. There needs to be therefore a different approach. The truth of the wax can only emerge in the wax’s differentiation from its having been identified with its empirical presence. Its identity is not the same as its empirical presence (while not denying that it is empirically present). The truth of the wax can only emerge when a different form of “consideration” occurs. Descartes writes, «*nudam considero*» (Descartes [1996], Vol. VII: 32). Descartes approved French translation is more emphatic, «*je la considere toute nue*». The emphasis coming from the addition of «*toute*» as an emphatic qualifier of the «*nue*» (Descartes [1996], vol. IX: 25). The nudity here is not the reduction to an essence. Nudity, in this context, is that which cannot be touched. Equally, it is that which is neither presented nor expressed by matter’s empirical presence. The separation of matter from the merely empirical allows, in the first instance, control over that which is given by sensation, what will become the aesthetic even though what will count as he aesthetic is yet to emerge at the time in which Descartes writes, and, in the sec-

ond, the truth of matter to be recovered.⁵ Truth is of course linked to cognition. Matter must fall beyond the hand and yet there must be that which is nonetheless still present. The wax is present such that there is an «I» who «sees», «touches» and «imagines» (Cfr. Descartes [1996], vol. VII: 31). As a result two forms of presence are introduced. The first pertains to mere matter. i.e. the reduction of matter to the empirical. The smell of the wax, its response to moving fingers as it warms, where the warmth is linked to fragrance and then to perceptible moisture. All of this the hand both feels and knows and yet, for Descartes, what the hand can never know is the quality of matter. Equally, the hand that knows has a similar status to the eye that sees immediately.

The limit of immediate vision is developed by Descartes in *La Dioptrique* in terms of an encounter with the blind. The limit, to reiterate the point noted above, is the moment of instability and thus the need to move from sensation to cognition. The question is not just «What do the blind know?» – more exactly the central question pertains to how the blind know. In the opening treatment of light, when light is explained in terms of a movement from the exterior to the interior by means of air and other «corps transparent», Descartes uses the example of those who are born blind to formulate his overall argument (Cfr. Descartes [1996], vol. VI: 84). The blind know the world via the use of a stick. The presence of objects in the world is transmitted by that encounter. Thus in Descartes' own terms, «on pourrait quasi dire qu'ils voient des mains» (Descartes [1996], vol. VI: 84) – note the addition of the «quasi». For the sighted light enters through the eyes. For the blind, on the other hand, a different relation to the world pertains. There is access, for the blind, to the world because the latter «passe vers sa main» (Descartes [1996], vol. VI: 84).

What is it that moves from the exterior to the interior? If the blind hand were to encounter edges and points and declare that what was encountered was a triangle, what is that has been encountered? What has been touched? What can the blind's hand know? All these questions pertain to the medium of knowledge and to timed presence. The blind hand encounters the world. There can be no doubt that the encounter occurs. The

⁵ This of course mirrors the argument that is worked out within the *Meditations* concerning the identity of self as “*res cogitans*”. The only way Descartes can solve the problem of what happens to the existence of the subject when it is not thinking– this is, after all, the problem inherent in locating the identity of the self within the formulation *cogito ergo sum* – is to assume that the ontologico-temporal nature of the “I” that is positioned within specific acts of thought – acts with finite duration and content – is radically distinct from a conception of the subject that is enduring and is thus “*res cogitans*”. It is not as though the subject as “*res cogitans*” could be anything other than that which is defined by thinking (cognition).

blind can feel and feel again in order to secure more information. However, its having been secured – the process – is then assured. What occurs is an encounter with an object. However, as the *image* is not identical with the object, then the question, as always, concerns how there can be movement from the reception of images, the encounter with objects and then the possibility that *l'ame* (the soul) can know. In the language of the *Meditations* what this means is that the possibility of «*mentis inspectio*»; i.e. an “inspection” by the mind (Cfr. Descartes [1996], vol. VI: 31 e Descartes [1996], vol. IX: 24). This is a capacity that is directed by the methodological imperatives given by «clear and distinct perception». Nonetheless, what is of significance is the assumption that there is a separation between an encounter with the world, whether it be with baton or eye, and the operation of the soul. (The soul it should be noted is the province of a knowing subject and not the province of the object.)

In *La Dioptrique* Descartes is explicit in regards to the limit of sensation. What has to be avoided is the supposition that «pour sentir, l'ame ait besoin de contempler quelques images qui soient envoyées par les objets jusques au cerveau» (Descartes [1996], vol. VI: 112).

