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Sozein ta phainomena, saving the appearances
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Physis has long been seen as an apparatus that maximally conforms to its purpose through the functionality of its parts. In Darwin's evolutionary theory, conformity to purpose results from competition between organisms. There is no doubt that a large aspect of natural evolution is devoted to innumerable purposeful devices in action. Nor can there be any doubt about the obvious surplus that *physis* both enjoys and pursues with boundless energy. As Roger Caillois describes in his analysis of the animal world¹, mimetism often is a completely useless skill for the survival of the animal form, or for its reproduction: these aesthetic tendencies in his opinion engage more with overabundance, passion, play, exhilaration and aesthetics in se, something that we could call *aesthetic function*, if we really wanted to find a *functionality*. The camouflaging behaviour, in its interplay between concealment, exposure and transparency, is often an excess of simulation for which the means deployed far exceed the useful degree of imitation. Therefore, structural arrangements sometimes result in a formulation of self-representation *as such*, which is not intended for any perceptive sense but simply *appears*. Disengaged from any function, but to the gaze itself, this mode of appearance without an addressee highlights the reality of a form in its presence, as pure spectacle. From this perspective, *physis* is an aesthetic phenomenon comprising both actors and spectators. In Heidegger's lectures, *physis* is that in which the emergence of light — φῶς, *phōs* — takes place in the middle of an open space that likes to hide itself.² For this space to be that of the aesthetics experience, in a play in which each element blurs or breaks up its contours, oscillating between invisibility and visibility, manifestation and concealment. Can aesthetics, from this point of view, inspire a discourse on natural evolution — one not rooted on *functionality* but on something else? Are we not missing a sense to see a world that is immediately everywhere around us?

The research was born in the Art Theory department with Marina Vishmidt and has been relocated in the Media Department with professor Clemens Apprich. It is a monographic philosophical work that focuses on following evolutionary morphogenesis in the framework of aesthetics experience that, rather than explaining, attempts to recode the relationship between the individual and its milieu from a processual, relational perspective. The project thus proposes the combined study of biology and aesthetics departing from Adolf Portmann's phanerology while integrating Gilbert Simondon's individuation. Unlike phenomenology, phanerology does not focus on the experience of consciousness, but on the aesthetics account of appearances. Hanna Arendt reads Portmann and devotes a chapter to appearance as something intended to be perceptually *felt*³, advancing the hypothesis that life processes themselves are at the service of appearance and not vice versa.

¹ R. Caillois, Il Mimetismo Animale, Medusa, 2017

² M. Heidegger, Eraclitus, Bloomsbury Academic, 2019

³ H. Arendt, *Apperence*, in The life of the Mind, Harcourt Inc, 1978. For a reflection on the theoretical relation of Adolf Portmann and Hannah Arendt P. Amodio, Di profondità filosofiche e superficialità viventi tra Hannah

One the one hand, therefore, auto-presentation, ex-position, ex-expression, differentiation into space and on the other the metamorphosis of a form that tears apart, dissolve its limits – its identity – into space. To take the camouflage tendency once again, mimetism represents a phenomenon of *oceanic dispersion* within the environment, for the individual breaks the boundaries of its own skin and tries to occupy the other side of the senses.⁴ As Gilbert Simondon explains, the result of the process of individuation, in its meta-stability, is not only the transitory individual, but also its associated environment, in an ever-changing relation in which both sides are meta-morphing.⁵ This inscription in space itself – through resonance, refraction, mimesis, mirrorism, echo, dispersion – performs through technological tools that morphological metamorphosis adapts for reasons that exceed those of identification, representation and determination as well. In regarding *physis* as a spontaneous intertwining of coexistence, a hanging together, that predates and will persist beyond one's own existence, each constituent element situated within this unity maintains an intrinsic autonomy and freedom – identity. Between a circle, an ellipse, an oval and a lime leaf, Buytendijk sustains⁶, it is the latter that is the most organic of all, the one in which the rule of the relationship is secretly foreshadowed rather than explicitly stated: the leaf can in fact assume innumerable forms while remaining a lime leaf. This organicity of interactions avoids all finalists, vitalistic and mechanistic interpretation since what joins the whole and the individual is nothing more than the gaps, the *écarts*, as Merleau Ponty states⁷, the latencies that constitutes them, just as melody, in Uexküll terms⁸, is experienced within its silent intervals. Conducting this kind of aesthetics enquiry means thus engaging with *physis* in its appearance, in its in between states – *meta-stability* – of exposition and withdrawal, between inside and outside. Nietzsche defines the very relation between object and subject as an aesthetics relation⁹: in this third space between domains the form as presence transpires in its elusive appearance. Consequently, appearances set the ground these latencies themselves as temporary aggregates that breakdown the boundaries of the real and the imaginary as well, in a crisis of perception. For this crisis, that of the *in between*, to be the springing of another form of intuition, for which time and space themselves are re-written, re-rendered. Western's intellectual knowledge still struggles to divest the individual in-itself and in its properties. Not knowing how to think the *in between*, the West has thought the *beyond*, has invented another plane of reality, the *meta* of metaphysics. The verbal-intellectual form of knowledge is founded on a vertical hierarchy of

Arendt e Adolf Portmann, in P. Amodio, C. Fuschetto e F. Gambardella, Underscores: Darwin, Nietzsche, von Uexküll, Heidegger, Portmann, Arendt, Giannini Editore, 2012.

