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INFINITY AND THE EGOSPHERE: REFLECTIONS ON IMMERSIVE ART

by

AMANDA P OWENS

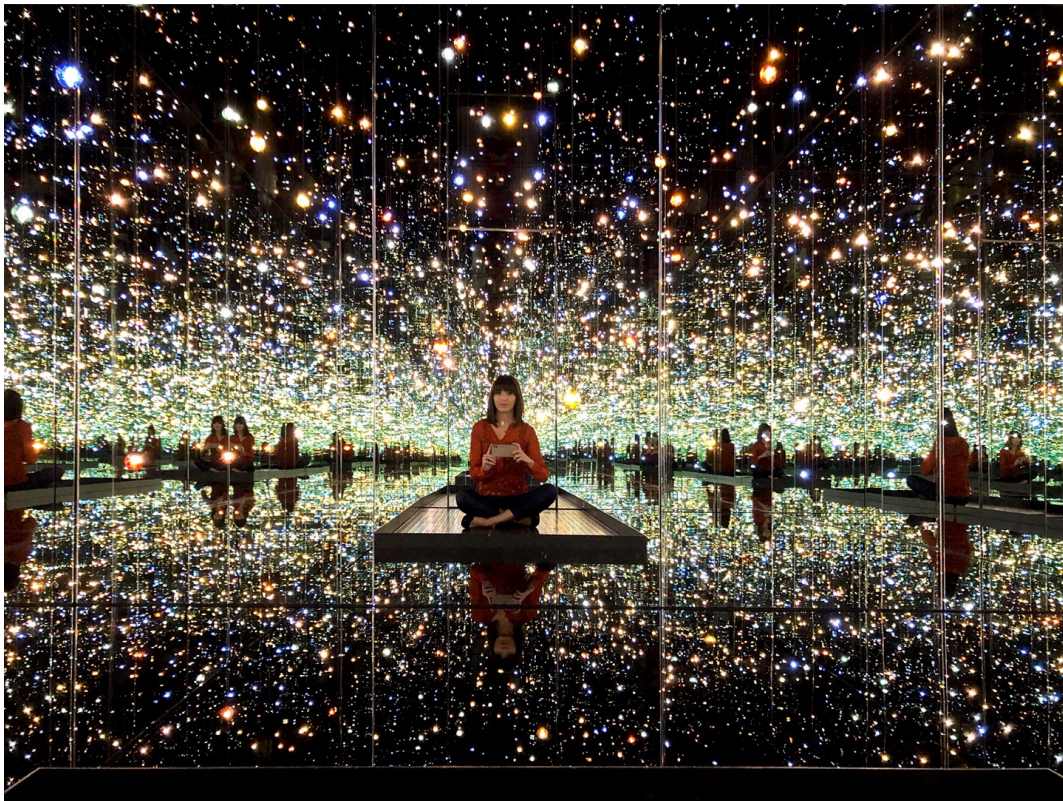
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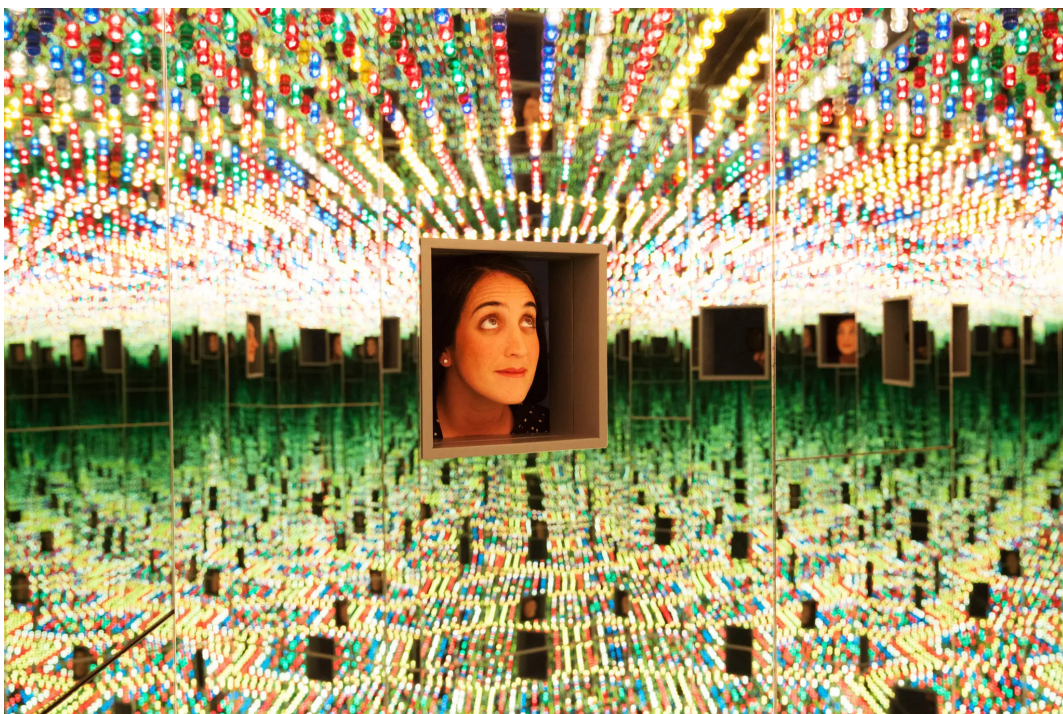
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*Yayoi Kusama, 'The Souls of Millions of Light Years Away'*



*Yayoi Kusama, 'Let's Survive Forever'. Tyrone Tuner*



Society today is saturated with images, so much so that it is unavoidable that we see the world, at least partly, through the lens of a camera. In the literal sense, when we take a picture. But also in the sense, especially for social media users, that when we enter a space, or construct a space of our own, we consider how it would look on camera. Guy Debord, in the 60s, wrote of the separateness, the splitting of the world into reality and image<sup>1</sup> that the spectacle created. Since Debord, the production of the images that form the spectacle has shifted, into the hands of the masses, into the realm of the everyday. We all hold the power to generate and share images. Simultaneously, the art world has embraced more and more environmental art. Dream worlds are created and ticketed, drawing crowds of people eager to step into a separate reality, and photograph it. Surely these rooms are part of the spectacle, omnipresent as they are across social media channels, but they are the union of reality and image, not the separation. Is it possible for the Debordian spectacle to be made into a real place? The relation of the self to the physical space surely must be changing as well, as these hallucinatory immersions become commonplace, the self becomes less tethered to a linear conception of reality.

