



Bodies Moved, Moved Bodies

A Phenomenological Study of the Embodied Experience in

Olafur Eliasson's Installations

Your blind passenger and Your negotiable panorama

A Master's Thesis for the Degree

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ABSTRACT

DIVISION OF ART HISTORY AND VISUAL STUDIES / FILM STUDIES

MASTER OF ARTS IN VISUAL CULTURE

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A Phenomenological Study of the Embodied Experience in Olafur Eliasson's
Installations *Your blind passenger* and *Your negotiable panorama*

By: Anna Rowland

This thesis provides an analysis of the embodied experience in Olafur Eliasson's installations *Your blind passenger* (2010) and *Your negotiable panorama* (2006). The empirical material was observed in 2011 at ARKEN Museum of Modern Art, Ishøj, Denmark, where the two installations were located at the time.

The author argues that the experience of a work of art is done through the beholder's entire body and certain notions can alter the quality of this embodied experience. The study explores how engagement and interaction with an artwork can get influenced by the intertwining relationship, created between the artwork and the beholder in different levels. In the process, the research provides a philosophical discussion about phenomenological methodology toward artworks, while integrating the philosophy with the author's own experience of the empirical material, and Eliasson's approach for his art.

The findings investigate methodological view about experiencing and perceiving works of art, proposing a new concept called *phenomenological sphere*, which consists of, but is not limited to characteristics and properties of beholders, artwork, and the spatiotemporal surrounding. The thesis concludes that the phenomenological sphere is what determines the extent and quality of the embodied experience; but acknowledges that it is not a rigid notion, and can change depending on each intertwining component of the experience.

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1. Introduction

1.1 Research objectives, questions, and hypothesis

Encountering artworks includes two things: one, experiencing and perceiving them; and second, being engaged. The engagement part though can vary from a mental stage, such as triggering new thoughts and ideas inspired by the artwork, to getting involved physically with the artwork. Engagement in both forms goes hand in hand with experiencing and perceiving the artwork. Experience of artworks as I suggest in this thesis, is not done only through perceiving the signals received via the beholders' optical nerves; though this includes a wider spectrum of physical/mental experience, and accordingly engagement. Beholders experience the artworks through their entire body.

Therefore, through this thesis, the embodied experience and beholders' engagement with artworks will be examined with considerations about all bodily senses. Furthermore, the notions of presence and embodiment will be investigated in relation to human experience and how the beholders perceive and interact with the artwork. Additionally, I will discuss to what extent such a perception is or can be, an active bodily perception. I will depart from Maurice Merleau-Ponty's notion of perception, which he refers to as "our kinaesthetic, prescientific lived-bodily presence to the world. [He continues that] We are a living bodily system (*le corps propre*), prior to the body-object that is constructed by science or medicine."¹ I will remark how the beholders' mental and physical existence in the world forms their perception, and how such a thing can be regarded as an interactive relation between the beholder and the work of art.

To accomplish the abovementioned and to adapt the subject matter to the boundaries of a master's thesis, I have decided to use two artworks from Olafur Eliasson namely *Your blind passenger* (2010),² and *Your negotiable panorama* (2006), as my empirical material; and analyse them in terms of embodied experience, and beholders' sensual and perceptual relation to them.

Several characteristics define the extent and qualities of embodied experience. These aspects together create a notion that I term *phenomenological sphere*. This thesis

¹ G.A. Johnson & M Merleau-Ponty (ed.), *The Merleau-Ponty aesthetics reader: philosophy and painting*, Northwestern University Press, Evanston, 1993, p. 8.

² Original title in Danish: *Din blinde passager*.

suggests that every artwork has some kind of sphere around itself, which alters the engagement of the beholder through different mental and physical responses, and correlatively, experiences.

This analysis eventually tries to illuminate certain characteristics in artworks, by aid of Eliasson's works, which affect the quality of the beholders' perception and experience of artworks. This will help me to introduce and elaborate the concept of the phenomenological sphere; how it is created and what aspects within and around the artwork can change its qualities. Accordingly, the effect of phenomenological sphere on embodied experience of the beholders, and their engagement with the artwork will be discussed. In addition, an elaborated discussion will be presented about the relation between engagement and presence, the very feeling of existing, being included both mentally and physically in the moment and in the world via the work of art.

1.2 Research method

I will depart from the empirical material and analyse the works from my own subjective perspective, while bringing in and connecting them to the theoretical discussions. Through the analysis, I will apply a phenomenological method inspired by Åsa Dahlin,¹ where she in her PhD dissertation *On Architecture, Aesthetic Experience and The Embodied Mind: Seven Essays*, uses her own body as a tool to discuss how phenomenon can be perceived. I will in the same manner, use my own bodily experience and perception, while I analyse the empirical material. I have followed Eliasson's art with interest since 2003 when I saw his installation *The weather project*.² From the first encounter with Eliasson's work of art I experienced that this works had a strong impact on my body and this observation together with curiosity why this installations arose this strong embodied experience is what lead me to choose this specific empirical material and to apply the phenomenological method on the subject for this thesis. This is due to the tradition that “[p]henomenologists usually analyze and describe their own appreciative attitudes and what is appreciated in them. This is what they have direct access to in *self-*

¹ Å Dahlin, *On Architecture, Aesthetic Experience and The Embodied Mind: Seven Essays*, Stockholm: School of Architecture, Royal Institute of Technology, Stockholm, 2002.

²*The weather project*, 2003, Turbine Hall, Tate Modern, London, UK,

observation.”¹ As Merleau-Ponty believes, “We shall find in ourselves, and nowhere else, the unity and true meaning of phenomenology.”² Furthermore, I will give an account of sensual relations and bodily engagement of the beholder with the artworks, in the process of approaching them. To denote the theoretical focus and to elaborate and study the notions of embodied experience along with consciousness, I will utilize the philosophical question of phenomenology. To do so, I will employ narrations of Merleau-Ponty about discipline of phenomenology in art; by means of the method E. Louis Lankford presents in *A Phenomenological Methodology for Art Criticism*,³ where he stresses that for a correct phenomenological criticism of a work of art, one should remain open and receptive, while upholding a constructive orientation towards it. He continues that “[t]he discovery of the significance of a work of art for a viewer requires the discrimination of ideas and feelings that may be derived from an examination of the work through interpretive analysis.”⁴ He specially focuses that no creation of meaning shall be considered absolute, and meanings synthesized while approaching artworks are always “subject to reinterpretation and verification.”⁵ This methodology will have a particular importance in this thesis, since by using my own body as a instrument, I will not try to offer absolute meanings for the empirical materials, yet I will try to illuminate how I, as a self, with a physical body and a complex metaphysical entity, can be moved by what the artworks are engaging me to do.

Lester Embree considers that the phenomenological methodology already from the start was interested in unfolding the mysteries of the human experiences. “Interest in the method of describing universal essences arose in the beginning of the phenomenological tradition and has always been widely accepted there.”⁶ Furthermore, Embree states that the activity of perceiving art can be rather straightforward and does not necessarily have to be exceedingly reflective. In order to apply the methodology of phenomenological aesthetics to the discipline of art one has to be predominantly intuitive, analytic and descriptive, but the uttermost crucial feature of the process is reflection; “one reflects on the already reflective practice,

¹ L Embree, ‘Methodology’, in H.R. Sepp & L Embree (ed.), *Handbook of Phenomenological Aesthetics*, Springer, Dordrecht, 2010, p. 218.

² M Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception*, 2nd edn, Routledge, London, 2002, p. viii.

³ EL Lankford, ‘A Phenomenological Methodology for Art Criticism’, *Studies in Art Education*, Vol. 25, No. 3, National Art Education Association, 1984.

⁴ Lankford, p. 157.

⁵ *ibid.*

⁶ Embree, p. 218.

and thus engages in reflection on reflection.”¹ However, Embree does not mean that phenomenology is the only philosophical approach that is based on reflections, but it appears to be richer in the reflexive matter than other traditions.² I have been as reflexive as possible in the process of analysing the empirical materials; yet it is important to state that throughout the observation of the empirical material, which happened during the summer of 2011, I intuitively analysed and took notes on my experiences. I actively got engaged with the artworks, and the extent of this engagement was already important, questioning, and interesting for me. Nonetheless, this was before when I decided to use these artworks as empirical material for my thesis. By this, I argue that the observations are more genuine and reflexive than if I instead would have investigated the material with the specific focus on embodiment. I assume that such a determined focus would have limited my observations, or could cause bias in the results. Furthermore, it is afterwards that I made the connection between the experiences of the empirical material and the theories by Merleau-Ponty. This order constituted reflections on reflections already made, in a reflexive phenomenological tradition, I would say.

1.3 Research material and delimitation

1.3.1 Empirical material

I have chosen Olafur Eliasson’s installation *Your blind passenger* as the first empirical material for my thesis since it provides the beholders, extensive possibilities to experience and get involved with this work in a variety of individual and embodied ways of seeing.

The second empirical case of this essay is Eliasson’s *Your negotiable panorama* which presents a straight and substantial view about how the beholders interact through their bodies with the work of art. The reason for choosing this work is the unique unavoidable situation provided by the work, for a rich bodily experience.

¹ Embree, p. 215.

² Embree, p. 216.

1.3.2 Theoretical framework

In the following research, I will use phenomenology as my theoretical framework, to elaborate the state of beholder in opposition to the artwork, and the dynamic bodily and mental interaction between these two. It is necessary to briefly explain phenomenology to make it easier to understand Merleau-Ponty's philosophy. Just like the name imply "phenomenology explores phenomena (from *phainein* meaning 'to show'; Greek for 'appearance'), which are perceived directly by the senses."¹ Edmund Husserl, the founder of phenomenology states, "human beings experience the external world as objects of consciousness".² The knowledge of the world always embarks on lived experience and human consciousness is by means intentional, because it is always directed on or at something; an experience of something. In that sense, the relation between the consciousness and the surrounding world is crucial. Merleau-Ponty develops Husserl's work and his main focus concerns the concept of perception and embodiment. The subjectivity of the human being is informed by our physical bodies. Merleau-Ponty claims that the body's influence is central to how we perceive the world and he criticise the Cartesian philosophy where body and mind is a dichotomy. Humans have access to and are connected through the world via our bodies, rather than being disembodied thinking minds; "our access to the world is through the body and not through, or not only through, the mind."³ For that reason, existence is not just thinking, it is embodiment.

