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The unbearable lightness of objects: Günter Figal's spatial aesthetics

Karam AbuSehly

English, Beni-Suef University and Freie Universität Berlin, Berlin, Germany

ABSTRACT

The main work of philosopher Günter Figal (1949–2024) was to undertake the continuation of hermeneutical philosophy after the deaths of its three major proponents: Heidegger, Gadamer, and Ricoeur. Figal's philosophical project combines both phenomenology and hermeneutics and presents the task of philosophy as being essentially hermeneutical. He also proposes that aesthetics is phenomenology, as nothing is more phenomenal than the work of art, which is out there to be interpreted. His contribution to aesthetics is generally based on his notions of the objectivity [*Gegenständlichkeit*] and spatiality of artworks. The objectivity of artworks makes obvious their spatiality, and space makes the objectness of the art object most apparent. Both objectivity and spatiality are also essential to the hermeneutics of art. Figal's contribution to aesthetics, however, is underexplored. The present study thus aims to undertake a conceptual analysis of Figal's contributions to aesthetics, especially his concepts of objectivity [*Gegenständlichkeit*] and spatiality of art. In so doing, the present study aims to present an account of Figal's aesthetics, highlighting its place in the German aesthetic tradition.

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Introduction

Günter Figal was, in the main, a philosopher who undertook the continuation of hermeneutical philosophy after the deaths of its major proponents: Heidegger, Gadamer, and Ricoeur. With Figal, hermeneutics was the core of philosophy, a philosophical tendency that finds the function of philosophy to be primordially hermeneutical, turning Gadamer's philosophical hermeneutics on its head. As instead of the Gadamerian notion that hermeneutics is philosophical, Figal argues that philosophy is in general hermeneutical, in the sense that its basic function is to interpret. For Figal, what we first encounter and what first stands over against us is the appearance of things. As such, philosophy, as a hermeneutical project, aligns itself with phenomenology. This in turn links hermeneutics to *exteriority*, a major concept in Figal's philosophical project. In this way, the preoccupation with exteriority, and the shift of focus of the hermeneutical task towards that which stands over against us, through appearance and self-showing, transfers "the question of understanding from an exegetical field to an ontological one, from the way we interpret texts to the way we understand the world" (Oliva 2011, 148). Figal understands his project, as Steven Crowell argues, as "bringing to completion Gadamer's displacement of transcendental by hermeneutic phenomenology" (2014, 121). The transcendental here is related to fixed grounds or foundations of understanding, in the very place of which Gadamer proposes history and language as dynamic horizons for understanding. The problems of these horizons, for Figal, is that they are reduced to self-understanding, which renders the object a self-image of the subject. In the words of Theodore George (2009, 904), Figal "promises a new approach to the philosophical study of hermeneutics … that would advance beyond Gadamer, Heidegger, and others in significant respect." This advancement comes in the form of linking the hermeneutical to the exterior, as anchor of reality, and, therefore, to factical life/the world itself as the hermeneutical space.

Figal's contributions to philosophy have, in general, received little attention. The volume *Die Gegenständlichkeit der Welt* [The Objectivity of the World] (Keiling et al. 2019), published on the occasion of Figal's 70th birthday, contains articles exploring and analyzing Figal's works. These articles address his ideas both theoretically and practically, especially through the way in which they approach literary texts, good design, freedom and space, the return of realism, and Kant's influence on Günter Figal's aesthetics ideas. Figal's concept of objectivity (*Gegenständlichkeit*) and his book, *Objectivity*, have been the concern of other separate studies. Daniel Dahlstrom (Dahlstrom 2014) presents a critical engagement with the concept of objectivity and that of freedom. Steven Crowell (2014) investigates Figal's concept of determination and analyzes his reading of

CONTACT Karam AbuSehly Karam.abusehly@fu-berlin.de; karamabusehly@art.bsu.edu.eg Department of English, Faculty of Arts, Beni-Suef University, Egypt

Heidegger in the light of such a concept. Freydberg (2012) focuses on the linguistic aspects of Figal's *Objectivity* book, especially on the concept of objectivity [*Gegenständlichkeit*] and its relation to the philosophy of language and on the Figal-Heidegger encounter concerning the issue of language. George (2012) comparatively analyzes the implementation of life as correlation, dependent on our relation to things, in both Figal and Heidegger. George (2011) explores Figal's view of language as showing and openness, in the latter's *Objectivity* book, taking this as a debate Figal stages with Derrida, with the central notion of supplementation that allows room for, unlike Derrida, fixation of signification. George (2009) offers a survey of the main ideas contained in Figal's hermeneutics as proposed in his *Objectivity* book.