The art 'environments' of the fifties and sixties have become art 'experiences' today, where the individual viewer's personal experience is central to the piece. Experiential art has grown in popularity beyond the art world, becoming a cultural object in its own right, a defining physical space of our mass culture. Kusama's infinity mirrored rooms remain the most famous example from the art world, as well as James Turrell's

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<sup>1</sup>Guy Debord, *The Society of the Spectacle* (Critical Editions, 2021), 2.



disorienting immersions of colored light. Superblue, the Pace gallery's startup in Miami (and soon the world) is the first "experiential art center" (EIC), a space that is not quite a museum or gallery, but holds a rotation of commissioned works by established artists and collectives (such as Turell), that are designed to be interactive. Beyond the art world, the Pop-Up 'experience' craze began in New York and Los Angeles with the Museum of Ice Cream. However, all of these different experiences occupy a similar place in culture, and have some defining characteristics in common. As architectural spaces, they are postmodern; attempts to ground ourselves in a confused by the endless streams of information that surrounds us at all times. They also generate a new cultural practice, which is the contemplation of the self– the construction of an online image for ourselves, a digital egosphere, that we interact with and broadcast on social channels. Their other common point is that they generate mass amounts of images. They attract visitors, at least partly, for the opportunity to take a photo inside them. These photos, endless photos of the same thing, aggregate online and become a mass ornament, reflective of the contemporary post-Fordist state of capitalism. The infinity photos reflect back, in a way, the infinity created by the original viral experience: Yayoi Kusama's infinity rooms.

Even if they don't recognize the name Kusama, nearly every member of the museum going, smartphone owning class of America, Europe, and Asia would recognize a picture from one of her installations. People are drawn to, and queue hours for, creations like *Fireflies on the Water* (2000), and *The Souls of Millions of Light Years Away* (2013), for a singular experience: art that is more than art, something that you interact with, rather than simply observe. One can't deny a work such as this an aura,



the authority that comes from the unique presence in time and space.<sup>2</sup> There is no possible way to reproduce the full effect of the mirrored room in a flat image. But at the same time, our experience of the rooms is almost always defined through images. We have seen other visitors pictures, many of them, before we enter, and we take our own while experiencing the work. Few other artworks are situated at such an intersection as this: they are an experience incapable of being fully captured in a photograph, yet at the same time they are *so photographable*. It's almost impossible to take a bad photo in an infinity room.

Those who do recognize Kusama's name may know that she has been making art 'experiences' long before the invention of the smart phone camera. She launched her career in the pop culture fed, Factory led, happening-centric art scene of 1960s New York. Art had moved off the canvas and into the gallery space and onto the streets. Art was 'dematerializing' as Lucy Lippard put it. In 1965, the same year as the first infinity room, Donald Judd, studio neighbor of Kusama's, published his essay "Specific Objects", where he argues that the best new work isn't painting or sculpture, but something else. The 'something' else isn't explicitly defined, but surely has something to do with the involvement of the viewer.

Art historians tend to approach the dematerialization from a formal, spatial, viewpoint. Cézanne and the cubists flattened the form in painting, giving it a relationship with the rectangular frame; color field and minimal painters gave it a relationship with the wall;<sup>3</sup> and minimal sculpture and conceptual art activated the floor space, creating

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<sup>2</sup> Walter Benjamin, "A Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction," *Illuminations* (New York, NY: Schocken Books, 1969), 436

<sup>3</sup> Brian O'Doherty, *Inside the White Cube* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1999), 23-34.





*Paul Cézanne, 'Still Life With Apples', 1893*



*Installation of Focus: Ad Reinhardt and Mark Rothko, MoMA, 2008*



an awareness in the viewer of spatial relationships. But it is as important to look at the surface experience of the work as the art historical significance, in this case this means examining the how the experience of the viewer *concerning themselves* has changed. A viewer, even one who knows nothing about art, interacting with a Robert Morris work is going to be thinking about themselves more than someone looking at a Monet (because they might trip over the work). Someone viewing a Kusama mirror room will certainly be thinking about themselves even more (because they can see themselves in the mirror). This perspective, the focus on the surface experience, is more closely linked to popular culture; which as Kracauer demonstrated in the 1920s, can be the most revealing of the true inner workings of contemporary society.

Kusama was part of this moment of shifting in the art world. In her work she drew both from the environment around her and her inner turmoil– she suffered from obsessive-compulsive disorder, and hallucinated the world becoming covered with polka dots and nets.<sup>4</sup> The moment also included pop art, the sexual revolution, and the antiwar movement. She staged happenings, without the involvement of galleries and often scandalizing the press. In 1968, she held Antiwar Happening on Brooklyn Bridge, painting dots on naked performers holding a banner that declared “KUSAMA SELF-OBLITERATION”. The idea of self-obliteration is an idea carried from her paintings, the ‘infinity nets’, and later through her mirrored installation works, earning her international renown. The paintings are large scale canvases covered with uniform, repeating net patterns. The repetitions may come from her hallucinations, but she embraces them as a philosophy:

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<sup>4</sup> Yuko Hasegawa and Pamela Miki, “The Spell to Re-Integrate the Self: The Significance of the Work of Yayoi Kusama in the New Era”, *Afterall: A Journal of Art, Context, and Enquiry* no. 13 (Spring/Summer 2006): 46-53, 47.



The polka dot has the form of the sun, signifying masculine energy, the source of life. The polka dot has the form of the moon, symbolizing the feminine principle of reproduction and growth. Polka dots suggest multiplication to infinity. Our earth is only one polka dot among millions of others. we must forget ourselves with polka dots! We must lose ourselves in the ever-advancing stream of eternity.<sup>5</sup>

The visual motif of the polka dot is the strongest, and most important in Kusama's world.

