

Maurice Merleau-Ponty's phenomenology of perception and the viewer's
experience in the works of James Turrell

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Introduction

Edmund Husserl, Martin Heidegger and Max Schele introduced Maurice Merleau-Ponty to Phenomenology. Since the publication of his doctoral thesis *Phenomenology of Perception* in 1945, Merleau-Ponty is seen as the prime scholar in the field of phenomenology.¹ Briefly described, the philosophical concept of phenomenology is the study of our experiences. Rather than dealing with the phenomenon itself, phenomenology engages with the subjective experience of it. Merleau-Ponty found that human perception is limited and always in the centre of its own realm.² He emphasises the impossibility of humans to develop a perspective that is not influenced by their time in history, place in nature and their culture. Merleau-Ponty's goal is to overcome this limitation and in doing so achieve an understanding of perception, human reality, truth, time, freedom and philosophy.³ Despite having different perspectives, it is still possible to attempt to transfer experiences amongst one another, as there never is a total detachment. This transferring could be done through language, but also through art.⁴

Before James Turrell studied Art Graduate Studies at the University of California, he had studied the Psychology of Perception. Besides that, he is also a pilot, sky cartographer and has a strong affinity with mathematics, geology and astronomy.⁵ This background is clearly visible in his art: human perception, light and space are important themes in his work; however, the experience of the viewer forms the core of his work. This paper ensues the conception that there are three moments where the concept of phenomenology takes place in the work of Turrell. Firstly, there is the authentic experience of the artist himself that inspired him to create the work. Secondly, the phenomenological exchange from the artist to the artwork. The final stage is the transmission of the artwork to the viewer's perception; this is the stage I wish to further investigate. When I discuss the engagement of the philosophical concept of phenomenology of perception in relation to the work of James Turrell, I will be referring to this final stage, concerning the experience of the viewer when confronted with the work of Turrell.

¹ Marshall, George. *A Guide to Merleau-Ponty's Phenomenology of Perception*. Milwaukee, Wisconsin: Marquette University Press, 2008, 16.

² Matthews, Eric. *The philosophy of Merleau-Ponty*. Chesham: Acumen, 2002. 33.

³ Marshall, George. *A Guide To Merleau-Ponty's, Phenomenology Of Perception*, 24.

⁴ Matthews, Eric. *The philosophy of Merleau-Ponty*, 21.

⁵ Website of De Pont Museum, consulted 3 November 2017, <http://www.depont.nl/en/collection/artist-information/turrell/>

Merleau-Ponty has created a vast legacy of theoretical knowledge that cannot possibly be covered in this thesis. Therefore, the first chapter will mainly focus on the parts of Merleau-Ponty's philosophical concept of the Phenomenology of perception that are closely related to the works of Turrell, such as the inner realm versus the actual world, transferring experiences, society, ambiguity and transcendental experiences. In the following three chapters, I compare the theory I described in the first chapter with three works by James Turrell. I will start with a description of each work followed by an insight of my personal experience of the work. In the last sections, I will apply Merleau-Ponty's theory of phenomenology to the works and writings of James Turrell.

Phenomenology can be extremely personal and subjective. It is simply impossible to capture what experiences were like for Merleau-Ponty, for I can only follow his writings. What I can do is use my own experiences and try to transfer them to the reader of this thesis by describing them as accurately as possible, and use these experiences as an example for explaining Merleau-Ponty's theory. This is why I have chosen only to write about works of James Turrell that I have visited myself. The combination of this three works gives a diverse overview of the work of Turrell. The first work is *Wedgework III* (1969): an installation with fluorescent light, which had been reinstalled in museum De Pont in Tilburg, the Netherlands in 1993. The second is *Skyspace* (1994) in MHKA in Antwerp, Belgium. The final work is *the Irish Sky Garden* (1990) in Skibbereen, Ireland.

Merleau-Ponty's book *Phenomenology of Perception* (1945) will be the main theoretical source for this thesis.⁶ I have studied some of his other publications as well, to get a broader understanding of Merleau-Ponty's philosophies: *The World of Perception* (1948)⁷, *Eye and Mind* (1964), and *The Visible and the Invisible* (1968)⁸. I have also studied his essay *the Primacy of Perception* (1947, translated by James M. Edie in 1964)⁹, which ends in a discussion where Merleau-Ponty defends his work. Despite the importance of these primary sources, it proved to be quite difficult for me to grasp the essence of the theory. This was due to the formal use of English, the sometimes seemingly endless enumerations of philosophical concepts and use of terminology. Secondary, the commentaries, like *A Guide to Merleau-*

⁶ Merleau-Ponty, Maurice. *Phenomenology of Perception*, London: Routledge, 2002, transl. Colin Smith.

⁷ Merleau-Ponty, Maurice, *The World Of Perception*. London: Routledge 2004, transl. Oliver Davis.

⁸ Merleau-Ponty, Maurice. *The Visible and the Invisible*, Notes trans. by Alphonso Lingis, Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1968.

⁹ Merleau-Ponty, Maurice, *The Primacy of Perception*, in *The Primacy of Perception* ed. by James Edie, Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1964.

Ponty's Phenomenology of Perception (2008)¹⁰ by George Marshall and *The Philosophy of Merleau-Ponty* (2002)¹¹ by Eric Matthews, helped me to better understand and structure the philosophical concepts of Merleau-Ponty. The information I needed concerning the installations of James Turrell I got from the websites of the institutes that exhibited his work, Museum De Pont in Tilburg and M HKA in Antwerp. While visiting *the Irish Sky Gardens* I obtained a book from the receptionist of the Liss Ard estate about the designing and building process to help writing my thesis. I gathered the quotes of James Turrell from his online platform¹², and website of project *the Roden Crater*.¹³

The reason for choosing this subject is highly personal: In my own installations, I make recreations of memories I have of special places. I want to capture the feeling I experienced and transfer it into the artwork, so that the viewers can have a similar experience. I do not recreate the space; I create a mix between a physical experience and an emotional memory of a place that I visited. My work is interactive, inviting the viewer to complete the artwork, giving every viewer a different experience. There are three moments in which phenomenology takes place in my work. First, the authentic experience that I had myself in the landscape; then the recreation of that experience in the artwork and finally the experience that the viewer has upon seeing the artwork. I find the last part most interesting, but it is also the part where I have done the least research so far. The research of phenomenology of perception is a new territory for me, even though I have the idea that it informs a huge part of my work. Doing this research will help me put meaning and directions in my future work.

¹⁰ Marshall, George. *A Guide to Merleau-Ponty's Phenomenology of Perception*. Milwaukee, Wisconsin: Marquette University Press, 2008.

¹¹ Matthews, Eric. *The philosophy of Merleau-Ponty*. Chesham: Acumen, 2002.