Although Figal puts aesthetics at the center of philosophical inquiry, his contributions to aesthetics are vastly understudied. The present study, therefore, attempts to approach this area in Figal's thought. To do so, the study adopts a conceptual approach, with a special focus on the spatiality and objectivity of art. This is because Figal has a conceptual apparatus comprising renovation, redefinition, and modification of concepts, in order for him, as Theodore George argues, to achieve a breakthrough (2009, 904). The study also seeks to explore what can be termed as Figal's spatial aesthetics.

Günter Figal and the objectivity of artworks

> In hermeneutical experience, one is concerned with something that one himself is not, with something that stands over against [*entgegensteht*], and, because of this, places a demand. Hermeneutical experience is the experience of the objective [*das Gegenständliche*]—of what is there in such a way that one may come into accord with it and that yet never fully comes out in any attempt to reach accord. Because of this, the objective must stand as the hermeneutical matter at the center of hermeneutical thought. Objectivity [*Gegenständlichkeit*] is the principal matter of the hermeneutical approach to philosophy. (Figal and George 2011, 2)

Günter Figal's project aims to bring realism and the objective back to the philosophical stage. He believes that "modern philosophy as a whole appears as a large-scale enterprise of de-objectivation" (2011, 108). For him, the objective has been marginalized by the notions of dynamism and fluidity, where nothing is "steadfast, standing on its own," and by withdrawal into language games (2011, 108). The idea that man is the measure of all things reduces the objective to the discursive and to the consciousness of the beholder. Figal, however, affirms that "beautiful things, along with their constitution and design, can be a measure for human residence in the world" (2015c, 367).

When approaching Figal's philosophy, one should be aware of a translation problem with the focal concept of *Gegenständlichkeit*. The word is not the same as objectivity, although this is how it is rendered when translating the book into English: *Objectivity: The Hermeneutical and Philosophy* [*Gegenständlichkeit: Das Hermeneutische und die Philosophie*]. As German already has the word *Objektivität*, meaning objectivity, *Gegenständlichkeit* is to be understood as objectivity or objectiveness, as it refers more to the objective in its concrete character, or the objectness of objects, than to the abstract idea of being objective. This is the sense in which the translation of his core notion of *Gegenständlichkeit* as objectivity should be understood.

The objective, for Figal, is also marginalized by two important philosophical patterns: the dialectical pattern of Hegel and Marx and the phenomenological pattern of Husserl and Heidegger. In the dialectical pattern, the objective is seen as the spirit's own product; thus, it is there only to help the spirit actualize itself. Exteriority becomes mere exteriorization. The same applies to Marx, with his idea of living labor, which "is supposed to transpose its own social character into the exteriority of the 'world of goods' and to overcome its loss of self through the appropriation of production" (Figal and George 2011, 108). There is something of the self in the process of objective production, whether in the social character of the products or in the alienated subject who cannot be identified with the object.

In the phenomenological pattern, where both Husserl and Heidegger "wish to achieve freedom over and against science" (Figal and George 2011, 110), the objective is reduced to the immanence of consciousness. Science enframes the objective, transforming it to identifiable and measurable events. Everything is dealt with as a standing reserve ready to be used. This scientism, this objectifying approach, is a stumbling block between the objective and the inner experience. Both Husserl and Heidegger, in their critique of the theoretical, are keen to vitalize the inner experience of things and thus to keep a distance from the objective.

Figal proposes, one can safely argue, the transcendence of things, a transcendence that stands over against. As standing over against, things are objects; they are exterior to us. They have extra mental existence, and such extra mental existence is to be approached on its own terms. The objective directs our attention to what is not us, and so the subject is confronted with something other than itself and against itself. The objective opposes us, stands in the way, or "*im Gegen-stand*" as Figal writes, towards its grasping. "This allows what an object is," Figal argues, "to be expressed with clarity: not some arbitrary thing, but, rather, something *insofar as* it is over against" (2011, 107). In this way, the objective, or the

thing, "leaves the human being in referential relations that are due neither to the care of the self nor to one's own conduct" (2011, 114). These referential relations led Figal to reconsider correlation, and to pose the idea that correlation is not immanent in consciousness. As Theodore George explains:

> Figal … argues that correlation is precisely an exteriority that allows our references to things and the things themselves to belong to one another in the first place. Correlation is neither immanent to subjective consciousness nor one of the things that transcends us. Neither immanent nor transcendent, correlation is exterior, as the relation in virtue of which reference refers, and thing appears". George (2019, 67)

Correlation is an exteriority, for Figal, because our reference to something is a reference to a possibility the thing itself demonstrates. This reference then points at the thing's possibilities. Interpretation happens in this referentiality to that which is there to be interpreted. As that which is there is phenomenal, according to Figal, the reference "has to do justice to [its] phenomenality, and in doing so it will be guided by the intention to let the appearances be there. Such a reference will not just be stating but rather be eminently showing. What is shown is not just made known but confirmed in its appearance" (Figal 2014b, 19). All this is set into motion because of the objective character of objects, as things that stand "against" the subject. We realize the existence of things when they appear to us, as if out of the dark. When they appear, they obstruct, they stand in the way of our perception, as primordially objective.