The repeating dots take over ever surface, covering canvases, herself, others, furniture, and walls. The act of creating the dots not only portrays her hallucinations visually, but the obsessive physical labor of creating the repeating shapes helps her maintain a balance between herself and the world.<sup>6</sup> The polka dots evolved into the form on lanterns in the mirrored rooms, and self image has entered into competition with self obliteration.

But the Mirror Rooms exist in a new context today– does the self-obliteration remain? Although environments as a genre generally are considered to have started in the late fifties and early sixties, and they were not friendly to the viewer: “the effect on the spectator who joins them is one of trespass.”<sup>7</sup> The mirror rooms are incredibly friendly to the viewer. While they started in counterculture, they are now showed at, and owned by, the biggest international institutions: the National Gallery, the Tate Modern, the Louisiana. They are one of the biggest attractions to these museums. They appeal to everyone, often drawing hours long lines. The experience of seeing one is regimented, controlled, and orderly. Far from the chaos of the late 60s, the institutions that put them on sell tickets, times, organize lines, even set a time limit for the viewing experience. Kusama's created 'experience' isn't alone. Whatever the rooms original

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<sup>5</sup> John Gruen, “The Underground”, Vogue, no 152 (October 1968): 148.

<sup>6</sup>Hasegawa et al., 48.

<sup>7</sup> O'Doherty, 49.



effect, they exist today as part of a larger cultural object: the ticketed immersive experience, or the room that generates images. This is the main issue that is generated by the cultural object of the infinity rooms, something that Kusama could not have imagined. The complete illusion of the rooms, the 45 second separation from the real world is broken because we bring the world, concentrated, into the cube with us. Our phones do this, and simultaneously bring the infinite space out of the sealed room and onto the internet. Nearly everyone who goes into the cube takes a picture, and not just of the work. The pictures attempt to capture the boundlessness of the illusion, but at their center: the viewer. The 'me' in the infinity. The self, not obliterated, but defined. While Kusama's goal of becoming one with everything

The accumulation of the images in the #infinityroom tag on Instagram creates a new kind of infinity— the endlessness of images compiled and connected online. The image of reflections in reflected ad infinitum in the ether of the internet. The images look mostly the same— the viewer centered in the field of lights, give or take camera quality and photographic skill. Some of them are taken by someone else, instead of in the mirror itself. Many of the posts, aren't from real people at all, but from city guide accounts: one of the top posts is from @lifehacksla, and consists of a full video, the camera panning wildly around the space to added-in techno music, while text on the screen offers instructions on how to get tickets. Another is from @popups london, an account that claims to list: "london. instagrammable. popups." Along with the infinity room, it lists other experiences worthy of a photo. But they aren't just museums, the account's other main content is food. Food has been transformed from something we eat to enjoy, not to mention stay alive, into an aesthetic commodity. Aesthetically perfect





*Phalli's Field, 1965. Castellane Gallery*



food and photographable popups, then, perform the same function on Instagram. They both serve to embellish our image online, photographic signs that define us as cool, or hip, or artsy, or cultured.

Of course, environmental exhibits have been growing in popularity since the 60s. However, something immersive or experiential doesn't always guarantee the same virality, the same image generating power, as the infinity rooms. Pipilotti Rist's retrospective at MoCA Geffen, *Big Heartedness, Be My Neighbor*, is an immersive wonderland— Rist created a lush world of the interior of an apartment, with projections splashed across the walls, a bed to lie in, and a dining table to sit at. But it isn't 'instagrammable' in the same way as the infinity room— the fine detail and movement of the space doesn't come through in a small box in a feed. The exhibit has many rooms, but on the MoCA instagram geotag, the grid has a kind of coherency: The part of the exhibition that people post is a forest of hanging lights, that the visitor can walk through and be surrounded by. While not a complete, sealed off environment, there is a definite visual resonance with the infinity room.

But immersive experiences that have less claim to the established art world have just as much, if not a stronger, hold on pop culture. The introduction of the smartphone into the museum sphere, and especially the immersive art sphere, has made the experience of the art overshadow the actual art; it almost becomes irrelevant. Spaces have come into existence for the purpose of generating social media images. The Museum of Ice Cream was among the first to make headlines, followed by the Color Factory, both spawning locations in NYC, San Francisco, Los Angeles. These both consist of a series of brightly colored rooms with filled with "art pieces" (a ball pit,



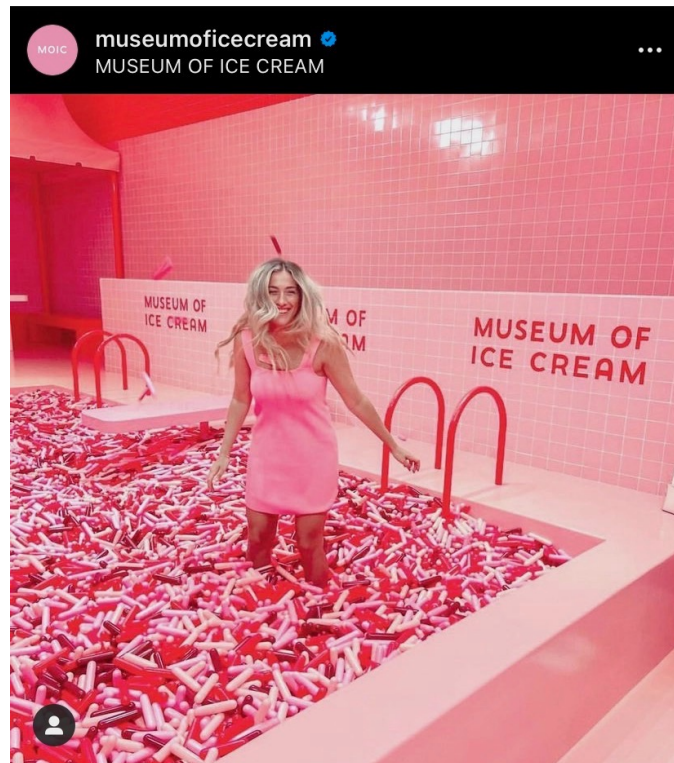
models of ice cream, hanging bananas, and pink and yellow walls), and stickers on the floor that direct you the best photo spot. The Atelier de Lumières started the projection room phenomenon, projecting huge versions of Van Gogh paintings across the walls and floor of a gallery. Many other companies latched onto the business model, and now a version exists for Frida Kahlo, Kandinsky, Monet, and endless more.

