Kissing the Sky: James Turrell's Skyspaces

Chris Cottrell: RMIT University, Australia

ABSTRACT

In contrast to terms which make clear distinctions regarding spatial limits, such as inside and outside, interiority can be understood as an ambiguous spatial condition. A sense of interiority, where spatial volumes interact as a dynamic interplay of surfaces, materials, atmospheres and perceptions, is a constant blurring of these limits. This interplay is foregrounded in the work of James Turrell, whose projects engage the complexity of these relationships. His projects create ambiguous and oscillating readings of inside and outside, the experience of which is more complex than the abstract or sublime experience of his work as typically represented. This paper will discuss an early installation by Turrell called Meeting (1986) in relation to Sylvia Lavin's notion of 'kissing': an extended metaphor which uses the term in both its bodily and geometric senses, to describe a more pliable and dynamic notion of spatial threshold. Kissing will be used to think through the relationships present in the experience of Turrell's work. I will examine how combinations of our bodies, exterior atmospheres – weather, and interior atmospheres – ambience, intermix to create new, provisional ways of thinking about threshold. This complex experience of interiority distinguishes it from the discipline of architecture. Thinking of the interior as distinct from architecture allows it to operate as a site of experimentation, which can disrupt our habitual attention and invite a reconsideration of the categories we employ to make useful sense of the world.

I am sitting in a room, on a high-backed wooden bench that wraps continuously around all four walls of the white cubic space, facing inwards. The only interruption to this bench is the door through which I entered. There are no windows. My neck is tilted back as I look up towards the ceiling: a subtly gradated plane of blue is crisply edged by the same white plasterboard construction of the upper walls of the space. It is late afternoon wintertime and the room is slightly cold. This view of blue framed in warm white holds my attention, even as I become aware that my neck is beginning to get sore. Time passes.

And as time passes, the sky blue ceiling plane slowly darkens. A soft orange light gently washes up the upper walls, its intensity increasing as the sky's blue vibrancy darkens towards dusk. This balancing act between darkening sky and lightening walls creates a sense of the two held together as one, a continuous surface that gives an impression of the sky hovering just at the edge of the space. It is almost within reach, a palpable, indisputably material presence. And as I settle and start to become comfortable with thinking of the sky as an abstracted material surface just a few metres to each other, breaking this illusion and jolting me back to a world that I inhabit. This disruption, visually, spatially and sonically, begins his work often present a solitary experience of spatial abstraction a cascade of questions concerning my relation to the interior, and with connotations of the sublime, in contrast to the richness both my own and the interior's relation to the outside world.

third floor of a former school building in the New York borough of Queens, which since 1976 has been the Museum of Modern Art's contemporary art space PSI. It is a permanent installation of a work from 1986 called Meeting by James Turrell. The room has been completely reworked and refurnished, the ceiling removed and opened to the sky. The room is open to the public every day during dusk, when the light levels are changing most rapidly.

lames Turrell's practice rose to prominence in the 1960s, along with other artists such as Robert Irwin, John McCracken and Doug Wheeler, who were all working in Los Angeles and exploring perceptual effects. Though not formally organised, their practices are frequently grouped under the umbrella term Light and Space. These practices worked in an abstract material register similar to the Minimalists on the east coast, but with a heightened emphasis on the ephemeral relations between viewer and the situations that their works posed. They worked with the immaterial characteristics of perception, transient effects, rather than the physical properties of materials. While minimalism emphasised the spatial and material relationships within and between pieces of work and a viewer, it relied very much on the creation of discrete objects. The works of Turrell and the other Light and Space artists took the perceptual act and spatial experience as the central subject of their practices and as a consequence their works tended to be more diffuse, or explicitly spatial. The artists discussed their work in relation to phenomenology and perceptual psychology, the latter a subject that Turrell had previously majored in during his undergraduate studies at Pomona College in Los Angeles, Turrell also worked from his late teens as a commercial pilot, and some of the changing light conditions, scale and optical effects he experienced while flying came to inform his arts practice.²

above my head, a pair of seagulls swoop into the frame, squawking To discuss Turrell's work raises difficulties due to the gap between the experience of the situations he creates and how they are in which the exterior is 'out there', distinct from the interior space represented through photography and writing. Photographs of and complexity of the work as it can be directly encountered. This paper tries to go beyond these static, sublime readings to The experience I have described takes place in a room on the promote a more dynamic and complex understanding of the ambiguous spatial thresholds at play in Meeting.



