

Article

## Heidegger on “Saying” and the Inconspicuousness of Showing in the Arts

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**Abstract:** The later Heidegger endeavors to elucidate human existence in its relying on language and the connection between “saying” and “showing.” I try to clarify the philosophical significance of showing, beyond a common semiotic understanding of “sign,” “signifying,” and “appearing.” For this I take advantage of a phenomenological inquiry about how showing is constituted by the inconspicuous effectiveness which is set free in pictorial showing.

**Keywords:** Heidegger, art, inconspicuousness, saying

### The paradoxical movement of thought

For Martin Heidegger metaphysics and the whole body of European philosophy has come to an end. At this critical turn in history, “movement” and the “way” became two of his major concerns, as is highlighted by titles such as *Off the Beaten Track*, *Country Path Conversations*, or *On the Way to Language*. Systematic philosophizing, on the ground of undoubted principles and progressing towards truth by means of rational methods, should be replaced by an open move of “thinking” in the “proximity” of Being. Instead of mental processes, such as reflection or conceptualization, thinking means “doing.” Thinking should be practiced like an “exercise” (*Übung*)—even, perhaps, as the exercise of “looking in thinking” (*Sehen im Denken*).<sup>1</sup> Instead of pursuing any linear progression towards a fixed goal, the thinking exercise should be more like rambling in the fields. By means of moving along on not well-trodden or even not yet blazed paths, thinking only strives to always hold itself within the circle of Being. There will be paths to move on, just due to moving, as thinking has

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<sup>1</sup> Martin Heidegger, “Aus Gesprächen mit einem buddhistischen Mönch,” in *Reden und andere Zeugnisse eines Lebensweges*, GA 16 (Frankfurt am Main: Vittorio Klostermann, 2000), 589.

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become the “way-making movement” (*Be-wägung*).<sup>2</sup> Crucial for this is “*Gelassenheit*”—“letting” and “being let.”<sup>3</sup> Paradoxically enough, the thinking one is requested to learn to “wait.” Waiting without expectation guides the “way-making” movement of thinking, as it is the only way to open up to Being.<sup>4</sup>

The later Heidegger’s thought is often considered to hinge on the linguistic dimension of the history of Being.<sup>5</sup> Yet it is only within the broader horizon of the “waiting” exercise of thinking—and certainly not on the grounds of some “philosophy of language”—that his reflections on language obtain an adequate understanding. For only by means of a “waiting” disposition will the thinking person eventually become able to “witness and receive” (*vernehmen*) the call of Being, so as to “respond” (*antworten*),<sup>6</sup> that is “to speak in accordance with and from” (*ent-sprechen*)<sup>7</sup> Being.

### Thinking between speech and intuition

As is well known, Heidegger claims that it’s not we humans who speak; rather, “language speaks.”<sup>8</sup> For language is “the house of Being.”<sup>9</sup> The “propriative event” (*Ereignis*) actually condensates into the poet’s speech. “The Saying” (*die Sage*) properly unleashes the event of sense-giving, as it genuinely narrates, and discloses, the truth of Being.<sup>10</sup> However, touching a crucial point here, Heidegger’s elucidation of the intimate relation between language and Being repeatedly resorts to a paradigm shift. Not only are there said to be two equally “fundamental ways of appearing” (*Grundweisen des Erscheinens*), namely “looking and saying” (*das Blicken und das Sagen*). Yet more astonishing is his claim that the very essence of “saying” itself does not consist in “enunciation” (*Verlautbarung*) but in a “soundlessly attuning,

<sup>2</sup> Martin Heidegger, “Das Wesen der Sprache,” in *Unterwegs zur Sprache*, GA 12 (Frankfurt am Main: Vittorio Klostermann, 1985), 186–187.

<sup>3</sup> Martin Heidegger, “Zur Erörterung der Gelassenheit,” in *Aus der Erfahrung des Denkens*, 2nd rev. ed., GA 13 (Frankfurt am Main: Vittorio Klostermann, 2002), 37–74; Martin Heidegger, “Ἀρχιβασιή. Ein Gespräch selbsttritt auf einem Feldweg zwischen einem Gelehrten, einem Forscher und einem Weisen” and “Abendgespräch in einem Kriegsgefangenenlager in Rußland zwischen einem Jüngeren und einem Älteren,” in *Feldweg-Gespräche (1944/45)*, 2nd rev. ed., GA 77 (Frankfurt am Main: Vittorio Klostermann, 2007), 1–159 and 203–245.