Superblue, the art startup associated with art world giant Pace gallery, is one of the most notable, being a blue chip, art world endorsed space completely dedicated to experiential art. All of these places are in urban centers, attractive as they are to young people with disposable incomes— their prices all hover around the 40\$ mark. This is much higher than a traditional museum or gallery entrance; even the Broad Museum in Los Angeles, home of *The Souls of Millions of Light Years Away*, one of the most well known of Kusama's mirror rooms. Spaces completely dedicated to experience art fetch a much higher price, suggesting we are paying for something more than viewing a work of art.

### *the individual in the egosphere*

Spatial characteristics of viral museum exhibits like Kusama and the newer pop up concepts have certain features in common, regardless of whether they are built specifically for image generation. They are different from an ordinary white cube gallery space where visitors wander in and out at leisure. Instead, they follow a set path— the Broad infinity room really starts with the line, first to get in the door, then to get tickets, then to see the room, and the experience in the room is timed. Pop Ups like the Color





*Museum of Ice Cream*



*Visitors at the Museum of Ice Cream. Jason Henry*



Factory and the Museum of Ice Cream are also set into a controlled path, with chipper guides directing you through the rooms.

These spaces are a part of the cultural fabric of the contemporary world. The immersive experience is something with significance beyond its artistic merit (or lack thereof). As Siegfried Kracauer wrote, considering the life that has lost the power for self observation, what is submerged can be revealed through the study of surfaces: “the unity of the aesthetic construct, the manner in which it distributes the emphases and consolidates the event, gives voice to the inexpressive world.”<sup>8</sup> Through study of the aesthetic events of our time, we can get to things underneath. We have to consider what the space of the infinity room means beyond the intent of the artist, rather as a representative for this larger apparition in the built space of contemporary reality.

Built space in all spheres, not just in art installation, has taken on new meaning in the modern era. Frederic Jameson investigates this in his study of postmodernism. He analyzes the hotel lobby of the Westin Bonaventure in Los Angeles as a surface through which to understand deeper truths about culture. We can look at the infinity room through Jameson’s eyes and understand it as a kind of “postmodern hyperspace,” or a replacement for the real world. Architecture, for him, evolved too fast for our minds to catch up, and postmodern buildings like the Bonaventure are mutations in built space. The lobby doesn’t adhere to any logic that we can understand intuitively, or any established building conventions. Part of this is because of its relation to the outside city, or lack of. It exists as a world of its own, inward facing, separate from the outside

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<sup>8</sup> Siegfried Kracauer, *The Mass Ornament*, (Cambridge, MA: 1995), 173.



world. And isn't this what the mirrored rooms do? Kusama's installations offer an entire universe contained, with no relation to the outside. The pop up museum, meanwhile, simply offers a pastiche of the real world, candy-fied. Pop-ups, like the Museum of Ice Cream and the Color Factory, offer 'experiences', as if to replace the experiences of everyday life.

Besides the disconnection from the world, another postmodern aspect of Jameson's hotel is the extreme imposing of narrative structure on to space: architectural theory "attempts to see out physical trajectories through such buildings as virtual narratives or stories, as dynamic paths and narrative paradigm, which is heightened in postmodern building. Escalators and elevators replace movement but designate themselves as new reflexive sign and emblems of movement proper."<sup>9</sup> This speaks to the form of the experiential art piece— an infinity room is also a directed path: a journey from the line through the ticket booth, through another line and into the cube. Pop ups like the Color Factory and the Museum of Ice Cream have clear paths: they essentially are a series of rooms to pass through (and take photos in), with guides in each room directing the traffic of viewers to picture spots, informing them of rules and guidelines. These guidelines also regulate the life lived inside the spaces. In Candytopia, a New York popup, the guides announce, in a somewhat dystopian phrase, "The first rule is to always be happy and smile! Frowns make other people sad!"<sup>10</sup>

While not all photographable experiences outwardly attempt to control the viewers mood, the interaction of the space with the viewer-self is integral. Superblue,

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<sup>9</sup> Fredric Jameson, *Postmodernism, or, the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1991), 42.

<sup>10</sup> Amanda Hess, "The Existential Void of the Pop-Up 'Experience'," *New York Times*, September 26, 2018.



the highest budget space dedicated to serious experiential art, has made this interactivity a priority. The 'art startup' creates another world inside a warehouse in Miami. One of the first installations was Es Develin's "Forest of Us", a piece that bears striking resemblance to a Kusama environment. It consists of a two story mirrored maze, accessed by walking through a computer screen playing a short film that directs viewers through the maze. Cameras are mounted near the floor, which activate the viewer's reflection with lights appearing as branching veins. A pay-extra add on to the Superblue visit is teamLab's "Massless Clouds Between Sculpture and Life", a room filled with soap bubble clouds for the visitor to walk through.

Jameson sees these physical qualities of the architecture, the disconnection from the outside and the overt signing of functions, as a manifestation of the larger societal condition under postmodernism. He describes the hyperspace of the hotel lobby:

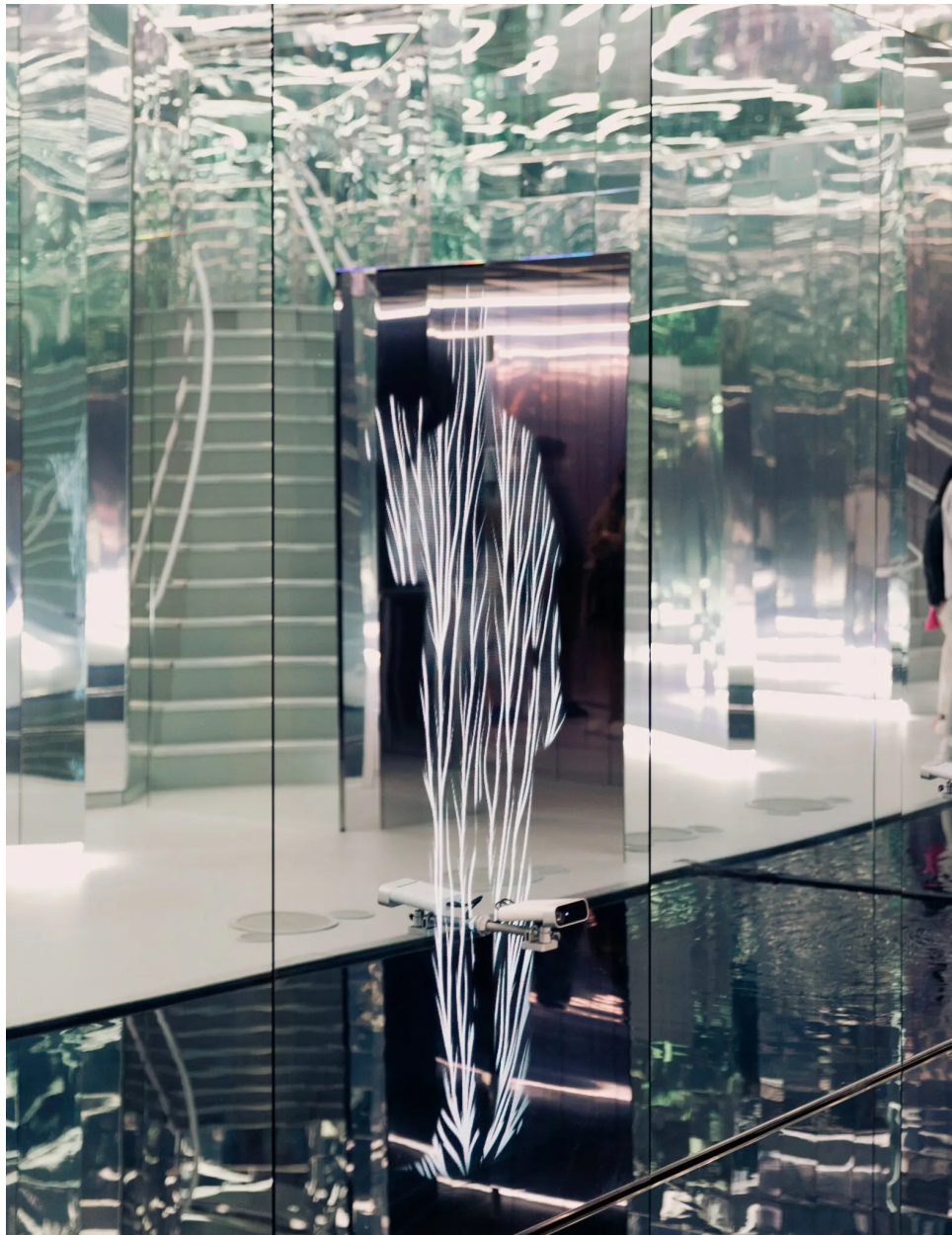
a disjunction point between the body and its built environment... can itself stand as the symbol and analogon of that even sharper dilemma which is the incapacity of our minds, at least at present, to map the great global multinational and decentered communicational network in which we find ourselves caught as individual subjects.<sup>11</sup>

Since Jameson's time, this great demented communicational network has gotten bigger, more confusing, and more omnipresent. If postmodern space is proof of the disjunction between the body and its built environment, the immersive art is a re-junction point: the shape of the immersive experience could be thought of as an attempt, however futile, to ground the individual in the network, to claim a space. But does it count for anything? The space that we ground ourselves in, through the reflection in the infinity room and the computerized mirrors in Superblue, is disorienting. We stake our presence in an

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<sup>11</sup> Jameson, 44.





*Silhouette of a visitor to 'Forest of Us' at Superblue. Alfonso Duran*





*Es Develin's 'Forest of Us' at Superblue Miami. Alfonso Duran*



immersive experience simply to go through the motion of staking ourselves somewhere. We place ourselves solidly in a room that itself has no solid ground.

This lack of solid ground, according to Hito Steyerl, is a symptom of the cultural moment. She sees us living in a world in constant ‘free fall’. Our collective sense of perspective is determined in part by the images that our society generates, and is inseparable from the political, social, and economic conditions of the moment– as linear perspective, its own illusion, corresponded to western dominance and colonialism. But linear perspective has been shattered across the last century or two by new forms of media. It began to slip during the industrial revolution, and was destroyed in the 20th century by film and montage, which break down stable temporal perspectives; painting, which abandoned any kind of representation; and quantum physics reimagining of time and space. The key to her theory of a new perspective is the omnipresence of the birds-eye view– from drone footage, surveillance, satellite images.<sup>12</sup> However, this only creates the illusion of a ground, when we are in fact falling permanently, and left with:

the loss of a stable horizon. And with the loss of the horizon comes the departure of a stable paradigm of orientation, which has situated concepts of subject and object, of time and space, throughout modernity. In falling, the lines of the horizon shatter, swirl around, and superimpose<sup>13</sup>

The new free-falling, horizonless perspective has manifested itself physically, in immersive art exhibitions that warp scale, perspective and environment. So if the action of marking our location in an immersive art exhibition is an attempt to reunify the body and its built environment, we are grounding ourselves to something with no ground.