Merleau-Ponty describes a rather intuitive process regarding the encountering with an object: "In perception we do not think the object and we do not think ourselves thinking it, we are given over to the object and we merge into this body which is better informed than we are about the world".⁴ This distinct observation illustrates in a remarkably clear way in which I believe the process of encountering an object – in this case, the empirical material for this thesis – is both intuitive and direct. At the time while I was performing the part of the analysis that took place in the museum where the artworks where situated, I did not have in mind how to think or what to think. In the moment of encounter with the artworks, I intuitively became united with the works and experienced them. I did not think theoretically at that time; rather this is something that I reflect over after, while analysing my experience.

¹ J Emerling, *Theory for art history*, Routledge, New York, 2005, p. 214.

² Emerling, p. 214.

³ Emerling, p. 215.

⁴ Merleau-Ponty, 2002, p. 277.

To sum up describing what is significant to this school of thoughts in the art context, I suggest that in phenomenology, when one wants to understand an artwork, one has to study it vigilantly as a phenomenon, as if it is a thing of physical matter. In the encounter with the artwork, one has to confront it not only for the simple reason that one has a body; the confrontation also takes place inside of one's body. For Merleau-Ponty "our facticity cannot be understood apart from an understanding of our bodies."¹

1.3.3 Delimitation

To stay within the framework of a master thesis, I limited my empirical material to two contemporary works of art. For the plain reason that I use my body as a device in the analyse and therefore has to be both physically and mentally situated in the same space as the work of art, to be able to analyse it, I found it hard to find time enough for including more artworks in this project. It could have been useful to apply the concept of phenomenological sphere on other forms of artworks, from other artists, and from other cultures, or from other time periods, to evaluate the functionality and accuracy of it. However, this can open a theoretical filed for other research projects in future with the same subject of interest.

1.4 Previous and current state of research

It is significant for Eliasson to emphasise how the role of the beholder constitutes an essential ingredient in his works of art. There are many publications about Eliasson's art and all of them draw attention to his ideas about the importance of the beholder and his/her active role in perception of the artwork. For instance, Eliasson mentions in an interview with Daniel Birnbaum regarding the viewer's standpoint in the process of experiencing art that "The situation lies with the viewer. Without the viewer, the readings of the piece could be endless. So with each viewer the readings and the experience are nailed down to one subjective condition; without the viewer there is, in a way, nothing."²

¹ JD. Parry (ed.), *Art and phenomenology*, Routledge, London, 2011, p. 5.

² M Grynshztejn, D Birnbaum & M Speaks, *Olafur Eliasson*, Phaidon, London, 2002, p. 14.

Furthermore, the relationship between artwork and beholder has always been a subject of interest for both art scholars and philosophers. Approaching the artwork and what happens through this process has inspired many philosophers¹ to discuss how artworks make meaning, what the beholders accomplish while perceiving an artwork. Such debates have led to the creation of different schools of thought, such as phenomenology within which, the direct sensual perception of the phenomena in the surrounding world is discussed. As an instance of application of phenomenology in relation to the bodily experience of aesthetics, one can again refer to Dahlin who applies this theory onto architectural creations. For instance, where she stresses that “we confront them with our bodies and our senses, as well as with thought and feeling.”² Such approach provides an important theoretical base for the subject of this thesis and I consider that there are many similarities between architecture and Eliasson’s installations, in as much as they both deal with spatial questions and have characteristics that include the whole person in their structure in an almost absorbing way.

Additionally, within such kinds of academic debates, where meaning creation process is analysed, specific attention has been given to certain artists such as Eliasson, who constructs their artworks with strong theoretical focus on the state of the beholder, and consider him/her as an active source in the meaning creation process.³ Therefore, to specify the subject matter within the thesis prospect, I will try to enlighten how Eliasson's *Your blind passenger* and *Your negotiable panorama* has certain characteristics that can be discussed in terms of phenomenology and bodily experience of artwork.

As mentioned earlier, there have been academic discussions about both Eliasson’s works, and the matters about approaching artworks and the role of the beholder. Nonetheless, presenting certain characteristics that create the phenomenological sphere, and terming it in this way has been missing from the academic debates that I have been following. Notions such as scale of the artwork, and how it affects the quality of interaction between the beholder and artwork, and as a result, how this altered interaction influences the perception, has not been debated within this structure. Thus, this thesis tries to bring forward the new notion of the

¹ For instance Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel, Maurice Merleau-Ponty, Hans-Georg Gadamer.

² Dahlin, p. 165.

³ For instance Mirosław Bałka’s installation *How It Is*, Tate Modern, London, UK, 2009.

phenomenological sphere around the artworks and put light on the extent of this sphere on beholders' perception.

1.5 Chapter Summaries

In this introduction chapter, I initiate with the empirical material and the theoretical framework of this thesis. I present the research objectives, the questions and hypothesis together with some of the previous and current research relevant for this topic. In the second chapter, I will focus on the empirical material of this thesis and connect them with some preliminary theoretical background. In the third chapter, I will focus on and elaborate the theoretical and philosophical concepts needed to develop the notion of phenomenological sphere, which will accordingly be the subject of the fourth chapter. Therefore, the ultimate goal of the following thesis will be presenting a theory that can be applied to a wider spectrum of artworks , which can evaluate what characteristics and qualities within them can alter the beholder's bodily engagement with the artwork and her/his experience and perception.

2. Case studies and theories

2.1 *Your blind negotiable flesh*

I have chosen *Your blind passenger* and *Your negotiable panorama* as empirical material for my discussion in as much as they are considered to provide the beholders with extensive possibilities of bodily experience. Olafur Eliasson himself describes his works as “devices for the experience of reality”¹. I would suggest that this phrase reflects his concerns about the beholder’s experience, and how they perceive the surrounding world; and my concerns about how his works can provide rich empirical material for the subject matter of this these. Eliasson’s works are considered to be endowed with multiple sensory potentials and they encourage “a critical attitude towards normative processes of perception while at the same time offering viewers opportunities to expand their ability to envision.”² The beholders’ kinetic involvement in his works can be understood as individual and embodied ways of seeing. When the beholder physically engages with his works by entering these two specific installations, s/he defines the outer dimensions of the works and gets physically and mentally assimilated with them. Through such experience, the beholder confronts her/himself, and the awareness of time and room becomes highly subjective. This particular interlace of outer physical and inner mental dimensions that comes with the experience of being integrated with Eliasson’s artworks, and almost being absorbed by them, makes them relevant objects for application of Merleau-Ponty’s concept of the *flesh*. He elaborates this concept in the chapter entitled *The Intertwining-The Chiasm*, from the unfinished *The Visible and the Invisible: Followed by Working Notes*.³

To be able to grasp the significance of the flesh, one has to start by an illumination of the source from where this notion sprung forth, the very relation between the visible and the invisible. “The visible about us seems to rest in itself. It is as though our vision were formed in the heart of the visible, or as though there were between it and us an intimacy as close as between the sea and the strand.”⁴ Here, Merleau-Ponty discusses the relation between the vision and the visible as a complex embodied and

¹ Grynsztejn, Birnbaum & Speaks, p. 39.

² M Grynsztejn, '(Y)our Entanglements: Olafur Eliasson, The Museum, and Consumer Culture', in; Madeleine Grynsztejn (ed.), *Take your time: Olafur Eliasson*, San Francisco Museum of Modern Art, San Francisco, 2007, p. 17.

³ M Merleau-Ponty, *The Visible and the Invisible: Followed by Working Notes*, Northwestern University Press, Evanston, 1968.

⁴ Merleau-Ponty, 1968, pp. 130-131.

interlaced phenomenon. Yet, we can neither merge our bodies into the visible, nor can the vision take place inside of our bodies; though the vision would then disappear in the formation of a change in the position between the seer and the visible. What we see is there in front of our eyes just as it cannot be inside of our bodies. In a similar manner, we cannot see our retina inside our eyes, yet we know that it is there. In addition, paradoxically, at the same time as we perceive something it is as if a transformation takes place and we become a part of what we see, almost like it comes into us.

It could be said that the meaning of a work of art is comprised through the intertwining dialectics between a subject and that work of art, within which the meaning turns visible for the beholder. When people approach a phenomenon or an object – and in this case, an artwork – they already bear skills, and certain capacities for perception. Yet, the approaching happens within the context that the phenomenon exists in. Thus, the meaning or how a phenomenon is perceived, depends on the beholder, and on the properties of the phenomenon and the context. From the phenomenological point of view, it is “the interaction of external conditions and internal construction that forms the basis for human creation, response, and apprehension.”¹ Based on this discussion, Merleau-Ponty established the notions visible and invisible, suggesting that the visible is the external phenomenon and the invisible are what is created inside the beholder by means of his/her imagination and perception. Therefore, every visible phenomenon has its own invisible facet.

However, the flesh, which perhaps best can be explained as if it is a natural element – like air and earth –, also embraces in itself a deep and existential dimension. Merleau-Ponty describes that the “flesh is not matter, is not mind, is not substance. To designate it, we should need the old term ‘element’ [...] The flesh is in this sense an ‘element’ of Being.”² I would argue that this idea of the flesh is appropriate to discuss in connection to Eliasson’s works in as much as they deal with the consciousness in the symbiotic interaction between the beholder and the artwork, and the constant flux between the external and internal carnality that communicates via the work of art and the beholder, and vice versa. Regarding the flesh, George Lakoff and Mark Johnson state that “our body is intimately tied to what we walk on, sit on, touch, taste, smell, see, breath, and move within. Our corporeality is a part of the

¹ Lankford, p. 152.

² Merleau-Ponty, 1968, p. 139.

corporeality of the world.”¹ In similar ways that our body is connected to the earthly world and all that comes with it, the beholder is allied with this thesis’ empirical material, in as much as bodily interaction between the two parts is indispensable.