¹² Website of James Turrell, consulted 14 September 2017, <http://jamesturrell.com/about/introduction/>

¹³ Website of James Turrell's Roden Crater project, consulted 14 September 2017, <http://rodenrater.com/about/>

1. Merleau-Ponty's philosophical concept of the Phenomenology of perception.

1.1 Explanation of terminology

Before we can explain the philosophical concept of phenomenology, it is essential to clarify the concepts of the actual world and the inner realm. Following Marshall's interpretation of Merleau-Ponty, the actual world consists of 'the mathematical, measurable, quantitative, material, determinate, matter, physical, and bodily'. The inner realm is about what is in 'the subjective mind, the non-mathematical, non-measurable, qualitative, immaterial, indeterminate, spiritual, and, most importantly, the soul.'¹

Perception ('an awareness of one's surroundings that is produced by the operation of the senses')² is the only way human beings can take in information. One needs to be aware that the actual world and one's perception of it are not the same. A human perception is in the centre of their own realm and cannot be seen apart from their time in history, place in nature and culture. Thus, one can only perceive the world from a certain perspective. Even science, although it seems objective at first sight, is created amongst human beings, and is based on their perceptions.³ Merleau-Ponty states that human perception is limited by the imperfection of the senses it depends upon and that even the most objective of observations are based on the observer's previous perceptions and experiences.⁴

According to Merleau-Ponty, an experience can be described as a perception after it has entered someone's mind, and the perception has been subjected to one's inner realm. Not the facts, but what something was like for someone is important here. At this stage, the information is even more coloured and subjective.⁵ Two people can have a similar perception, but after the entering of the inner realm, the experiences can become very different, or even contradictory. However, this does not mean that one experience is truer than any other. By communicating about the experience and taking in other, different perspectives one might

¹ Marshall, George. *A Guide to Merleau-Ponty's Phenomenology of Perception*. Milwaukee, Wisconsin: Marquette University Press, 2008, 36.

² Allen Robert ed., *The New Penguin English Dictionary*. London: Penguin Books, 2001, 1032.

³ Matthews, Eric. *The philosophy of Merleau-Ponty*. Chesham: Acumen, 2002. 33.

⁴ Merleau-Ponty, Maurice. *Phenomenology of Perception*, London: Routledge, 2002, 17. Transl. Colin Smith.

⁵ Merleau-Ponty, Maurice. *The Primacy of Perception*, in: Edie, James M. *The Primacy of Perception and other Essays on Phenomenological Psychology, the Philosophy of Art, History and Politics*, Evanston, Northwestern University Press, 1964, 33.

have, one can attempt to transfer experiences, thoughts and senses. This can be done through language, but also through art.⁶

Following Matthews, human beings cannot be considered as being completely separated from each other.⁷ All inner realms merged together form the 'human reality', we all have in common:

Merleau-Ponty is assuming that certain ideas have become part of the Western way of looking at things and as a result, they have distorted not only our everyday, scientific, and philosophical understandings of what it means to be human, but also our practical dealings with others.⁸

It is important to remember that the origin of this 'human reality' or 'lived perception' lies in the combined inner realms, which always comes in a context. Marshall explains Merleau-Ponty's concept of 'lived perception' as the vantage point to reality and to our own inner realms: 'It is on the basis of this 'lived perception' that we abstract, conceptualize, theorize, and develop our sciences and philosophies.'⁹ He goes on to state that our perceptions give us reality as it is, but that humans tend to be so overwhelmed with the given reality they overlook the limitations of each of these ways of grasping reality. Merleau-Ponty pleads for a more independent stance as 'to be seduced by reality is to fall into a fundamental but natural error.'¹⁰

1.2 What is the definition of phenomenology?

The term phenomenology is rather difficult to describe due to its paradoxical character and because it is only accessible through the phenomenological method itself.¹¹ The New Penguin English dictionary describes it as:

The description of the formal structure of what is directly experienced and of consciousness, in abstraction from any consideration of causal connections between what is experienced and the external world.¹²

In other words, it is the study of our experiences. For Merleau-Ponty, phenomenology could roughly be described as

The totality of perceptible things and the thing of all things, which must be understood not as... a kind of unified law which would cover all the partial phenomena or as a

⁶ Matthews, Eric. *The philosophy of Merleau-Ponty*, 21.

⁷ *ibid.* 17.

⁸ *ibid.*, 28.

⁹ Marshall, George. *A Guide to Merleau-Ponty's Phenomenology of Perception*. 55.

¹⁰ *ibid.* 55.

¹¹ Merleau-Ponty, Maurice. *Phenomenology of Perception*, page VIII.

¹² Allen Robert ed., *The New Penguin English Dictionary*. London: Penguin Books, 2001. 1043

fundamental relation verifiable in all, but as the universal style of all possible perceptions.¹³

Merleau-Ponty's interrogation of phenomena and perception proved a ground breaking research into the complexity of these ostensibly rudimentary elements of everyday life. Each person in an audience can have a different experience about a show, even though the phenomenon i.e. the show on display is the same. Experiences of the audience members can even contradict one another, but that does not mean that one is truer than the other. According to Merleau-Ponty, the scientific field of phenomenology has developed to such a state that it is now practised and identified as a manner and style of thinking: what began as a movement has now arrived at a state where it has a 'complete awareness of itself as a philosophy.'¹⁴

However, phenomenology continues to be entangled with non-scientific ambiguities such as world, time and space as they are lived, while preserving their essential ambiguity.¹⁵ This creates a clear distinction between the scientific facts and the experiences that are derived from those ambiguities. Not what happened, but what was it like, is important. For Merleau-Ponty, language and science are merely examples of rules humans made amongst each other, in order to make it possible to communicate and to attempt to make sense of their perceptions of the world.¹⁶ It must be stated that the phenomenological way of thinking is not an attack on science and theoretical accounts; it is merely a different way of interpreting that what we perceive.

It is to understand better the significance of its findings for our general view of human beings and their place in the scheme of things; the enemy is not science itself, but misguided philosophical conclusions from it.¹⁷

1.3 Phenomenology before Merleau-Ponty.

Maurice Merleau-Ponty is seen as the prime scholar in the field of phenomenology. He was introduced to the subject through lectures of Edmund Husserl, Martin Heidegger and Max Scheler when he entered the École Nationale Supérieure in Paris in 1926. The German philosopher Franz Brentano (1838-1917) first mentioned the term phenomenology. Edmund Husserl then developed his ideas based on Brentano's findings, writing critiques on historicism

¹³ Merleau-Ponty, Maurice. *The Primacy of Perception*, 16.

¹⁴ Merleau-Ponty, Maurice. *Phenomenology of Perception*, 8. Transl. Colin Smith.

¹⁵ Marshall, George. *A Guide to Merleau-Ponty's Phenomenology of Perception*. 74.

¹⁶ Merleau-Ponty, Maurice. *Phenomenology of Perception*, 9. Transl. Colin Smith.