<sup>4</sup> GA 77, 110, 115–116, 120, 122, 216–217, 227, 229.

<sup>5</sup> Gianni Vattimo, “Essere, storia e linguaggio in Heidegger,” in *Scritti filosofici e politici* (Milano: La nave di Teseo, 2021), 164–168.

<sup>6</sup> Heidegger, “Der Weg zur Sprache,” GA 12, 249, 256.

<sup>7</sup> Heidegger, “Die Sprache,” GA 12, 29.

<sup>8</sup> Heidegger, GA 12, 10.

<sup>9</sup> Martin Heidegger, “Brief über den Humanismus,” in *Wegmarken*, 2nd rev. ed., GA 9 (Frankfurt am Main: Vittorio Klostermann, 1996), 313, 333, 358; see also GA 12, 156.

<sup>10</sup> Heidegger, GA 9, 315; Martin Heidegger, “Aus einem Gespräch von der Sprache,” GA 12, 137–138, 143, 188, 195.

beckoning pattern" (*das lautlos Stimmende, Winkende*).<sup>11</sup> As a matter of fact, "saying" is considered to essentially rely on "showing" (*zeigen*)<sup>12</sup> which, in turn, is conceived of as "beckoning": showing invites someone to look. Thus, what makes linguistic signification understandable is neither the "sign" itself nor the signifying function termed "reference" (*Verweisung*)<sup>13</sup> but the *event* of showing. This event consists in a "hint" which "lets appear"<sup>14</sup> to someone.

In this way poetic speech, "witnessing and receiving" the truth of Being, becomes the original incarnation of the "Saying." Beyond meaningful linguistic expression, the "Saying" clearly is presumed by Heidegger to be rooted in a sense-giving core of nonverbal showing. To think means "to behold the insight of the inconspicuous, out of the interstice of its shining. To seeing-ly hear the invisible stilling of the propriative event—showing."<sup>15</sup> As showing indeed goes on in silence, and under the premise that "beckoning" is foundational for speech, Heidegger's famous statement about the "chimes of stillness" (*Geläut der Stille*)<sup>16</sup> operating at the core of language becomes very plausible. Yet what about "inconspicuousness" (*Unscheinbarkeit*) which is said to genuinely characterize showing? Was the latter not interpreted as "to let appear," that is as to make something *conspicuous*? Obviously Heidegger's idea of an original showing is not equivalent to "plainly indicating or illuminating something."

Remarks concerning both of these problems, that is of how saying relates to showing, and that of how showing itself relies on inconspicuousness, are not abundant in Heidegger's writings. The issue apparently has been left off partway but urgently needs to be explored in depth. At stake are central philosophical questions such as: Should Heidegger's "it gives—there is" (*es gibt*) ultimately be conceived of as "it shows up"—"es zeigt (*sich*)"? In this case what are the implications of the original "Show" or "Zeige" that inaugurates a sense of being? Furthermore, can the "waiting" of *Gelassenheit*, within the movement of thinking, come about through our immediately being touched by what shows up and appears—yet before we understand anything, as "signified" by the show? Is there a crucial connection between the intuitional experience of showing, and

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<sup>11</sup> Martin Heidegger, *Parmenides*, GA 54 (Frankfurt am Main: Vittorio Klostermann, 1982), 169.

<sup>12</sup> Heidegger, GA 12, 158, 188; "Das Wort," GA 12, 210; "Der Weg zur Sprache," GA 12, 241.

<sup>13</sup> Martin Heidegger, *Sein und Zeit*, 16th ed. (Tübingen: Niemeyer, 1986), §17, 76–83.

<sup>14</sup> Heidegger, GA 12, 188, 202.