This peculiar type of alterity of the objective, this "againstness," so to speak, of objects, must orient philosophical inquiry, eventually leading philosophy to be hermeneutical. The demand the objective places is thus a hermeneutical demand. The objective deserves interpretation, for the simple reason that it stands exterior to us, confronting us with some thing yet to be attained. For Figal, the hermeneutical experience is an experience of the objective (2011, 2). We interpret; therefore, we are in the world. This gives hermeneutics an ontological function, one related to life and to all that is: the world. Figal also argues that in the objects, "what is objective in the world and life are intensified" (2011, 118). To unlock this intensification, hermeneutics is tied to the objective. Understanding, interpretation, and objectivity all belong together, as Figal confirms (2011, 121). With Figal, hermeneutics is no longer an interest in the structure of understanding, but in the world, the objective.

This return of the object, through "hermeneutical rehabilitation," is of critical importance. It is a critique of Heidegger's pseudo-objective presence of *Dasein*. As calling the subject *Dasein* is not enough, for Figal, to be a claim for the objective. It is also a critique of Gadamer's "reservation against ultimate grounds and groundings," which in Figal's view "neglects what hermeneutics is supposed to be directed toward and, so, open for: the matters themselves" (George 2009, 905). Still, the return of the objective is a critique of Derrida's deconstruction and the slippery grounds of interpretation. Figal counters such neglect by stressing the objective, the exterior.

A major component in Figal's project is, therefore, to connect hermeneutics to philosophy, a connection that overcomes the restriction of hermeneutics to "a theory of understanding, communication, and historical consciousness" and moves the function of hermeneutics form an exegetical to an ontological one (Oliva 2011, 148). It becomes ontological in the sense that it is related to understanding the world as exterior to us. For Figal, the world becomes a hermeneutical space. Commenting on Figal's project, Hans Ruin writes that Figal argues "for a re-orientation of hermeneutic philosophy toward a *something*—an *etwas*—as the experience of an irreducible thing-hood" (2019, 99).

Objectivity does not mean, however, that interpretation exhausts the meaning of an object. This is because the idea of "standing over against" keeps the object exterior, to the extent that it "discloses itself only to a *sense of reference*" and consequently, interpretation "lives *in reference* to the exterior" (Figal and George 2011, 67). This makes Figal's version of hermeneutics referential rather than based on the enactment of meanings, where a meaning is determined by the hermeneutical experience. Interpretation in this sense is presentation (*Darstellung*); it is a presentation of possibilities. In interpretation, we show things as they show themselves, as language, in Figal's account, is showing. This showing is also presentation. As Figal writes, to understand something is "at the same time always to understand how it is given. One understands not only something, but rather, always also the relation of interpretation, that is, of presentation, and object. What one understands in this way is the structure of presentation" (2011, 121).

Aware that this understanding of the structure of presentation would lead to reflectiveness and that the object can, again, be reduced to what appears to consciousness, Figal proposes that we must "open up the structure of presentation," that is, "making it transparent for the context in which it belongs in order to consider it and put it into language based on this context" (2011, 122). Anchored in context, interpretation will not slip into mere narratives or discourses, and the focus will no longer be on the structure of presentation and its moments, but, rather, on the *self-showing* of these moments *in* their context. This self-showing makes these moments of the structure of presentation "phenomena." Here, Figal links hermeneutics to phenomenology in stating that the word phenomena "places the

discussion of the structure of presentation into a context that allows its philosophical status to be determined: The philosophical contemplation of the structure of presentation is phenomenology" (2011, 123). It is phenomenology because, for Figal, the hermeneutic experience is one of *showing*.

Figal's phenomenology of space

Figal's phenomenology, however, is different from Husserl's, where the exteriority and transcendence of the object are not reduced to the immanence of consciousness. Husserl's phenomenology is a phenomenology (self-showing) of space. Objective appearances are the most obvious realities. This makes phenomenal reality spatial, which in turn renders phenomenology a phenomenology of space. Discussing Heidegger's notion of "clearing" (*Lichtung*), a space where entities come to appear, Figal swiftly moves to his own notion of space. If "clearing," for Heidegger, makes Being most evident, then space, in Figal, makes the objective most evident. Space, for Figal, is the horizon for the understanding of objects. Space is where objects appear and show themselves. And if phenomenology is a phenomenology of the real, which makes it a realist phenomenology, it must also be spatial. The version of realism Figal champions is phenomenological realism and as such, that is, as a phenomenology of the real, it is a spatial phenomenology, where space is the "zone" of objective self-showing. In this way, the world, which is "life-world and thing-world in one, the totality of the epitome of experience and the epitome of what it is possible to experience," becomes, for Figal (2011, 152), a hermeneutical space, approached phenomenologically.

