A Phenomenological Approach to Media Art Environments

The Immersive Art Experience and the Finnish Art Scene

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Immersiveness is an increasingly present term in today's communication. In the art field, the phenomenon of immersive art experiences is mainly announced or described in the press releases for exhibitions, reviews in art magazines and in TV programmes. In recent years, some articles, and books about immersiveness have also been published by scholars. As an art historian, I wanted to investigate immersive art, a new artistic field that can be defined as a multimedia experience where visitors interact with artwork whilst immersed in a range of sensory experiences. In this research, I have investigated the immersive art experience from the perspective of art history, social theory, and media studies situated within a phenomenological theoretical framework.

What moved my research into immersive art? For many years I was dedicated to the study of video art history and phenomenology. In this research, I wanted to investigate more intensively the historical moment when video art installation turned immersive. Thus, I conducted a comparative analysis of the forms of immersive spatiality. These forms include spatial environments, participatory installations, video art installations and interactive environments. In the twentieth century, just as painters felt restricted by the canvas surface bounded by the frame, so video artists felt the need to project their moving images outside the boundaries of the monitor. A parallel can be established between the transition to the curved canvases in the panoramas, and from the single-channel video to the multi-channel installation. Thanks to new technologies, video artists were able to project their works into and onto the surrounding space, directly onto the walls of the museums, and later outdoors, in an immersive way.

I have also examined the historical antecedents of immersive spaces. I have traced the late eighteenth-century immersive environments ranging from moving panoramas with their circular structures, via Claude Monet's curved painted panels, to Lucio Fontana's spatial environments, which have recently been rediscovered and defined by international scholars as precursors to immersive environments.

Phenomenology was a very interesting and effective approach to investigate immersive art, and particularly the writings of Maurice Merleau-Ponty. I intended to prove how phenomenological concepts can be revelatory in the approach to immersive experiences. Immersive art, as an embodied mutual experience, materialises the phenomenological notions of spectatorship, corporeality, motility, porosity, chiasm, and encounter – significant notions for interpreting video, interactive, and immersive installations.

In this thesis, I balanced a general and a detailed view both in the artistic and in the philosophical field. It was also important for me to observe both the international and the Finnish art scene in immersive art environments. As well as this, I wanted to consider the development of post-phenomenological theories in Finland and abroad. Here, I remind you of the significance of a chiasmic encounter, as suggested by Merleau-Ponty in his description of a pool in *Eye and Mind*. He writes that the water of the pool is also present in the surroundings because it reflects onto the tiles and across the garden. The pool is everywhere perceptually through its reflections.[1] In the same way, perceptions and knowledge intertwine in our global community. Therefore, it is important to consider both local and global aspects in the field of art research.

I started to analyse phenomenology by reading articles. I wanted to find out how and when it started to affect the Finnish cultural scene. I also acquired another part of my research material

1   Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *L'oeil et l'esprit* (Paris: Gallimard 1964); English translation by C. Dallery, *Eye and Mind, in Maurice Merleau-Ponty, The Primacy of Perception and Other Essays on Phenomenological Psychology, the Philosophy of Art, History and Politics*, edited by J. M. Edie (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1964), 182.

by conducting interviews. In total I interviewed 21 respondents, mostly Finnish artists, art professionals and philosophers. Their answers generated new knowledge for the field regarding phenomenological thought and aspirations in Finland, particularly from the 1990s onwards. In my thesis, I have selected and quoted some of the respondents' statements to highlight significant information. For example, Marjatta Oja's practice is so close to the Merleau-Pontian concept of overlapping,[2] that in her situational sculptures, she creates a sort of overlap between moving images, the given space, and the objects. Since the early 1990s, projections and reflections are at the basis of her process of intersection. In relation to the spatialisation of video art, artist Lauri Astala affirmed that "the most important feature of video installations is spatiality".[3] In early 2000s, he also became familiar with Merleau-Ponty's *Eye and Mind*.[4] In other words, Oja and Astala highlighted how phenomenology was a strong topic in Finland during those years. In addition, artist Tuomas A. Laitinen stated that his approach to the artistic research is 'phenomenological'.[5]

Another challenge was to draw together the Finnish and international contemporary art scene. Thus, I have chosen to focus in more detail on several international artists who work in immersive digital art, such as Pipilotti Rist and teamLab, and on a group of Finnish artists who works in the field of video installation, interactivity and immersivity. More specifically, I have focused on the impact of media art on Finnish artists, namely Eija-Liisa Ahtila, Lauri Astala, Laura Beloff, Hanna Haaslahti, Marjatta