Figure 1: James Turrell, Meeting, 1986. MoMA PS1, New York. Photo by Martin Seck, 2011.

Meeting is an early example of a series of works by Turrell which he calls 'Skyspaces'. These works explore the possibilities of space to contain, and be filled by, the changing light of the earth's atmosphere. In an interview conducted around the time this work was being developed for the space at MoMA PSI, Turrell describes his approach to the manipulation of light, and its relationship to the material qualities of space: 'The physical structure is used to accept and contain light, and to define a situation. But the light can determine the space, and it can be experienced more than the structure if the surface does not call attention to itself.' ³ This concern with our perception of the immaterial properties of space is present throughout Turrell's practice. Elsewhere he has said: 'I feel my work is using the material of light to affect the medium of perception. I'm using light in its material aspect... I try to take light and materialize it in its physical aspects so you can feel it — feel the physicality.' ⁴

Meeting creates a situation that asks questions about the interior and its position in relation to atmospheres, in both the sense of ambience and meteorology. I am directly exposed to an experience of the weather, as a combination of temperature, humidity and atmospheric pressure, but also as an optical phenomenon. The sky is bordered by a plasterboard ceiling which extends for a metre or so from the walls. The detailing of the ceiling/roof junction is such that it finishes with an extremely thin edge, creating a sense of an almost paper-thin plane enclosing the space. Its thinness, combined with the artificial lighting's effect of balancing the colour intensity of sky and ceiling, generates the perception of the sky hovering as a plane overhead, immediately equivalent with the rest of the ceiling. The effect is one of abstraction: the sky becomes a flat material surface, rather than a spatial field of seemingly infinite depth. These operations give the sky material qualities of heaviness and presence; its weight seems to press in on the room. In an unexpected spatial move, there is a sense of the sky sealing the room, an effect achieved through careful design of its interior qualities. However, at the same time I am aware of the room being open to the weather. This doubled awareness, or ambiguity, creates a tension in my understanding of the interior. The space feels contained but it is enclosed by the sky, which I know to be at a scale well beyond that of the room. My experience is one of being held within an ambiguous spatial condition – or what I refer to as 'interiority'.

This ambiguous condition leads to thinking about potential slippages between the experiential spaces of inhabitation and the representational spaces of abstraction. In *Meeting*, space becomes representational when it loses its depth and is viewed as a surface. There is a process of abstraction at work — by removing contextualising visual references such as the horizon, particular qualities and details of the sky are isolated and intensified. That is, the interior of *Meeting* co-ordinates a series of spatial and optical effects which lead me to perceive the space of the sky as a pictorial plane, rather than an inhabitable volume. As Turrell says, 'You can inhabit a space with consciousness without physically entering it, as in a dream. You can be in it physically and see it in that manner also.' *Meeting* is a real-time abstraction of a small portion of the everyday world.

So far I have described a personal phenomenological reading of Turrell's work. This initial approach is in line with Turrell's own thinking and writing about his practice, which tends to focus on the visual and a sense of the embodied experience of his work. However such representations do not account for the presence of everyday details from outside the work and the impact they have on an understanding of the interior. I assert that the spatial experience of Turrell's work is richer and more complex than the way it is typically portrayed. In pursuing an alternative approach I face a difficulty: How can the relationships between the interior and its surrounds be articulated in a way that acknowledges their complexity? I will make use of Sylvia Lavin's notion of kissing, a term which she employs in both its bodily and geometric connotations, to develop a model that can help articulate moments of spatial ambiguity, such as those encountered in Meeting. The intention is also to think more generally about interiority as a means to coordinate the relationships between materials, ephemeral effects and viewers, to create complex spatial relations. This opens the discussion up to qualities that are not easily represented, such as hearing, as well as the epistemological implications raised by these spatial encounters.