The fundamental significance of space in Figal's philosophy is further emphasized in his *Unscheinbarkeit: Der Raum der Phänomenologie* [Inconspicuousness: The Space of Phenomenology]. This book completes the trilogy that began with *Objectivity: The Hermeneutical and Philosophy* and *Aesthetics as Phenomenology: The Appearance of Things*. Space, which is the inconspicuous in Figal's account, serves as the spider's web that holds but nevertheless is not foregrounded. The inconspicuous space becomes the backbone of appearing (*Erscheinung*), creating a multiplicity of possibilities between what appears and what is inconspicuous. Such playfulness decenters the reflecting ego in favor of the world reflected upon. Space becomes the phenomenological foundation.

To pay attention to the appearance of things is to engage in an idealistic experience. To work against this notion, Figal emphasizes inconspicuousness. When inconspicuousness is withdrawn, appearance is foregrounded. As Figal writes: "One is attentive to something by ignoring something else, and accordingly something stands out in attention because something else is inconspicuous. If one says of what is in the attention that it appears, then without inconspicuousness there is no appearance" (2015d, 10). This allows Figal to develop a new dimension of phenomenology. If what appears to consciousness takes its appearance from that which does not appear, which is the inconspicuous (*unscheinbar*), then phenomenology must deal with inconspicuousness as the ground of appearance; that is, what makes appearance possible. Such awareness of that which does not appear is key to our experience of what appears. What is inconspicuous here is space, which becomes the grounding of whatever appears. As a ground, space becomes pure possibility, in that it allows things to appear. Unlike in Heidegger, space, rather than time, is the horizon of Figal's existing appearances. Space becomes the possibility of referring to the real and of knowing what the real is (Figal 2015d, 1). Figal thus develops an understanding of phenomena and their phenomenality from the perspective of the inconspicuous space. He proposes a phenomenology which thinks from the point of view of such inconspicuousness.

As phenomena as such is spatial, phenomenological experience is also spatial. This means that we exist in space, we perceive in space, and we pass judgments in relation to space. And this, as Figal strongly argues, is "a change of attitude" (Figal 2015d, 77). He most likely has in mind Heidegger's notion of time as the horizon of Being. Figal writes that "[e]verything that shows itself needs *free space*; without free space it cannot be a showing itself, so that showing itself as such is determined by the possibility of admission, as it can be experienced in free space" (215d, 82). He further argues that time itself, as time's sequential nature indicates, "must be understood as a possibility within the possibilities of space" (2015d, 86).

The following section presents an account of Figal's aesthetics as spatial aesthetics. It is spatial in the sense that artworks as objects are spatial and are in space. Spatiality is thus quite essential to art, either as hermeneutic context or as part of its objectivity. The notion of the inconspicuousness (*Unscheinbarkeit*) of space is also integral to Figal's spatial aesthetics, an aesthetics that gives priority to artistic beauty and appearance rather than meaning.

Figal's spatial aesthetics

> As appearing things artworks are beautiful. (Figal and Veith 2015a, 4)

Artworks are objects. For an experience with such objects to be aesthetic, it must not be reduced to a hermeneutical experience of meaning that goes beyond the aesthetic object and resides in the realm of truth. For this to be achieved, the objective character of artworks must be always in view. "Standing out in their primary visibility, [artworks],"

Figal writes, "are visible objects that are primarily objective *in* being visible" (Figal 2016, 159). Figal also stresses the objectivity of artworks by stating that "aesthetic experience is by no means the subject-centered '*Erlebnis*' in Heidegger's and Gadamer's sense" (Figal 2021a, 73). Figal here confirms the objectivity of artworks that makes them independent of both the artist and the observer. Artworks are objects present either to the artist or to the one observing them, in the sense that they stand over against (*entgegensteht*). The intensified objectivity of artworks is embodied in their ability to interrupt everyday life, to stop us in the process of projecting the stream of our thoughts onto things and to be attracted, questioned, and objected to by these things. As the embodiment of such standing over against, artworks pass their objectivity to their appearance as being the phenomenal aesthetic anchor of perception.

Going beyond truth is going beyond metaphysics. The primordiality of objects in the world is also tied to the notion of going beyond metaphysics. Overcoming metaphysics, Figal writes, will not lead to the absence of truth or the inaccessibility of objects. Rather, objects are accessible, and this accessibility is "neither an illusion nor a result of subjective sovereignty" (Figal 2019, 158). The preoccupation with the primordial, that is, with appearances, can achieve such going beyond metaphysics. As Figal writes, "the primordial is not being in a metaphysical sense and thus not subordinate to the metaphysical quest for truth" (2019, 159). The primordial, rather, is undetermined and inexhaustible, and as such it necessitates no metaphysical presuppositions. As such, the primordial, as Figal puts it, represents "the inexhaustible abundance of appearance" (2019, 162). One of the major aspects of the primordial is the aesthetical aspects, through which Figal concludes that aesthetics could be regarded as a philosophical endeavor that transcends metaphysics (2019, 163). Unlike Heidegger, who sees in works of art a disclosure of Being, Figal sees that the question of the beautiful, epitomized in appearance and the primordial, "cannot easily be subordinated to the metaphysical question of truth and being" (2019, 163).