2.2 *Your blind passenger*

Eliasson’s installation *Your blind passenger* is a ninety meter long tunnel. Entering the tunnel, the beholder’s body is immediately surrounded by thick fog and a bright light. Visibility is hardly 1.5 meters and the fog so thick that one loses sight of the complete spatial surroundings and at moments even one’s own body. This work puts the beholders in a situation where they have to depend on other senses than just the visual; as they step inside, they are enveloped in the work and becomes a physical part of it.

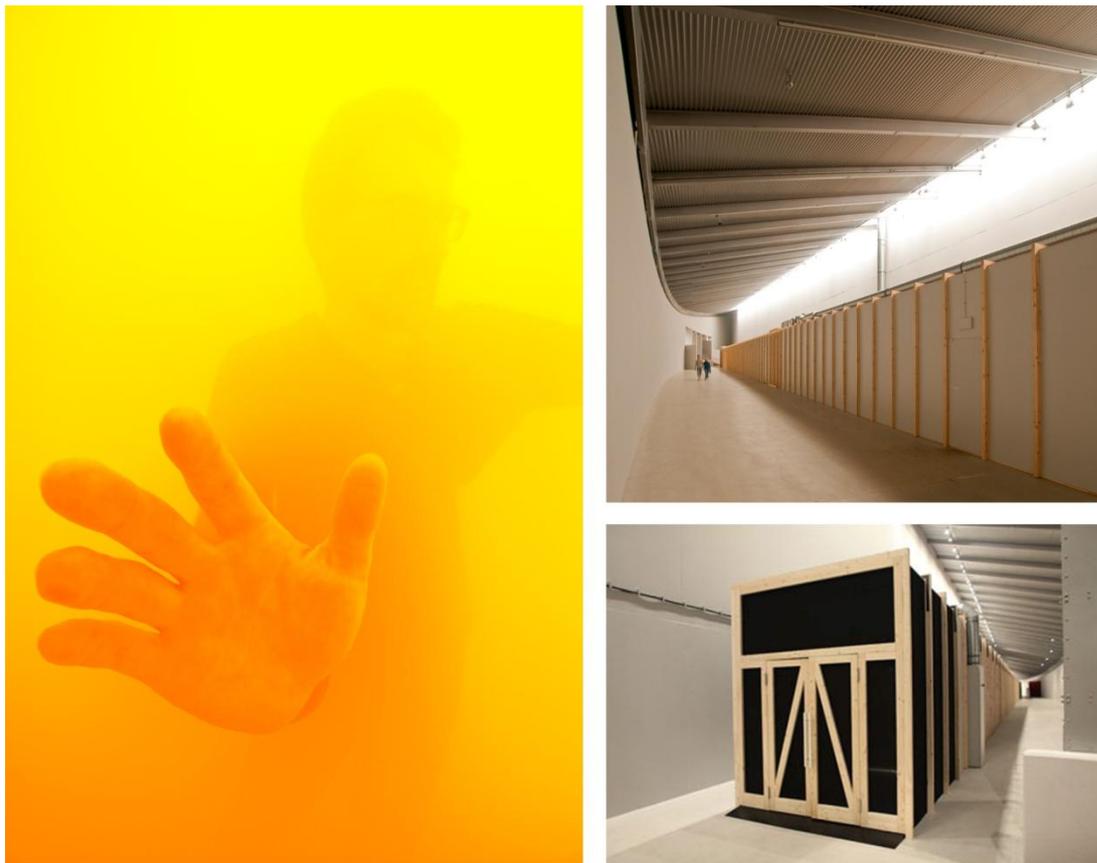


Figure 1: Left: inside of *Your blind passenger*
Right top: *Your blind passenger* from the outside
Right bottom: one of the entrances to *Your blind passenger*

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© Olafur Eliasson

¹ G Lakoff & M Johnson, *Philosophy in the Flesh: The Embodied Mind and Its Challenge to Western Thought*, Basic Books, New York, 1999, p. 565.

In order for the beholder to be able to experience *Your blind passenger* it is in fact indispensable that s/he actually passes *through* the artwork, though it is constructed as a lengthy tunnel. Seeing the actual body of the tunnel as an art-object displayed in the museum is a part of experiencing the artwork; yet, it is not possible to see, feel or take part of this particular artwork from the outside. It has to be experienced from the inside and through the whole body, not merely the eyes. When the beholder physically passes the threshold and enters the tunnel that defines the outer dimensions of *Your blind passenger*, the beholder faces her/himself, and the consciousness about time and space can be perceived in a highly subjective way.

In the following division of this text, with a phenomenological approach and taking in account the notions of flesh and what already has mentioned as visible and invisible, I start my own analysis regarding *Your blind passenger*. Meanwhile, I will be using my own body as a platform, and my bodily experience as a reference to base upon my narration of phenomenology, and to investigate the theoretical focus of the thesis in a detailed and applied manner.

For me, seeing the long tunnel from the outside before entering was quite thrilling, because it gave a rough estimation of how long time it would take to walk through it. As soon as I entered the tunnel and became integrated in the light and fog the world outside seemed to disappear and the time lost relevance. The very eyes that just some seconds ago could see the surroundings so clear now tried to adjust to the bright light and the thick fog but without being able to see longer than approximately one and a half meter ahead; it became almost amusing. A warm and curious feeling arose inside of me and I felt safe to start walking straight forward without really seeing or knowing what I could expect to meet in front of me. Because of the reduced vision, the other bodily senses became more alert and I now used my ears to locate the sound from other visitors and the sound from my body moving into the tunnel to analyse and estimate the spatial information. Any slight obstacles in front of my feet, which were not visible anymore for my eyes, would immediately stop me from walking, and any minor sounds oriented my stretched moving hands as well as my head. It felt like I had never been so aware of my entity, my being.

It was peaceful in the tunnel and I could hear just a few other persons somewhere in front of me. Possibly those calm and stumbling sounds triggered this secure feeling that I felt. If someone started to scream, it would completely change the situation into

something awkward and scary. Therefore, I stumbled along quite slowly and I noticed that the light gradually changed colour as I moved. The intensity of the light was the same though; it was only the colour that changed as I walked by. One of the things that helped me to navigate was figuring out that the colour changed according to my movement.

I experienced an intensive presence as I stood there in the foggy colour as I was one integrated part of this element; as if we were one and the same flesh. When I slowly moved I was and felt totally intermingled with the surroundings. When passing the blue area I felt blue and coming into the yellow area, I felt all yellow warm and sunny. I stopped there for a while fascinated by the warmth that I felt and I reached up my hands in an attempt to understand if there was some radiator somewhere because it really felt like being in the sun on this location. It was impossible for me to figure out if this was the case and I consider this phenomenon to be produced by the qualities of the warm yellow colour.

Somewhere in the middle of the tunnel, it became darker and darker, until it suddenly became totally dark. It was a strange feeling to walk towards this unknown darkness, and I got the impression that the closer I came the dark part the lower the ceiling became. Not that I really had any chance to estimate the height of the ceiling before in the tunnel, but the impression of having a really high ceiling in the light areas dramatically changed to the opposite in the darker part. I even discovered myself crouching down and protecting my head with my hand while walking past the pitch-black area slowly. By creating a kind of non-space within this space by excluding the visual sense completely the focus shifted from the tunnels interior to my bodily interior. On the other hand, perhaps it was the same though we are intertwined, but it all became obvious when I heard my own breathing, felt my own heartbeat and became conscious of my previous experiences of darkness. It becomes clear that the visitor plays an important role in this artwork, and that individual pre-understanding and previous experiences highly influence the understanding of it.

Inside the tunnel, the outer world stopped existing and the only thing that caught my attention was this element that I was a part of. It is therefore hard to say how long time it took me to pass through the tunnel and come out on the other side; and it is of course without relevance. This just indicates that the mentally and bodily experience

of being included in the artwork and being involved with it to such an extent that the outer dimensions like time and the exterior society becomes insignificant for a while.

I will now pass on to the second work of art that constitutes the empirical material for this thesis. After a more general description of the second case study, I will once again return to my own phenomenological account of experiencing the artwork.

2.3 Your negotiable panorama

The second empirical case of this thesis is Eliasson's *Your negotiable panorama* (2006), a centrepiece of ARKEN's (Museum of Modern Art, Ishøj, Denmark) collection, which presents a more direct and tangible view about bodily interaction of the beholders with the work of art, and vice versa. The artwork is constructed of a huge cylindrical room, which enfolds a big artificial pool filled with water. In the centre of this basin, there is a unique lamp, made in a specific shape that illuminates and casts a circular stripe of light over the surface of the water, from which it reflects on the surrounding wall. The whole artwork is set in this dark space. There is one small entrance to the work, through which the visitors enter and from where they also see the source of light from the outside. The only thing one can see while approaching the entrance is a small piece of the ray of light, cast by an unknown source over the interior wall.

To be able to visit this specific artwork, one has no other way, than to most probably unintentionally, interact with the artwork. As soon as the beholder approaches the work of art to see, or more appropriately, to experience it by positioning his/her physical body inside the sphere that encloses the artwork, the *negotiable panorama* starts to react to the presence of the beholder. This is a reaction caused by the beholder's body; seen, perceived, and understood through the same body. As soon as the visitor passes the only existing entrance, they press down a panel. Their pressure is transferred to the bottom of the basin, which causes the shallow water to move and creates small waves. As a result of the disturbance on the water surface, the reflected light stripe on the surrounding wall alters and creates random animated shapes and special wavy movements. This process happens every time someone enters or leaves the artwork.