¹⁷ Matthews, Eric. *The philosophy of Merleau-Ponty*. 42.

and on psychologism in logic and analysing the concept of 'intentionality'. 'Intentionality' can here be explained as a 'directness' towards the object (the 'intentional object'), which need not actually exist, and it was taken to be a necessary feature of consciousness and its acts.¹⁸ For example, the existence of a spider is objective, but the fear it can awaken in your subjective consciousness is not something that exists in the actual world. This bridges the objective perception with the individual consciousness and the inner realm, but further extends into the common phenomenon of arachnophobia, which forms an overarching subjective consciousness that is shared with other individuals.¹⁹ Husserl's concept of phenomenology would prove Merleau-Ponty's main source of inspiration. Merleau-Ponty then added new elements of studies such as Gestalt psychology, contemporary neurophysiology and Freudian psychoanalysis and humanistic Marxism, before his doctoral thesis *Phenomenology of Perception* was published in 1945.²⁰

1.4 The primacy of perception.

While the *Phenomenology of Perception* locates itself within perception, George J. Marshall deems its concerns are metaphysical: He interrogates the nature of 'reality' or 'being' as found in perception, looking for the fundamental nature of human reality that enables perception to occur.²¹ He follows Merleau-Ponty when commencing a deconstruction of the phenomenology of perception: Much of the *Phenomenology of Perception* is an attempt at arguing for the primacy of perception over reflective and analytic thought.²² Merleau-Ponty addresses this primacy as follows:

By these words, the 'primacy of perception', we mean that the experience of perception is our presence at the moment when things, truths, values are constituted for us; that perception is a nascent logos; that it teaches us, outside all dogmatism, the true conditions of objectivity itself; that it summons us to the tasks of knowledge and action.²³

Merleau-Ponty's phenomenological way of approaching perception was not an attack on science or theoretical thought, but developed into a new method of perceiving experiences. Here he emphasizes the importance of perception as a bridge between empirical knowledge and rationalism and thus reinstates his personal position in-between these fields of philosophy

¹⁸ Moran, Dermot. *Introduction to Phenomenology*, London: Routledge, 2000, 6.

¹⁹ Matthews, Eric. *The Philosophy of Merleau-Ponty*, 24.

²⁰ Moran, Dermot. *Introduction to Phenomenology*, 12-14.

²¹ Marshall, George. *A Guide To Merleau-Ponty's, Phenomenology Of Perception*, 54.

²² *ibid.* 54-55.

²³ Merleau-Ponty, Maurice. *The Primacy of Perception*, 25.

which was revolutionary at the time.²⁴ He goes on to describe the potential function for phenomenology:

It is not a question of reducing human knowledge to sensation, but of assisting at the birth of this knowledge, to make it as sensible as the sensible, to recover the consciousness of rationality.²⁵

1.5 The limitations of our perceptions

When deconstructing phenomenological perceptions, Matthews states that one can use an intellectual approach, where knowledge comes from the use of reasoning, or an empirical approach where knowledge is dependent on experience of the external world.²⁶ For the intellectual, the structures that give unity to our experience are imposed on it by our own minds. In effect, perception is equated with thought about perception. Here, the sensations provide 'matter' that is given 'form' by the structure of the judgment. The units of experience are not, as they are for the empiricist, meaningless sensations, but the judgements that we make about those sensations. However, both empiricists and intellectualists share the common assumption that experiences cannot contain structure or form in itself, but that it can only have a structure if our minds impose it upon a formless matter of sensation.²⁷ This is where intentionality would bridge the empirical experience to scientific approaches in order to come to a closer understanding of its interpretations. Merleau-Ponty calls this 'realistic analysis and causal thinking': the believe that an object holds a consciousness in the world, separate from other objects, such as the body, and is standing in causal relations to them.²⁸

According to Marshall, an essential part of Merleau-Ponty's theory on perception has been built from the position that Empiricism and Intellectualism are anything but vacuous positions. Both positions arise from 'lived perception' and both grasp reality through that experience. The problem is that each grasps reality in a certain limited way. For Merleau-Ponty, perception is required to access the inner realm and one cannot separate those two from each other.²⁹

As mentioned before: Merleau-Ponty aims 'to overcome the limitations of these perspectives and in doing so achieve an understanding of perception, human reality, truth,

²⁴ Matthews, Eric. *The Philosophy of Merleau-Ponty*, 42.

²⁵ Merleau-Ponty, Maurice. *The Primacy of Perception*, 25.

²⁶ Matthews, Eric. *The Philosophy of Merleau-Ponty*, 7. Descriptions derived from Allen, ed. 2001: Empiricism, 456; Intellectualism, 729.

²⁷ Matthews, Eric. *The Philosophy of Merleau-Ponty*, 7-8.

²⁸ *ibid.*, 7.

²⁹ Merleau-Ponty, Maurice. *Phenomenology of Perception*, 5.

time, freedom and philosophy.³⁰ Merleau-Ponty does this by showing that each view has trouble accounting for certain aspects of 'lived perception'.³¹ Ultimately, the goal is to become aware that our perspective is limited, and that we experience reality in 'lived perception'. Merleau-Ponty created a bridge between two absolutizing categories, in which one through its definition excluded the other. In going back to lived experience with such claims in hand, one discovers these contradictions. Merleau-Ponty attempts to use these contradictions to force us to transform our narrow perspectives and thus see truth in its complexities and depth.³²

³⁰ Marshall, George. *A Guide to Merleau-Ponty's, Phenomenology of Perception*, 24.

³¹ *ibid.* 56.

³² Merleau-Ponty, Maurice. *Phenomenology of Perception*, 65.

2 In what ways does *Wedgework III* in Tilburg engage with Maurice Merleau-Ponty's philosophical concept of phenomenology of perception?

2.1 Description of the work.

The installation was originally made in 1969, but was recreated in museum de Pont in 1993. A dark corridor leads you to space that is partly lit in fluorescent light, measuring 3,65 x 12,30 x 10 meters. A low wall at the beginning of the space regulates the spectator's position within the installation, rendering the source of the artificial light outside its field of vision.¹