<sup>15</sup> Martin Heidegger, *Winke I und II (Schwarze Hefte 1957-1959)*, GA 101 (Frankfurt am Main: Vittorio Klostermann, 2020), 166: "Denken heißt: den Einblick des Unscheinbaren aus der Fuge seines Scheinens er-blicken. Sehend-hören das [sic] unsichtbare Stille des Ereignisses - zeigen."

<sup>16</sup> Heidegger, GA 12, 27–29, 204.

thinking, as the latter may learn to “wait without expectation,” when witnessing the event of showing?

With respect to our understanding of texts, at the core of our perceptual “institution of meaning” (*Sinnstiftung*) Edmund Husserl has disclosed what he termed “affectivity” (*Affektivität*), “affection” (*Affektion*), or “affective mood” (*Anmutung*). According to him, there is always a certain “pull” (*Zug*), “tendency” (*Tendenz*), or “inclination” (*Neigung*), emanating from signs or meaningful objects. It is affection that first “motivates” our capture of sense and meaning—yet before we effectively have begun to understand.<sup>17</sup> Even more than the spoken or written word in the case of linguistic signifying, something which shows up, just through its appearance to us, indeed seems to “motivate” our capture, on a pre-linguistic level. The very event of appearing immediately attracts our attention, urging us to attribute sense and meaning to the show.

Regarding this problem, it proves helpful to critically inquire into the structure of artistic showing. For, contrary to popular opinion, artistic phenomena are not reducible to the referential function of a meaningful sign, nor should they be reduced to a mere matter of sense perception. Heidegger himself famously expounded how truth as the event of “unconcealment” is staged by art, transcending any simple logic of appearance versus concealment.<sup>18</sup> Beyond this twofold pattern artistic showing effectuates a peculiar mode of *inconspicuousness*. It is for the sake of this intrinsic inconspicuousness that showing in the arts cannot be adequately grasped within the framework of hermeneutical interpretation, focusing on the disclosure of some determinable signification. Art subverts the common scheme according to which our aesthetic experience is believed to be tantamount to our subjective awareness or capture of meaning, as delivered by the bias of “conspicuous” indication or symbolic reference. Instead, artistic showing should rather be called “inconspicuous showing.” Hermeneutics cannot attain showing *as* showing. Semiotic interpretation necessarily remains blind with respect to the *event* of showing as such, which operates besides or even prior to any content being shown, also besides or prior to any signification we may attribute to an appearance. Due to its *affectively touching dimension*, the show of art essentially exceeds the domain of hermeneutical disclosure of meaning. Instead, affection through artistic showing requires—and fosters—a sort of “letting and being let,” on part of the aesthetic beholder. There is an elucidating similarity between the aesthetic attitude and

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<sup>17</sup> Edmund Husserl, *Analysen zur passiven Synthesis. Aus Vorlesungs- und Forschungsmanuskripten, 1918-1926*, ed. by Margot Fleischer, in *Husserliana XI* (The Hague: Martinus Nijhoff, 1966), §12, 43–44; §32, 148–149.

<sup>18</sup> Martin Heidegger, “Der Ursprung des Kunstwerkes,” in *Holzwege, GA 5* (Frankfurt am Main: Vittorio Klostermann, 1977), esp. 40–43.

Heidegger's remarks on a *gelassen* disposition of thinking. It is this affinity that commands the following critical reassessment of our conception of artistic showing.

Affective motivation through showing, yet before instituting sense and meaning—since ever this has been considered a core feature of art. In an Aristotelian tradition, this phenomenon tends to be reduced to a "pathos" or "(e)motion" of the soul, being generally regarded as a surplus effect added on to the signifying dimension of artworks. However, contrary to this common opinion, aesthetic thinkers such as Friedrich Schiller, Berthold Brecht, or Theodor W. Adorno, prominently claimed that our being affected by art exceeds such secondary psychic effects. For them it is unquestionable that, during our experience of art, *aesthetic affection* itself and as such becomes responsible for our disclosure of meaning and truth. Art has to be considered as a means to affectively induce our *movement towards signification*, which is the very movement of thinking. It is for this reason, too, that art is essentially in quest for critical thought, in order to become art in the full sense of this term. If such is in fact the purport of the *intensity of showing* proper to art, then can Heidegger's *gelassen* move of thinking, too, become initiated or guided by way of aesthetic practice and aesthetic experience? Can our being touched by inconspicuous showing in the arts actually teach us how to "wait"?