In her book *Kissing Architecture* (2011) Lavin begins by discussing kissing in its geometric sense with reference to photographic composition. This type of kissing occurs when an element in the background is aligned with one in the foreground, such that the two appear to be touching in a strange and discomforting flattening of the near and far. She then employs kissing as a bodily metaphor, before extrapolating it to ideas of architecture. She says: 'Kissing confounds the division between two bodies, temporarily creating new definitions of threshold that operate through suction and slippage rather than delimitation and boundary.' Turrell describes *Meeting* as having 'to do with the meeting of space that you're in with the meeting of the space of the sky.' In this meeting there is a dynamic exchange between the various materials, atmospheres and perceptions, where the threshold between the interior and the weather atmospheres becomes fluid and ambiguous, and subject to individual perception. Utilising the new definitions of threshold that kissing creates offers a way to negotiate the moments of spatial ambiguity in this work of Turrell's, and can then provide a reference point for other experiences of interior complexity.

For Lavin, kissing is something that happens between two bodies, or two disciplines, but always between one and an other. It is a way of thinking about the exchanges and affects of these interrelationships. She begins with instances where the site of exchange is a material surface; as she says, 'Architecture's most kissable aspect is its surface. Space is hard to get a hold on. Structure has historically been inadequately pliant. Geometry — well, who really wants to kiss a square?' ¹⁰ She discusses the work of several artists who make extensive use of video projection on and into architectural spaces in their practices, such as Pipilotti Rist and Doug Aitken. However, this is perhaps a less complex idea of kissing, a video projection onto an architectural surface is only the lightest of kisses, and while Lavin goes on to convincingly argue that it begins to disrupt ideas of disciplinarity, things get more interesting when she states, 'surfaces are where architecture gets

close to turning into something else and therefore exactly where it becomes vulnerable and full of potential.' In this way kissing can be used to open up possibilities for thinking about the interior in its relation to architecture.

In order to stage this kiss between the interior and architecture, it is necessary to think of the interior as distinct from architecture, as something with a degree of autonomy, rather than an equivalent to, or a byproduct of, the architecture. ¹²This frees the interior to 'seek out provisionality, changefulness, and to provide architecture with a site of experimentation.' 13 The questions raised in my experience of Turrell's interior characterise it as a site of experimentation, and point to the possibilities of interior design as an autonomous discipline, which has value in its ability to begin a reconsideration of other related spatial practices such as architectural design and installation art. Lavin argues that the interior's strength lies in its capacity to bring together material surfaces in such a way that the interactions between materials are amplified, ¹⁴ and can be employed to work against each other with a sense of dynamic tension. This disrupts a simple static reading of space, and creates a more provisional idea of spatiality and its disciplinary authorship.¹⁵ To clarify, kissing is not a collaboration between two that aims to make one unified thing; it is the intimate friction between two mediums that produces twoness — reciprocity without identity — which opens new epistemological and formal models for redefining architecture's relation to other mediums and hence to itself.' 16 The kiss holds these two distinct bodies together in a moment of intensity where they are seemingly inseparable, but always only temporarily. This transient quality of two being together as one, but simultaneously not one, still two, of oscillating between twoness and oneness, is the power of the kiss.

Though Lavin focuses her discussion on the implications of light projected on a material surface, there is a sense that there are instances where thinking only of the surface is not quite enough. In my experience of *Meeting*, I perceive the sky as both surface and volume. As a surface, the sky kisses the artificially lit plasterboard surfaces of the interior, creating a sense of enclosure, if only a provisional one. But when this surface effect is disrupted, say by passing birds or feeling the chill of outside air, it is the interplay between volumes, between ephemeral qualities of space or atmospheres – not surfaces – that becomes significant. Turrell's work opens up three other configurations of inter-related, possible 'kisses': the gentle kiss of two spatial volumes, where the room-space and the outside space touch along an extremely thin but blurry edge, the charged, vibrating kiss in the oscillation between perceiving the sky as both surface and volume, and the unsettling kiss between the sense of a distinctly located perceiving body and a perturbed perceiving body caught up in the spatial ambiguities that these previous kisses create.

To take up this first kiss, two volumes (rather than two surfaces) interact as a mixture of airs across a thin, architecturally defined edge, blurring the limits of both the interior and exterior spaces. Here, I will characterise both the interior volume of the installation and the exterior volume of the sky as two distinct but inseparable 'atmospheres'. This term is chosen deliberately because

of its ambiguity, as it compels a careful unpicking and articulation of what is happening in these interactions. The term 'atmospheres' also encapsulates associations of ephemeral, immaterial, spatial and highly situated conditions; qualities that many contemporary practices, such as Turrell's, are attentive to. In fact his practice has been explicitly described as one of creating an atmosphere.¹⁷ By using the sky as a material in the design of the space, Turrell conflates the meanings of atmospheres. It is simultaneously the sky above, the weather, the earth's atmosphere, as well as a key element in creating the spatial ambience, or atmosphere, of the interior. Activating both the meteorological and interior senses of atmospheres creates another moment of complexity in unravelling my experience of *Meeting*'s interiority.