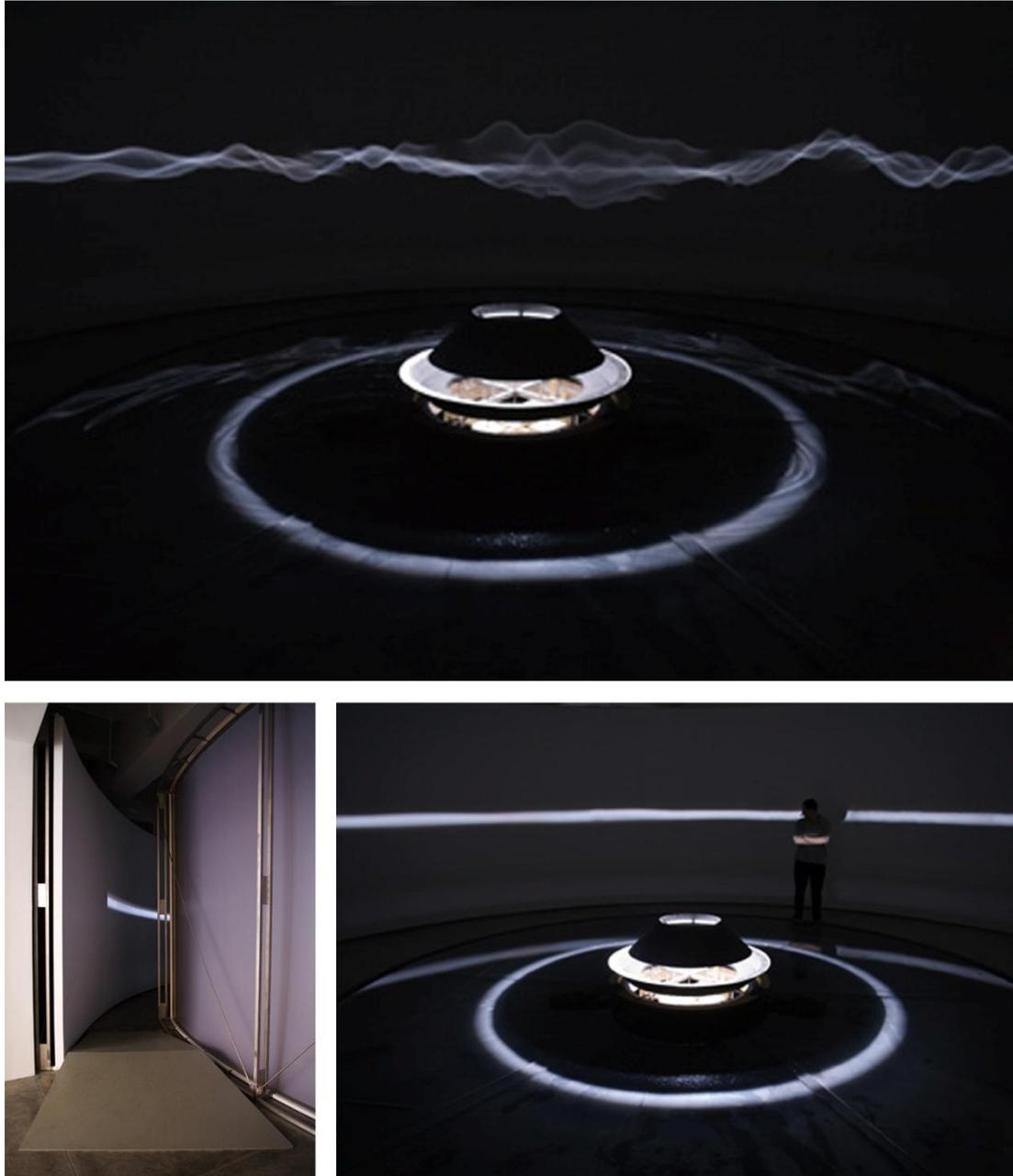


Figure 2: *Your negotiable panorama* and its entrance

© Olafur Eliasson

In the subsequent part of this section, I explain my own analysis of *Your negotiable panorama* with a phenomenological approach and also considering the notions of flesh, visible and invisible. In the same manner as I did in the previous section, I will again take my own body, and my bodily experience as a point of departure to be able to clarify my narration of phenomenology, and to investigate the theoretical focus of the thesis in a detailed and applied way.

From my perspective, the exterior wall of this artwork is quite dull and does not give the visitor any perplex promises. The rather uninteresting outer dimension of this artwork is a bright contrast to the mysterious interior. I passed over the threshold without understanding right away that it was my body that activated the movements in the light on the wall. I became immediately fascinated by the beautiful wavy line that slowly moved over the walls surface, in the height of my eyes, almost like a horizon. I carefully observed the reflections from the basin, and my eyes followed the movements around the circular room as the tempo of the movements gradually slowed down.

After a while, when the water was completely still the horizon emanated a pure tranquillity and I was stunned to experience this calm and peaceful state that spread into my mind and body. Once again, I experienced that I was intermingled with the installation as if we were of the same flesh. The invisible calm state was obvious both in me and in the work of art in the same time. The calm horizon reflected this mindful condition and made it visible for me. In a sense, one can say that the ray of light that so steadily reflected the projections from the water signified inner piece, both in me and literally in the water basin as well.

Another visitor entered into the artwork and activated the movements in the water again, and I now understood how the mechanism worked. As more people came in, the meditative state was completely gone, and I started observing the play of shadows from the bodies on the wall. The increased action in the room gave a quite merry feeling that reminded me of a walk on a crowded jetty on a warm summer day. Perhaps this was the result of the contrast of the dark room and the bright reflections from the water that now moved more dramatically, but I do think the plurality of persons in the room and their shadows increased the sensation of dynamism and bodily presence.

One visitor played with her hand in the water to see how the reflections acted upon the wall, which made me perceive better the general curious and positive mood in the room. When I came back again to the space after a while when it was empty, the wavy line played a secondary role. Now instead my own shadow grabbed my interest. I became aware of my own position in the room and I tested how my shadowed alter ego image depicted different gestures. As if, my double told

something about myself. It was nearly like a remote mirror and I imagined my own reflection on the dark silhouette.

The reason I have chosen *Your negotiable panorama* is the unique inescapable situation provided by it for an enriched bodily experience, together with the cognitive aspects of the beholder's understanding of his or her own position in relation to the artwork, to: "becoming aware of your position, your gaze and your perception of the world, sensually and intellectually."¹ I would suggest that this is how the shadows worked in this work, for instance. Shadows on the walls address an inherent dualism. By blocking the reflected light, the shadows remove the effect of the very body, which has just made the effect. They remind the beholder for the second time, of their bodily presence; of the consequence of their existence.

Eliasson notes that the greatest potential of phenomenology lies in the idea that subjectivity is always susceptible to change. He wants to see his works as tools for the beholder to be negotiating and re-evaluating the environment, which paves the way for a causal relationship with our surroundings.² That reminds of one important aspect of this artwork, the very title of it. I suggest that the reason for such entitling is due to Eliasson's intention of creating a phenomenon, which can help the beholder to renegotiate with his/her surroundings, to re-experience the phenomenon, and ideally later, the world. He wants his art to open up a dialogue with the beholder, and remind him/her for possibilities of having a subjective approach and experiencing the world in an individual manner.

2.4 Your blind passenger versus Your negotiable panorama

"An Eliasson exhibition invites visitors to be enveloped by, circulate in, and act upon an installation that is continually responsive to their own unique and manifold approaches, itineraries, and velocities."³ Through multiple sensory expressions that for instance, can be felt on the skin or as a smell or a sound in the installation, the somatic participation becomes elevated and the experience is often felt as much as it is seen. However, it is significant to Eliasson's artworks that they never hide or

¹www.arken.dk/content/us/art/arkens_collection/installation_and_media_art/olafur_eliasson/about_the_work_your_negotiable_panorama, retrieved 2012-03-05.

² O Eliasson & R Irwin, 'Take your time: A Conversation', in Madeleine Grynsztejn (ed.), *Take your time: Olafur Eliasson*, San Francisco Museum of Modern Art, San Francisco, 2007, p. 52

³ Grynsztejn, (ed), 2007, p. 18.

mystify how they are constructed. He states that it is important that the experience is presented undisguised to the spectator, otherwise the capacity for the spectator to see her/himself seeing and to evaluate and criticize her/himself in relation to the space, has lost its potentials. The cognitive aspect of Eliasson's works emphasizes the fact that it is possible for the spectator to become conscious of their own capacity to "seeing yourself seeing", as Eliasson term this awareness.¹

What the beholder confronts within *Your blind passenger* and *Your negotiable panorama* is a perfect actuality of his view. However, what motivates this thesis is the overlap of Eliasson's philosophical outlook and principles of phenomenology, which stresses that those phenomena in the world are not what a person can make out of them; they are what beholders create. This is due to each individual's unique manner of approaching the phenomenon, and indefinite number of personal skills and views. Hence, the visible world might be considered to be "the surface of an inexhaustible depth"²; which remarks constantly existing prospective ways of unique interpretations and fresh meanings that can emerge within and about the phenomena.

Neither *Your blind passenger* nor *Your negotiable panorama* offer any instructions for the beholders; yet, they are inviting the beholders to engage thoroughly with them to an extent that they become even a physical property of the artworks. This elevates the awareness of the intimacy, and in the same time open up for questions like: how close can an individual get to an artwork? Is definition of dimensional closeness of a person with an artwork, zero millimetres?

While walking in the mist in *Your blind passenger*, it is not only the beholder who is totally inside and enclosed by the work, but it is even the work which is inside the beholder's body. The beholder breathes the artwork; experiencing that the light almost penetrates the skin, with its various colours that gives either a warm sensation or a cold one, on and inside the body. I here consider the wide spectrum of colour and the sensual relation between the actual temperature of the colour and the perceived body. It is as if the beholder is a living ingredient of the work itself, as if both the work and the beholder share the same flesh, the same entity. Yet again, recalling Merleau-Ponty's notion of the flesh as atmosphere, to strengthen this

¹ Eliasson & Irwin, p. 55.

² F Evans & L Lawlor (ed.), *Chiasms: Merleau-Ponty's Notion of Flesh*, State University of New York Press, New York, 2000, p. 71.

feeling of infinitive closeness between the artwork and the beholder.¹ I would describe this as the ultimate intimacy with a work of art. One cannot claim that the beholder cannot see the work, despite the eye sight is so reduced. The artwork does not hide or mystify anything. It appears that it is the beholder to be explored, to be seen, to be perceived.

¹ Merleau-Ponty, 1968, p. 139.

3. Making sense through embodied interaction

3.1 Making sense of the world

When we approach an artwork with the intention to experience it, we are taking part in an active process which leads to a result; a result which in different philosophical views might be defined differently. Making meaning, making sense, perceiving, understanding, interpreting, being seen, or appearing, are all results of such an active process of approaching artworks. I consider them all as outcomes of the process, which are termed differently within different perspectives; however, what I am interested in emphasizing is the beholders' dynamic role in making meaning, or giving meaning to the artworks.