To allow such a possibility would be to maintain instability as an ineliminable presence. The activity of the «soul» can be located therefore beyond a domain that is given by an opposition between literal sight and literal blindness. Both are limited in relation to the form of perception identified by Descartes as part of his response to Mersenne's objections to the positions advanced by Descartes in the *Second Meditation*. Fundamental to Descartes argument in his *Response*, as will be noted, is a form of immediacy. While it remains the case that «clear and distinct perception» is methodological and therefore takes place over time there is the claim that «as soon as» («aussitôt»/«statim») truth emerges, there is the immediate move – an immediacy presented in terms of the operation of nature – to belief and thus to judgment (Cfr. Descartes [1996], vol. VII: 144 e Descartes [1996], vol. IX: 113). The other, and interrelated form of immediacy, is found in the next line of the argument. Having claimed that the move to belief and thus certainty takes place immediately, the knowledge that is discovered and whose expression by a sign in which signifier and signified are coextensive is, as a result, a form of a knowledge characterized as much by what can be described as epistemological exhaustion as it is a form of absolutization. The absolute object of knowledge having been discovered means that «il n'y rien à chercher davantage» (Cfr. Descartes [1996], vol. VII: 144 e Descartes [1996], vol. IX: 113). This absolutization is presented in *Le Discours de la Méthode* in terms of the singularity and completeness of the truth as it

pertains to «the thing» (*la chose*) (Descartes [1996], vol. VI: 21)⁶. What is identified here in terms of absolutization is linked, of necessity, to questions of representation. While time figures, it is essential to note that the time that is figured is given within the finality of the sign. Signification and knowledge both allow for the finality of enclosure and thus completion. As will emerge the hand holds open the possibility that precludes the equation of judgment and completion.

If there is a move, one occurring with a necessary reciprocity, between hands and signs then it involves locating a discrepancy between the potential infinite of touch, in the first instance, and the conception of finitude exacted by the structure of the sign at work in the Cartesian system and which finds one of its most exact formulations in Arnauld, Nicole (1970) in the second⁷. The finality of the sign that is the mark of knowledge stems the infinite hand that continues to move over the object, moving but without knowing. The object is sensed, one may have a sense of the object perhaps even a feel for it, however the infinitude of touch must be stopped in the name of knowledge and thus with the completion of the sign. In other words, the potential instability that would seem to be inherent in touch (thus in sensation) needs to be controlled. The coextensivity of the signifier and the signified reiterates the temporal structure noted above in which there is an immediacy of relation between knowledge and belief and equally knowledge and judgment. The timed hand can only ever move. Knowledge, within a Cartesian frame of reference however, involves cessation and completion. At this precise point it becomes possible to reposition and thus rework what is taken to be a founding instability. There is another possibility for the potentiality within touch; a potentiality whose realization defers the hold of the opposition between sensation and cognition. Within such a setting what remains open, held open by the hand's potentiality, is a conception of touch, and therefore of matter and time that are able to resist their complete enclosure within the Cartesian system. This hand can move without knowing. There is

⁶ In this regards Descartes wrote that: «*n'yanat qu'une verité de chaque chose, quiconque la trouve sait autant qu'on peut savoir*». At work here is a conception of object ("thing" "*la chose*") that allows for its complete subordination to the projects of both epistemology and representation. While the conception of the object that is implicitly at work within Herder's *Plastik* is radically different, a critique of this aspect of Descartes' philosophical undertaking find its most eloquent expression in Bataille's discussion of Descartes in the formers *L'expérience intérieure*. Cfr. Bataille (1973): 123-126.

⁷ See in this regard the definition of the sign Arnauld, Nicole (1970): 80: «*Le signe enferme deux idées: l'une de la chose qui représente; l'autre de la chose représentée; sa nature consiste à exciter la seconde par la première*». See in addition Foucault (1966): 78-81.

therefore an opening in which what comes to the fore is not just the already present status of the touching hand but its presence within a reworking of the relationship between matter and time. An intimation of this possibility is clearly present in Diderot's *Lettre sur les aveugles*.

Diderot's work is not of interest simply because it takes up what could be described as a thematic of blindness and therefore of touch as opposed to sight. Rather, the significance of his work lies in its commitment to a form of philosophical materialism within which both sight and touch escape the axiomatic equation with forms of literal presence in the first instance and a temporality of immediacy in the second. There is an additional point that needs to be added. Diderot also incorporates an element that is an inevitable consequence once the identification of the material and the empirical has been overcome, i.e. the necessity to incorporate the immaterial as part of matter's presence. Perhaps the most direct way that the initial move noted above, namely undoing the definition of touch in terms of its literal presence, can be identified is in regards to the manner in which Diderot established the relationship between ideas and blindness. As will be noted ideas are connected to the timed hand. In a passage of central importance Diderot presents this position in the following terms:

Comment un aveugle-né se forme-t-il des idées des figures. Je crois que les mouvements de son corps, l'existence successive de sa main en plusieurs lieux, la sensation non interrompue d'un corps qui passé entre ses doigts, lui donnent la notion de direction (Diderot [1992]: 94).