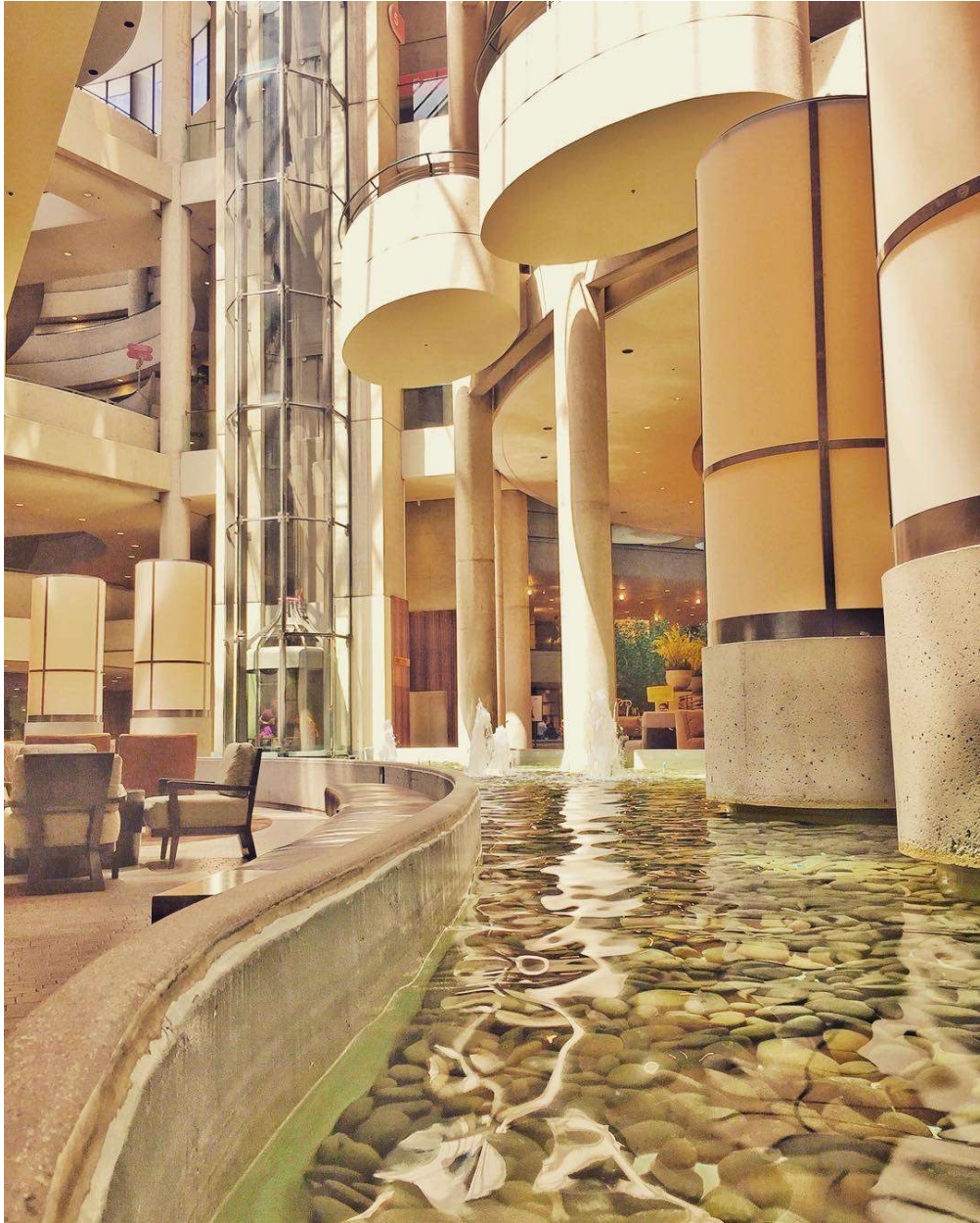
The upset in spatial orientation, for Jameson, corresponds to a new kind of

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<sup>12</sup> Steyerl, 22.

<sup>13</sup> Steyerl, 14.





*Westin Bonaventure Lobby*



collective practice. Postmodern subjects act differently when moving through postmodern space. The immersive experience, whether created for art or production of photographs, corresponds to a new collective practice as well, one that centers the individuals contemplation of themselves, the documentation of the self: this is the act of taking self-portraits in the immersive space. The relationship between the practice the space is reflexive— the exhibit doesn't just generate the practice, but the practice generates the space. The mirrored rooms invite selfie taking, and the actions of countless people taking these photos and sharing them across social media draws record crowds to the exhibitions, which incentivizes the creation of new photographable spaces.

Thinking of the exhibition space as an architecture that encourages self-contemplation of the self resonates with Sloterdijk's idea of the egosphere, and his treatment of architecture as cellular forms. He argues that two major contemporary social tendencies are "the setting free of solitary individuals with the help of individualized home and media technologies, and the aggregation of masses, unified in their excitement."<sup>14</sup> He looks at these tendencies through the forms of the apartment and the stadium, but the form of the immersive experience can concern both tendencies. Social media acts as an architectural space for the aggregation of the masses, a digital stadium filled with thousands of individual, personal photographs of the event, while simultaneously being isolating and reflective to the individual viewer.

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<sup>14</sup>Peter Sloterdijk, "Cell Block, Egospheres, Self-Container," *Log*, no. 10 (Summer/Fall 2007): 89-108, 89.



He discusses the cell form, the repetition of individuals in masses, where the individual is cultivating a relationship with themselves while existing in a living 'foam' of cells. For him, the studio apartment with a media console is most representative of this egosphere, the tendency towards cell formation. But we can look at the image that we make for ourselves online as a kind of egosphere, our own cell of images. Don't we inhabit our own Instagram account as much as we inhabit physical space? Our feed is so curated by us, by the accounts we choose to follow, it becomes a manifestation of ourselves, in the same way that our home is a manifestation of our tastes and habits through our belongings. Social Media, although of course social, is time spent alone with ourselves— no one else in the world fully comprehends the exact blend of information that we take in, even our closest friends. So it is simultaneously a place we inhabit, and one of our primary ways of connecting with the world.

For Sloterdijk, the architecture of the egosphere goes in conjunction with the myth of the new western man: "the liberated individual, who has been made flexible by the flows of capital, devotes himself to the cultivation of his relationship to himself."<sup>15</sup> This myth has evolved, even since the mid-2000s. The evolution of this myth, that of the post-internet individual, manifests in online architectures, and is fed by the consumerist machine of social media. The myth is embodied by the figure of the influencer. Personhood is transformed into something neat to be consumed, like the picture perfect food featured on the same city guide accounts that collect immersive experiences. The everyday ritual is aestheticized, categorized. From walking down the street, to studying or reading a book to having a latte, the everyday experience must be photographable. A

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<sup>15</sup> Sloterdijk, 90.



picture at an immersive exhibit is perfect– it denotes that the user is cultured, interested in art, while the art is visually satisfying, easily digestible and most importantly, highlights the viewer in the frame. It is the spectacle in the internet age, the consumers being made to feel like every moment of life needs to be photographable, and when they are in this state of mind, they are especially susceptible to being sold things (and sold experiences).