Hans-Georg Gadamer refers to Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel, when Hegel considers a special active role for the beholders in the process of making meaning. His approach suggests that the beholders' role in this process is even more important than the artist's original state. Hegel advocates that "the work of art is the expression of a truth that cannot be reduced to what its creator actually thought in it".¹ Such a view gives more credit to the beholders' interpretations and thoughts when confronting an artwork, than the creator's initial thoughts and intentions, or the meaning s/he intended to transfer to the beholders.

Furthermore, in a slightly different but still similar view, Noël Carroll regards the artwork as an object which is intended to have a function. A function which is "connected with what a spectator can get out of an artwork in virtue of its facilitating or promoting certain types of responses or interactions."² Within this vision, it is not only the beholder who is actively approaching and making sense of the artwork, but also the artist actively intends to include such functionality in the work. I would suggest that Eliasson in a similar way intends to make sense with his creations, and to make meaning, both for himself as a producer of the artwork and for the beholder that are invited to engage with the work of art in a process of meaning creation. Eliasson states that he wants his work to have an impact on the beholder and the surrounding world. Eliasson describes that he wants the work to be "sincerely and

¹ HG Gadamer, & R.E. Palmer (ed.), *The Gadamer Reader: A Bouquet of the Later Writings*, Northwestern University Press, Evanston, Ill., 2007. 124.

² N Carroll, *Beyond Aesthetics: Philosophical Essays*, Cambridge University Press, New York, 2001, p.7.

honestly and responsibly in the world. I want it to have an impact somehow.”¹ To achieve this goal he problematizes existential questions, such as: do we as human beings really feel that we have any effect on the world? Does it make sense if we participate or not? He elaborates this with ideas concerning the fundamental consequences of existence, which is “a causal dimension to our life.”² Eliasson asks: “Does it actually matter that we have an opinion about something or that we are here in the first place?”³ He suggests that one of the most important qualities a work of art has is that it does not necessarily take it for granted that the world is truthful. The art treats the world in many ways as if it is a model. If you fruitfully begin to have a dialogue on the basis that reality is a construction, then all of a sudden reality becomes relative and suddenly everything in it can change and can be renegotiated. This means that the world or the reality is not something that is objective but rather subjective and personal.⁴

From my point of view, this is a statement that Eliasson expresses via his works of art. Playing with the reality and bending it to be as negotiable as possible opens up for a discussion that erupts from the artwork and reaches the beholder’s mind and body with a strong impact. I argue that this mindful engagement can make the beholder more reflective and more aware about what makes sense in the world for him/her. The interaction with artwork creates a better self-awareness that can be stimulated by this reflexive mood of understanding oneself via the world and the artwork.

Lakoff and Johnson state that there are several different aspects that determine how we understand the world to be like. Our sensory organs, how we can move and control objects, our culture and how we interact with the surroundings, and so forth. “What we take to be true in a situation depends on our embodied understanding of the situation, which is in turn shaped by all these factors.”⁵ Therefore, to grasp what is truth or not, rely on the on hand on how we comprehend the world via our bodies, and on the other hand, what kind of previous experiences we have that have formed us to who we are. However, one has to keep in mind that no truth is absolute;

¹ *Olafur Eliasson: Space Is Process*, DVD, JJ Film, 2009.

² JJ Film, 2009.

³ *ibid.*

⁴ *ibid.*

⁵ Lakoff & Johnson, p. 102. (Italic in the original.)

although, truth is always subjective and a person or a thing offers innumerable point of views.

Regarding Merleau-Ponty's phenomenology, Lankford notes, that "nothing exists absolutely; knowledge acquired through perception is always subject to revision."¹ Individual truth or knowledge is therefore rather negotiable in the best of circumstances. This state of flexibility reminds of how the phenomenological methods "allow individuals to make sense of things in the world while allowing for the vagaries of both the perceiver and the perceived."² However, returning to the discussion concerning Eliasson's art, I argue, that his installations encourage the beholders to take part in the artwork from various and individual perspectives both as perceiver and perceived. It is highly significant how the beholder tries to make sense both of themselves and the artwork in relation to each other while being inside of the installation. This indicates why Merleau-Ponty notes "phenomenology can be practiced and identified as a manner or style of thinking".³

3.2 Presence and interaction

There is a social dimension to Eliasson's works that is connected to how the work is activated by both perception and participation of oneself and others; "the very apprehension of other people and their movements"⁴ gives the mood of *being-in-common*, or *being-with*, as opposed to *being-in-solitude*. A sense of being is a part of the experience these works are meant to create in the beholders. They jog our memory about our existence; a way of existing that is about both our individuality, and our commonality aspects. As we interact with them, they remind us of our presence. This fact is in a close relation to what I mentioned earlier about the shadows in *Your negotiable panorama*, that they made the beholders aware of their position in the world, sensually and intellectually. To see your own shadow on the wall, created by your own interaction with the work, highlighted with the movements of light, which are produced due to your own body's effect, might remind you of being-in-solitude. Nevertheless, as soon as someone else causes the same chain of reactions which ends up affecting the shadow that is *yours*, as soon as you see other's

¹ Lankford, p. 154.

² *ibid.*

³ Merleau-Ponty, 2002, p. viii. (Italic in the original.)

⁴ Grynshztejn (ed.), 2007, p. 19.

shadows beside yours on the wall, as soon as you see the very light-waves which your body created get altered by other's presence, the second aspect of your existence 'being-in-common' gets into the focus. The interaction inside this arrangement between the visitors, but also between the surrounding artwork and the beholder's, leads to the interesting state where all parts starts to negotiate with each other.

This flux between being-in-solitude and being-in-common also emerge inside *Your blind passenger*, where you are highly concerned about your presence in the moment and the relationship of your body with the surroundings, as soon as you sense the presence of other beholders you feel a kind of commonness. Your dialogue with the surroundings, which includes the other visitors as well, reminds you of the similar way they experience the situation. Even if they speak another language, even if you do not see them and just hear their laughter, their sounds that illustrate their emotional state; you feel that you and them all belong to the same issue. Everyone else is walking in *My blind passenger*; as I am also existing in *Theirs*.

Additionally, these works function in different perceptual layers. Our interaction with the works might start even earlier than confronting them physically. The rhetoric that influences the beholders' perception does not lie within, and is not only a result of the physicality of the interaction. The beholders' intellectual dialogue with Eliasson's artworks starts – or gets completed – with perception of the artworks' names. It is clear that the frequent use of the possessive pronoun 'your' in the titles of Eliasson's art as in *Your strange certainty still kept*, [1996] *Your only real thing is time*, [2001] *Your negotiable panorama*, [2006] signifies the importance of the spectators active engagements and reflection upon the artwork. Amanda Boetzkes notes that the titles of Eliasson's artworks "refer to the individuality of the spectator's perceptual experience through an emphasis on the word 'your'".

Furthermore, Boetzkes also distinguish interesting parallels between the titles of Eliasson's artworks and the core of Merleau-Ponty's ideas about how perception is reconciled via the bodies in interaction with the surrounding universe; "the titles are a restatement of Merleau-Ponty's initial claim that perception is mediated through the subject's bodily contact and intertwining with the world."¹

¹ A Boetzkes, 'Phenomenology and Interpretation Beyond the Flesh', in, D Arnold (ed.), *Art History - Contemporary Perspectives on Method*, Wiley-Blackwell, Malden, MA, 2010, pp. 47-48.

The active part the beholder takes in an artwork is crucial. Eliasson clarifies in a conversation with Hans-Ulrich Obrist, that the spectator does at least half of the work through their participation with the artwork, “whether they are aware of that or not”.¹ It is interesting how Eliasson reflects over the beholder’s ability to understand his or her part in the artwork, while he explains how the participation can include a cognitive aspect. According to him, the “spectators are engaged in a certain situation, and if this situation is activating, they see the situation engaging back [...]. Obviously the situation doesn’t actually react back at them, but they, through a constructed third person, see themselves seeing.”² This consciousness of “seeing yourself seeing”³ is a phrase often used by Eliasson, which implies the cognitive aspects of the visual and mental experiments that return the spectator to an awareness of his or her own perceptual senses. However, it is not only an awareness of perception; it is also an idea of having a relationship between the visual and the intellectual part of the embodied seeing. Eliasson recurrently combines these two elements of thoughts and elaborate on the idea of “seeing-yourself-sensing or sensing-yourself-seeing”.⁴

The aim is to establish a dialogue between on the one hand the act of having an experience and on the other hand to simultaneously being aware of the experience and in the same time evaluating it. Eliasson states that the focal point are not on experience *versus* interpretation; it is rather concerning “the experience *inside* the interpretive act, about the experience *itself* being interpretive. You could say that I’m trying to put the body in the mind and the mind in the body.”⁵ This intermingled idea of sensing and seeing becomes comprehensible when I compare with the embodied and in the same time intellectual experience, I had inside *Your negotiable panorama* and *Your blind passenger*.

In both installations, I perceived a sensation of using my body and mind in a dialectic interaction. As if, I knew through my body; and my body felt intelligent, in a bizarre way. This reminds of Merleau-Ponty’s statement where he says, “I say of a thing that is moved; but my body moves itself, my movement deploys itself. It is not

¹ HU Obrist & O Eliasson, *Olafur Eliasson*, König, Köln, 2008, p. 47.

² *ibid.*

³ Eliasson & Irwin, p. 55.

⁴ C Gilbert, *Olafur Eliasson*, in, BOMB Magazine, Nr. 88, 2004, p. 24.

⁵ Gilbert, p. 24.

ignorant of itself; it is not blind for itself; it radiates from a self.”¹ In *My blind passenger*, my eyes were seeing me being in a situation that I couldn’t see anything but light and colour, and it was my body who perceived itself and its surrounding environment. This feeling was enhanced at the most exaggerated way, in the middle part of the tunnel where it was no light, and nothing seeable; and it was only through my body that I could know.

This being aware of our being, simultaneously being aware of this awareness, and making sense of what we experience while we interact with objects in our surrounding, opens up an entrance to a challenging philosophical debate called embodied experience.

