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Creative and disturbing Infinity: Mirrors as Materials

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Creative and disturbing Infinity: Mirrors as Materials

1. Introduction

Two years ago, in 2021, I visited an exhibition of the famous Japanese artist Yayoi Kusama at the *Gropius Bau* in Berlin, titled *Yayoi Kusama: Eine Retrospektive. A Bouquet of Love I Saw in the Universe*. Amongst the many artworks she created, I was particularly interested in her so-called 'Infinity Mirror Rooms' – installations, in which she uses mirrors or mirrored surfaces as a means to extend the existing space into the infinite. The idea of somehow being able to experience infinity appealed to me greatly, and luckily, the exhibition displayed several of these installations. What I did not expect before visiting the rooms was that one would come out of most of them completely confused and disoriented – it took me several minutes to recover my usual sense of space and self. The mirrored infinity did not have the serene, wondrous effect I had imagined, being more disturbing than I had anticipated.

Therefore, I started to wonder: Why is this kind of 'infinity' so disconcerting? And what is the role of the mirrors in the mentioned setting? How are we to understand the elusive 'material' that the mirror is and its effects on us? Against this background, I will attempt in the following paper to examine how mirrors function by the examples of Kusama's rooms and by employing Foucault's theory of space because I believe that it provides a relevant assessment of the mirror as a material of liminality. After briefly outlining Foucault's account on 'utopias' and 'heterotopias', I will focus on two of Kusama's early mirror installations: *Infinity Mirror Room – Phalli's Field* (1965) and *Kusama's Peep Show – Endless Love Show* (1966). In the following chapter, I will then try to analyse the impact of these two artworks on the visitors and the arising questions when faced with such works of art – with a particular focus on the mirror's functions linked to Foucault's thoughts on spatiality.

2. The mirror in Foucault's conception

In his 1984 essay "Des espaces autres", in English translation "Of other Spaces", Michel Foucault differentiates two types of space: the 'utopias' and the so-called 'heterotopias'. According to him, utopias are "unreal spaces", "sites with no real place" (24) because they describe spaces with no correspondence in the real world. Heterotopias, on the contrary, represent places that truly exist, which can be found in reality and which can be entered (with certain limitations). According to the philosopher, they are located "outside of all places" and are different in this respect (ibid.). Some examples of heterotopias are the cemetery, the garden, museums or psychiatric hospitals (Foucault 25-26).

In this context, the mirror has a particular position because it allows a kind of 'joint experience' of both types of space and thus functions as well as a utopia and a heterotopia. "The mirror is, after all, a utopia, since it is a placeless place. In the mirror, I see myself there where I am not, in an unreal, virtual space that opens up behind the surface[...]" (Foucault 24). Yet the mirror can also be

described as a heterotopia, argues the philosopher, since it is real – as is connected to the actual place, where I find myself and because it questions the position that I occupy in this space:

From the standpoint of the mirror I discover my absence from the place where I am since I see myself over there. Starting from this gaze that is, as it were, directed toward me, from the ground of this virtual space that is on the other side of the glass, I come back toward myself; I begin again to direct my eyes toward myself and to reconstitute myself there where I am. (ibid.)

This quality of functioning simultaneously as a utopia and as a heterotopia situates the mirror as a gap between spaces, a threshold between space and non-space, while at the same time referring to both. Thus, it can be regarded as a type of door towards a different perception since it has the ability to question the “real site” where one stands while seeing oneself in the mirror.

The liminality and ungraspability of the mirror that Foucault unearths in this essay extends beyond its role as both types of space. The arising problem with mirrors understood from the heterotopic perspective is that even though they exist as objects and by that, to some extent as ‘real spaces’, one can never really enter the actual mirror space because it is merely virtual. One can touch the mirror and actually feel its materiality, its hard and cold surface, but one can never step inside it. This quality throws the mirror back into the utopic type of space. In some sense, this interplay between its utopic and heterotopic properties seems to exemplify the interplay between the virtual and actual realms described by Gilles Deleuze (cf. Deleuze). The virtual is unreachable, yet it affects and changes the actual continuously, much as the mirror affects and questions our perception of space or the location we find ourselves in. I would like to further explore and exemplify these ideas with some of Yayoi Kusama’s environmental installations.