So, in my experience of this installation, how and why does the meteorological mingle with interior ambience to create this complex spatial situation? Lavin's notion of kissing again helps to explain this moment where these different atmospheres combine. *Meeting* constructs a perceptual trick of collapsing volumes so they are read as co-incident surfaces, but in the background there is always an awareness of my body occupying the space, so that the representation of the sky as a surface is always delicately held in a state of anticipated disruption. The quality of these thresholds, between interior and exterior, between surface and volume, is more complex than that of simply separation. Through a slippage of the representational and experiential, a new temporally dependent sense of threshold is created, one whose vague and ambiguous qualities the term atmospheres encapsulates. These qualities are attended to in some detail by Ben Anderson who examines these issues of atmospheric thresholds with reference to the work of phenomenologist Michel Dufrenne, saying:

An atmosphere exceeds clear and distinct figuration because they both exist and do not exist. On the one hand, atmospheres require completion by the subjects that 'apprehend' them. They belong to the perceiving subject. On the other hand, atmospheres 'emanate' from the ensemble of elements that make up the aesthetic object. They belong to the aesthetic object. ¹⁸

But, importantly, Anderson extends this description of atmospheres beyond binary categories of subjects and objects. Atmospheres are, in this account, always incomplete, involved in a process of emerging and transforming as they are 'taken up and reworked in lived experience – becoming part of feelings and emotions that may themselves become elements within other atmospheres.' ¹⁹ The perception of atmospheres is something before, and always resistant to, the representational. They are collections of spatial and temporal relations that implicate me in a moment of possibility, rather than a representation of something pre-existing. Making sense of atmospheres requires a bodily engagement with the surrounding space; of absorbing and being affected by diffuse ephemeral qualities, and a recognition of my own contribution to, and place within, these qualities. This push and pull dynamic between bodies and spaces can again be understood through the notion of kissing. I am both a part of, and apart from, the room in which I am sitting, held together as two enmeshed but separable entities. A new and lively experience of interiority results from

the negotiation of a series of contradictory sensations, which Meeting constructs a space of possibility, where my experience the space. Meeting raises questions as to the material status a magical material realm, just beyond my reach. of immaterial phenomena, such as the light, colour and depth possibilities for thinking about the world around me.

balancing this with artificial light, it flattens the sky, This imbues to this shifting and ambiguously defined interior space. the sky with a material presence, the sky's slowly changing colour and occasional irruptions of movement and activity means it Ironically, for all of her bodily metaphors of surfaces that soften maintains its presence and liveliness. There is a complex interplay and deform, Lavin's discussion focuses on the idea of kissing between my perception of a flat plane and the knowledge that between various mediums and tends to downplay the role I am viewing a segment of the atmosphere directly above me. of our bodies in encountering these scenarios. So while it is The blueness of the sky vibrates against the warm orange-white productive to think of the discipline of architecture as distinct of the walls, creating an optical effect of liveliness and a constant from, and engaging with, other forms of practice, such as video shifting of my sense of foreground and background.