3.3 Embodied experience

Within our existence, there is a constant dialogue between the surrounding world and us, which simultaneously offers and demands meaning. If we look upon our engagement with our surroundings from a phenomenological viewpoint, we might eventually find out about an on-going involvement with objects, which “simultaneously transcend us and yet ‘speak to us of ourselves’.”² We perceive as we live. It is an inseparable part of being; as having a body is. Therefore, the body is an integrated and necessary part of this interactive subject-object dialogue. “Like a dialogue, perception leads the subject to draw together the sense diffused throughout the object while, simultaneously, the object solicits and unifies the intentions of the subject.”³ It is a relational flow of information between the subject and the object. I believe that this condition of give and take strengthens the responsiveness between the world and us.

This intertwined channel of communication between subject and object is something that can be recognised from the interaction between the beholder and the artwork. As mentioned in the analysis from previous chapter; I experienced a rigorous presence inside Eliasson’s installation *Your blind passenger*. I got an almost overwhelming feeling that I was blended together with the surroundings and that I became an integrated part of that element; as if we were of the same flesh. I believe that this

¹ Johnson & Merleau-Ponty (ed.), p.124.

² Evans & Lawlor (ed.), p. 3.

³ Evans & Lawlor (ed.), p. 4.

existential experience is excellently described by Merleau-Ponty's notion of the flesh, which shall be thought upon "as an element, as the concrete emblem of a general manner of being."¹ In this case, I find that, the flesh delineates the symbiotic coexistence between the artwork and I.

Additionally, it should be kept in mind that within the phenomenological perspective, experience and perception are not just done via eyes; perception is a multisensory experience. "In the interface between our bodies and the outer world, we have well-developed bodily tools which help us read and integrate with the world. We have the sensitivity of our skin; the extension and flexibility of our limbs; our sight and hearing; and our senses of smell and taste, which together make up our sensorimotor system."² We perceive as we exist, and we are embodied, as we exist.

The sensuous experience are imbedded in a dialogue between mind and body in as much as we find the experience somewhere between what one thinks and what one senses. "Sense experience operates at a membrane between the sensible and the thinkable",³ as Laura U. Marks notes.

Regarding my own sensuous experience of the artworks, there are other aspects like the olfactory and the gustatory dimensions that have not yet been discussed; while they play important roles in a comprehensive embodied experience. My olfactory experience for *Your blind passenger* was quite noticeable. The thick fog had a special smell, not to an extent to be irritating, but it could attract the attention. For a while, I even thought whether the thick fog could be injurious for my body. It was not a big concern, but what worth considering was the dialogue between the surrounding and I, through the sensory stimuli, which reminded me of my own body.

However, neither the artwork nor the surrounding environment provided any means for stimulating the gustatory senses. Moreover, *Your negotiable panorama* was free of smell and taste. The day when I visited ARKEN, there were rather few visitors in there. I presume that the stimulation of the olfactory senses must be more obvious if many visitors entered into the installations in the same time. Then it would be possible to experience the scent of other persons. Another reason that I did not made any observation of smell in *Your negotiable panorama* can be explained by Jim

¹ Merleau-Ponty, 1968, p. 147.

² Dahlin, p. 166.

³ L.U. Marks, "Thinking Multisensory Culture*", in F Bacci & D Melcher (ed.), *Art and the senses*, Oxford University Press, Oxford, 2011, p. 239.

Drobnick, who argues that this olfactory absence in the almost sterilized atmospheres of the museums are quite expected.¹ The standard condition regarding the olfactory senses stimulation in a public building like ARKEN appears to be highly controlled; it shall not be any smell that can be noticeable, unless it is a part of an artwork.

¹ J Drobnick, 'Volatile Effects Olfactory Dimensions of Art and Architecture', in D Howes (ed.), *Empire of the Senses-The Sensual Cultural Reader*, Berg, Oxford, 2005, pp. 265-280.

4. Phenomenological sphere

4.1 Pre-knowledge, circumstances and historicity

How an artwork makes sense is not limited to the symbolic representations it demonstrates. The general significance of an artwork is in part, engendered throughout the encounter of beholder and artwork. Therefore, anything that affects the encounter consequently influences the sense-making process. We make sense of things through our biological bodies. Thus, while encountering a work of art, external physical conditions that directly affect our bodies, as well as mental and biological conditions influence our perception. However, this intertwining gets closer to the subject of interest of this thesis, when Merleau-Ponty's definition of the boundaries of the body within the world is brought in. Merleau-Ponty mentions, "my body is a thing among things; it is caught in the fabric of the world, and its cohesion is that of a thing. But because it moves itself and sees, it holds things in a circle around itself."¹ In his perspective the body is part of the flesh, and thereby the world. Hence, the interweave between phenomena (artworks), bodies (beholders), surrounding physical conditions (the world), and meaning (perception) in phenomenology principles comes to a level that "it becomes impossible to distinguish between what sees and what is seen, what paints and what is painted."² Within phenomenology's philosophy, the beholders can alter to subjects for artworks, as the artworks are subjects for them. Thus, subject and object, whichever is which, are parts of the same thing. This anthology of things, or circumstances within which making sense happens, are creating a part of what I termed earlier as phenomenological sphere.

Furthermore, Lankford notes that, "no funded interpretation of a work of art ever exhausts the possibilities of meaning inherent in the work. A single work of art may speak with fresh significance to different people at different times under differing circumstances."³ This is why I argue that the physical body can also be considered as a *circumstance*; a circumstance of experiencing the artwork. Thus, regarding the notion of phenomenological sphere, the beholder's body accordingly shall be considered as a component of the phenomenological sphere around the artwork.

¹ M Merleau-Ponty, *The Primacy of Perception: And Other Essays on Phenomenological Psychology, the Philosophy of Art, History, and Politics*, Northwestern University Press, Evanstone, Ill., 1964, p. 163.

² Merleau-Ponty, 1964, p. 167.

³ Lankford, p. 154.

The artwork as an object though, bears not only symbolical properties and haptic qualities, but also includes historical significance and biographical information about its creator. It shall be expected that previous knowledge about the creator of the work, or its historical values, alter the beholder's experience. Although these properties are considered to be assets of the artwork, yet I argue that they are assets of the beholders. An old painting might be thrown away if the owner is not aware of the biography of its artist; while a Picasso sketch on a matchbox will be worth a considerable amount of money.

What I am trying to illuminate here is the identity of the phenomenological sphere. The thoughts and ideas about the phenomenon exist in the flesh, but it is the body of the beholder that reaches them, or so to speak, biologically contains them. "History is not external and objectified in a situation but is inside the spectator."¹ Every single experience is therefore highly individual and dependent on what pre-understandings and earlier experiences the spectator brings with her/him into the art; all this forms his/her understanding of it. Therefore, when the beholder has some knowledge about the context around a work of art it becomes a part of the phenomenological sphere and effects the relation between the beholder and the artwork. Imagine standing in the long queue at Musée du Louvre, lining up to see Leonardo da Vinci's *Mona Lisa*. It is most likely that the elevated expectation the beholder indubitably has, is originated from the enormous reputation that this particular work of art carries. Such previous knowledge greatly affects the actual encounter. If we instead imagine that the beholder encounters an unknown portrait of a woman, the canvas is in similar size as *Mona Lisa*, located in a casual small town gallery; it is likely that the lack of background information, together with low prospects makes this encounter less prominent. I do not signal that only famous artworks has phenomenological spheres; I am just notifying that the historical context is one of the many aspects that can have consequences for this sphere.

4.2 Temporality

If I were to describe the definition of the phenomenological sphere in a sentence, I would say that the phenomenological sphere consists of a set of qualities that evoke

¹ P.M. Lee, 'Your Light and Space' in Madeleine Grynsztejn (ed.), *Take your time: Olafur Eliasson*, San Francisco Museum of Modern Art, San Francisco, 2007, p. 33.

and affect the embodied experience of artworks. The stronger these qualities are, the richer the experience, and the engagement with the work will become. However, having a phenomenological philosophy behind this theory makes it naturally a highly subjective matter; meaning, the sphere and how much it evokes the beholders, differs for each. Especially when taking into account the beholder's physical body as a component of the sphere, which is different by nature in each person.

So far, I have elaborated some components within the phenomenological sphere and now my intention is to move on to some other crucial notions that influence the phenomenological sphere, which are related to time, space and scale. Eliasson believes that artworks shall not be considered some kind of static objects, which are supposed to “embody some kind of truth that may be revealed to the spectator.”¹ Rather, as he explains further, “artworks have an affinity with time—they are embedded in time, they are of time.”² He elaborates further that while a person takes time to experience a work of art, disregarding if it happens in a museum or outside, the person is dynamically engaged in a ‘spatial and temporal situation’.

I argue, that both temporal and spatial aspects are of great importance for how strong the experience of the artwork can become. How long time the beholder spends engaging with the artwork has a direct impact on the phenomenological sphere. I suggest that the longer time the beholder connects and actively engages with the artwork, the stronger the emotions and consequently also the experience will become. When the beholder stays reflective in the encounter, the more thoughts, memories, associations and ideas will the artwork evokes. This reflective state paves the way for interpretations of the work that is linked with the beholders' embodied consciousness and previous experiences from life, in short, the pre-knowledge. Therefore, the length of time is relevant for how reflective and dialectic the encounter with the artwork will be, and thereby the bodily effect of the phenomenological sphere depends on these factors.

Regarding the dialectic relation between time, space, and being, Eliasson mentions Merleau-Ponty's view on our idea of time that depends on how we recognize our body in space. According to him, Merleau-Ponty's idea is that it is “only as bodies in

¹ Eliasson & Irwin, p. 51.

² *ibid.*

space that we are capable of grasping time.”¹ In other words, time “is something that only exists within a human perspective.”²

4.3 Spatiality

“What is it that makes a space productive? What is it that makes a space challenging and exciting and embracing and including and hospitable and tolerant and so on?”³ These are fundamental questions that Eliasson raises regarding our relation to the space; and I would suggest that both *Your negotiable panorama* and *Your blind passenger* actualize what he is questioning. The beholder can experience them as exciting, embracing, challenging, and so forth. Therefore in this section, I depart from the same subject, the *space*, to shed light on how our dynamic relation to the space, when we experience a work of art, strengthens the phenomenological sphere.