Oja, and their subsequent generation, such as Tuomas A. Laitinen and Erkka Nissinen. In the 1990s, for example, Ahtila's use of multiple screens represented one of the earlier experiments with immersivity not merely in Finland but also in the Nordic art scene. In her multiple-screen projections, she reveals that the spatiality of video art is not only a technique, but rather a novel way of approaching existence, of evading a human-centred attitude.[6] Since the early 1990s, Hanna Haaslahti has created artificial worlds where viewers become actors and spectators simultaneously. In general, her approach to technology is dedicated in analysing how media and technology affect society. Erkka Nissinen, who belongs to the younger generation of Finnish artists, created the multimedia installation *Aalto Natives* (2017) with Nathaniel Mellors. They immersed the public in a visual spectacle, in an immersive theatrical experience by a synchronizing analogue and digital tool.

Regarding international artists' artworks, the immersive exhibitions of teamLab at the Amos Rex (2018) and Doug Aitken at Kiasma (2020) could be seen as a step forward in the direction of immersivity, because they were both first solo exhibitions in Finland. While teamLab presented large immersive projections in the Amos Rex's underground exhibition halls, Aitken created an immersive video environment on a large, circular double-sided screen. Kiasma also held other relevant immersive exhibitions such as Pipilotti Rist's solo exhibition *Elixir*, based on 3D-modelled video projections in the main exhibition hall in 2009. In these immersive exhibitions, it is evident how the passivity of the spectator has been overcome thanks to an amplification of sensitivity and responsiveness to a specific environment.

2   See Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *Le Visible et l'invisible* (Paris: Gallimard, 1964); English translation by A. Lingis, *The Visible and the Invisible*, edited by C. Lefort (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1968).

3   Lauri Astala, interview by L. Scacco. 18 October 2019.

4   Ibidem.

5   Tuomas A. Laitinen, in conversation with L. Scacco. Helsinki, 6 April 2018.

6   Florian Langhammer, "How Do We Picture the World Around Us? Eija-Liisa Ahtila in the Studio," *Collectors Agenda* (2017), https://www.collectorsagenda.com/in-the-studio/eija-liisa-ahtila.

I have also investigated two important institutions in Helsinki: the Museum of Contemporary Art Kiasma and the Amos Rex Museum. Kiasma's name refers to the concept of 'chiasm',[7] that symbolises the spread of Merleau-Pontian ideas on the Finnish cultural scene from the 1990s. Meanwhile, the Amos Rex Museum represents another venue for showcasing the latest developments in immersive art environments.

I have then focused on the role of art museums today, and to conservation practices in media art. The new possibilities of the digital era have changed the notion of contemporary art museums: from visual archives to participatory sites, from mid-sized halls to large spaces and from linear to non-linear display criteria to leave room for interplay. In addition, the need for professional competencies to generate media art environments has prompted artists to collaborate instead of aiming for individual creation. Today, shared authorship is expected, and is creating new challenges in art conservation theory and practice.

Because my research has many objectives, I have findings in various areas. I have outlined that when reading virtual and immersive art experiences, phenomenology offers an alternative method to the dualistic interpretation, that leads to reciprocity, circularity, and porosity. This allows the digital space to be interpreted from a new perspective. Overcoming the Cartesian dualism has also been a challenge for some pioneers of immersive art in their attempt to build an embodied experience, like Canadian artist Char Davies.[8] Illusion can be avoided when viewers shift from perceiving to performing, following the plot, and actively partaking in it. A phenomenological approach can improve immersive art experiences by moving away from the illusive simulations that have prevailed until today and moving nearer to our way of being-in-the-world. A 360-degree representation recreate the circular, spatial and reciprocal attitude through which we engage with the natural world.

I have also illustrated an affinity between the shift from videotape to immersive environments with the shift from a 'spatiality of position' to the 'spatiality of situation' described by Merleau-Ponty in *The Phenomenology of Perception*.[9] To develop a spatiality of situation, individuals require an environment to move, interact, and extend their actions. This dynamic mirrors the artists' aim of creating a video art installation, a small reality to interact and experience spatiality. Recent developments in immersive environments are proof of the specificity of video art and its prominent position in the field of art history. Its concurrent space-time response encourages the feeling of a 'lived' experience. Artists embrace the emergent forms of spatial exploration opened by video art in a constructive continuum rather than viewing them as new technologies.

In my thesis I ask: what is an immersive experience? I have outlined various degrees of immersive experiences that depend on the scale of the art environment, the possibility of entering the space, the feeling of proximity or, at least, the prospect of making contact and the perception of being surrounded by an environment. Spatiality and motility emerge as the major characteristics of a state of immersion.