As I become aware of the optical mechanisms that construct experience of Turrell's work encourages thinking about these the work, I can, as with any illusion, choose to read it either way; bodily qualities, alongside issues of surfaces and atmospheres, and rather like reading a series of marble floor tiles whose hexagonal how the interior co-ordinates all of these elements. The slowness arrangement suggests a cubic surface either projecting or of visual stimuli in Meeting, where, for the most part, the only thing receding from the ground plane. As a single planar surface, the to watch is the slowly shifting colour of the sky, brings a greater sky is co-incident with the rest of the ceiling. Alternatively I can level of awareness to my other senses, in particular my sense of choose to remain aware of the fact that I am viewing an illusion, hearing. The awareness is one of bodily space, the space of my that a carefully designed combination of detailing, material own presence, which is pitched out around me by my physical finishes and lighting is causing me to view the sky, which I know sensations.²¹ By removing visual references to the outside world, from experience is spatial, as a flat plane. I can either allow myself I begin to actively imagine it through the sounds I hear. to be drawn in to the disorienting pleasure of illusion or draw myself out and enjoy the pleasure that comes with understanding For what is for the most part a fairly serene and controlled visual the illusion. Flicking between these possibilities, flattening the sky environment, its location in New York is far from calm. I can down, popping it back up, and then flattening it down again, I hear the various noises from the streets around the gallery; the experience the 'kiss'. An engagement with a kind of threshold movements of cars, roaring as they accelerate away from traffic that, as Lavin puts it, operates 'through suction and slippage.' 20 lights, There is the screeching of metals as trains on the elevated The illusory quality of the project creates a tangible sense of rail line that brought me to the gallery continue shuttling back the sky as a material presence, which I am able to manipulate. and forth across the city. Occasionally a plane rumbles overhead.

requires an active, creative engagement with the qualities of of the sky switches between that of everyday phenomenon and

of the sky above. The sense of ambiguity created by Turrell's Viewing the sky through an opening in the ceiling, rather than mixing of atmospheres is a productive one, which opens up new the wall, as is the case with an ordinary window, removes any reference to the horizon. This lack of a reference point creates a sense of detachment that shifts my attention between the The second configuration that Meeting proposes is the optical phenomenon of slowly changing light, and a heightened disruptive oscillation between perceiving the sky as a volume awareness of my body occupying a specific location in space. The and as a surface, and the attendant ambiguity that this illusion last of these three configurations, which again can be examined provokes. By framing a discrete portion of our view above, and via Lavin's idea of kissing, is that which places my body in relation

> projection or interior design, as kissing bodies, also of significance is the sensuous bodily relationship to the spaces we inhabit. My

These sounds form a sharp contrast to the relative slowness and stillness of my visual experience, and create a background awareness of activity and daily goings on beyond the room I am in. The transportation noises draw my thoughts to the networks that connect me to the rest of the city, and I imagine myself travelling back home, projecting my body in both time and space. But as with all these oscillations that kissing creates, this sensation pulls in two directions. By projecting myself out into the city's networks, I am simultaneously more aware of my present location in relation to this network. Listening to the sounds beyond the gallery disrupts and reinforces my sense of being located in the world.

This sense of being 'pitched out' beyond my body and into the spaces beyond the gallery, while experiencing a heightened sense of my own body, follows a similar logic to the other topological shifts that kissing creates. Writing about an attentive sense of listening, Gernot Böhme describes a model in which one 'inwardly re-enacts that which is heard... rendered convincing by the common experience that when one hears a melody one, to a certain extent, sings along with it inwardly.' 22 But he argues that things are not as neat as this, that there is never a simple distinction between inside and outside. Sounds must be experienced, an embodied process of listening in which we are projected outside ourselves, an expansion of bodily space where we do not simply encounter sounds, but are 'formed, moved, moulded, crenated, cut, lifted, pushed, expanded and constricted by voices, tones, sounds,' 23 Böhme calls this an experience of acoustic atmospheres — again an atmospheric experience, with its connotations of ephemerality and ambiguously defined In the experience of Meeting, there is a constant shifting between spatial limits. He then goes on to argue that this experience readings of the interior. This is further complicated by the virtual skips over the space in-between, but I would argue that it in fact qualities that Turrell explores in his manipulation of natural and intensifies a sense of the in-between, of a dynamic threshold. artificial light. He says: I have an interest in the invisible light, the Sounds from beyond the gallery space draw me into a bodily light perceptible only in the mind. A light which seems to be relationship with the world outside, creating a heightened sense undimmed by the entering of the senses.' 24 This 'light perceptible of the space in-between as charged with activity and potential. only in the mind' suggests perception as a process by which The complexity of spatial relationships means I am forced to we make internal representations of our experiences in order constantly negotiate the shifting thresholds that the work has to interpret the world around us, but these representations caused me to register, I occupy a space that is highly provisional, are constantly shifting in response to outside influences. The tentative, that is purely between.



dislocative experience that Turrell's work offers is only ever

Figure 2: James Turrell, Meeting, 1986. MoMA PS1, New York. Photo by Ray Weitzenberg, 2006.

temporary, and can be undone by the irruptions of everyday sounds and activities. For Turrell particularly, but also as a general case, this dynamic calls attention to the value of the interior as a site of spatial experimentation. By interfacing between architectural spaces and the everyday, the interior occupies an important space where we can experience the kiss of the in-between, an experience that heightens an awareness of the relations that delicately bind the lived world together.