Spatiality is yet another element that regulates the feature of the sphere. The possibilities of the different perspectives that the artwork is perceived from, is closely connected to the spatial possibility that the beholder can access, around or inside the artwork. When the beholder is able to physically move around in a space that allows and encourage movements, the impact of the artwork gets increased by the spatial situation. The physical activity that takes to move the body to different positions creates enhanced amount of perspectives that has consequences on both body and mind. Eliasson claims that when making an installation, he tries to deconstruct a negotiable and tangible space for people; but he stresses that “this is evident only if you move, only if you go around”⁴ in that space. The increased spatial options achieved through moving within the space, not only gives a better understanding of the visual aspects of the artwork it are also auspicious for reaching a reflective mode. If the beholder has a limited or a fixed position to engage with the artwork the experience of it will be restricted.

The spatial and the temporal aspects are in many ways closely connected in as much as it takes time to move around and by positioning the body in different locations and situations an increased amount of information will reach the beholder that would

¹ Obrist & Eliasson, p. 120.

² GJ Marshall, *A guide to Merleau-Ponty's Perception*, Marquette University Press, Milwaukee, Wis., 2008, p. 63.

³ JJ Film, 2009.

⁴ Obrist & Eliasson, p. 56.

have been hard to achieve if the beholder did not invest that time, to engage with the artwork from different perspectives.

Eliasson's installations encourage the beholder to engage in various ways and it demands that the beholder is willing to spend some time, interacting with the art. It is not even possible to experience *Your blind passenger* if the beholder does not walk through the long tunnel, which takes some time. By investing that time, I would say that one leads automatically to an improved reflexive engagement that strengthens the interpretative relation between the beholder and the artwork. If I once more return to *Mona Lisa*, this time neglecting the historical aspect of the painting and rather, reflect over the spatial and temporal aspects; I would argue that usually both time and perspective are quite limited in the encounter with *Mona Lisa*, due to the large amount of visitors that are lining up to view the painting in the Musée du Louvre. The rather short time the beholder is allowed to spend in front of the painting limits the possibility to stay in an open and reflexive mood. One might be astonished by the fact that the painting is smaller in reality than one expected it to be, and then it is time to move on before any more reflections might be exercised. The awareness of all the other people in front and behind in the line affects the mental state, since the beholder might consider their imagined expectations concerning time and reaction spent in front of the artwork. This might cause a feeling of stress that normally has negative effect of the interpretation process.

Generally, the space that an artwork is placed in imposes its conditions on the subject matter and the experience of artwork. The imposing happens through firstly the conditions that the surrounding space imposes directly on the body of the beholders such as temperature, humidity, light, air quality, soundscapes, and so forth; secondly through its effect on the interpretation that the beholders make from the artwork. The interpretation can depend on the emotional relation, previous knowledge and preconceptions that beholders have developed for that space. For instance, experiencing an artwork in Musée du Louvre as a building, which already bears many historical, artistic, and other metaphysical values, cannot be equal to experience of even the same artwork in displayed at another place. Dahlin mentions that encounters "with architectural objects penetrate our lives, they enrich and disturb our actions. Whether we want to or not, we confront them with our bodies and our

senses, as well as with thought and feeling.”¹ Thus, considering my former argument that elucidated the beholder’s ideas, thoughts, and preconceptions as properties of the body and therefore the flesh; my current argument tries to illustrate how the surrounding space of an artwork, with its unique properties affects the embodied experience of its beholders.

Regarding ARKEN, the building that hosted this thesis’ empirical material, it is clear that this unique architecture affects the persons moving inside and around the construction. Søren Robert Lund, the architect behind ARKEN, has given the building a dynamic and expressive architecture that encourages imagination and exploration.



Figure 3: ARKEN

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¹ Dahlin, p. 165.

“The museum was constructed to challenge one’s eye as well as one’s balance.”¹ The largest exhibition room where *Your blind passenger* were situated is called the Art-Axis, and by viewing this space from the entrance hall, the visitor might experience an optical illusion caused of the gradual difference in height which causes the room to appear much longer than what it really is. This unusual and lengthy room with just two corners made me want to move along the axis and I felt a desire to touch the raw concrete walls. I imagine that my need to touch and to explore this space is a result of the optical illusion that fooled my eyes. The tactile sensation together with the spatial walk along the room was a way to explore how my body reacted on this space.

The fact that this museum is located outside of Copenhagen by the coastline makes both the trip out there and the experience of the building in relation to the maritime surroundings a bit peculiar. As if you already know that you are about to experience something special. You do not accidentally or spontaneously walk in there by chance, as you could have done if the museum were located in the city centre. You are there because you made an active choice to go there. This determination is a consequence of pre-knowledge and/or expectations that the visitor already in advance has gained regarding the museum, its location and the exhibitions on display. Both this pre-knowledge and the decision to spend time and money (transportation and entrance fee) to go there results in visitors that are motivated and interested in art. The journey to ARKEN can also work as a preparation for the visitor’s mental and bodily encounter with the museum. The atmosphere aroused among the visitors is serious, alert and curious, and contributes to an experience that adds value to both body and mind.

However, any artwork by itself, needs, or has, or creates a physical space. This space as well evolves the beholder’s experience, independently from – but still under the effect of – the surrounding space. Regarding Eliasson’s installations, they can be seen as spaces, which are designed and planned to be different from our everyday experience of space. “Eliasson’s tunnel of fog points toward the field of imagination and a nowhere to be explored, while at the same time insisting on placing this space in the here and now of visitors walking through the tunnel.”² I argue that the more a

¹ www.arken.dk/content/us/about/architecture/on_the_architecture, retrieved 2012-05-16.

² Camilla Jalving, *Utopia at the Art Museum: A Review of the UTOPIA Project at ARKEN Museum of Modern Art in Denmark*, *Utopian Studies*, 2011, Vol. 22, Issue 2, p. 364.

space created by an artwork provides the beholders with possibilities of unusual experience, the stronger the experience becomes; and accordingly the stronger phenomenological sphere. In other words, the more the beholders' bodily experience is different from what they are used to in an ordinary situation, the more they get engaged with the artwork while confronting it. Eliasson himself claims that today's individuals have gotten manipulated senses that makes them believe or perceive the world in a certain way, which is organized in a way we are planned to see or experience it.¹ According to him, it was idealistic if we could see and experience things in our individual ways, but we cannot, because "[o]ur senses are not natural, they are culturally produced, and the commodification of our senses has generalized the way we see the world."² Thus, more unique sensory experiences within a space can remind us deeper about our being, about our existence. As in *Your blind passenger* where the beholder is situated in a place that is not similar at all to an everyday experience. A unique place imposes its characteristics on its beholders, and creates a focused feeling of *being* for them.

Therefore, as I tried to illuminate, *being* is an outcome of space, while it is a consequence of time as well. One cannot exist if time does not exist. Thus, if the beholder does not take time to experience the artwork, to pass through it, to move in it, to engage with it, then the notion of being within the same flesh could not exist. *Being* within the embodied form is a consequence of space. To be embodied, one requires both the dimensions of timescape and placescape. However, the surrounding space and the space that is created by artwork are to an extent intertwined that it is very hard to place any borders to define where which space finishes, and how much each of them is altering the embodied experience.

Since I have been discussing aspects of time as temporal and aspects of space as spatial, I will continue to combine the two components and refer to them as spatiotemporal aspects, though they are concerning the relation of existing in both space and time. There is a close connection between spatiotemporal aspects and scale and I will now elaborate how this can be traced in the interaction between beholder and the artwork.

¹ G Helfand, *Olafur Eliasson*, ARTINFO, 2007, retrieved 2012-05-16, www.artinfo.com/news/story/25573/olafur-eliasson.

² *ibid.*

4.4 Scale

Scale constitutes another quality of the phenomenological sphere that gives rise to, and has an effect on the embodied experience of artwork. I argue that if the scale of an artwork is grand, accordingly, the experience of it will have a greater embodied impact. I do not want to imply that artworks in smaller scale cannot make great impact on the beholder, which they of course can in many cases. I merely stress that grand scale in artwork is one important factor for leaving a strong impact on the beholders bodily response and interaction with the work of art.

When a work of art employs a grand scale it means that it occupies a larger part of the space. This implicates that it requires both more time and spatial movement to be able to fully experience a huge piece of art, than a smaller one. If the work is a big painting, the beholder needs quite some time to be able to actually register the whole painting in mind. To confront the painting by observing it from one fixed position from a distance makes it perhaps possible to get a good overview but it makes it impossible to grasp the details. That is why the beholder needs to position her/his body from different distances and from different angles from the painting to get both the whole and the details. Therefore, it can be said that the spatiotemporal aspects of the scale are influencing the embodied experience. The same spatiotemporal considerations are valid regarding installations or sculptures of larger scale.

Earlier, I talked about the space created by artworks, and how space can evolve the degree of experiencing an artwork; while now, my argument concerns the scale that is created by that space. Artworks by nature, or by the situation they are placed in, provide their beholders an amount of space in which, they engage with the artwork and simultaneously experience and perceive it. The experience of a work of art does not happen on the surface of the artwork, it happens within the relational space between the beholder's body and the artwork.

Every work of art has a space around itself and this space incorporates the beholder. If we imagine that, as soon as the beholder steps out of this space and position her/himself beyond the approximate margins that define the intimate communication or radiance that takes place between the work of art and beholder, in this instance the embodied experience will decline. This has effect on the total experience of, for example, an exhibition. If we think of a gallery with paintings on the walls, I suggest that as the beholder engages with each painting, an invisible sphere of experience

emerges between the beholder and the artwork within the space in which s/he confronts the artwork. When s/he passes from one painting to engage with next one, s/he will have to step out of the first space and enter another. This can cause the beholder to perceive the exhibition fragmented or as a punctuated experience; if the exhibition is not well curated and the space is not carefully constructed. While in a well curated exhibition, these spaces overlap each other instead of being disconnected every time moving from one work of art to the other, the beholders can arise a experience of being more absorbed or united with the exhibition; and a linear perceiving can be experienced rather than a punctuated. It is important to emphasize that, I do not suggest that the work of art shall be placed physically close to each other to fulfil the overlap of phenomenological spheres. I want to highlight that it is possible to create an exhibition space, which embraces the beholders with a rather grand phenomenological sphere, that can affect and engage the beholders' bodily and mentally presence in an active and inclusive way.

