

## ***Introduction***

In 1907, Edmund Husserl wrote to Hugo von Hofmannsthal:

The artist who ‘observes’ the world, in order to gain knowledge of nature and man for his own purposes, relates to it in a similar way as the phenomenologist. [...] When he observes the world, it becomes phenomenon for him, its existence is indifferent, just as to the philosopher (in the critique of reason). The difference is that the artist, unlike the philosopher, doesn’t attempt to found the “meaning” of the world-phenomenon and grasp it in concepts, but appropriates it intuitively, in order to gather, out of its plenitude, materials for the creation of aesthetic forms (Husserl 2009, 2).<sup>1</sup>

From its very beginnings, phenomenology has carefully treated art and aesthetic phenomena as a special sphere, depicting the fact of the appearance of things, and of the world, within its framework. The aesthetic attitude enables the phenomenal nature of an experience to be captured: ‘to be is to appear.’ At the same time, since the time of Husserl, phenomenological descriptions, as a result of corrections made by Martin Heidegger, Maurice Merleau-Ponty, and many others, began to account for not only objective but also existential and corporal dimensions. The description of ‘pure essences’ was perhaps not as interesting for artists and viewers of works of art as new ways to characterize aesthetic experience, taking into account the corporeal, affective, temporal, spatial, and cultural dimensions of art. In the work of some contemporary art theorists and artists one can find traces of the revolution represented by the discovery of the phenomenological method, as well as of the evolution through which it passed. Today, in the context of the emergence of new forms of art, such as performance art, installations, and video art, in the face of the changes that have occurred in thinking about architectural form and sculpture, in relation to the new languages of dance and new concepts of listening and responding to music, we are well aware that, following Heidegger, we should reject the notion that art ‘belongs in the domain of the pastry chef. Essentially it makes no difference whether the enjoyment of art serves to satisfy the refined taste of connoisseurs and aesthetes or serves for the moral elevation of the mind.’ Involvement in the world—which appears

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<sup>1</sup> Originally published in: Husserl 1994, 133–136.

to us in many forms and shapes of which artists attempt to make sense—is a common point of reference for contemporary phenomenologists as well as for those who, in contesting certain traditional theoretical assumptions, define themselves as post-phenomenologists.

The artist and the phenomenologist, therefore, turn out to be closely related to each other, for their attitude towards reality is similar: the sense of wonder at the world and, at the same time, selflessness in experiencing it and a particular attention paid to it. For this reason, the paths of phenomenology and art have repeatedly crossed ultimately leading to the 'aesthetic turn' in phenomenology, when the focus of phenomenological studies shifted towards art and art-related questions. The experience of a work of art becomes a paradigm of phenomenological experience, revealing its destructive power and, at the same time, its ephemeral nature. It is the work of art that truly reveals the paradoxical nature of the phenomenological experience as such, constantly oscillating between the weakness of subjectivity faced with what is presented or—as French phenomenologists put it—what is given to it, and its ability to create meaning.

What articles collected in this volume have in common is their authors' belief that phenomenology and its conceptual tools are still perfectly suitable for writing about art. For questions that phenomenology asks about art refer to the excess typical of any work of art, to its unique way of being that verges on the status of subjectivity. Furthermore, phenomenology needs a work of art as much as the work of art needs phenomenology. Hence the aesthetic vertigo of phenomenology: on the one hand, when referring to a work of art, phenomenology reveals its own foundations, which include questions of sensuality, appearance, corporal being in the world, intentionality or inexhaustibility of description; on the other hand, it shows its own limits that are shifted with each new transgression of art, when art becomes conceptual, uses the digital image, transforms into performance or site-specific. At such moments, phenomenologist's doubts about his/her own possibilities, his/her vocation, and even about what he/she sees, prove creative as—ultimately—they lead to the construction of new tools that allow the description of the discovered phenomena and the manner in which they appear.

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1. Husserl Edmund (2009), *Letter to Hofmannsthal*, trans. S. O. Wallenstein, *Site Magazin*, pp. 26–27.
2. Husserl Edmund (1994), *Husserliana, Dokuemnte, Briefwechsel*, Band 7: *Wiissenschaftlerkorrespondenz*, Dordrecht: Kluwer, pp. 133–136.