3. *Infinity Mirror Room – Phalli’s Field* (1965)

The room-sized installation *Infinity Mirror Room – Phalli’s Field* (fig. 1) was part of Kusama’s solo exhibition *Floor show* at the *Richard Castellane Gallery* in New York, held in 1965, seven years after Kusama had moved to New York (Applin 1). The mirrored room was constructed inside the first room of the gallery, building thus a room within a room – a similar undertaking as the technique of ‘mise en abyme’ in literature or the ‘Droste effect’ common in art. The 2,5 meters high room with a surface of 25 square meters was covered in mirrored panels on all four walls, while on the floor phallus shaped protrusions made out of polka dot-printed cotton fabric filled with wadding spread with a narrow pathway in the middle. Participants could walk inside the installation and see endless reflections of themselves and the phalli’s images on the ground. The phalli, however, displayed various shapes with different types of polka dot prints –from uniform rows of tiny dots to big red spots– thus eluding an arrangement of identical units (ibid.).

Through this type of arrangement –the reflections of both the bulges and the visitors in several directions– the distinction between subject and object is

neutralised, thus casting the participants' bodies as objects amongst other objects, as Jo Applin suggests (2). This seems to have been intended by the artist, as she imagined that the participants "could walk barefoot through the phallus meadow, becoming one with the work and experiencing their own figures and movements as part of the sculpture" (Kusama part 1). The setting leads to a destabilisation of the self and the other, of subject and object, since the image and the body can hardly be distinguished on a visual level.

And yet, the work is not accompanied by any instructions on how it's supposed to be visited, therefore heightening the participants' psychological uncertainty created through the use of mirrors. Should the installation be entered alone or with other people (Applin 3)? How can one behave in an almost fully mirrored room where every small move will be visible in infinite repetitions? Even if the artist imagined people walking through the phalli's field barefoot, one would walk in shod. Should the visitor take their shoes off or walk over the field as they entered? As these questions indicate, not only is the space of the installation extended by the use of mirrors, but the encounter with the artwork is suspended and opened up, thus placing the work on a threshold of experience – with an evident reference to the self.

Infinity Mirror Room – Phalli's Field provides an ambiguity between different modes of encounter: on the one hand, the psychological side, in which the participant's sense of self is fractured and multiplied and on the other hand, a utopian liberation and playfulness, the latter being particularly achieved through the cotton fabric phalli (Applin 81). These themes are explored by the artist in several other works. This first installation was followed by a series of other so-called 'Infinity Mirror Rooms', of which multiple variations exist. The space of the installation would then be prolonged into what can abstractly be understood as an infinite series of 'Infinity Rooms'. Before examining the role of the mirror in this artwork and its connection to Foucault's theory more thoroughly, I would like to briefly consider a second mirror room, which reveals some other aspects that might be of interest.



Figure 1: Yayoi Kusama standing inside *Infinity Mirror Room – Phalli's Field*, sewn stuffed cotton fabric, board, and mirrors, 455 × 455 × 250 cm, "Floor Show", Richard Castellane Gallery, New York, 1965 © Yayoi Kusama.

4. Kusama's Peep Show – Endless Love Show (1966)

The second work I will briefly discuss is *Kusama's Peep Show – Endless Love Show* (fig. 2), shown at the same gallery on the 16th of March of the following year. The show displayed a single multimedia installation, a hexagonal room covered in mirrors on all surfaces. In the mirrored ceiling, coloured electric lights in red, blue, white and green were embedded, blinking on and off in cycles forming 17 different patterns (Kuramitsu and Joyce 179). Music by the Beatles was played at the opening of the exhibition, and each visitor received a badge with "Love Forever", distributed by the artist (ibid.; Zelevansky 26).

Other than the first mirror room I previously mentioned, participants could not walk through this installation but only peek in through two small windows, just large enough for their faces, set on opposite sides of the room. Thus they were confronted with their faces reflected endlessly, reminding of self-

portraits (Hoptman 47). Therefore, the participants were not entirely immersed in the room by entering an extension of the physical space, but only allowed to have a quick glance at it, being deprived of the haptic perception. Besides one's confrontation with one's images, this room forces the viewer into an encounter with other participants, thereby interweaving the 'I' with the 'Other', as Midori Yamamura points out (104). Both visitors would, in this instance, be cast as voyeurs, peeping through the two letterbox-shaped windows into a private space, a separate universe of obsession and vertigo, trapped in there by their own reflections and the gaze of the other (Applin 18). The artist described this work as follows:

These psychedelic images made the work a kind of kaleidoscope, mirroring the light at the root of all things and luring anyone who entered the room towards madness. This was the materialisation of a state of rapture I myself had experienced, in which my spirit was whisked away to wander the border between life and death. (Kusama part 1)