Immersive environments can be seen from inside and outside, entered into, circled, and interacted with from countless positions. It is easy to identify a strong affinity with phenomenology in this moving into and around the artwork extended

7   Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *Le Visible et l'invisible*, 130–155.

8   Char Davies & John Harrison, "Osmose: Towards Broadening the Aesthetics of Virtual Reality," in *Computer Graphics (ACM SIGGRAPH)*, Vol. 30, No. 4 (1996): 25–28.

9   Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *Phénomènologie de la perception* (Gallimard: Paris 1945); English transl. Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *The Phenomenology of Perception*, translated by C. Smith (London and New York: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1962), 115.

in the space, in activating and transforming it. An immersive work solicits an experience of multi-stable spatiality. It also solicits a new type of spectatorship. With the new technologies, the metamorphosis of spectatorship places viewers at the centre of the environment and transforms them into performers. So nowadays, we can talk about 'immersants' instead of viewers.[10]

In my conclusion, I have also outlined the importance of the role of others. Viewers can understand the different possibilities offered by immersive artworks partly because they see other users activate some of these potentialities. I have clarified the role of others in highlighting immersive art spaces, in tune with Merleau-Ponty's thought.[11]

Otherness is also considered when artists anticipate the interaction of future visitors to their interactive artworks. Their first formulations of immersive spaces usually consider and envisage interactional and motional possibilities. Immersiveness is therefore created through reciprocal considerations. A recipient can enjoy an immersive experience when certain conditions are met. This notion of reciprocity accentuates how a phenomenological approach can expand the concept of immersiveness.[12]

Regarding the Finnish art scene, I have observed that the emergence of immersivity in the 1990s through the spatialisation of video art coincides with an intensified interest in phenomenology. The importance of intersubjectivity, spatiality and spectatorship: all these notions are evident in the practices of Ahtila,

Astala, Beloff, Haaslahti, Laitinen and Oja. In Finland, the 'phenomenological moment' and the development of technology have enabled artists to build an embodied experience through spatiality and experientiality. As a result, today, 'spatial thinking' has become an integral part of Finnish artists' approach and has meant an openness to connect and merge layers of natural and virtual realms. Through the interviews, I have demonstrated how a phenomenological vocabulary is present in Finland, on the levels of artistic processes and institutional praxis. Thus, I see the phenomenological approach as an embodied part of the Finnish art professionals' experience.

Experientiality highlights that the presence of other people is welcome. In an immersive environment, the more participants, the better the visual and sensory outcomes. Thus, discourse moves from aesthetical to ethical, supported by notions such as sharing, liveliness and encounter. Immersive art environments, which often use circular or spherical shapes, resemble small worlds with their sense of 'placement' and invite viewers to experience them. They seem to respond to the human need to rediscover the universe through its phenomena and simultaneously mediate our relationship with the digital sphere. Digital spaces are environments within which we address our lives, in which our experiences are formed. I have argued that immersive artworks expand the cohabitation and integration between nature and technology. In this direction, Laura Beloff attempts to bridge digital and natural worlds through wearable technology and bio-art.

I have also explored the research question: Can immersive art become a sustainable activity in the future? Immersive environments capture the full extent and breath of artist and audiences' sensations, without permanently occupying the physical space. Immersive artworks temporarily overlap with reality through projections and are therefore environmental-friendly and

10   As early as 1995, Davies used the term 'immersant' to describe the participant of her VR work *Osmose*, although the word did not catch on at the time. See www.immersence.com, read 15 May 2021.

11   Merleau-Ponty dedicated one chapter in *The Phenomenology of Perception* to the existence of others in human relationships. See Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *The Phenomenology of Perception*, 406.

12   Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *Eye and Mind*, 164.

sustainable. This approach can be defined as ecological because ephemeral representations and narratives elaborated by the artists endure as experiences in people's memories and, on request, can be restaged via a digital archive. Despite falling into the same category as other digital media, immersive art generally has specific qualities because it is only present when materialised in its surroundings. Thus, immersive artworks intermittently exist and respect the environment.

I think that my conclusions open the way for further research into the phenomenological moment in the Finnish art scene, and to the history of Finnish media art. In addition, the findings of my dissertation will be of interest and use, I hope, to our society. Immersiveness as high level of interactivity and experientiality. Thus, it can complement the digital shift in the field of representation in many ways. It can strike a balance between computational culture and experience, enhance relationships with others, foster an ethical approach, and recognise the advantages of sustainability. These aspects have emerged from investigating immersive art experiences and they shed light on the present increasing recognition of immersiveness.

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