While for Diderot any one born blind is deprived of the capacity to imagine since the imagination involves the use of colour, the passage still demands considerable attention not just because of the way the hand is positioned but because it is the same hand which, as Diderot argues earlier in the *Lettre*, judges beauty. The blind individual «judge de la beauté par le toucher» (Diderot [1992]: 90). The touching hand judges. Thus opening up the possibility that judgment is now a material practice no longer defined by immediacy. The move from immediacy to touch where the latter is now positioned in terms of judgment is the opening to mediacy and thus to a radically different conception of judgment. The set up created by the interrelationship of mediacy, touch and judgment has both an importantly different temporal structure as well as a different conception of the object. Neither the temporal structure nor the conception of object could be situated within a Cartesian formulation of subject/object relations nor, as significantly, could they be defined in terms of immediacy.

A hand touches a face. Beginning with the nose – either at the tip or to one side – it matters little, what counts is that the hand is moving. The hand slides. A movement,

which could be as much an inquiry, thus yielding the question – whose face is this? – as it is a caress and thus an encounter with skin demanding pleasure. The moving hand has an inherently ambiguous status. Moving from nose to cheek returning prior to tracing with finger tips extended the way the cheek will suddenly, though smoothly, become an ear. Perhaps the finger moves on discovering a change of texture, moving backwards and forwards at the point at which texture changes prior to allowing itself the discovery of what at first is a warm then moist opening which in opening up, perhaps beneath the finger, becomes the mouth. Diderot describes the same when writing of the *l'existence successive* of the hand. The hand cannot stop touching precisely because there is no point at which the touching should stop. Not only does this provide access to the way for the one born blind there emerges what for Diderot is the *notion de direction*. Equally, it is also clear that the direction in question is not from beginning to end. Rather direction is movement itself. Movement is inherently directional. Even the backward and forward movement that satisfies when the nose itches remains movement. Is it only for the blind – and this may indeed be Diderot's implicit conjecture – that the «skin» (*la peau*) is beautiful? Beauty now involves neither image nor representation. Unlike for Kant for whom beauty is a feeling of pleasure that accompanies, immediately, the presentation of an object, the capacity to register beauty's presence, for Diderot, may lie in the moving finger and thus in touching⁸. As Diderot notes in relation to the one born blind, «Il juge de la beauté par le toucher» (Diderot [1992]: 90). The skin in question therefore is not the exquisite pink skin elegantly captured by Chardin in his painting of the schoolmistress if that skin were thought to be no more than a surface, rather it is the skin under my fingers – my blind fingers – when they touch. This does, of course, open up the possibility of another approach to Chardin's painting. One already there in Diderot's own writings on Chardin and in which there is a fundamental transformation in how the "surface" is understood. The surface will have been animated site, infused with "spirit". For Diderot, as the line above suggests, beauty is felt. In being felt it is no longer

⁸ While cannot be argued for in this context the essential difference between Kant on the one hand and Herder and Diderot on the other is the latter's concern with the nature of the object and not with the subject's response to the presentation of an object. In regards to the specific claim concerning immediacy this can be understood in terms of the absence of the concept – where the concept's presence would be understood as that which mediated (determined) in advance claims about the object's beauty. To this end see the argumentation of §9 of the *Critique of the Power of Judgment*. Also the claim made in §6 that «the person making the judgment feels himself to be completely free (*frei*) with regard to the satisfaction he devotes to the object». The state of being "free" is another instance of a structure of immediacy.

a question of the subject's response to an object's presentation but of a reworking of the nature as well as the contents of the subject/object relation. The question of the finger is not foreign to Herder's concerns. Herder suggests were something to appear doubtful or contradictory to the «art student» then the student should make use of «the fingers of his inner sense [*den Finger seines inner Sinnes*] in order to discover that which he could not otherwise identify: the shape of the spirit within the form [*Gestalt des Geistes in dieser Form*]» (Herder [1978 (2002)]: 90).