⁴ R. Caillois, Il Mimetismo Animale, Medusa, 2017

⁵ G. Simondon, Individuation in Light of Notions of Form and Information, University of Minnesota Press, 2020; G. Tenti, Estetica e morfologia in Gilbert Simondon, Mimesis, 2020

⁶ F. J.J. Buytendijk. "Contrassegni intuitivi dell'organico". In: Estetica e scienze della vita. Morfologia, biologia teoretica, evo-devo, Milano, Raffaello Cortina Editore, 2013

⁷ M. Merleau-Ponty, La Nature: Course du College de France (1956-1960), Points, 2021

⁸ Jakob von Uexküll, "Come vediamo la natura e come la natura vede se stessa". In: Estetica e scienze della vita, 2013; Theoretical Biology, London: Kegan Paul, Trench, Trubner & Co, 1926; A stroll through the world of animals and men: a picture book of invisible worlds in Instinctive Behavior: The Development of a Modern Concept, International Universities Press, 1957

⁹ F. Nietzsche, On True and Lie in an Extra-moral Sense, Marchenhaus Verlag, 2024

phenomena that is contingent upon the isolation of forms in respect to ground, resulting ultimately in a *vision that is incapable of seeing*. When discussing the *visual* presence of appearances, the sense of sight is implied only as a vector of simultaneity. Appearances are visual, they are *images, phenomena, contingencies* not in the meaning of sight, but in the sense that in their meta-state they are *all given together*, flattening the discursive diachrony, even though they can only be conceived as linear unfolding or developing. Moreover, including in morphological performance the *écart* means avoiding the identity criteria of verbal-intellectual knowledge, maintaining instead the *meta* element in the horizontal relation between terms. The Heideggerian *apophantic eye*, contrasting the verbal-intellectual form of judgement, does not thus ascertain *what is false* and *what is true* about a phenomenon and its function; in other words, this form of judgment does not attempt to establish order, topologies and categories, but rather it feeds on chaos. This lateralisation of appearances is not too dissimilar to that conducted by Deleuze and Guattari in *Mille plateaux* through the figure of the rhizome. Instead of developing vertically, it does so horizontally, laterally: the rhizome indicates anything but rootedness, verticality and hierarchy as it grows in a diffusive, reticular structure¹⁰. It refers to, therefore, the course of an experience that moves in a spontaneous, chaotic manner, creating an innumerable number of connections. Adolf Portmann's phanerology deploys elements of biology, such as that of *Selbstdarstellung*, self-presentation, that are based on the horizontal depth of skin. Aesthetics thus is *a technology of the interspace and time* in which each individual world, that is, each individual form, enters into relation to a subsequent world that concerns it but of which it cannot account: herein lies that which is *common*. This never-linear interaction outpaces the verbal-intellectual judgement by entailing what Goethe was calling "sensory imagination"¹¹: a form of in-scription instead of de-description, of intuition instead of observation. This simultaneous, local and situated use of the senses embraces the experience of what Karl Blossfeldt calls "the skin of the world".¹² Aesthetics, by retrieving its original meaning of "sensible moment of perception", emerges as that which *makes space* – participates – to the ultimately meta-stable condition of appearances themselves. Aesthetics sensitivity is thus an *experimental science* that reframes imagination and intuition as its own tools – its own tactics. By witnessing reality without necessarily acknowledging it, the difference between experience and explanation discloses, for aesthetics is a theory and a practice that, beyond grasping in *time*, accommodates in *space* the perception of reality and at the same time the reality of perception itself. In Goethe's words, the *theory already manifests*¹³, just like *the sky manifests the laws of colour and vision*, this is the ultimate meaning of "saving the phenomena", "saving the appearances". Evolutionary performance ultimately transmutes surpluses, excesses as well as useless information into functioning organisms – into an eye that, despite its inherited blind spots, gives us sight.

¹⁰ G. Deleuze, F. Guattari, *Mille Plateaux*, Minuit, 2013

¹¹ J.W. Goethe, "The experiment as mediator between subject and object" (1823), in *The metamorphosis of plants and other writings on the science of nature*, S.Zecchi, Guanda, Milano, 1983

¹² E. J. Oliviera, Towards a Phanerology of Images: Karl Blossfeldt and the Skin of the World, in J. Andermann, L. Blackmore, D.C. Morell, *Natura: Environmental Aesthetics After landscape*, Journal of Landscape Architecture, 2022

¹³ J.W. Goethe, J.W. Goethe, "Polarity" (1805), in *The metamorphosis of plants and other writings on the science of nature*, S.Zecchi, Guanda, 1983

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