As objects, artworks primordially possess appearance. They stand out among other objects by virtue of this appearance. In general, they are what they are *as* appearance, or as phenomenal objects. They are objects of pure appearance, and, as such, Figal calls them appearing things (*Erscheinungsdinge*). Artworks, as Figal writes, show their thing-like reality in a distinctive way. The reality of artworks becomes merged with their appearance, and this makes their phenomenality an objective phenomenality. As Figal puts it, "artworks stand amidst things as appearances" (2015a, 77). This means that artworks are objects that, more than any other objects, pay attention to how they show themselves.

Appearance in artworks is more apparent and intensified than appearance in nature. This might be due to the difference between artistic beauty and natural beauty. Artistic beauty brings natural beauty into appearance within the artwork's limits. This enclosure of the natural into the artistic becomes disclosure of the natural in part or in whole. Figal gives the example of the stones that were brought to the Zen gardens in Japan, so that a piece of art was formed. Figal writes:

> The stones in a Zen garden, which are often transported from a great distance to find their place in the garden, are not processed. They are not sculptures, but were rather discovered to be beautiful just as they are, in their shape and surface texture. Their placement in the garden is to show them as the stones that they are. (2015a, 161)

Although the stones are not sculptures, but rather were brought from a distance to the garden without processing, what turns them into artworks is the act of enclosing, bounding, and special placement. Natural beauty, when brought into the boundary of artworks, becomes appearance and as appearance it is possibility. As possibility, appearance is also plurality: "Artworks are appearances, and they appear as pluralities" (Figal 2015b, 46). Unlike T. S. Eliot's "what branches grow out of this stony rubbish," (The Waste Land), the Zen garden's answer is: stones. Stones that are inconspicuous, rather than concealed, come into view as appearing things (*Erscheinungsdinge*). In the Zen garden, the focus is on the stones themselves.

This standing-for-itself in the form of appearance further stresses the artwork's objective reality, an objective reality that needs to be approached phenomenologically without reducing it to subjectivist propositions. Such appearance, again, is *deictic*. Artworks are deictic, according to Figal, in the sense that they refer to, rather than beyond, themselves in an act of self-showing. Here, Figal perhaps wants to avoid references to a social reality, the very interpretation of which would bring about nothing but narratives and discourses that would lead to the eclipse of the artwork, shifting it from an object through an appearance that is deictic to something beyond the objectivity of the object.

As objects that make possible and explicit the experience of appearance, artworks, exterior as they are, also align aesthetics with phenomenology, by the intensification of their appearance. Aesthetics even is phenomenology, as Figal argues, because the main feature of art is phenomenality. "Accordingly," Figal writes, "aesthetics essentially is phenomenology; it must be phenomenology if it wishes to grasp that which can be aesthetically experienced, and grasp it by way of art in its clearest and most distinct shape" (2015a, 2).

Conceiving artworks as the "leading paradigm of phenomenology," Figal confirms that this is "no plea for reducing phenomenology to aesthetics or philosophy of art" (Figal 2021c, 173). As intensification of appearance and, therefore, a presentation of phenomenality as such, artworks can help phenomenology in its endeavor to grasp and explain phenomenality as such, which artworks make perceptible.

Unlike previous strands of phenomenology, Figal's phenomenological approach to art does not aim to go beyond the appearance of art itself, that is, beyond the zone of its objectness. Claiming that philosophy is presuppositionless, Figal believes that artworks must be viewed as objects that self-show, and must be approached without presuppositions on the part of the subject. The presuppositionlessness of philosophy, for Figal, entails a phenomenological *epochē* that allows objects to appear on their own. In this case, aesthetic reflection—unlike its version in Kant, where the aesthetic is equated with the morally good and, thus, aesthetic reflection ultimately refers to a beyond—is a reflection related to an object.

The phenomenological approach does not mean that art is not to be understood. In Figal, aesthetics is also integral to his hermeneutical philosophy. He argues that there is no experience of art without taking into consideration the hermeneutic character of art. As singularly standing over against us, art is there to be understood. Echoing his assertion in his *Objectivity* book, that what needs interpretation is the objective, Figal writes in *Aesthetics as Phenomenology*: "Artworks are essentially interpretable and in need of interpretation; they are inherently to be understood" (2015a, 4). As such, Figal's hermeneutical philosophy, as Thaning explains, is "a phenomenological form of inquiry," an inquiry into the appearing things Thaning (2016, 451).