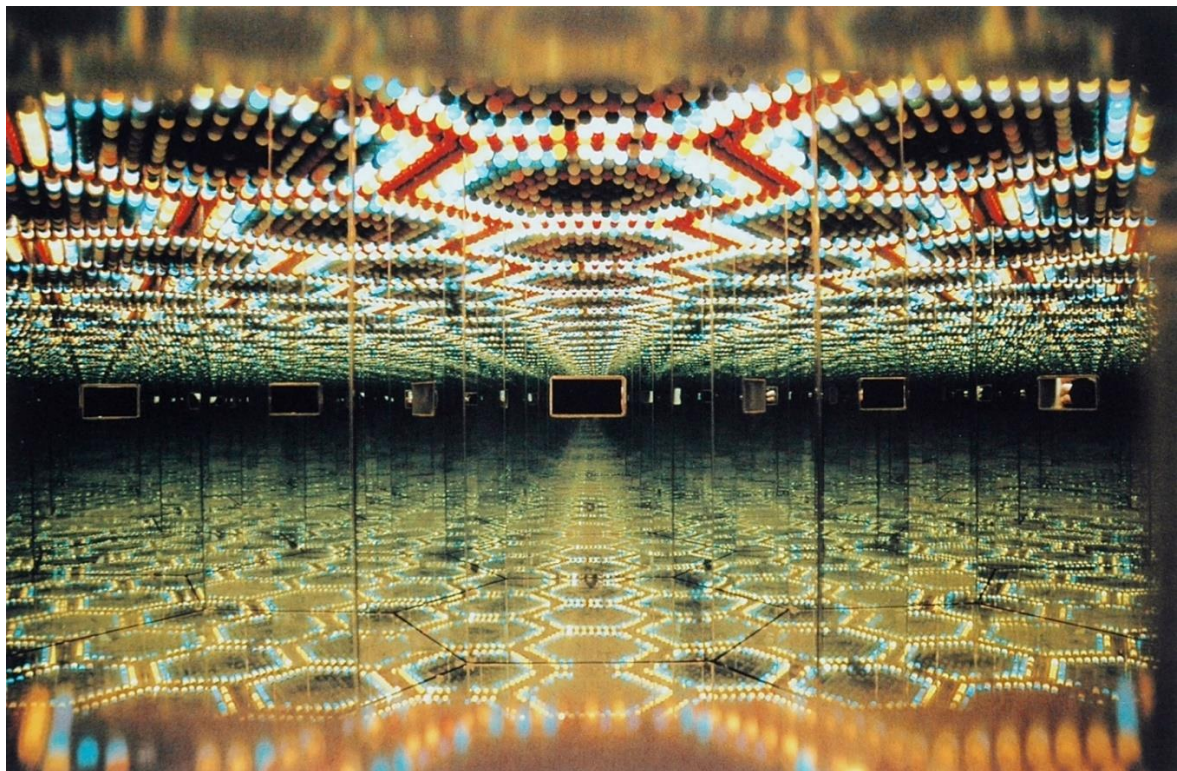


Figure 2: Yayoi Kusama: *Kusama's Peep Show – Endless Love Show* (1966), mirrors, light bulbs, stainless steel, approx. 2m wide, reconstructed for "Summer of Love: Art of the Psychedelic Era", Tate Liverpool, 2005.

This kind of liminal experience on the verge of life and death that the artist tries to recreate through her work connects it to the heterotopic space of the cemetery, which Foucault uses as an example in his essay (25), as the cemetery incorporates life and death both physically and symbolically.

In this installation, the state of liminality and the level of confusion is taken to an extreme – on the one hand, because all of its surfaces are mirrored and,

on the other hand, due to the accelerated changing rhythm of the differently coloured lights. If the participant's experience was balanced by the lack of mirrors on the ceiling in *Infinity Mirror Room – Phalli's Field* – the first installation of the room had no ceiling at all, and further reconstructions display a neutral coloured one – *Kusama's Peep Show – Endless Love Show* is giving no point of orientation, thus plunging the viewer into a disturbing and maddening universe, which suspends their common perception of space more potently.

5. The mirror space and its implications

Let us return to the initial Foucauldian idea of the mirrors' utopic and heterotopic spatiality. I have specifically chosen these two early installations – Kusama has, as mentioned, created many other mirror rooms since – because they seem to bring forth the qualities of mirrors as surfaces of a 'joint experience', both utopic and heterotopic. In the newer installations, the mirrors function rather in their virtual role related to the utopian space – they build calm, fascinating, alluring universes in which the participant wants to linger for a while. In contrast, *Kusama's Peep Show – Endless Love Show* disturbs the eye and therefore indirectly forces the viewer to get some distance from it. Furthermore, as Jo Applin suggests, in *Infinity Mirror Room – Phalli's Field*, the physical environment is not entirely dissolved – creating an infinite wonderland, like the newer installations would. The viewers would instead find themselves in a "potential space", aware of the material production conditions of the work. This space allows experimentation with new modes of being and living – thus connecting it to our everyday lives and reality, even as a virtual, unreal kind of space (Applin 80-81).