However, the scale of space, provided by the artwork, determines the degree and quality of the bodily experience. The larger the scale is the more overwhelming can the bodily experience become, as long as the space retains the characteristics explained earlier in the previous section. An artwork-space which is big enough to surround the beholder's body, or affect it more entirely – rather than partially –, is more capable of creating a richer embodied experience for him/her. I would suggest that experiencing a space with a huge scale can be considered similar to the experience of architectural structures. Dahlin states that architecture “absorbs the whole organism, and our evaluations of it are usually based on the sum total of the full complexity of experience.”¹ The absorbing nature of a large scaled space or an architectural structure is that it has capacity to include the whole body inside itself and by this affect the experience both emotionally and physically.

The feeling of being absorbed, being included, or being enclosed, requires first of all a feeling of being embodied. I argue that the human being often refers to his/her own body when relating him/her to the surrounding. If the scale is of monumental proportions, the human body will experience himself/herself minor, and this feeling of being a lot smaller than the object often results in a strong embodied experience.

¹ Dahlin, p. 165.

5. Conclusion

One of the most important challenges I faced while writing this thesis was my limited access to the empirical material. *Your negotiable panorama* and *Your blind passenger* were on display a while before I achieved the idea of writing this thesis, and during the time I wrote the thesis I had no access to them anymore. On the one hand, having access to the artworks could ease the clarification process, or could lead to reflection over other aspects of bodily experience of the artwork and accordingly could broaden my definition of the phenomenological sphere. On the other hand, the fact that I had no more chance to experience the artworks while having a phenomenological approach and keeping in mind all the aspects of the bodily experience and what I discussed in this thesis, made this thesis more authentic. Being aware of the subject matter of the thesis could evolve my experience of the artworks, as it could result in not being able to avoid my previous knowledge and experience both about the subject and about the artworks and the artist, while confronting the artworks. Therefore, writing the analysis based on my notes from the experience and the memory I had from the confrontation, can result in a more original and pure result; while I do not neglect the fact that this time span can also result in a reduced memory of the actual experience, and therefore, reduced the amount of details from the experience.

The other concern I had for the thesis was being able to enrich my arguments, through having a face-to-face conversation with Olafur Eliasson, but regarding the delimitations of this thesis, such an ambition had to be neglected. In addition, it could have increase the validity of my theoretical argument, if I could apply it to a broader spectrum of examples, and use more artworks as empirical materials, either from Eliasson, or from other artists. Yet for the same reason, I had to keep my work focused within the boundaries of a master thesis project. Although, I will now leave my reflections over what possibly could be regarded as limitations behind and turn the focus toward other outcomes I achieved during this process.

Through this thesis, I have consequently used a phenomenological approach to explore how the embodied experience and the beholders' engagement with works of art concern all bodily senses. This thesis provides an analysis of the embodied experience in both *Your blind passenger* and *Your negotiable panorama*, to shed light on how the experience of artworks is done through the beholder's entire body,

and how certain notions can alter the quality of this embodied experience. This study investigates how the interweaved relationship between the artwork and the beholder affects the engagement and interaction with an artwork.

This study suggests that when a beholder approaches a work of art, s/he undergoes an active process of experiencing the artwork through not only her/his eyes, but even more than that through her/his complete body. This happens when the beholder gets involved with the artwork both mentally, and physically, as s/he perceives it and interacts with it. Such an interaction that includes both body and mind and leads to perception in the same time is called embodied experience. Embodied experience deals with the consciousness and concerns the symbiotic communication between the beholder and the artwork. It also concerns the continuous fluctuation between the outer and inner carnality that corresponds via the work of art and the beholder, and vice versa. Several factors delineate the quality of such an experience, which together, create a concept that I term the *phenomenological sphere*.

The phenomenological sphere consists of notions; existing materially or immaterially, that are related and created by several agents and factors: the artwork, the beholder of it, the creator of it, and the circumstances through which the experience happens. The phenomenological sphere is actively created every time a beholder approaches and gets engaged with a work of art; therefore, it varies each time, depending on the circumstances. Mutually, the quality of the engagement alters every time, depending on the qualities of the beholder, the artwork, and the circumstances. This indicates that, each time a beholder confronts an artwork, the phenomenological sphere is unique, and belongs to that specific beholder, that specific time, and the circumstances that existed or were created through the confrontation.

However, some artworks provide stronger qualities for a richer embodied experience, and as a result, engage their beholders more, and leave a greater impact on them. This means that these kinds of artworks – including the two works of Olafur Eliasson discussed in this thesis –, bear, or can lead to creation of a strong phenomenological sphere while a beholder is experiencing them. Such works, can engage a beholder excessively due to characteristics such as their scale, their inescapable spatiotemporal conditions and historical eminence. Additionally, the confrontation with artworks will result in an even richer embodied experience if the beholder is

prone to enhance the created phenomenological sphere through her/his own bodily qualities, emotional state, preconceptions and previous knowledge s/he has about the artist, artwork, and the place the artwork is located in. Thus, those artworks that encourage the beholders to take part and engage with them and motivate the beholders to react both as perceiver and perceived, as Eliasson's works do, create a condition for their beholders to make sense both of themselves and of the artwork in relation to each other. It happens through the intimacy between the beholder and the artwork, while the beholder becomes a living element of the work itself, as if both of them are sharing the same flesh.

This study shows how close the intimacy between the two sides of this interactive process can become, as in *Your blind passenger* where both the artwork and the beholder are even physically placed inside each other, and only through being a part of each other's bodily entities the experience can take place. Or in *Your negotiable panorama* where the beholder affects the artwork, and the artwork reflects the effect back to him/her, and again the beholder alters the effect and gives it back to the artwork. This is a chain reaction that cannot happen unless it happens between the components of the same entity.

This thesis considers an important role for the beholders' thoughts and previous knowledge in the formation of the phenomenological sphere. Yet, it suggests that the previous knowledge and thoughts are also a part of the same flesh that the artwork and the beholder belong to. Thoughts and knowledge about a phenomenon like an artwork, are not only reflections of the phenomenon which is a part of the flesh, but also, it is the bodily existence of the beholder that contains the thoughts; which is as well a piece of the same flesh. Therefore, thoughts might be considered as metaphysical things, but within this perspective, with all their metaphysicality, they are still meaningful in connection to an embodied entity.

Furthermore, the phenomenological sphere is under the influence of the space in which the artwork lies; and the space is a notion, understood and perceived by the beholder. Thus, the artwork's surrounding space is a part of the phenomenological sphere, but its degree of effect on the phenomenological sphere depends on how the beholder perceives the space. The beholder's perception of the space can depend on the physical conditions of the space itself at the time of confrontation with the

artwork, as well as the beholder's own emotional approach toward the space, which can also depend on the beholder's previous knowledge about the space.

However, artworks create their own space within their surrounding space; and in some cases the two spaces can become to an extent interwoven, which makes it hard to clarify where the artwork and the experience of it is finished. Nevertheless, the space provided by the artwork, affects the phenomenological sphere as well; especially, if this space is scaled to a magnitude that can include the beholder's body, or can provide conditions that affect the beholder's body extensively. By altering the degree of bodily and mental engagement with the artwork, these spaces can influence the experience of the work of art. The reason I connected Dahlin's narration of the bodily effect of the architectural objects into this thesis was the authority these objects can have on qualities of their beholders' experience. The same authority can be observed in Eliasson's installations that are structured and meant to enclose the beholders, due to their scales, and as a result, whether the beholders want to or not, confront them with their bodies and senses, and with their thoughts and feelings. These works not only enclose their beholders, but also do not provide any other way of experiencing them, rather than being enclosed by them; just like architectural objects. I decided to analyse these two works of art due to the reason that they include and embrace the beholder in such a way that they have to respond and interact with the artwork.

This interaction is done via both body and mind, because these installations trigger both the beholder's emotional state and their bodily engagement with the artwork and with the surrounding. The encounter and the interaction require a reflexive mood that returns an even stronger experience back to the beholder. This clarifies that the confrontation with artworks lead the beholder to move through a spatiotemporal ambience, and take time to interact with the artwork, and to figure out how the artwork make sense and the beholder's existence in the time and space helps the making sense process.

If the beholder stays open and reflective in both body and mind, a fruitful dialogue between the work of art and the beholder can initiate an intertwined process of sensing the artwork both mentally and bodily, and seeing the artwork in the same two folded way. As the beholder moves his/hers body through the work of art, the art moves inside the beholders mind. This embodied experienced are in the same

time both physical and intellectual. In both installations of Eliasson, I perceived a sensation of using my body and mind in a dialectic interaction; as if, it was only through my body that I knew.

Eliasson's works show how one becomes a part of the negotiating phenomenological sphere, and how the beholder becomes an intertwined part of the artwork, which was philosophically reflected in Merleau-Ponty's notion of flesh. Nevertheless, what remains interesting about the phenomenological sphere is how every component of it is entangled with the other components, and how according to each confrontation it gets a new identity. All in all, this is the interplay between the artwork, the creator, the beholder, and the context which produces the phenomenological sphere.

Finally, I would like to encourage those who are interested in phenomenological approach toward artworks, or those who are interested in the notion I present here as the phenomenological sphere, to continue applying the theoretical base of this thesis on further artworks. Further research can be done on Eliasson's artworks as well, to argue if such qualities exist in other works of him, or if there are other qualities that affect the embodied experience in other ways. Further development of the phenomenological sphere as a philosophical concept would be desirable. It would be interesting to find out if there are other characteristics and components, which can be included in this notion; to enhance, and clarify this notion even more. It could also be useful to apply the concept of phenomenological sphere on other forms of artworks, and consider other artists, also from other cultures. In addition, I would suggest considering artworks from other time periods, to evaluate the functionality and accuracy of the notion of phenomenological sphere in a broader perspective.

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