No matter the job status of the modern online individual, they participate in the collective practice of self-objectification, performance for the Instagram eye, and immersive exhibits, no matter their original intent, are the ideal space for this practice. Our behaviors mediated by social media follow the model of the influencer, in the sense that we begin to see ourselves as something to be optimized.<sup>16</sup> Even before mass social media, Sloterdijk noted this impulse: his egospherical apartment is “simultaneously a cave and stage”, where “the outfit becomes a design problem, the clothing choices a self project. In fact, in developed ‘experience’ society, the individual qualifies as an author who claims authorship of his own image.”<sup>17</sup> When we go to immersive experiences, take pictures there, and post them, we are authoring our experience.

For Sloterdijk, in contemporary times, primary living has become “dissolved, in favor of the symbiosis between the solitary individual, himself, and his environment.”<sup>18</sup> Living within large family structures isn’t necessarily the norm anymore, and the cultural urge for independence replaces cohabitation bonds with self-reflection and self-

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<sup>16</sup> Jia Tolentino, “Always Be Optimizing,” in *Trick Mirror: Reflections on Self-Delusion* (New York: Random House, 2020), pp. 63-94.

<sup>17</sup> Sloterdijk, 100.

<sup>18</sup> Sloterdijk, 96.



sufficient apartment design. This sentiment translates to the installations, as well, because we create our own 'self-containers' online. The infinity room achieves both the symbiosis between the individual and himself and the individual and his environment. Both happen on physical and digital levels. The viewing of the self in mirror in the infinity room is joining the individual with his self image, and the environment of the mirrored room (Kusama's goal). While the action of taking the picture and sharing it does the same, making the individual one isolated cell among a mass of instagram images, and allowing to engineer his self presentation online: the space we go to becomes a facet of the self in the instagram prism.

New social activities take place online: although people gather in the gallery spaces, they aren't being social in the physical space. Most of the 'experience' consists of waiting around (to take a photo, which will be shared online). In this way it is reminiscent of Kracauer's hotel lobby, where the togetherness of the occupants has no meaning:

While here, too, people certainly do become detached from everyday life, this detachment does not lead the community to assure itself of its existence as a congregation. Instead it merely displaces people from the unreality of the daily hustle and bustle to a place where they would encounter the void only if they were more than just reference points<sup>19</sup>

The social part happens later, the mass of interactions created by experiential art are online. It is more Debordian: the spectacle of social relations mediated by images. Even social relations taking place in the physical space, the pre-image state, remain under the shadow of the images, because we are living the reality of something we have

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<sup>19</sup> Kracauer, 176.





*#infinityroom tag on Instagram*



already seen online, and the act of image making, because the way we act in the space is determined by how we want to photograph it.

In this way, the spaces are a site of crossover between the physical and digital worlds— a further evolution of Jameson’s evolved hyperspace. The appeal of immersive is about living, about reconciliation between worlds. The infinity room has the draw it does today because of the “separation between bio-physiological and physical reality derived mainly from our information driven society. We live in a world of dual realities and survive by reconciling the two.”<sup>20</sup> If the one reality is the physical world and the other is informational, how do they connect? The exhibit wants to be a kind of surface between the two. But the issue between the self and the world that immersive art seeks to reconcile is complicated now by the fact that the creation of this specific physical reality is being driven by a demand for information, a demand for images.

### *a mass of images*

These very images are as important to the study of the object as the experience of the individual in the cube and his activity online. Because on one level, the infinity room is a new conception of space, something that surrounds you, a realization of a disappeared horizon— on another it is simply a mass of similar images on the internet. The images themselves are important here. We need to consider a new type of image, unique to the form in which it was created. The social media image, the instagram image, is something with a distinct aesthetic that is inseparable to its mode of proliferation. What makes an image successful on social media is its similarity to every

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<sup>20</sup> Hasegawa, 41.



other social media image, or its adherence to a type. It coheres to a defined category, making it easily found by an algorithm and categorized.

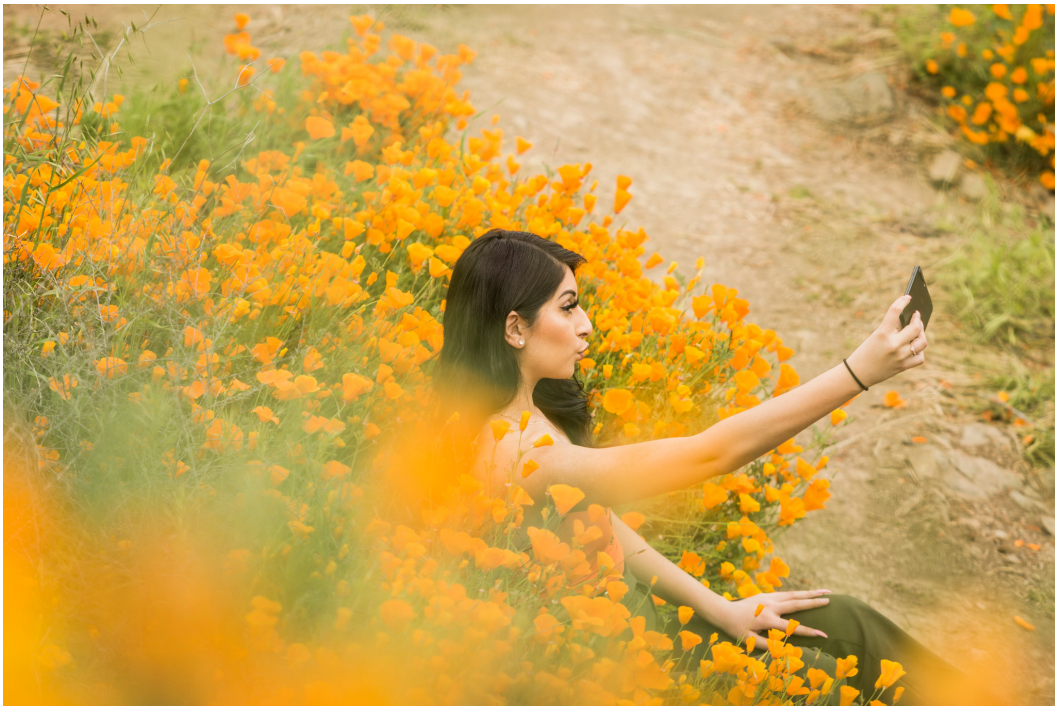
In the earlier days of the internet, this genericness of images created by algorithms hadn't fully taken over. Still, the sheer amount of content being produced made it possible to lose the individual in the mass. Natalie Bookchin's 2009 video piece, *Mass Ornament*, deals with this. The piece consists of a grid of YouTube clips of people dancing, alone in their rooms. Through her editing, the dancers synchronize in their individual private spheres. The title draws on the Kracauer essay of the same title, reflecting on the dancing Tiller Girls of the 1920s. For him, the individual girls ceased to exist, their movements instead belonging to one big machine, which is reflective of the Fordist factory logic that was changing society at the time. But the individuality, the separateness, of the girls on YouTube, is key. The machine has moved from the factory into private spheres, through the internet. The accumulation of selfies in the infinity room can be seen in a similar light: alone, together. They are individual egospheres, aggregated into a mass.