From the perspective of Foucault's 'utopias', both artworks exhibit infinite, unattainable universes, expanding in the virtual spaces of the mirrors' combined back-and-forth reflections. This mirror space is then utopic since it is ultimately unreachable, purely virtual and endless. And yet, the two installations have disturbing effects on the visitors, as I have experienced while visiting their reconstruction at the *Gropius Bau* in Berlin. Why is that? It seems that the heterotopic spatiality that Foucault presents might help provide one answer to this question. The mirrors, in this case, pose questions of authenticity – and probe accordingly into the idea of beginnings and endings. While facing the dizzying experience of the room, one cannot help but wonder: Which one is the 'real me'? Is the image on the right only a 'copy' of myself, my doppelganger, or is that the real me (but maybe I don't know it)? In this context, regarding the mirror as a heterotopic space, as Foucault suggests, seems like a valid proposition since exactly this kind of hallucinatory experience enquires into the value of the 'real', the 'real space', and 'real self'. The visitor knows through their bodily sensation that the mirrored images they see are just reflections, illusions of a utopic space. At the same time, they cannot withdraw from the sensory visual experience, which affects them, their perception and regular coordinates being destabilised and extended whilst in there.

Inquiring into the self then reaches beyond the search for one's most accurate reflection. It becomes a re-examination of the stable subjects we consider ourselves to be, in the sense that Roland Barthes performatively asks and describes in his autobiography:

“But I never looked like that!” – How do you know? What is the “you” you might or might not look like? Where do you find it [...]? Where is your authentic body? You are the only one who can never see yourself except as an image: you can never see your eyes unless they are dulled by the gaze they rest upon the mirror or the lens [...] even and especially for your own body, you are condemned to the repertoire of its images.” (36)

Barthes quite accurately reveals here, on the one hand, our compulsive search for our ‘true selves’ or our most accurate and ‘original’ image of our self as we perceive it. In our daily lives, we turn indeed to the mirror or the photograph/video in our quest for the authentic ‘I’. But both the mirror and photograph create only illusory images of momentarily states we find ourselves in. Kusama’s mirror rooms envelop this aspect, raising questions about, amongst other things, the prevalent practice of taking selfies. The artist’s current popularity seems to stem, at least partly, from her installations’ renown as ‘cool’ backgrounds for selfies – and indeed, the rooms are inviting visitors to take pictures within them, especially since the artist performatively staged herself over the years through photographs in various of the installations (see fig. 1). Nevertheless, such mirror rooms as *Kusama’s Peep Show – Endless Love Show* also challenge the interpretation “that the photographs taken within them are exercises in narcissism and vanity” (Zelevansky 25). Particularly in this room, it is almost impossible –as I also had to discover– to take a picture of most of the room without at the same time photographing oneself, one’s hand or at least one reflection thereof (see fig. 2).

On the other hand, in the cited passage, Barthes exposes the questions of authenticity, which seem to have concerned Deleuze when he developed the theory of the ‘simulacrum’ (cf. Deleuze). The power of the simulacrum, as Deleuze understands it, lies in challenging and overturning the very idea of authenticity, of the ‘essence’ and thus blurring the lines between original, copy and copy of the copy: “With the simulacrum, the order of participation is rendered impossible, since there is no longer any possible hierarchy, no second, no third” (Smith 104). The simulacrum then suggests that there is a good reason why Barthes is asking, “Where is your authentic body?” – a body that we can never find because there is none to be found. Kusama’s mirror rooms demonstrate this idea quite practically: While confronted with endless reflections of herself/ himself, the participant loses the sense of security that the stable notion of the ‘I’ or ‘subject’ bestows upon them and becomes confused since they see the ‘I’ everywhere. The ‘original’ and the ‘copy’ have become visually undistinguishable – this is the heterotopic power of the mirror.