As a prelude to a direct concern with Herder it is vital to note two important moments that occur in this passage. The first is the one away from a literalization of both the finger and touch. Hence the reference made, in the passage, to the «fingers of his inner sense». The second is the position of a relationship between «form» (*Form*) understood as material presence and «spirit» (*Geist*). The latter could be understood as much as a gesture to a form of idealism as it is to the presence of immateriality. The latter – the immaterial (named in this context as *Geist*) – emerges once there is a sustained attempt to effect a separation between materialism and empiricism. In other words, the conjecture, as has already been noted, is that once the material and the empirical have been separated then implicit within the work and as part of the object's material presence is an active quality that is inherently immaterial.

There is an important echo of such a possibility in Diderot. What is interesting is that Diderot, almost despite his commitment to differing forms of philosophical materialism, leaves open the space for what emerges as the ineliminability of the immaterial once there is a commitment to a form of materialism. To be precise, the immaterial occurs in the space provided by the severance of the equation of the material and the empirical. This is clear, not only in Diderot's treatment of painting within the *Essais sur la peinture*, it is also there in his work on specific painters. In regards to the latter, in writing about Chardin, he notes the following:

Chardin est entre la nature et l'art: il relègue les autres imitations au troisième rang. Il n'y a rien en lui qui sente la palette. C'est une harmonie au delà de laquelle on ne songe pas à désirer: elle serpente imperceptiblement dans sa composition, tout sous chaque partie de l'étendue de sa toile; c'est, comme les théologiens dissent de l'esprit, sensible dans le tout et secret en chaque point (Diderot [1994]: 495).

What is significant in this formulation is the recognition, and this despite the language in which it tries to find expression, of a quality that is always in excess of that which is there to be described and yet which is at work within what would have been described. The reference to «spirit» (*l'esprit*) is not to an externality and thus not to that

which in being external would have had a determining effect on both the quality as well as the identity of the object's internality. Spirit is a quality of the object. What is of significance here is the impossibility of any complete separation of «spirit» and the object's material presence. Its presence is «sensible» yet «secret». In other words, it is an immaterial force as part of matter, occasioning as a consequence a rethinking of matter as an already present site of activity. The move from Descartes to Diderot, one in which Herder can be located, is the repositioning of the «soul» from the subject to the object. It should go without saying that this repositioning has to be understood as an emphatic reconsideration of the aesthetic. A reconsideration in which the significant element is the emergence of the “object” as an entity defined in relation to modes of animation. With both Diderot, and as will be suggested Herder, and thus *pace* Kant, there is the move from the «form» of the object – i.e. the object's generalizable conditions of intuitability – as the basis of aesthetics to the object itself⁹. However, it is the object within an emergent materialism and thus not the object of mere sensation.

Herder

Written in the wake of Diderot's *Lettre*, Herder's *Plastik* (1778) is one of the first attempts to present a philosophical account of sculpture. More as a prelude than an introduction – that will occur in a moment – Herder's enterprise, perhaps its capacity for disruption can be noted in the way a relation to Greece is established. In a discussion of Anacreon's *Bathyllus*, a poetic enterprise concerned with the move from poetry to painting, Herder writes that «the Greek never conceived beauty other than in determinate form [*in bestimmter Form*]» (Herder [1778 (2002)]: 80). The reference to the al-

⁹ Hence there is the need to distinguish this position outlined here from the one presented by Kant in §15 of the *Critique of the Aesthetic Power of Judgment*. In that Section it is clear that a concern with the object is a philosophical impossibility for a judgement of taste. Judgments that evince such concerns – judgments in which “charm” and “emotion” play a role (cf §13), are judgments that allow for the object and are correspondingly not “pure judgments of taste”. Impossibility, in this context has to be understood within terms set by the relationship between the subject and the form of the object. Kant's position is presented in the following formulation of the aesthetic judgment: «an aesthetic judgment is of a unique kind and affords absolutely no cognition [*kein Erkenntnis*] (not even a confused one) of the object, which happens only in a logical judgment; while the former by contrast, relates, the representation by which an object is given solely to the subject, and does not bring our attention to any property of the object, but only the purposive form in the determination of the powers of representation that are occupied with it».

ready determined nature of “form” does not mean that there is the complete absence of any vestige of idealism in Herder. On one level it would seem as though the retention of terms such as “spirit”, “soul” and (and perhaps even “beauty”) defined Herder’s project as straightforwardly idealist. However, once it is recognized that “soul” and “spirit” retain their philosophical hold as that which animates and thus gives life to material presence, where the soul’s presence is defined in terms of internality rather than externality, then this opens up the possibility that both “soul” and “spirit” allows for their own radical reinterpretation. What is important is the philosophical space they identify. Thus it will be essential, following from what has already been noted in relation to Diderot, to return to what the concession of animate matter allows in terms of what it provides for another possibility within the history of aesthetics.