The interpretation of art is related to what its beauty entails. The notion of the decentered orderly beauty of artworks makes Figal highlight potentialities, possibilities, and pluralities as dimensions of the understanding of art. The stress on these interpretative aspects is a stress on the inexhaustibility of the meaning of artworks. As objects, artworks remain exterior, and consequently inexhaustible in meaning. Figal has in mind an avoidance of reducing the percept, or the artwork, to a concept. He thus writes, "[e]very concept-oriented approach would fall short of the picture or poem as an artwork" (2015b, 47). At first glance, this seems to be an influence of Adorno's non-identitarian thinking. However, Figal is critical of Adorno's aesthetic theory and sees that art cannot be dialectical, albeit negatively. As a web-like presence of appearances, art is an interplay of possibilities, and this interplay is crucial to its understanding. Here, decentered-ness as the hermeneutical characteristic of art is, writes Figal, "a mode of appearance" (2015b, 52).

Decentered-ness and the interplay of possibilities are integral to the thing-like appearance of art. The comprehension of this thing-like appearance can be relationally achieved through an interplay of beauty, art form, nature, and space. As far as beauty is concerned, Figal is affected by Kant in arguing that the beauty of artworks is a "decentered order." It is an order in the sense that everything in the artwork is in its place. Taking a line out of a poem, for instance, destabilizes it; adding a line also would create an inflationary redundancy. There is a sense of organization and order in art. Such a beautiful order is also decentered, as there is no unifying center from which the beauty of the artwork flows. It is not this or that aspect of its appearance that makes it beautiful. Rather, it is the decentered plurality of aspects. As the beauty of artworks is a decentered order, it is intensely an appearance.

The decentered-ness and the artwork's openness to possibilities make it part company with truth and reside in the realm of beauty. In his "Is There Any Truth in Art?: Aesthetical Considerations," Figal writes that artworks are nothing but appearance. By this he means that they "do not correctly or incorrectly refer to something. Artworks are not true or false like statements or depictions. As we may say, they have their own truth" (2014a, 552). The truth of artworks is immanent to the domain of art; that is, if an artwork is truly artistic, it is a true work of art, not something pretending to be art. If art is appearance, the appearance of art simply as *appearance*, "does not conceal something; it is nothing else than the appearance that it is … The truth of artworks is that they are truly *mere* appearances, nothing else but appearances" (Figal 2014a, 552). In this sense, there is no truth behind, or beyond, artworks as pure appearance. One can thus speak of art with no consideration of truth, which, for Figal, does not exist. What exists in art is the possible, which, in its possibility, is beyond truth. As Figal confirms, "[a]rtworks are not true; in their decentered order and their self-showing nature they are beautiful" (2014a, 560).

Artworks show themselves in art forms. The art form thus becomes a mode of showing. As a way of showing, art forms lead to a different "deictic or representational sense of art" (Figal and Veith 2015a, 98). This leads Figal to argue that art forms —the imagistic, the musical, and the poetic—are forms of world and life, as they, like Platonian "categories," pervade everything. As such, in them, Figal writes, "the world can be present in a more or less restricted limitation and thereby be recognized" (2015a, 130). Art forms are then forms of accessibility and, therefore, forms of appearance. As forms of appearance, art forms refer to nothing beyond what appears. The actions of the artists on their work, be it shaping, poetizing, or whatever else, are a "setting-

into-place of the forms of appearance that through this setting-down first reveal themselves to be the forms of art" (Figal and Veith 2015a, 134). Artworks can also be composed of the three forms of art, and, in this way, they become essentially and formally a mixture of forms of appearance. True artworks, for Figal, are a mixture of art forms, as this mixture of modes of appearance highlights the decentered nature of its orderly beauty. Art forms have a strong connection to artworks' showing. As Figal puts it, "[t]he works show in the art forms of which they are a mixture; they allow that which they show to present imagistically, musically, and poetically" (2015a, 138). Showing themselves through the art forms, Figal still argues, works of art are "a phenomenon in the phenomenological sense, a possibility lifted out of factual existence" (2015a, 138). As possibility, artworks are approached through their appearance, which is their natural character.

Naturalness is a constituent element of artworks. What is immediate about artworks is that they are perceivable, and they are perceivable as nature is. Here, Figal engages in the question of the relationship between art and nature. Art, Figal affirms, has its origin in nature: "The natural always occurs in *τέχνη* [art] as well. To be sure, forms that are produced are invented, but in the end the material is always natural; the series of manipulations always leads back to something natural" (2015a, 150). At the foreground of Figal's idea of the origins of art in nature is Frank Lloyd Wright's *Fallingwater*. The Fallingwater house is a work of architecture that is built over a waterfall, creating a sense of continuity and discontinuity with the surrounding nature, which serves as landscape. The waterfall itself becomes an integral part of the artificiality of the house. The glass doors and the windows all serve as frames for the natural scene outside, rendering the piece of work an organic piece of art and architecture. One can conclude from this example that there is both intersection and relationality between art and nature, and that the sense of discontinuity is created by art itself, in the same way the Fallingwater house represents discontinuity with nature. In short, "art is limitation and inclusion of nature" (2015a, 154).