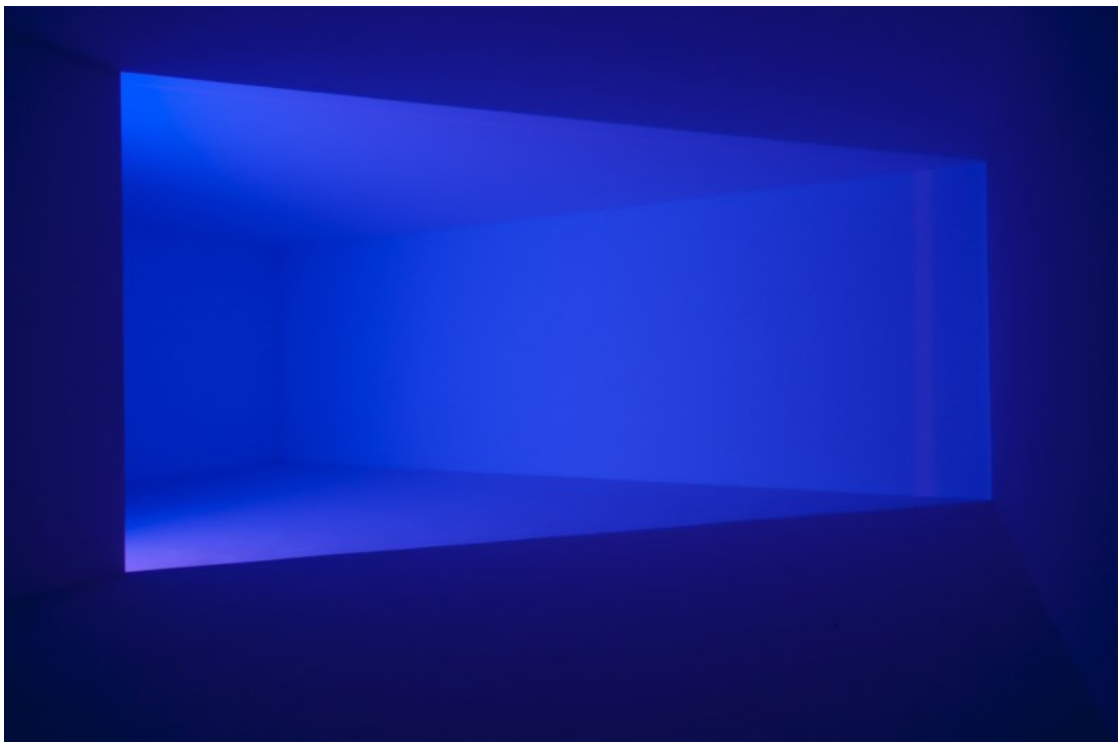


Image 2.1, James Turrell, *Wedgework III*, 1993, Installation with fluorescent light, 3.65 x 12.30 x 10m. Museum de Pont, Tilburg, The Netherlands. Image: Museum de Pont

2.2 My personal experience of *Wedgework III*.

The installation is placed in an isolated room in the middle of a large open space in the museum. I was slightly disorientated when I entered the dark corridor and I had to feel the walls in order to know where I was going. Before the final bend, I saw a glimpse of a purplish blue light coming towards me. I found a place to sit in front of the light spectacle where I could perceive the work. It was still quite dark despite the subtle artificial light. Where light normally diffuses through a space, the installation created the illusion of a material demarcation. I was trying to figure out if there was a lit up cubically shaped emptiness, or if the light was merely suggesting that negative space. The absence of the direct source of the light enlarged this

¹ Website of De Pont Museum, consulted 17 November 2017, <http://www.depont.nl/en/collection/artist/turrell/wedgework-iii/info/>

difficult enigma and my mind was continuously switching between both possibilities. My eyes were struggling to focus and I felt confused or misled by my own perception. Later on I started to walk around; hoping that a different perspective might help me to regain my sense of depth, but it was in vain. Next to me, another spectator's curiosity got the better of him. He used the flashlight of his phone to light up the installation space and it became clear that I was looking at lit up negative space. After finding out the true dimension of the space, I could not unsee it. My mind stopped switching between the two possibilities and the mystery was taken away from me.

2.3 Maurice Merleau-Ponty's philosophical concept of phenomenology of perception and *Wedgework III*.

In a normal situation, light defuses into a space, but in *Wedgework III*, the light creates a spatial boundary that divides the room in two. Like a screen that cuts through the space, '*Wedgework III* makes us doubt our perception. Our eyes register a space either that is not there or a space that reshapes itself through obscuring the source of the light. Turrell describes this as a form of "wordless thoughts".'² In an interview with Julia Brown for the Museum of Contemporary Art in Los Angeles, Turrell stated about his installation that: 'What you see alludes to what it really is—a space where the light is markedly different.' Brown analyses Turrell's application of light as an artist's medium by saying that: 'the textures that make up an impression of a "mist" or "film" in Turrell's pieces are coloured, and they make us contemplate questions about the nature of visual sensations.'³

Personally, I perceived *Wedgework III* in two different perspectives: at first, I saw a cubically shaped emptiness that was lit up by artificial light, and then I discovered that the light was merely suggesting that negative space. The conflict did not take place in the 'actual world', but rather engaged with how the perception of the actual world affected my psyche. Whether the options existed in 'the actual world' is irrelevant: the fact that I experienced them both makes them equally true for me, even though they contradict one and other. However, when the other spectator used his flashlight the state of conflict changed. After this, I was unable to see one of the options. One of the possible perceptions had been destroyed by the flashlight and could no longer be true for me. Still, I am able to recall both perceptions and able to relive the feeling of the past experience. However, when looking back at this memory of the

² Website of De Pont Museum, consulted 6 April 2018, freely translated from Dutch.
<http://www.depont.nl/en/collection/artist/turrell/wedgework-iii/info/>

³ See: Interview with James Turrell, in Julia Brown, ed., *Occluded Front, James Turrell, Los Angeles: Museum of Contemporary Art and Lapis Press, 1985, 13-48, 22.*

experience I had in *Wedgework III*, it is hard not to let the information I know now, interfere with my original experience. Merleau-Ponty mentions the difficulties that occur when analysing both past and present perspectives that derive from past events and memories in the following quote:

Although my present draws into itself time past and time to come, it possesses them only in intention, and even if, for example, the consciousness of my past which I now have, seems to me to cover exactly the past as it was, the past which I claim to recapture is not the real past, but my past as I now see it, perhaps after altering it.⁴

James Turrell is aware of the fact that his work can be seen in different perspectives and can awaken different experiences for his viewer. He states that: 'My work is more about your seeing than it is about my seeing, although it is a product of my seeing'⁵ He enables his artworks to transfer a personal experience or perception from his own to the spectators and in his quote, he puts the experience of the viewer above his own. This emphasis indicates to me that Turrell sets out to create a completely new experience for the viewer, rather than recreating or reliving a personal experience. However, this new experience a viewer might have, could not exist without the fact that Turrell tried to transcend his original experience in his work.

One can attempt to transfer a personal experience towards someone else by describing and discussing it, but you can never tell if the other person perceives it in the exact same way as you do. You simply cannot see in anyone else's head, for you are stuck with your own individual limitations. We can derive from this that the experience I have towards light and *Wedgework III*, differs from Turrell's experience. Following this, I can never be sure that my experience of his work matches the experience that inspired him to make *Wedgework III*.

In *the philosophy of Merleau-Ponty*, Matthews claims that the experiences humans have are an attempt to make sense of their perceptions. A human being is not simply a consciousness, but needs to be seen in the context of his time in history, his social environment, nature and place.

The phenomenological prescription of my experience cannot be achieved without reference to my social and historical situation. Merleau-Ponty calls this 'phenomenology of origins' or 'genetic phenomenology'.⁶

⁴ Merleau-Ponty, Maurice. *Phenomenology of Perception*, 413. transl. Colin Smith. 60

⁵ Website of James Turrell, consulted on 3 September 2017, <http://jamesturrell.com/about/introduction/>

⁶ Matthews, Eric. *The Philosophy of Merleau-Ponty*, 38.