The retention of a version of idealism, a version that can be recast in terms of the relationship between the material and the immaterial, indicates that, in this instance, the problematic of vision that defines the way beauty is formulated in the Platonic Dialogues is, for Herder, no longer apposite as the basis for developing an understanding of painting and sculpture in the Hellenic period. The other element that is at play within such a setting is not just form, but the sense proper to form, namely touch. The disruptive claim concerning the quality of the already “determinate form” means that there cannot be for Herder a question of beauty as an end in itself. Nor, more exactly is it possible to abstract beauty from the specific determination marking its presence; i.e. the determinate presence of sculpture as opposed to poetry, or painting. It is as though Plato’s insistence that what needs to be pursued is “absolute beauty”, since it is that which accounts for the way a given particular is beautiful, has itself become impossible. The Platonic move is always to argue that while there are determinate beautiful things they attain that state due to the operation of the Beautiful. It functions as the cause. This self-referential universal would then become the object of philosophical study *par excellence* (Cfr. Benjamin [1987]). For Herder, “beauty” is a quality of the object. Moreover, it is a quality that does not depend upon Beauty’s externality.

Herder’s *Plastik* opens with a reference to Diderot. With Herder, in a sense following Diderot, the hand takes on a more complex configuratio (it will always need to be noted, albeit parenthetically, that there cannot be a history of either the hand or touch as though what is at work is the same in every instance¹⁰). Nonetheless, what has to be

¹⁰ Two instances of the many ways in which the history of touch and the history of the hand can be deployed see Gilman (1993) and Bickenbach (2003). Moreover, the history of both touch and the hand cannot escape having to consider the injunction within the history of Christianity i.e.

remembered is that the hand is timed. The claim here is that the overall project of Herder's text is announced in one of its opening moves. The opening is staged in relation to Diderot and specifically Diderot's preoccupation with the effect of cataract operations on the blind. The central question therefore is: With sight what do the once blind see? In relation to a question of this nature Herder begins in the following way.

What do these strange experiences teach us? Something that we ourselves could experience daily if we were to acknowledge that sight [*Gesicht*] reveals merely shapes, but touch [*Gefühl*] alone reveals bodies: that everything that has form is only known through the sense of touch [*nur durchs tastende Gefühl*] and that sight reveals only visible surfaces [*nur Fläche*] – moreover not the surfaces of bodies but solely surfaces exposed to light (Herder [1778 (2002)]: 35).

This positioning of the surface, as linked to the eye, sanctions an important development within philosophical writings on art (and within that positioning note they way in which what is "touched" is other than the literal "surface")¹¹. While both Kant and Hegel will allow for different treatments of painting as opposed to sculpture neither link the particularity of each to the operation of a different sense. In part this is the originality of Herder's initial approach. And yet it is subtler since it is only in terms of touch, and thus the centrality of the hand, that form and the relations between forms in painting can be understood. There has been a move therefore from the literal hand to giving the hand, and with it touch, the major role in any account of the operation of art's work. However, while in terms of experience this is of great significance, of equal importance, is the way there is a transformation of the object. The object that is seen is different, it will have to be argued, in terms of its ontological status from the one that is merely seen. Hence the need to see touching.

Touch must remain for Herder that which guarantees seeing. Precisely because seeing is bound up with surfaces it is for Herder linked to the dream since the latter is the surface with neither depth nor internal connection: «Sight gives us dreams, touch gives us truth» (Herder [1778 (2002)]: 90). Hence, Herder writes:

Pity the lover who gazes upon his beloved from a distance as if she were an image on a surface and for whom this suffices. Pity the sculptor of an Apollo or a Hercules who has never

Christ's words to Mary Magdalene, *noli me tangere* (John 20:17). The Latin invokes the touch in a far more emphatic way than the original Greek. It is the Latin that had the determining effect on the history of art. Diderot and Herder can be seen therefore as attempts to "desacralize" the art work through their insistence on a transformation of touch.

¹¹ I have taken up the question of the surface's problematization as it occurs in Walter Benjamin's early writings on art in Benjamin (2009b).

embraced the body of an Apollo, who has never touched even in a dream, the breast or the back of a Hercules. Truly from nothing there can arise only nothing: the ray of light touching nothing can never become the warm creative hand (Herder [1778 (2002)]: 42).