Artworks as beautiful and phenomenal things are "aesthetical," which means, by the very etymology of the word, they are primarily perceptible. Perception, Figal writes, is "primarily *particular*" (2021c, 175). When approached for an aesthetic experience, the artwork is individual and is thus perceived. Figal then proceeds by saying: "An artwork can only be an individual if it is *distinct* and, together with this, *separate* from other things so that it *sticks out* from the plurality of things or from a diffuse ground or background, at least to a certain degree" (2021c, 175). The artwork thus conceived, Figal affirms, is necessarily *spatial*. And this brings us to the most essential element, which is that of space. The exteriority of artworks, as objects, has led Figal to phenemenologically consider the spatiality of artworks as a characteristic feature of art. In contradistinction with Heidegger's critique of distantiation created by technology, Figal sees that artworks are characterized by distance. They are there, outside and exterior. Being there, at a distance, makes the beautiful and distance intertwined. "[T]he experience of the beautiful," Figal writes, "is an experience of the distant" (2015a, 210). For at a distance, the objectivity (*Gegenständlischkeit*) of artworks becomes most evident. This distance is hermeneutical in nature; it enables the observer to observe. If one gets close to a painting, Figal says, one sees only texture. Distance allows appearances to appear in their objectivity. As Figal puts it, "[t]he beautiful thing *remains aloof*. One must allow it to impart something instead of wanting to initiate something with it" (2015c, 367). Nonetheless, as standing there, opposing and confronting us, the beautiful is close and nearby. This nearness brings about attention and appreciation of the object, "which means that one gladly resides in its vicinity. Only an objective thing can be nearby (*in der Nähe*)" (Figal 2015c, 367). This interplay between distance and nearness unveils the spatial character of artworks.

As objects, and as appearances out *there*, artworks are spatial and show themselves in space. The spatiality of artworks, Figal confirms, is obvious; thus, artworks become, in their spatiality, "the *objects* of aesthetic experience" (Figal and Veith 2015a, 5). Sculptures are set up in space, so that the more or less distant observer can observe. The adequate effect of a piece of music is achieved when music is played in a certain space, where sounds "resonate and unfold [and where its] successiveness is held together by the uniformity of its spatial sound" (Figal 2015a, 183). Even in poetry, lines are arranged spatially and one can refer to a word or an image by saying "here" or "there." Language, in general, as Figal asserts, depends on spatiality. Every language has "rest indicators," that is, punctuation marks: full stops, commas, and paragraph breaks are to indicate interstices or spaces in writing. Meaning unfolds as one "moves on" along a piece of writing. In this way, spatiality, as Figal defines it, is "that which gives and enables, without therefore being the ground of artworks" (2015a, 6). Spatiality here is internal and phenomenal.

Hence a phenomenology of space is quite appropriate to aesthetics. In "Spatial Thinking," Figal writes that "[t]he appearing and self-showing of things in correlation with a perceiving and discovering capacity is spatial" (2009, 242–3). The

correlation is not one of letting-be of things, as Heidegger reacts to technological enframing of things; it is, however, one of exposing ourselves to the exteriority of things, and being open to their possibilities as they appear in space. About the spatiality of artworks, Figal writes:

> Artworks as such are spatial. It is only from out of this spatiality that the demanding and binding aspects of artworks arises, and with these the possibility of an adequate experience of art. In their spatiality, artworks are the objects of aesthetic experience. (2015a, 5)

The spatiality of art has the character of relationality. It allows access to the world, to life itself. Life, thus, is "constructed as the relational, hermeneutic space where meaning arises between things' appearance and our responsiveness to them" (Veith 2012, 149). Also, it is worth mentioning here that spatiality is relational rather than dialectical. Figal does not see art as dialectic. His relationality of art, one can presume, is a relationality between an object, the artwork, and its *objective* context. This is an intensification of objectivity and a practical step on Figal's part in order for him to avoid regression to the subject. In this, he is critical of Adorno's dialectical theory of art. Although Adorno, as Figal argues, emphasizes the independence and priority of aesthetic objects, and is critical of reducing the object to the subject, he "regards artworks as products of the subjective rationality," and so "his only possibility of understanding their objectivity is to conceive this objectivity as a result of a 'dialectical' change that is exclusively accessible to 'dialectical' reflection." Therefore, for Figal, "the supremacy of conceptual thinking is back" (2021b, 88).