### The paradigm of speech and showing in the arts

In general art is believed to deliver sense and meaning. Art is regarded as *indirect and unconcise* signification, in close analogy with the paradigm of language and speech that, however, are considered to be more or less *direct and concise* means of signifying. According to an ancient scheme of signification, what appears in a work of art and presents itself to sense perception may be interpreted as a sign which symbolically refers to some meaning. As the author of *Being and Time* explains, signs are things that exceed their own presence-at-hand as each of them "shows," that is "refers" to something that is designated,<sup>19</sup> and eventually each sign necessarily relies on a general horizon of "meaningfulness," that is a "totality of relevance" (*Bewandtnisganzheit*).<sup>20</sup> From this stance, artistic signs may be considered as disclosing to sense perception a spiritual dimension which, itself, cannot appear.

In accordance with common belief Heidegger presumes that only when a thing turns into a "sign" it may become art. Negatively speaking, artworks exhibit an "ontological privation," in comparison with ordinary

<sup>19</sup> Heidegger, *Sein und Zeit*, §17, 76–83.

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*, §18, 83–87, esp. 84.

things that exist as they appear. Artworks are *not* what appears, their essence does *not* consist in their being present. When understood *as* signs artworks only exist in the mode of “as if.” Yet, positively speaking, artworks are *more* than just things or “equipment” (*Zeug*). For their appearing always covers a *surplus of referential co-appearing*. At stake is not what is perceived but something that exceeds presence-at-hand. Something absent becomes manifest within or through symbolic appearance. Thus, art means enhanced appearance: its showing *lets* appear. This general feature is not limited to mimetic art; it even encompasses non-denotative artworks and contemporary performance art, as such phenomena only function as “art” when the beholder experiences more than what is accessible to sense perception. However, contrary to the commonsense logic of sign and signification it may as well be claimed that the power of artistic showing actually consists in *explicitly not showing*, or showing something that, as the pretended object of the show, remains “unapparent.” Beyond, or even contrary to, Heidegger’s semiotic prejudice it may be claimed that artworks actually perform *inconspicuous showing*.

Of course, Heidegger contested the instrumental view of language and art, which draws on an Aristotelian concept of signification. Is it for this reason that Heidegger endeavors to understand the “Saying” according to the paradigm of showing? However, as long as even Heidegger’s conception of the inaugurating speech of poetry still owes to the classical notion of the “sign,” simply understood as “referential indication of meaning,”<sup>21</sup> it will be hard for the event of showing to leave the prison of semiotics. At least, one precondition for art to deliver insight into an original “Show” that may be more fundamental than saying, is that the concepts of sign and signification be banished from any inquiry concerned with artistic showing and aesthetic experience. If there is meaningfulness at stake in an artwork, yet there is no abstract sense which “shows itself” *through* the artistic configuration. The effectiveness of art does *not* rely on “showing something,” i.e. on meaningful representation.

The artistic show commences where the act of showing paradoxically withdraws from *what* is shown. Art subverts the logic of signifying, as it unfolds a dimension of non-appearance and inconspicuousness which crucially induces *responsiveness*, not interpretation of meaning. During the aesthetic experience we are *pulled towards* a horizon of existentially relevant meaningfulness. At this point the external, neutral spectator or onlooker becomes transformed into the *involved beholder* who does not just receive a

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<sup>21</sup> Just in this reductionist concept of a “sign,” confounding it with a mere “signal” and thus depriving it of the essential event of “signi-fying,” i.e. of “showing,” Bernard Stiegler sees the crucial shortcoming of Heidegger’s existential analysis: Bernard Stiegler, *La technique et le temps* (Paris: Fayard, 2018), 279, 282, 776.

message, as manifested or transmitted through artistic symbolization. The beholder is transported into another condition of existence. Due to affection by art, the beholder is *not able to not respond* to an inconspicuous appeal towards meaning. By beholding the show of art we expose and hold ourselves amidst meaning. This "pathos" – Bernhard Waldenfels' "*Widerfahrnis*" – represents the core of inconspicuous showing in the arts. Here may lie the clue to the question why showing in fact is more basic than saying, and why Heidegger eventually resorts to a "*Zeige*."