This makes our experiences limited and it means that we are only capable of perceiving our perceptions in a certain way. Matthews concludes from this that science can be seen as an assumption people created in order to grasp and explain the world around them.⁷ Here, phenomenology transcended science, as there were multiple possible explanations for a singular experience.

In Turrell's *Wedgework III*, the singularity of our previous experiences and our scientific knowledge about space and light are questioned and become ambiguous or even irrelevant. It illustrates how phenomenology does not attack science, but that it rather is a way of thinking that transcends it.⁸ Each viewer has a unique experience, even when they perceive the same artwork. These experiences can even contradict one another, but that does not mean that they are not all true.⁹ Phenomenology is not about the objects in the 'actual world', but about giving meaning to individual perceptions of the actual world, just as *Wedgework III* creates an environment in which subjective experiences rise above scientific truths. Personal experiences are perceived through 'lived perception', meaning they are only possible to perceive from a certain and limited perspective.¹⁰ Turrell's artworks allow us to discuss our personal and contradictory perceptions and thus help us resolve and reconstruct our sense of perception.

⁷ Matthews, Eric. *The Philosophy of Merleau-Ponty*, 7.

⁸ Marshall, George. *A Guide to Merleau-Ponty's Phenomenology of Perception*, 22

⁹ Matthews, Eric. *The Philosophy of Merleau-Ponty*, 5.

¹⁰ Merleau-Ponty, Maurice. *Phenomenology of Perception*, 413. transl. Colin Smith.

3 In what ways does *Skyspace* in Antwerp engage with Maurice Merleau-Ponty's philosophical concept of phenomenology of perception?

3.1 Description of the work.

James Turrell started creating his *Skyspaces* in the mid-seventies. There are dozens of them all around the world and they are all unique. Some have artificial light as well as the natural light, and there is a variety in the shapes of the opening in the ceiling. The installation that I will be discussing was built on the rooftop terrace of the M HKA museum in Antwerp in 1994 and measures 6.5 x 6.5 x 5.5 meters. Reclining benches made out of wood are covering the lower parts of the walls inside the installation. The installation has one doorway and a square shaped opening in the ceiling, which allows natural light to enter the space.¹



Image 3.1 James Turrell, *Skyspace*, 1994, 6.5 x 6.5 x 5.5 m., M HKA, Antwerp, Belgium

¹ Website of M HKA Museum, consulted 22 December 2017,
<https://www.muhka.be/en/collections/artworks/s/item/3833-skyspace>

3.2 My personal experience of *Skyspace*.

After a long day of wandering through Antwerp and slowly getting overstimulated by the seemingly endless exhibitions in the M HKA museum, I arrived at the rooftop terrace. Filled with all the artworks and experiences the city had to offer to me, I paused for a cup of tea. I noticed the cubical building, but at first, I was uncertain whether it was an artwork or not, and if it would be open for public access. After a well-deserved break, my curiosity could not help to have a peek inside. When I came near, I saw a sign that read *Skyspace by James Turrell*, which filled my heart with excitement. I had read so much about Turrell and his *Skyspaces*, but I had no idea the M HKA museum had a work of his in their collection. I placed myself on the tilted bench inside the installation, which pointed my awareness towards the ceiling. The sky was blue as there were no clouds that day. I never before experienced the colour of the sky as intensely as I did then. The square shaped sky seemed almost depthless. It interested me how an artwork could make me perceive the sky in such a different way than it normally would. I was focussing so much on observing the sky, I could notice the mildest colour fluctuations as the sun was slowly setting and I saw the square shaped solar imprint moving slowly across the wall.

I merged into a deeply fascinated and meditative state, which made me lose sense of time and everything else that seemed to occupy my mind that day. I felt completely refreshed when I walked out of the installation. I decided to skip the last section of the museum; nothing could have possibly exceeded this experience.

3.3 Maurice Merleau-Ponty's philosophical concept of phenomenology of perception and *Skyspace*, Antwerp.

At dusk, the blue light grows progressively deeper, clouds and passing airplanes become invisible and the first stars emerge. Until the opening seems filled with a velvety jet-black cloth, like a dark square that appears to be painted on the ceiling.²

This quote from the website of the M HKA describes an experience wherein the viewer sees the light changing from dawn till dusk till darkness from within the *Skyspace*. It describes how the work of James Turrell awakens a consciousness of light and space in the viewer. The light and its colour are given an almost material, tangible quality; transcending from empty space to a presence that changes as one observes it. Melinda Wortz gives a clarifying statement about the way Turrell uses the light in the *Light and Space* exhibition in New York in 1980:

² Website of M HKA Museum, consulted 6 April 2018,
<https://www.muhka.be/en/collections/artworks/s/item/3833-skyspace>

Instead of using materials like paint and canvas or carved marble to create the illusion of other objects, Turrell presents the material that are present in any situation-light ... Turrell asks us to look at light in and of itself.³

In *Skyspace*, Turrell does not make a recreation of light, but uses natural light only. Despite our everyday exposure to natural light, Turrell, through framing the sky, manages to create an alienating effect that forces the viewer to rethink the presence of the light and his relation to it. Without altering it, the sky and the light become the artist's medium. These type of 'materials' Turrell uses are what Merleau-Ponty describes in *Eye and Mind*, as not 'real' objects.

Light, lighting, shadows, reflections; colour, all the objects of his [the painter's] quest are not altogether real objects; like ghosts, they have only visual existence. In fact they exist at the threshold of profane vision; they are not seen by everyone.⁴

Merleau-Ponty claims that you cannot only see light itself; you always see light on an object that is lit up by it. According to Craig Adcock, the writer of *James Turrell: The Art of Light and Space*, this is exactly what James Turrell tries to disprove in his artworks. He intends to convey the idea that we do see light in the air: 'Turrell's achievement is making it possible for us to see light as light rather than illumination on objects'.⁵

The only way human beings can perceive light, and space, or in fact all information and objects, is through their own senses. Or according to Matthews: 'The perceived world is always the presupposed foundation of all rationality, all value and all existence.'⁶ This makes every human being the centre of his or her own world. However, there is a significant difference between the actual world and our perception of that actual world. It is simply not possible to perceive information objectively, because you will always perceive it from your own perspective. For we have a consciousness that allows us to be more than just objects in the world.⁷ Matthews concludes that:

To explore our being-in-the-world is also to explore our ways of being involved with the world, the purpose we have in relation to surrounding objects and the meanings that we give them.⁸

³ Melinda Wortz, *Introduction to James Turrell*, exhibition catalogue: *James Turrell, Light and Space*, New York: Whitney Museum of American Art, 1980, 8.

⁴ Merleau-Ponty, Maurice, *Eye and Mind*, in the *Primacy of Perception*, ed. James M. Edie, Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1964, 168.

⁵ Craig Adcock, *James Turrell: The Art of Light and Space*, Berkeley: University of California Press, 1989, 7.