6. Conclusion(s)

As we have seen, the mirror proves to be a more complex and heterogenous material than it appears on the surface. The way Kusama makes use of it, the mirror has the intriguing property of creating an endlessly extended space and, by that, rendering the invisible –or the ungraspable idea of infinity– visible. This infinity we experience when entering one of her mirrored artworks is nevertheless a purely virtual one, a utopian space, as Foucault legitimately describes – it re-

mains inaccessible to us as a place to be physically entered. We can only touch it through our visual perception. However, suppose we are to come into contact with this virtual, infinite space. In that case, our bodily presence is required, even if we can only perceive it by our eyesight – one cannot encounter it by looking at photographs of the installations.

Foucault seems to have recognized this paradox of concurrent participatory indispensability and ultimate unattainability the mirrored installations display when he characterized the mirror as both a utopia and a heterotopia. Because the mirror has itself physical materiality: it actually exists; it is an object we can touch, like a painting or a photograph. Could then the space within the mirror, the one we call virtual, the one Foucault calls utopian, not be understood as an extension of reality, which is just as existent as the object mirror, but to which maybe we don't have access (except visually) because of certain limitations? Where do we draw the line between real and unreal, and why? This examination proves the mirror can be understood as a heterotopia in the way Foucault imagined it. In its function of heterotopic space, the mirror's force originates from allowing and challenging the participants through the dissolution and at least temporary suspension of their regular spatial orientation. They are ultimately compelled to interrogate their perception and definitions of reality and actual spaces – and the authenticity of the 'self', as we could see both with Barthes and Deleuze.

Under these circumstances, the question of the existent and the unreal also becomes a question of the privileged position of the 'real'. If the simulacrum demolishes the hierarchy of original and copy, then the utopic mirror space becomes just as relevant as its heterotopic counterpart. And indeed, the virtual infinity the visitors of Kusama's rooms engage with brings forth a curious aspect of humanity: It seems to me that –even if we are always in quest of it– when we humans are confronted with infinity, be it only a virtual one, we are not quite equipped to withstand it, much in the way the characters of *Grimus* (cf. Rushdie) can only deal with their eternal condition by fixating obsessively on something so that they would not lose their minds.

The question I was asked during the presentation in Potsdam, whether I regard Kusama's installations as utopic or dystopic, goes to the heart of the problem. As I have tried to show in this paper, I would argue that the rooms are both utopic and dystopic. However, I would also like to add that the utopia they simulate might be the reason they turn into dystopic spaces for the participants – beyond the madness we have seen created by the speedy lights and music. The visitor might not be prepared to endure their reflections and the unfolding of space to infinity – it might turn into a burden, a dystopic episode when confronted with such vastness. If that is the case, it means the mirror creates and simultaneously deconstructs infinity.

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Περίληψη

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Δημιουργικό και ανησυχητικό άπειρο: Οι καθρέφτες ως υλικά

Ο καθρέφτης, όσο συμβατικός και αν φαίνεται, ιδιαιτέρως, ως ένα καθημερινό αντικείμενο, ενέχει υψηλή δραστηριότητα, όταν αποσπάται από το συμβατικό του πλαίσιο και τοποθετείται, για παράδειγμα, σ' ένα έργο τέχνης. Το άρθρο διερευνά την οριακή υλικότητα/χωρικότητα του καθρέφτη. Όταν ανέπτυξε τη θεωρία του για τη χωρικότητα, ο Foucault αναγνώρισε τις δυνατότητες του καθρέφτη και αποκάλυψε τα μεταβατικά χαρακτηριστικά του. Συνεπώς, αξιολογούνται στο παρόν άρθρο οι ιδιότητες του καθρέφτη, κυρίως, μέσα από το πρίσμα της φουκωικής θεωρίας. Δύο από τα "Infinity Mirror Rooms" της Yayoi Kusama αποτελούν τα κεντρικά παραδειγματικά σημεία της ανάλυσης. Αυτές οι αποτελούμενες από καθρέφτες εγκαταστάσεις αποκαλύπτουν σε πρακτικό επίπεδο τις φουκωικές αντανάκλασεις: τη δημιουργική και, συγχρόνως, ανησυχητική δύναμη αυτού του υλικού. Όπως φαίνεται, η πιο προσεκτική-στενότερη εξέταση του υλικού εγείρει ερωτήματα, που ανακαλούν ορισμένες από τις σκέψεις του Roland Barthes περί της γνησιότητας και του συμβόλου, καθώς και το κατά Deleuze ομοίωμα. Ο καθρέφτης είναι υλικό διφορούμενο και ασύλληπτο – είναι δυνατό να οδηγήσει στη γένεση ενός (εικονικού) απείρου αλλά και να ενοχλήσει, να συγχύσει, να ταράξει, εξίσου, την κοινή αντίληψη.