In order to obtain an adequate understanding of the genuine modes of appearance and showing engaged by art, we have to perform phenomenological, or rather aesthetic, reduction. Looking at artworks has to be envisaged as an encounter with "aesthetic objects." What are the implications of this reduction?

First, while signs refer to a *closed* "totality of relevance" whence they obtain their signification, the artistic horizon of signifying is an *open* one: any accomplishment of sense and meaning is always deferred to other interpretative acts. That is the reason why hermeneutics as well as history of art, when fixing historical significations in the manner of iconography, tend to reduce the validity of artistic configurations to some face value, that is to some topic or concept that remains external to the particular artistic phenomenon. What is neglected by this sort of historicist hermeneutics of art is the specific *mode of appearance* of artistic phenomena. Yet meaningfulness, as being *immanent* in a perceptible configuration, inevitably relates to an *open* horizon of signifying, opening up to ever to be renewed perceptual experiences in the future.

Second, accounts given by art history, with respect to a particular artwork, mostly do not reflect the beholder's aesthetic experience. These accounts often are void of aesthetic empathy, omitting the fervor we become involved in when we experience art. Yet this fervor is exactly what artistic showing is concerned with. Art takes advantage of an inconspicuousness which is inherent in the act of showing. Its peculiar intensity results from its *implicitly* affecting us, not from explicitly delivered signification. Any hermeneutical approach to artworks, focusing on "conspicuous" meaning, must necessarily miss the inconspicuous dimension of *affection through showing*. Affection *as* such cannot be accounted for by referring to the symbolic content or stylistic features of an artwork. The affective event remains inconspicuous throughout in what conspicuously appears. Yet it is precisely in response to the inconspicuous affection by the show of art that the beholder *engages with meaning* – instead of just capturing, understanding some signification. When confronted with the motivating pull towards meaning, the aesthetic beholder surrenders to an *inconspicuous obligation to engage* with artistic meaningfulness. As the beholder's whole person and

existence is being *disposed of*, during an aesthetic experience, the classical “cognitive subject” imperatively turns into a “bodily Self.”

In his account of artworks such as the Greek temple or Vincent van Gogh’s painting *Une paire de chaussures* (1886, Amsterdam: Van Gogh Museum), Heidegger himself obviously remains within the narrow semiotic frame of symbolical expression which allows for a hermeneutics of art. Yet besides functioning like a sign, artistic showing exhibits a much richer and more complicated structure. As Michel Foucault shows in *The Order of Things*, for instance Diego Velázquez’ painting *Las meninas* (1656, Madrid: Museo del Prado) obliges the inconspicuous beholder of the picture to become entangled with the presentation of an interior scene. Jan Vermeer’s *Het meisje met de parel* (1665, Den Haag: Mauritshuis) forces us to engage in a dialogue with the image. We feel like being disposed of by a subtle, “inconspicuous” effectiveness, set free by the astonished and inviting expression of the girl who is depicted as looking towards us. From a spectator at a distance, we involuntarily turn into engaged beholders, due to inconspicuous implications inherent in what is shown. Just the same affection beyond signification is also illustrated by Gerhard Richter’s *Betty* (1988, Saint Louis: Art Museum). Here it is the absence of the depicted person’s gaze, as she turns her back on us, that feels like a personal insult. We cannot resist, we must engage with this pictorial show, due to our frustrated expectations. Finally, Edouard Manet’s *Olympia* (1863, Paris: Musée d’Orsay), as well as his *Le déjeuner sur l’herbe* (1863, Paris: Musée d’Orsay) succeeded in provoking a harsh shock, by means of a refined play with the frivolous exhibition of bland nudity. Due to the glances striking the beholder from inside the image, the exposed naked body causes the beholder’s own denudation, as we may feel very uncomfortable in the position of an impartial and distanced spectator, outside the picture. Manet’s display of the classical nude maliciously transgresses the borderline between pictorial representation and violently taking possession of the beholder’s person. Our being affected by the show is put into effect by the “innocent” gaze depicted as reaching us from inside the image. This striking power of the show may be considered as an inconspicuous surplus, exceeding the mere content of depiction. We are “let in” by such showing, and only can “wait” in a *gelassen* disposition, as we ourselves become exposed to what we already are participating in. Aesthetic openness, through “showing,” results in our getting involved in the world looked at.