For Herder it is in relation to his treatment of sculpture that it becomes possible to return to the more general treatment of the philosophy of art. Sculpture is both an exceptional case and yet precisely in being exceptional it provides the measure in which it becomes possible to generalize. In terms of the strategy adopted by Herder in *Plastik* it is the «infinite sublime» – an engagement staged in relation to Job and Burke amongst others and yet reducible neither to the simply theological nor the merely physiological – that plays a central role. The *colossal* provides both the «origin» [*Ursprungs*] and the «essence» [*Wesen*] of sculpture (Cfr. Herder [1778 (2002)]: 93). Sculpture is presented not just in relation to its inherent spatiality but also in regards to its having an active quality; matter as dynamic. Being is acting out and what is acted out is the work's matter. Matter therefore is an activity. As such the work of matter (a state of affairs that incorporates work as matter) has to be rethought as always already dynamic. Hence Herder's remarkable claim that sculpture, «speaks to us as an act» [*als Tat zu uns spricht*] (Herder [1778 (2002)]: 80). Solidity had acquired a potential and consequently materiality now insists within a form of potentiality. It matters. It will be vital to return to this point. What it indicates, to reiterate the point already noted, is a transformation of the object occurring within the move towards the centrality of touch. As such, what is needed is another account of matter's presence. An account that links potentiality and materiality such that what is at work is both the presence of an immaterial force though equally a dynamic conception of matter (Cfr. Benjamin, Caygill [2009]). The co-presence of the two demands a shift on the level of nomenclature. The static connotations of "matter" need to cede their place to a term which attributes to the work of art a workful quality; as such matter becomes *mattering*¹².

¹² See Benjamin (2010). Here as part of a general engagement with the question of colour I argue that: «the ontology of art work – i.e. the being proper to art - is defined in terms of activity. The work of art works. It is a dynamic process that always has its own complex economies. The second is that meaning is always, and only, an after effect of the way matters works. As such, the working of matter is the precondition for the possibility of meaning. This aspect of a work can be understood as its *mattering*. *Mattering* as the work of matter is, within a materialist aesthetics, the *conditio sine qua non* for attributions of meaning. Moreover, to insist on *mattering* is both to maintain the centrality of matter thought as a locus of activity rather than a merely static event, while at the same time holding to the necessity of the particularity of a given work. The *mattering* of one work is always distinct from that of another».

Rather than the flat surface on which light is projected, sculpture captures and reflects light, holds it and passes it on. Captures it, for a face is bathed in light; moves it, as there is the casting of shadows. Light falls on a cheek – in part – in the movement across the face, a movement, which while marking the movement of the eye is one in which the eye is touching. The eye is becoming the hand. It is not just that the object brings a form of the infinite into play; defining sculpture in terms of an act locates the infinite as much in the object's mode of presentation as it does in the condition of a response. Art, taking sculpture as a type of paradigm, can as a condition of its being – the being of art – never be finished. The infinite sublime is not just the truth of sculpture. In enacting the unending it acts out the being of the art object: being as mattering. The detail here is essential since for Herder sublimity brings the «true image of Gods and heroes» into play (Herder [1778 (2002)]: 94). There is a need therefore to work through these formulations rather than take them as designating an already determined and structured field of inquiry. Hence, the reworking of Herder.

Herder starts his treatment of the infinite sublime by identifying sculpture as that which does not have a single point of orientation, rather it «explores in the dark» [*im Dunkel*] (Herder [1778 (2002)]: 93). Countering an aesthetics of light, an epistemology of illumination and an ontology of delimited singularity – one bearing, as has already been indicated, an important connection to the object of Cartesian “clear and distinct perception” – there is the productive condition of the dark; of touching *im Dunkel*. What is staged here does, of course, need to be understood as a form of blindness working beyond the hold of the literal. While the part of the argumentation that emerges at this point in the book's development returns to the general, if not more traditional, conceptions of the sublime, namely as that which is already in excess, Herder introduces an important difference. Rather than excess engendering, of necessity, a transcendental realm, in this context it is linked to another conception of the unending or infinite. Rather than the infinite as the non-representational as though all that was involved is a limit in relation to the comprehension of the object – this would of course be the position for Kant – for Herder what the infinite sets in play is fundamentally different state of affairs. For Herder the limit is given by the being of the object. The move from subject to object has been completed. The passage, in which this other infinite emerges, even though Herder does of course not present it in terms that underscore the centrality of the object, in lieu of the subject, is the following:

the hand never touches the entire object. It cannot grasp a form all at once, with the exception of the sphere, which is the form of stasis and contains perfection in itself. The hand can

rest on the sphere and the sphere in the hand. , with articulated form, the work of the hand is never complete [*nie zu Ende*]: it goes on feeling as it were indefinitely [*immer unendlich*]. (Herder [1778 (2002)]: 94)