And yet, even since 2009, the logic of the internet has evolved. The regularity of patterns doesn't have to be sought out and edited together, but is in fact generated by the way the instagram algorithms work. In the case of pictures of immersive experiences, the most successful ones are made up of repeated patterns or shapes: think of Kusama's polka dots, of the ball pits in the museum of Ice Cream and the Color Factory, the rain room, the endless refractions of mirrored stairways in Develin's *Forest of Us* at Superblue. Repeating patterns often look as good or better in photographs than real life. The Infinity Room may be the exception because of the regimented viewing





*A visitor at the ball pit of the Color Factory, NYC. Amy Lombard for NYT*



*A visitor at the 2019 Superbloom in Antelope Valley, CA. Emily Berl for NYT*



times that guarantee solitude with the work, but most immersive/pop up experiences are filled with people and clutter, sometimes having designated picture taking spots that cleanly crop it out. The detail and depth Pippilotti Rist exhibition at MoCA doesn't come across in pictures, except for the section with the hanging lanterns. The repetitiveness of the texture of the images not only makes them easily recognizable, but it also doesn't distract or get blocked out if the main focus of the image is a person.

In a rare occasion, a space that meets these conditions for virality can be created accidentally. In 2019, record numbers of people went to see the superbly in Southern California, especially in Lake Elsinore and Antelope Valley. The parks and towns were overwhelmed by the influx of visitors,<sup>21</sup> who became aware of the phenomenon through social media. Although not designed as an immersive experience to draw photo-seeking visitors, there is a certain aesthetic resonance with the infinity room. The poppies are repeating shapes, spread out endlessly across the hillside— an infinity of orange outside. The simple, repeating pattern of the flowers of course makes for a perfect background for an image featuring the visitor.

The masses of images can be examined through Kracauer's eye, can be thought of as a kind of 'mass ornament' themselves. The Tiller Girls are organized— "the regularity of their patterns is cheered by the masses, themselves arranged by the stands tier upon ordered tier."<sup>22</sup> While there is no stadium in the museum, like with the comparison to the egosphere, the mass transfer and viewing of images on instagram can be seen as the post internet world's way of aggregating the masses. The regularity

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<sup>21</sup> Zak Stone, "Under the Influence of a 'Super Bloom'," *New York Times*, March 23, 2019.

<sup>22</sup> Kracauer, 76.



in the patterns of the Infinity Room or any of its commercial permutations is exactly what is cheered by the masses. For Kracauer, the meaning of the ornament is the patterns themselves— “the star formations, however, have no meaning beyond themselves.”<sup>23</sup> It is the use of military precision while having nothing to do with the military— because the regularity is the end in itself. In immersive art, we have patterns of infinity, with no meaning except to generate an infinity of selves online. In the contemporary world, the mass ornament has evolved to involve the spectator as part of it. The people in the selfies become the legs of the Tiller Girls, like in Bookchin’s video. Each figure is in their own box, and yet uncannily coordinated, part of the same object. The selfies in the infinity room are the same.

As Kracauer’s essay connects the abstraction of the dancers to the abstraction required by the unchecked development of the capitalist system, embodied by Fordist factories, the masses of instagram or YouTube squares can reflect on the current system. Natalie Bookchin describes this in an interview about *Mass Ornament*:

“If the machinery of the Fordist era was mechanical, post-Fordism is digital. The vehicles for production today are information and communication technologies, rather than conveyor belts and assembly lines.”<sup>24</sup> Immersive experiences are certainly a factory for images, which in turn generate time spent on instagram, which translates to advertising dollars.

Steyerl, in her essay “Is the Museum a Factory?”, notes that many contemporary art museums physically exist inside old factories. And that they are part of the post-

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<sup>23</sup> Kracauer, 77.

<sup>24</sup> Rhizome, *Rhizome*, May 27, 2009.



Fordist endless production: “A gallery, and art space, a white cube...which also has become a hotbed for contemporary production. Of images, jargon, lifestyles, and values. Of exhibition value, speculation value, and cult value. Of entertainment plus gravitas. Or of aura minus distance.”<sup>25</sup> If experiential exhibits are factories, the production never ends, because takes place mainly on the internet, which seeps into every facet of our lives.

The existence of the Infinity Room, as representative of the larger cultural phenomenon of experiential art is inseparable from our self-image, individual and mass. It returns us to Kusama’s original question: do the endless polka dots allow us to “lose ourselves in the ever advancing stream of eternity?” The answer, of course, isn’t singular, because the world of information on the internet doubles our lived experience, and endlessly multiplies the context of our experience. We lose ourselves, as Kusama intended, perhaps for the 45 seconds we remain in the room, but this still is interrupted by the presence of the outside world in the room with us, in the form of our phones. But after the 45 seconds, we don’t lose ourselves— we use the figure of the infinity room to build a “self-container”, to add another facet to the image of ourself we build online, in a way commodifying ourselves. And yet there is another infinity created through the images we share online, the mass ornament of the endless stream of selfies generated by the room, rivaling the reflections of the flowing lights themselves.

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<sup>25</sup> Hito Steyerl, “Is the Museum a Factory?,” in *The Wretched of the Screen* (Sternberg Press, 2013), pp. 60-76, 62.



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