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The Experiential Museum: Immersive Installation Art in the Age of Social Media

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The Experiential Museum:
Immersive Installation Art in the Age of Social Media

Senior Project Submitted to
The Division of Art History and Visual Culture
of Bard College

by
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Introduction

Immersive Art Installations in the Age of Social Media

Scrolling through my Instagram feed I immediately recognize the glowing fluorescent tube in the corner of the room, it's light bouncing off the space, creating new shapes and spectrums of color, as one of Dan Flavin's sculptures. *Untitled* (1976) is one of my favorite artworks by the minimalist artist (Fig I-1). When I would visit the work on one of my many trips to Dia: Beacon, I would spend as much time as I could looking at the ways each color blended together on the walls. Visitors would line up behind me, waiting to take their turn using the work as a photo-op. I brace myself while I read the caption of the post. It reads "paid \$12 to take Instagram pics." As I stare at the photograph of a girl smiling as she poses in front of the work of art, I wonder to myself, "then why go at all"? Although each of these Instagram posts is just as surprising, it is not a new phenomenon to me. Growing up near the Hudson Valley institution it was a common trip made by local teenagers to take pictures for Instagram, using the immersive works as interesting backdrops. Dan Flavin's light works were the favorite. Visiting other cultural institutions over the past two years, I have observed the similarities between what attracts a person to take a photograph of themselves in these spaces. What I have found has influenced my decision to write this thesis on immersive installation art specifically.

Immersive art typically describes installations that envelop the viewer, surrounding them in a multi-sensory environment. Since the development of installation art in the 1960s, artists have experimented with different immersive forms as a way to directly involve participants.

Works such as Hélio Oiticica's *Tropicalia* (1967) and Jesus Rafael Soto's *Penetrables* (1967) utilize immersivity as visitors physically enter the works of art, while artists such as James Turrell and Doug Wheeler use light in perception-altering environments. Yayoi Kusama incorporates both these techniques along with reflective immersion through the use of mirrors in her "Infinity Room" installations. Today, artists continue to experiment with immersion techniques, encouraging active viewer participation and engagement with the development of new technology such as virtual and augmented reality. Immersive art more often than not involves installation art, as the form refers to work that must be physically entered, and often completed upon viewer participation. Differing from traditional sculpture or painting, installation art addresses the viewer directly "as a literal presence in the space."¹

My personal interest in immersive installation art began with visits to Hudson Valley art institutions such as the Storm King Art Center and Dia: Beacon when I was growing up. Installations by Dan Flavin, Richard Serra, Walter De Maria, and Robert Irwin seemed larger than life to me. I became fascinated by my own satisfaction as I entered Richard Serra's metal sculptures or wandered through Irwin's *Excursus: Homage to the Square*. These experiences made me want to explore the phenomenon of the instagrammable artist as a guiding question of this project: how social media has changed how we interact with, experience, and think about art. Concentrating on installation, this thesis illustrates how artists developed innovative methods of creating art before the era of new technology, and how new developments in the field influenced the ways viewers interacted with the works. Since Instagram launched in 2010, immersive exhibits by artists such as Yayoi Kusama and James Turrell have driven people to their works to

¹ Claire Bishop, *Installation Art* (London: Tate Publishing, 2005), [Page #25], pdf.

take the perfect social media snapshot. The installations have taken on a whole new meaning than originally intended due to their fit online.

In the year 2020, art can be found almost anywhere, out in the middle of an Arizona desert, inside abandoned storefronts, as well as showcased in international biennials and art fairs. Online, art exists throughout countless digital databases, websites, and social media platforms, making it easier than ever to access the work you are looking for. However, if you're not looking, but rather scrolling aimlessly through a social media feed, you're more likely to come across vibrant spectacle worthy art. Deeply engaging works of art like Kusama's and Turrell's allow the viewer to take part in the artistic process, encouraging them to post their experiences online.

Each chapter of this thesis analyzes the ways that social media and technology have influenced the type of art people want to see. I utilize work by Yayoi Kusama and James Turrell to explore common themes in their work that influenced the development of recent immersive playgrounds. While neither artist intended their work to take on this new meaning online or draw crowds simply hoping for a selfie, aspects of their work made the fit inevitable. As Yayoi Kusama has been crowned the most instagrammable artist I begin by tracing her ascent to fame. I then compare her "Infinity Rooms" to James Turrell's Roden Crater to show the difference in intent but the similarity in outcomes of the two 1960s installation artists. While Turrell may have felt stronger in resisting his work's fit online, the spectacle and scale of Roden Crater have only made this digital spread more vast.

Following the model that James Turrell and Yayoi Kusama unintentionally created, I explore the commonality between the 1960s installation artists and what are referred to as

Instagrammable pop-ups. Since 2016, only two years after Yayoi Kusama's exhibitions were the most visited in the world, Instagrammable pop-ups have become the next social media craze, and the go to immersive experience. "Instagrammable," which became an official word in the Merriam-Webster Dictionary in 2018, describes anything that is "visually appealing in a way that is suitable for being photographed for posting on social media."² Pop-up museums have made multi-million corporations off of the desire for these instagrammable moments.

Countless articles have been published on how social media has changed the art world, but little work has been focused on the similar immersive qualities that have drawn spectators into specific works of art. Contemporary art historians such as social media expert who advises museum Jia Jia Fei, the University of Missouri Kansas City art history professor Cristina Albu, and art historian and critic Claire Bishop are fundamental thinkers in this new era of immersive installation art. Each scholar has produced writing that has influenced my decision to develop this thesis. There are distinct similarities between the people who flock to Dia: Beacon's Dan Flavin or wait to see Yayoi Kusama's "Infinity Rooms" for hours. New technology has created an increased desire for immersivity in our everyday lives. Lights, reflective materials, or larger than life installations satisfy this need for multi-sensory experiences.