The counter to Descartes' sense of closure is not at opening in which the claim that it would always be possible, to recall Descartes' language of "looking for" [*chercher*], to search out additional elements, could then be made. Such a response would be no more than a gloss on a hermeneutic project stemming from a preoccupation with meaning. A preoccupation that leaves the object untouched. It would not pertain to the object and would not be defined in terms of the relation that a transformation of the object's status would have demanded. Rather, difficult as it may be there is the need to hold to "obscurity" [*Dunkle*], and thus to the "night" [*Nacht*] (Herder [1778 (2002)]: 93). Neither term diminishes the object; indeed they get close to its truth. Neither terms obfuscates. They identify the condition of meaning. The night is the time of the always more; the time resisting an end, the time of a darkness in which the hand works endlessly. That on which the hand works cannot be mastered, the infinite stands in the way, stands almost as a between, such that the continuity of movement, the operation of the blind had uncovers more but preserves the site as one of continual uncovering. It is a continuity made possible by the "soul" though only on the condition that the presence of the soul is defined in terms of an operative, thus workful, sense of internality.

Herder's retention of the "soul" locates his work, as has already been indicated, within the history of idealism. However, it is that history that has to be reconsidered. This location does not involve clear distinctions. Idealism is at its most productive when it can be understood as asserting firstly the irreducibility of material presence to empirical presence and secondly the co-presence of the immaterial and the material as constitutive of an object. Hence there will be an important distinction between the ideal found, for example in Plato and Goethe for whom that which is external to particulars ("forms" and "*Ur-phenomena*") have a causal relation to the identity of particulars on the one hand, and the forms of idealism at work in both Hegel and Herder on the other¹³. While it occurs in different ways, in both instances the "ideal" is integral to the

¹³ Walter Benjamin's treatment of this aspect of Goethe's conception of the artwork, precisely because of the externality of the "*Ur-phenomena*", leads to Benjamin to conclude that such a conception makes art uncriticizable. And yet the move to criticism necessitates allowing the work a quality that cannot be equated with either description or commentary. The work of art will always be more. The limit of Goethe, for Benjamin is clear. In his formulation for Goethe art, «itself does not create the archetypes they rest prior to all created work , in that sphere of art where is not creation but nature» (Benjamin [1996]: 180).

work itself¹⁴. In the case of Herder, to reiterate the general points noted above, the irreducibility of matter to the empirical involves in the first instance the introduction of an immaterial presence as that which informs matter and secondly the interplay between the material and the immaterial accounts for the way in which the infinite is at work within Herder's conception of the art object. Within such a setting idealism acquires a different character. It becomes an account of the interplay between mediacy and immateriality. Eschewed by such a setting is what may be described as the counter-positioning of the immediate and the empirical (which is itself a position that is inextricably bound up with what has already been identified as the literalization of the eye and the hand.) In order to take this reworking of idealism a stage further there needs to be a return to both "spirit" and the "soul".

The inevitable concession concerning "spirit" noted in Diderot reappears in Herder. Herder describes the presence of the soul in ways that escape any quick identification of the soul with a form of transcendence where transcendence assumes both externality and causality. The soul is defined in terms of life and the animate. Herder's formulation is both deliberate and careful and takes the particularity of sculpture as its point of departure. Herder's claim is that, what «sculpture should create [...] are forms in which the living soul pervades the entire body [*einem edlen Körper durchhaucht*] (Herder [1778 (2002)]: 45 [modified translation]). As such art has the «task of representing the embodied soul [*Seele im Körper dazustellen*]» (Herder [1778 (2002)]: 45). It is in relation to this setting of work that it becomes to situate beauty; for Herder, «beauty [...] is always only the shining through of form, the sensible expression of perfection [*Schönheit ist nur*

¹⁴ The relationship between Hegel and Herder is an extremely fruitful area of inquiry. What matters is how the question of "soul" is to be understood. In this regard see Walsh (2008): 479-480. For an important statement of how that relation might be understood see Gjesdal (2006). Central to Gjesdal's characterization of the difference is the way that their differing philosophy's of history – the absence of teleology in Herder – means that works would have a different sense of expression (expression in relation to what has been called in the argument of this paper the "immaterial") and thus there would be a historically determined hierarchy within artworks: «the difference between Herder and Hegel is, in other words, not only that Herder does not turn Greek art into the ideal of art as such, but also that he takes no art-form to be the privileged or paradigmatic expression within the boundaries of Greek culture. There are no normative hierarchies among the periods, nor among the aesthetic forms of expression within a given, historical paradigm. No type of art manifests the essence of art as such, and to perceive tragedy as less perfect an art-form than sculpture (yet as more attuned to modern spirit) would simply not be an option for Herder» (Gjesdal [2006]: 26).

immer Durchschein Form, sinnlicher Ausdruck der Vollkommen] (Herder [1778 (2002)]: 78).