The self-evidence of space makes it inconspicuous. This inconspicuousness is, for Figal, a fundamental aspect of space. The inconspicuousness (*Unscheinbarkeit*) of space triggers another dimension of relationality, where space is relationally connected to the appearance (*Erscheinung*) and phenomenality of things. Things appear at the expense of the inconspicuousness of space. Artworks give space a distinctive presence and make space obvious in its inconspicuousness. The phenomenality and appearance of objects together with the inconspicuousness of space as the context of these objects establish the relationality necessary for Figal's spatial aesthetics. As Figal writes, phenomena can "only be adequately understood in their unison with the inconspicuous" (as quoted in Alvis 2017, 231).

The standing out of artworks is possible only through the inconspicuousness and recession of space. By foregrounding spatiality, Figal wants to further affirm his claims regarding objectivity, that is, there are things beyond our perception and that artworks can help the inconspicuous to be most obvious. Figal acknowledges that "Heidegger was the first to formulate philosophically the idea of the spatiality of artworks as the determination of a place" (2015a, 185). For him, artworks are possible only in space: "Insofar as space gives artworks to appearance, they can simply be there and stand forth—as pure possibilities that have become things, and as things that have become pure possibilities" (2015a, 5).

The appearances of artworks are also possibilities waiting for development. Both appearances and possibilities need distance in order for them to express themselves. Distance here is hermeneutical, in the sense that it gives way to a wide range of interpretations and understandings; thus, a realization of the possibilities of the artwork takes place. Unfolding the possibilities of artworks also unfolds our self-understanding, which is more or less objective, based on the fact that the objectivity of art is also that which stands against us. In this regard, Figal writes that

> artworks confront us with what and how we ourselves are as persons—they do not do so in imitating or presenting persons or personality, but in making visible, audible, and readable our own mode of appearance. Since we are always involved in our mode of appearance, we will never be able to objectify it. Therefore, we need art. (2015b, 54)

What artworks thus do, in relation to us, is to decenter our existence. They cannot do that if they do not stand out there, not as reflections of ourselves, but as objects standing against us. This has nothing to do with a pragmatist interpretation of appearance, on the part of Figal. For Figal does not take the pragmatist interpretation of shining into consideration. Thus, the social and ethical potential of art remains marginal for Figal's understanding of aesthetics (Mirković et al. 2020, fn 33, 225). This marginality of the social meanings of art is a central aspect of the artistic in art, its objective appearance in space.

Conclusion

Figal combines philosophy of art and philosophical aesthetics, with special stress on the notion of beauty, that is encapsulated in appearance, which, in turn, is not a psychological phenomenon. One can safely say that, for Figal, the subject is not the transcendental foundation for phenomenology as phenomenology, for him, becomes anchored in the profundity of the given, the objective. Artworks as objects are spatial and exist in space, a proposition that makes space integral to the phenomenality of the phenomenal. Understanding the appearance of art, that is, its most constitutive element, cannot be achieved without taking spatiality into account.

Shades of dialecticism loom over Figal's writing about art. Yet he dismisses the idea that art is dialectical. Figal is critical of Adorno's dialectical approach to art, which is based on dialectical reflection. He is also critical of Heidegger's inability to escape subjectivism. Instead of taking philosophical interest in *Da-sein*, or being-there, Figal refers to the object that appears there (*Da-scheinen*). Yet Heidegger's influence on him deserves particular attention, especially in Figal's reversal of many Heideggerian notions, the most obvious of which is the reversal of temporality to spatiality.

In a later development, in his *Unscheinbarkeit: Der Raum der Phänomenologie*, Figal contributes to the history of aesthetics in a fundamental way. The history of aesthetics is primarily the history of *Schein*, at least until Marxist theory introduced the notion of *negativity*. Figal finds a unique way to go, cutting a path between *Schein* and negativity: here, realist phenomenology of art stands between the idealist notion of *Schein* and the crude realist notion of negativity, which sometimes goes beyond art and gets enmeshed in social, economic, and political conditions. What *Schein* gets enmeshed in, in Figal's account of *Unscheinbarkeit* [inconspicuousness], is the inconspicuous space surrounding artworks, not the social, economic, and political conditions. This opens up a space for inexhaustive possibilities for interpretation.

Figal rejuvenates the hermeneutics of art by considering artworks as objects that shine in space, hence bringing phenomenological realism to the foreground. What shines there is the objective, and its objectiveness is grounded in spatiality. The spatiality of artworks allows them to be phenomenologically described in their very possibility, as things out there in spatial context. As objects with pure appearance, artworks are immediately perceptible and immediately linked to beauty rather than truth. As such, Figal brings beauty and the objectness of the objects back to the theory of art.

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ORCID

Karam AbuSehly http://orcid.org/0000-0002-8227-1079

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