⁶ Matthews, Eric. *The philosophy of Merleau-Ponty*, 45.

⁷ Marshall, George. *A Guide to Merleau-Ponty's Phenomenology of Perception*. Milwaukee, Wisconsin: Marquette University Press, 2008, 22.

⁸ Matthews, Eric. *The philosophy of Merleau-Ponty*, 17.

The only way I was able to become aware of the *Skyspace*, was by using my senses and seeing it from my perspective. I entered the installation after a long and very intense day with many stimuli. I experienced the work as overwhelming, but this of course does not mean the work itself is overwhelming. It is simply how I felt seeing the work from my perspective at that certain time. One could argue that the feelings *Skyspace* had awakened in me, said more about me personally then it said about the work Turrell had created. That would mean that the relation I had with the installation could be helpful to me in exploring and finding purpose and meaning in my life in this world, instead of it merely being an object in the actual world. On his website, James Turrell states that:

My work has no object, no image and no focus. With no object, no image and no focus, what are you looking at? You are looking at you looking. What is important to me is to create an experience of wordless thought.⁹

Turrell here acknowledges the importance of self-reflection for the viewers of his artworks. Julia Brown follows and finds that, contrary to usual statements about his *Lightspaces* (such as *Wedgework III*), the *Skyspaces* do not give the opportunity to see oneself seeing, but the chance of feeling oneself seeing.¹⁰ This indicates that the experience of perceiving of Turrell's installations is deeper than merely seeing it. According to this statement, the light and spaces in his installations can be perceived with the entire body. Merleau-Ponty gives a description of a similar way of perceiving with the body, which could also help us to rediscover ourselves.

We shall need to reawaken our experience of the world as it appears to us in so far as we are in the world through our body, and in so far as we perceive the world with our body. But by thus remaking contact with the body and with the world, we shall also rediscover ourselves, since, perceiving as we do with our body, the body is a natural self and, as it were, the subject of perception.¹¹

In harmony with *Wedgework III*, Turrell tries to capture an experience in his work. 'My desire is to set up a situation to which I take you and let you see. It becomes your experience.'¹² Once again he states that the experience of the viewer is more important to him than his own. However there is a significant difference compared to *Skyspace*. *Wedgework III*, is a static work. The artificial light in the installation ensures that the circumstances are always identical. *Skyspace* is dynamic because of the use of natural light in constant movement. Time,

⁹ Website of James Turrell, consulted 14 September 2017, <http://jamesturrell.com/about/introduction/>

¹⁰ James Turrell in an interview with Julia Brown, in Brown, Julia ed. *The Art of Light and Space*, Santa Monica: Welton Becket Associates, 1984, 43. In: Brüderlin, *The Innerworld of the Outerworld of the Innerworld: James Turrell and the Boundaries between Sensory and Spiritual Experience*, Ostfildern: Hatje Cantz Verlag, 2009, 143.

¹¹ Merleau-Ponty, Maurice. *Phenomenology of Perception*, 413. transl. Colin Smith, 184.

¹² Website of James Turrell's Roden Crater project, consulted 14 September 2017, <http://rodenrcrater.com/about/>

weather and season affect the light and its colours at every moment. The viewer is able to see minute movements and chances in the sky. Every perception of the work will be a unique one.

If different viewers witness the same perception, it will lead to different experiences. With differences in perceptions, the experiences are likely to become even further apart. When spectators become aware of the differences in experiences they are having in the *Skyspace* installation, it will help them in deepening their personal awareness.

I can think only if I have something to think about, a world to relate my thoughts to; and I can conceive myself as an 'I' a 'subject' only if I am aware of other subjects, other 'I's' from whom I can distinguish myself.¹³

Merleau-Ponty states that the arts have the potential to communicate in both language, in the verbal sense, as well as through the expression of experiences.¹⁴ Even though you can only perceive information from your own perception, this does not mean that you cannot interact with other people and the world around you. 'There is a necessary gap between ourselves as subjects and the objective world of our experience, but never a gap that amounts to total detachment.'¹⁵ Two human beings can have differences in experiencing an artwork, but because there is no total detachment, you are able to discuss this with one and other. Discussing these differences in experiences can help you to relate and understand other human beings, other cultures and different times. You cannot have the same experience as someone else, but you can attempt to come closer towards each other, by being aware of their different perspectives. Exactly this is what can make art so precious to me.

¹³ Matthews, Eric. *The philosophy of Merleau-Ponty*, 35.

¹⁴ Ibid., 21.

¹⁵ Ibid., 43.

4 In what ways does *the Irish Sky Garden* in Skibbreen engage with Maurice Merleau-Ponty's philosophical concept of phenomenology of perception?

4.1 Description of the work.

In 1989, James Turrell visited the Liss Ard Estate in Skibbreen for the first time and started sketching and designing his project for the Liss Ard Foundation South-Cork. The original plan included three installations: *The Crater*, *the Mound* and *the Pyramid*. Due to both technical and financial reasons, only the Crater was actually completed in Liss Ard estate's gardens. To enter the volcano shaped installation, one needs to go through a narrow concrete corridor, which ends in stairs going upwards. In the centre of the crater, a stone sculptured bench positions the spectators. Lying down facing the sky, one sees the ellipse shaped edge of the crater forming a framework for the sky. Every moment the sky will look different due to the continuously changing position of the sun, moon and stars.¹



Image 4.1 James Turrell, *the Irish Sky Garden*, 1989, 50 x 25 m. Liss Ard Estate, Skibbreen. Own image.

¹ Wick, Oliver, *The Irish Sky Garden*, Skibbreen: Liss Ard Foundation, 1992

4.2 My personal experience of *the Irish Sky Garden*.

Since I had already seen all of Turrell's works based in the Netherlands, I looked up if there were similar installations elsewhere and found *the Irish Sky Garden* at Liss Ard Estate in Skibbereen. Once I moved to Ireland, I immediately started planning a trip to see his work in Skibbereen and booked a timeslot to see the work. Filled with excitement, I collected the key. It felt like a huge privilege to have private access to such an immense installation. After a ten-minute walk through the estate's peaceful gardens, I arrived at the gate, which led to a dark and narrow corridor made out of concrete. It was cold and I sensed an oppressive and mysterious feeling. As I walked up the stairs, it slowly became warmer and brighter. When I reached the top, my eyes were filled with light. I beheld the green crater shaped installation underneath the bright and beautiful sky, which I was experiencing in a different way than I usually would. I was able to sense the space of the sky, as if I were in the centre of a gigantic dome that filled my eyesight completely. As I laid down on the bench in the middle of the crater and looked up, I started noticing minor changes in the colour of the light and I saw the wave-like motions of the clouds. This allowed me to perceive it in such a deeply emotional way, that a sublime sensation fell over me.