To begin to work through this complex of relations it is essential to note that what is central is Herder's insistence that the work of art is the work of matter – hence the work of art is its “act”. Accepting the link between work and “act” is to assume that the work of art *is* – “is” in the strong sense of exists, thus what is involved is a claim about the ontology of art work – in its being at work. Work therefore has an inherently actative dimension. To account for matter as work necessitates recourse to matter as dynamic. The work of matter is the ground of meaning. Attributions of meaning are therefore always the after effect of the work of matter. Indeed, whether it is recognized or not, work is the precondition for the attribution of meaning. The impossibility of an identification of meaning and finality cannot be explained in terms of relativity on the level of meaning. The contrary is the case. Meaning's lack of finality has its conditions of existence in a conception of object defined by the “unending”. This is Herder's point concerning the relationship between touch and the object: a relation in which there had been a transformation of its constitutive elements. As such questions of interpretation have to be re-defined in terms of the nature of the connection between the finitude of the interpretative decision and the work as itself defined by the potential infinite of matter, where matter is understood as always already the site of its own animation. (Matter as *matter-ing*.)

Herder's account of this set up has recourse to both “spirit” and the “soul”. However, the presence of the soul is not to be accounted for in terms of the latter's presence within the object that then allows for the possibility that the soul could have an existence and thus a possible history that is external to its having been objectified. This is the difference between Hegel and Schelling on the one hand and Herder on the other. And yet there are moments of equivocation. As part of a complex argument sculpture is taken as inherently allegorical because it involves the presentation of «one thing through another [*eins durch andere*]» (Herder [1778 (2002)]: 96). Indeed, Herder goes to suggest that sculpture as an instance of what he refers to as «*das bildende Kunst*» (which are the visual arts in general) is in a state of what he describes as “permanent allegory” precisely because sculptures «image the soul through the body [*sie bildet Seele durch Körper*]» (Herder [1778 (2002)]: 96 [mod. translation]). This needs to be interpreted however in light of the passage already noted in which it was argued that the “fingers” of “inner sense” discovered the «shape of the spirit within the form [*Gestalt des Geistes in dieser Form*]» (Herder [1778 (2002)]: 90). Both “soul” and “spirit” open up a concern

with “beauty”. There is an important set of interconnections. Soul pervades matters. It animates matter. Beauty becomes form’s shining. Beauty is not the form. It is its mode of being present; presenting as shining. Beauty is bound up with the inherently active nature of matter. Beauty becomes a quality of the object; a quality that shines. Shining has a genuine accord with matter’s animation and the soul’s pervasive presence.

While it is always possible to uncover those moments within *Plastik* within which more conventional understandings of the role of both “spirit” and “soul” can be discerned, hence the reference above to Herder’s equivocation, it is nonetheless still possible to insist on the centrality of the work of matter within Herder’s own position. Insisting on that work involves a return to touch. Touch, while bringing the opposition between sensation and cognition into play, do so on the basis that the conventional determinations of that opposition no longer play a determining role within the subject/object relation that characterises every philosophical concern with the work of art. Another philosophical project is announced. As emerged from the way in which touch figured in the writings of Descartes touch has a potentiality that could not have been stemmed by the move to the literalization of the either the hand or the eye. Once touch can be incorporated in ways that reposition both the nature of the subject and the object, as well as the content of their relation, a transformation in which references to the “soul” moves from the subject to the object, there is an accompanying transformation of the nature of the object¹⁵. The object becomes that which in resisting its reduction to the literal acquires a quality that announces the reduction’s impossibility. Touch, therefore, in introducing a temporal dimension that is not circumscribed by immediacy, in yielding a conception of the object in which its *matte*ring is central, stages different dimensions of the structure of thought that are essential to the development of a materialist philosophy of art.

¹⁵ See Zuckert (2009): «imaginative proprioceptive identification allows us, Herder suggests, to understand the expressiveness of the sculpture, the way in which the comportment of the sculpture can express fitness, health, strength, well-being, emotional states, or tendencies to action, that is, the way in which this (represented) body is “ensouled,” “alive”, active» (Zuckert [2009]: 285). – She goes on to argue that this position can be understood in terms of a new conception of embodiment. The contention here is that it is the transformation of the conception of seeing that allows for the already present sense of embodied subjectivity.

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