

AESTHETICS & CRITIQUE

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Aesthetics & Critique IX

Styles of Appearing. Aesthetics and Phenomenology

University of Fribourg

11-12 June 2026

CALL FOR PAPERS

In January 1907, the founder of phenomenology, Edmund Husserl, wrote a letter to the Viennese Modernist playwright and poet Hugo von Hofmannsthal, suggesting that the phenomenologist's and the artist's methods are closely connected. Husserl's suggestion remains provocative to this day, as its full implications are yet to be fully grasped. Undeniably, for more than a century now, the tradition of phenomenology has cleared a path for philosophy that departs from argument-centric approaches in favor of firsthand corporeal experiences rooted in the lifeworld. This also entailed suspending or "bracketing" the question of whether our metaphysical, ethical, or aesthetic beliefs are justified, focusing instead on the way things appear to us: phenomenology sets aside the "what" (the mind-independent nature of things) to home in on the "how"—the mode in which things are given in our experience.

If this is a valid characterization of the phenomenological method, it aligns it closely with the discipline of aesthetics, as founded by A.G. Baumgarten in the 18th century. Aesthetics too, one might argue, predominantly leaves aside the nature of what is being depicted or expressed to focus on the "how": on how things are presented to us by artworks or other aesthetic objects and, correspondingly, on what it is like to sense them in aesthetic experience. Günter Figal even went as far as to claim that aesthetics could never be anything but phenomenological. Be that as it may: uncontestedly, what phenomenology and aesthetics have in common is a shared interest in the "style" of appearing.

Although Husserl himself hinted at this proximity in his letter to von Hofmannsthal, his own writings on art and literature are remarkably sparse. While Husserl never wrote a formal work on aesthetics, Jacques Derrida maintained that his thinking yields a "latent aesthetics." This claim seems applicable to the phenomenological movement as a whole: while attempts to develop a systematic phenomenological aesthetics are surprisingly rare—with Roman Ingarden and Mikel Dufrenne as the exceptions that prove the rule—the aesthetic dimension however takes center stage in the work of numerous other authors, from Eugen Fink, Jean-Paul Sartre and Maurice Merleau-Ponty through Erwin Straus, Henri Maldiney, and Bernhard Waldenfels. What happens, then, when we look at phenomenology through an aesthetic lens? And in turn, what is the outcome of practicing aesthetics as a kind of phenomenology?

The ninth iteration of the Aesthetics & Critique workshop will address the complex and layered relationship between aesthetics and phenomenology. Topics for discussion include:

- What does it mean to ground aesthetics in phenomenological analysis rather than other approaches? Conversely, could an aesthesiological approach—as required by aesthetic objects and situations—offer a refinement to phenomenology as a method?
- What is the relationship between sensible experience and artistic experience, and how does a phenomenology of art relate to the phenomenological analysis of sensible experience in general?

- Can the concept of style help describe different modes of appearing (and of reacting to it)?
- How is sense-making inextricably connected to corporeal sensing?
- What possibilities does the artist's encounter with the world offer the phenomenologist—perhaps a heightened sensitivity to the nuances of lived experience?
- How can aesthetic as well as aesthesiological categories help reconceptualizing the multisensorial mediascapes of our contemporary condition?
- How can experimental aesthetic practices become test sites, both individually and collectively, for transformative embodied experiences?

Conveners: Emmanuel Alloa, Alessandro de Cesaris, Masoud Olia

Invited Speakers

Charles Bobant (Paris)

Mauro Carbone (Lyon)

Maud Hagelstein (Liège)

Adnen Jdey (Louvain)

Harri Mäcklin (Helsinki)

Marcia Sá Schuback Cavalcante (Stockholm)

Alessandra Scotti (Torino)

How to participate

Participants are invited to send a proposal (max 400 words) and a CV to Alessandro De Cesaris (alessandro.decesaris@unifr.ch) by April 30th. Notifications of acceptance will be sent by May 5th.

Travel, accommodation and meal costs will be covered for all speakers.