4.3 Maurice Merleau-Ponty's philosophical concept of phenomenology of perception and *the Irish Sky Garden*, Skibbereen.

A few times in my life I had a sublime experience that felt so superb that it felt it was bigger than myself, it transcended my inner realm. The experience of the *Irish Sky Garden*, described above, was one of these moments I would call sublime. 'Sublime or sublimity: 1 Of the highest moral or spiritual worth; exalted. 2 astoundingly beautiful or grand.'² It completely took over my mind, as if I briefly escaped reality and merged into the moment of the art. As if the presence of something greater fell upon me. This is how I imagine a monk would feel upon entering a gothic cathedral, or how a child would feel that sees the sea for the first time. I have had similar experiences in nature, but the arts prove to be excellent for this too. I was unable to find any clarifying statements regarding sublime experiences in the entire oeuvre of Merleau-Ponty. I feel that sublimity could have been a significant addition to his theories, which could provide understanding in these certain type of experiences. In the book *Het Sublieme* by Dutch art historian and critic Hans den Hartog Jager, I found a description of sublimity within the arts, that most closely matches my personal conceptions of sublimity:

The best contemporary art always comes from a clash of ideas, images, memories and shapes you could not possibly predict. Nevertheless, the sensation is always the same:

² Allen Robert ed., *The New Penguin English Dictionary*. London: Penguin Books, 2001, 1402.

all of a sudden, you end up in a place you did not know, where you feel more, or differently than you ever did before. That is the redeeming beauty.³

I find it difficult to understand that in Merleau-Ponty's studies about the subjective experience, sublimity remains unspoken. Despite the absence of sublimity in the works of Merleau-Ponty, his writings about transcendence come the closest to it:

To appear as transcending consciousness is to appear as being more than what appears. It is in this rather paradoxical claim about the nature of human transcendence that Merleau-Ponty locates truth.⁴

Merleau-Ponty merely acknowledges the transcending consciousness as being more than it appears. He does not mention what he means with 'more', which makes this statement rather vague. Unfortunately, this does not give me enough information to apply Merleau-Ponty's theory to the sublime experience I had in *the Irish Sky Garden*. Writings by Merleau-Ponty on the concept of sublimity would have been greatly beneficial in analysing the works of James Turrell, and could have acknowledged the experiences I had in his installations.

However, Merleau-Ponty does engage with matters that go beyond the primary sensual perception, into the subjective inner realm. Marshall states that Merleau-Ponty's philosophical concept of phenomenology of perception creates a bridge between materialism and intellectualism⁵:

For materialism today, the only thing that can be real is the material, and further material things either are or they are not. For intellectualism, a thing is either known or it is not known, and the real is what is known.⁶

Merleau-Ponty created an order that exists in between these two categories. He appealed to 'lived experience' and 'lived perception'; because it is there that we find the things that do not fit in with the closely demarcated categories of analytic reflection: 'ambiguity':

If we turn to lived experience, we discover that 'ambiguity' is always given and present. In short, 'ambiguity' is real, and it is a kind of being in between actuality and nothingness.⁷

Marshall's quotes about Merleau-Ponty match my personal experience. *The Skyspace* detracted me from all analytical categories, displaced me into a meditative state, and made

³ Den Hartog Jager, Hans, *Het Sublieme*, Amsterdam: Atheneaeum - Polak & Van Gennep, 2011, 128, Own translation.

⁴ Marshall, George. *A Guide to Merleau-Ponty's Phenomenology of Perception*, 62.

⁵ Materialism can be defined as 'a theory in which only physical matter is real and that all processes and phenomena can be explained by reference to matter.' (Alan ed. 857), for a definition of Intellectualism, see page 10.

⁶ Marshall, George. *A Guide to Merleau-Ponty's Phenomenology of Perception*. 57.

⁷ Ibid. 57

me lose track of time. The experience I had was not purely rational, because I needed to perceive the work to enter in that state. Neither was it purely empirical because it was a physical experience within myself, wherein my perceptions were mixed with my thoughts and feelings. I am fascinated by this in-between point Merleau-Ponty is describing, and I see a clear overlap with the works of James Turrell. Both are working in an in-between field wherein scientific ambiguities connect with the subjective inner realm. The act of engaging with such ambiguities that present themselves to us creates an artificial environment, such as in James Turrell's work. Adjusting and moulding these ambiguities also alters our experience of these ambiguities: When Turrell alters a space, our experience of that space is also altered. The meticulous planning of his artworks allows Turrell to guide these alterations and thus, to guide the viewer's experience of the space. In doing so, he is convinced that spaces can radiate a physical experience: 'I'm also interested in the sense of presence of space; that is space where you feel a presence, almost an entity — that physical feeling and power that space can give.'⁸

The Irish Sky Garden made me perceive the light and the sky in a very different way than I usually would. The shape of the crater had altered my sense of depth and the sky felt like it was closely surrounding me. Patrick Beveridge describes the spatial experience in the installations of James Turrell in *Color Perception and the Art of James Turrell* in a way that matches my personal experience:

When we experience an undifferentiated visual field— for example, in an aircraft—the airspace ahead of us appears to be filled with an immaterial “mist”... the optical texture appears to fill the airspace close to our eyes.⁹

Leonardo goes on to explain this phenomenon: 'These interior spaces ... appears to be just a few meters above the observers' heads... it appears to fill the aperture and enclose the space rather than open it up.'¹⁰ However, there are further effects noted in Turrell's construction of space, for example in Honour and Fleming's *A World History of Art*: 'Turrell's fascination for light has a clear reaction with the way many painters studied the effects of colour as a sensory and spiritual experience'.¹¹ New Yorker critic Calvin Tompkins mentions Turrell's ability to alter the scientific ambiguities and the way they are presented to us. Tompkins writes that 'His work is not about light, or a record of light; it is light — the physical presence of light made manifest in sensory form.'¹² The scientific ambiguity of the light has been adjusted and filtered through

⁸ Website of James Turrell, consulted on 3 September 2017, <http://jamesturrell.com/about/introduction/>

⁹ Beveridge, Patrick, *Color Perception and the Art of James Turrell*, Leonardo, 33 (4), MIT Press, 2000, 307.

¹⁰ Ibid. 308.

¹¹ Fleming, John and Honour Hugh, *Algemene kunstgeschiedenis (A World History of Art)*. Amsterdam: J.M. Meulenhoff, 2009, 860.

¹² Website of James Turrell, consulted on 3 September 2017, <http://jamesturrell.com/about/introduction/>

the work of Turrell and now the light is presented to the viewer in a new and unknown form. The senses perceive the light and the space, but also perceive the adjustments that Turrell has applied to it. The appearance of light and space, that which has always been familiar is suddenly reactivated and questioned by Turrell: a new type of experience is created that transcends our previous experiences, for we do not immediately understand it.

Conclusion

In this conclusion, I will give an overview of the explored connections between the philosophical concept of phenomenology of perception by Maurice Merleau-Ponty and the works of James Turrell. I will state my findings of Merleau-Ponty's theories in comparison with Turrell, by making connections between the different chapters. The findings that will be summarised here are to be seen as an informative account rather than the critical awakening of a debate.