At last, the insight concerning artistic inconspicuousness becomes even more convincing when non-representational, non-mimetic art is at stake. Here there is no illusion of something to be recognized, of any message and meaning exhibited, preventing the distanced spectator from actively participating in the show. For instance, in *White Center (Yellow, Pink and Lavender on Rose)* by Mark Rothko (1950, private collection) obviously no gaze

reaches us from inside the image, as nothing recognizable is depicted. The picture evidently does not function in the conspicuously indicating way a "sign" is supposed to. Yet the pictorial show, the intensely vibrating incandescence of luminous fields and strips could not be more "conspicuous." The crucial point is that this "abstract" painting breaks open at its surface, by inconspicuous showing. Beyond its presenting itself in front of us, it attracts us, making us feel like being absorbed by its glowing density and entering the iconic object. We may experience a "being let in," although there is nothing—no place or situation—to participate in. An inconspicuous surplus of affective effectiveness exceeds the perceptible content—fields and strips of color. We mutate into "waiting ones"—until we are "let in." With the pulsating image we share an unfathomable inner space that opens up towards us, at this "iconic site." Eventually the glow of the image coalesces with the surrounding world we pertain to, on the level of our existence.

This coalescence with the world, as effectuated by inconspicuous showing, maybe has been pushed to its extreme in "light installations" or "light spaces" created by James Turrell. Here only colored light shows itself, without conspicuously showing anything. Where the gloomy luminosity dispersed in a closed interior space slowly fades away, regains intensity, or changes its hue, the we are unconsciously pervaded by the mood we find ourselves immersed in. Yet this affection takes place at an "inconspicuous" pace; we are "let in" by a site that appears to be replete with intensified meaningfulness, yet utterly lacking specification. The inconspicuous show that does not show anything condenses into our "waiting" and our being "let in."

Experiencing non-representational artworks may increase evidence for the structure and functioning of inconspicuous showing. However, as "meaningfulness" here becomes an extremely vague and debatable category, the relation between showing and saying ventures to dissolve into mere elusiveness. What remains is no more than the event of "waiting" and being "let in." With these and similar artistic practices it seems as if the sphere of "the Saying" were left behind altogether. In contemporary art the "Show" may finally have obtained its independence from semiotics in the most general sense.

### Concluding remarks

A decisive connection between "saying" and "showing" surfaces in Heidegger's valorization of language. With respect to this problem, art demonstrates how showing exceeds semantically articulated speech. While verbal signifying relies on the *mediation* of understanding, an *immediate* pull is exerted on the witness of showing. The silent voice of art thus accomplishes

the “chimes of stillness.” Whereas even Heidegger’s original “Sage” still needs interpretation, the genuine “Zeige” invites the “waiting one” to immediately participate—to truly “receive” and “stand inside” (Heidegger’s “*Inständigkeit*”). Only in this way do we become “appropriated” by and to sense and meaning. Therefore, Heidegger’s “Saying” may indeed imply an even more original “Show.”

Furthermore, where showing “is let” to occur, by our aesthetic attitude, artistic behavior and aesthetic practice may be understood as an exercise in “waiting without expectation.” Artistic showing is far from reducible to the linguistic paradigm of signification or symbolical denotation. The show of art does not pertain to the domain of hermeneutics. It rather partakes in our fundamental relation with Being, to be lived-through by way of responsive *Gelassenheit*. The claim that “truth sets itself into the artwork” ought *not* to be understood in terms of a disclosure of sense and meaning, but as the *event of showing*. Showing, yet *before* poetic speech, lets us truly become “waiting ones,” in the face of Being. The experience of showing lets us become responsively *gelassen*: in a “waiting” mode relating ourselves to Being.

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