Over the hour that I've spent in this room (or has it been two? — Lavin reminds us that kissing distorts our sense of time) ²⁵ this experience of an intensified sense of presence has caused my thoughts to jump across a spectrum ranging from a heightened awareness of my location in space, relative to the gallery, the city, the earth and beyond, through the very specific qualities of the framed section of sky that I have been viewing. The notion of kissing offers a way of negotiating the complex relationship between bodies, atmospheres and interiors, even if it is only ever a temporary understanding, subject to shifting influences from any and all directions. Using the more dynamic and provisional model of threshold that kissing offers, provides a sense of tentativeness which keeps us on our toes, alert to the subtle dynamics of spatial encounter. Kissing begins to articulate how atmospheres are perceived and experienced through a designed interior, an interior that by remaining distinct from architecture allows it to open up more complex possibilities for understanding spatial relations.

I continue to gaze upwards. A plane flies past, heading east towards JFK airport, a contrail slowly dissipating behind. The sky continues to slowly darken as the day comes towards an end.

NOTES

- The origin of this term is not entirely clear. Many of the artists involved were not showing work publicly, and this grouping was made retrospectively as a convenient shorthand. Jan Butterfield gives an excellent overview of the context in which these artists were working in the introduction to her book The Art of Light + Space (New York, Abbeville Press, 1993)
- 2 Ursula Sinnreich, ed. James Turrell Geometry of Light (Ostfildern: Hatje Cantz, 2009), 114.
- Julia Brown, "Interview with James Turrell" in James Turrell Occluded Front, edited by Julia Brown. (Los Angeles,
- 4 James Turrell quoted in Richard Andrews, "The Light Passing," in James Turrell: Sensing Space (Seattle, WA: Henry Gallery, 1992), 12.
- 5 Brown, "Interview with James Turrell," 14.
- 6 For example see the interviews with Turrell and the essays discussing his work in Julia Brown, ed. *James Turrell Occluded Front* (Los Angeles, CA.: Lapis Press, 1985) and Richard Andrews, ed. *James Turrell: Sensing Space* (Seattle, WA: Henry Gallery, 1992).
- 7 Kissing in its geometrical sense refers to the just-touching, tangential relationship of two figures.
- 8 Sylvia Lavin, Kissing Architecture (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 2011), 5.
- 9 Long-term Installations: James Turrell, Meeting, accessed June 6, 2012, http://momaps1.org/exhibitions/view/170
- 10 Lavin, Kissing Architecture, 26.
- II Ibio

- 12 Ibid., 67.
- 13 Ibid., 64.
- 14 Ibid.
- These issues are taken up in detail through the research of Jonathan Hill. In particular see Jonathan Hill, *Immaterial Architecture* (London: Routledge, 2006), and Jonathan Hill, *Weather Architecture* (London: Routledge, 2012).
- 16 Lavin, Kissing Architecture, 54-55.
- 17 Brown, "Interview with James Turrell," 15.

Other examples include Diller + Scofidio, Blur (2002), Decosterd & Rahm, Hormonium (2002), Olafur Eliasson, The Weather Project (2003-4), and the works of Gerhard Lang for example, Cloud Walks (1997-ongoing), Berndnaut Smilde, Nimbus II (2012), Fujiko Nakaya, Living Chasm – Cockatoo Island (2012), Finnbogi Petursson, Current (2005) and Peter Zumthor; Therme Vals (1996).

- Ben Anderson, "Affective Atmospheres." Emotion, Space and Society 2, no.2 (2009): 79.
- Anderson, "Affective Atmospheres," 79.
- 20 Lavin, Kissing Architecture, 5.
- 21 Gernot Böhme, "Acoustic Atmospheres." Soundscape, no. 1 (2000): 17.
- 22 lbid.,
- 23
- 24 Brown, "Interview with James Turrell," 46.
- 25 Lavin, Kissing Architecture, 10.