The three installations of James Turrell I discussed in this thesis are all immense in size and fill an entire space. There is an aspect of illusion in his works and it brings up existential questions about our perception light, space and nature. *Skyspace* and *the Irish Sky Garden* are combining the inside space with the outdoors, and are using only natural light in contrast to the artificial lighted sphere in *Wedgework III*. Or as Melinda Wortz put it: 'his works are not objects, but it is light itself.'¹ However, in *Eye and Mind*, Merleau-Ponty describes that light, shadows and reflections are not real objects that exist in the real world. You cannot see light itself, it is only perceivable when it is projected on an object.² According to Craig Adcock, this is exactly what Turrell tries to question in his work.³ In his installations, Turrell takes away all the objects in a space before he frames the sky. He sets up an experience for the viewer wherein they can perceive the sky in an intense and focused way. Even the slightest colour changes and movements become visible.

Phenomenology is a way of thinking where, in contradiction to science, different perceptions of a single observation can exist beside each other. Not the actual world, but giving meaning to individual perceptions of that world are relevant here. James Turrell is aware about the differences in experience his works brings upon his viewers. These experiences of the viewers are more relevant to him, although it is a result of his original experience.⁴ Different spectators all have different experiences of his work, even though the perception of his installations in the 'actual world' are very, if not completely, similar to one another. After perceptions enter someone's inner realm, the information gets coloured and

¹ Wortz, Melinda, *Introduction to James Turrell*, Exhibition catalogue for: *James Turrell, Light and Space*, New York: Whitney Museum of American Art, 1980, 8.

² Merleau-Ponty, Maurice, *Eye and Mind*, in the *Primacy of Perception*, ed. James M. Edie, Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1964, 168.

³ Craig Adcock, *James Turrell: The Art of Light and Space*, Berkeley: University of California Press, 1989, 7.

⁴ Website of James Turrell, consulted on 3 September 2017, <http://jamesturrell.com/about/introduction/>

subjective due to our unique consciousness.⁵ Despite differences in experiences the viewers of his work might have, does not mean that they are not all true or less valuable.

Both Merleau-Ponty and Turrell acknowledge the idea that you can have a physical sensation of a perception you perceive.⁶ You can feel yourself seeing, so to speak. To be able to get the physical feeling and power of a space that Turrell described, your perceptions of that space need to enter your inner realm. There, perceptions can merge with inner thoughts and feelings. This physical sensation of a space that Turrell is describing, does not locate itself within the 'actual world' nor directly in your inner realm. Therefore, according to the concepts of Merleau-Ponty, these sensations can be described as an ambiguity. This 'ambiguity' locates itself in an in-between-field, between actuality and nothingness and close the gap between rationalism and empiricism.⁷ Humans depend on their perception to take in information, before it can be used to theorize and philosophize within their selves.⁸ In both the *Skyspace* and the *Irish Sky Garden*, Turrell makes adjustments in natural environments by framing or capturing it into his installations. Through his changes to the landscapes, our perception of it alters too. He gives his spectators a new and unknown form of light and space, which we do not immediately understand, because we have not had a similar experience like this before. Experiencing Turrell's work will make you look in renewed and more focussed way to the omnipresent nature and light.

For me, the installations of James Turrell form the perfect recipe for the creation of sublime experiences. His monumental installations that surround their spectators with a perception of the pure beauty of nature, the sky or light, in a way that is never experienced before. It can briefly let you escape from your inner thoughts and completely takes you away in the moment of the experience. I experienced a psychical sensation of the perceptions that I had in Turrell's installation. Setting up a situation for your spectators wherein they achieve a sublime experience, is the highest possible goal for me as an artist. Unfortunately, I was unable to find any direct concepts of sublimity or similar types of experiences in the writings of Merleau-Ponty that could give me more clarity in understanding this phenomenon. This is unfortunate for I found a notable presence of sublimity in my experiences of the works of

⁵ Merleau-Ponty, Maurice. *The Primacy of Perception*, in: Edie, James M. *The Primacy of Perception and other Essays on Phenomenological Psychology, the Philosophy of Art, History and Politics*, Evanston, Northwestern University Press, 1964, 33.

⁶ Merleau-Ponty, Maurice. *Phenomenology of Perception*, 413. transl. Colin Smith, 184. & Website of James Turrell, consulted on 3 September 2017, <http://jamesturrell.com/about/introduction/>

⁷ Marshall, George. *A Guide to Merleau-Ponty's Phenomenology of Perception*. Milwaukee, Wisconsin: Marquette University Press, 2008, 57

⁸ Marshall, George. *A Guide to Merleau-Ponty's Phenomenology of Perception*. 55.

James Turrell. To me, sublimity does not fit in Merleau-Ponty's concepts about the inner realm, and his descriptions of ambiguity and transcendental experiences do not completely comprehend it either. His writings about ambiguity and transcendental experiences are simply too vaguely described for me to be able to make a well-grounded comparison with sublimity.

Like mentioned before in this thesis, Turrell himself acknowledges the presence of possibility of self-reflection his work can bring towards his spectators: 'My work has no object, no image and no focus. With no object, no image and no focus, what are you looking at? You are looking at you looking.'⁹ When exploring our personal experiences, we unavoidably explore our own 'being-in-the-world' and the purpose we are having in relation to our surroundings.¹⁰ Therefore, the experience an individual has with an artwork, can say more about the person than it says about the artwork. When discussing the differences in experiences with an artwork with another spectator, you can become more aware of your personal inner realm, because you have others to distinguish yourself and your experiences from.¹¹

One can attempt to transfer experiences onto another through language, but the arts prove to be excellent for this too.¹² Turrell states that the viewers' experiences are more important to him than his original experience.¹³ Yet he cannot exactly know what the experiences of his spectators are like, because he is stuck in his own limited perspective, like every else is. You can however, attempt to come closer to one and other, by taking in mind different perspectives others might have and to discuss differences in experiences as accurately as possible.¹⁴ This will help you to relate to other human beings, cultures and times in history. Art can help overcoming differences between human beings, without necessarily having to agree to everyone. It helps you to understand different perspectives others might have and at the same time raise awareness of your personal norms and values.¹⁵ Living in a world filled with conflicts, xenophobia and hate amongst one and other, it makes me hopeful to know that art possesses the possibility to create a little bit more understanding and togetherness into this world and makes me feel privileged to be an artist.

⁹ Website of James Turrell, consulted on 3 September 2017, <http://jamesturrell.com/about/introduction/>

¹⁰ Matthews, Eric. *The philosophy of Merleau-Ponty*, 17.

¹¹ Ibid., 35.

¹² Matthews, Eric. *The philosophy of Merleau-Ponty*, 35.

¹³ Website of James Turrell's Roden Crater project, consulted 14 September 2017, <http://rodenrater.com/about/>

¹⁴ Matthews, Eric. *The philosophy of Merleau-Ponty*, 21.

¹⁵ Ibid. 21, 35.

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