I begin the first chapter, which focuses on Yayoi Kusama and her ascent to fame, with a brief background on the artist's childhood and early career in New York to shed light on her transition to installation art and utilization of reflective material. By experimenting with performance art and obsessive soft-sculpture environments, Kusama introduced themes of active viewer participation that would influence her later iconic "Infinity Rooms." Kusama's first two

²"Instagrammable," Merriam-Webster, last modified 2018, <https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/instagrammable>.

“Infinity Rooms,” *Phalli’s Field* and *Peep Show-Endless Love*, set the stage for her future success. Yayoi Kusama’s fascination with obliteration, performance, and human interaction developed alongside new technology such as the internet, social media, and smartphones to create an undoubted connection, influencing her role as the most Instagrammable artist.

James Turrell also experimented with immersive materials in the 1960s and despite his resistance, has joined Kusama in producing some of the most Instagrammable exhibitions of the decade. My second chapter analyzes Roden Crater, the indefinitely unfinished experiential site in the middle of the Arizona desert, as a product of the modern media spectacle. Along with the globalization of mega-exhibitions and international biennials, Roden Crater satisfies the desire for larger than life artworks to draw crowds and media attention. An emphasis on exclusivity and grandeur clouds the overarching purpose of the unfinished site, which in its originality engages the viewer in celestial vaulting and light-altering perception. Despite being closed to the public forty-five years after its acquisition, celebrity interest and a glimpse of Roden Crater in the media has sparked fascination with the site.

The third chapter of this project explores the recent pop-up museum phenomenon that made its mark with the help of the experience economy. While referred to as museums, the sculptures inside resemble props while the rooms resemble stage sets. Each environment relies on a participant to engage with the work by taking a photograph within the space. While economic and political uncertainties affected the traditional art market in 2016, the year saw the birth of a new sector through the introduction of experiential pop-up museums. While the concept was coined by two economists in 1998, the experience economy continued to develop as social media did. Following Yayoi Kusama, James Turrell, and other 1960s installation artists,

the Instagrammable pop-up satisfies our desire for an immersive sensory experience. Following the fundamental qualities of installation art, the pop-up museum environments focus on viewer experience. As I emphasize in chapter three, these qualities specifically make immersive installation art and Instagrammable pop-ups a perfect fit for our smartphones and a profitable business in the experience economy.

In the 1960s immersivity depended on the inherent materiality of the artwork. Viewers wandered through environments, participated in happenings, and engaged in installations. Today, we measure immersivity and visitor engagement with the number of posts an exhibition gets on social media. Using our smartphones as a window into the world, we have become accustomed to documenting our experiences to prove where we have gone or what we have done. For this reason, installations that incorporate our body such as Yayoi Kusama's "Infinity Rooms," James Turrell's Roden Crater, and Instagrammable pop-ups like the Museum of Ice Cream have become increasingly popular on social media. Museums are no longer able to uphold "no photography" rules but rather encourage them by including hashtags on wall labels or asking people to tag their photos with the institution's social media page.

Chapter One

The Rise of the Instagrammable Artist

One by one, block after block, I turn each corner and observe what feels like a never ending field of heads. The neighborhood in Chelsea, New York City would assume there was a concert or famous celebrity inside the contemporary art gallery by the amount of people waiting outside David Zwirner in the middle of Winter. With friends and family home for the holidays, this specific Saturday produced the longest wait time to see Yayoi Kusama's latest "Infinity Room" *Dancing Lights that Flew up to the Universe* (2019) since the exhibition's opening. Having only gotten to the gallery a half hour after it opened its doors that morning, the wait time to spend 30 seconds in the room had reached four hours. While debating whether or not to stay, the line that spanned four blocks filled with millennial and Generation Z social media fanatics continued to grow despite David Zwirner employees reporting the four hour wait time was only for the "Infinity Room" and not the rest of the exhibition. As no one steps off the line, mumbles of "who are we waiting to see again?" echo off the New York City buildings, confirming my speculations that people were willing to wait for four hours for their own infamous "Infinity Room" selfie.

Whether you have only seen her work on Instagram, saw her trending on Twitter, or have followed her work over the years, you have likely come across Yayoi Kusama's "Infinity Rooms." When the artist began her career in the 1950s it would have been impossible for her to foresee the influence her work would have on viewers in years to come. Over the past six decades, Kusama's work has changed the way we view and think about art. Although she began

creating her immersive installations long before the introduction of social media, their vibrant quality and mirrored material create the perfect backdrop for the now instagram obsessed generation. Ignored for decades, the Japanese artist defied all odds for a foreign woman in a male dominated field. This year, Kusama warrants her own Macy's Thanksgiving Day Parade balloon, countless sold out retrospectives across the country, and millions of tagged photos on Instagram. Some attribute her fame to her works' vibrant and photographic instagrammable quality, however the artist coined her first mirrored room long before the first smartphone selfie.

Yayoi Kusama was born in Matsumoto, Japan on March 22, 1929. She began drawing polka dots motifs and what would be later called "Infinity Nets" around the age of ten.³ Kusama's family was not supportive of her desire to create. Her mother would often catch her daughter frantically drawing and rip the paper out from under her. This may have influenced Kusama's desire to create as much and as fast as she could. Coming from old money, Kusama's family was of high social standing. They owned six large hothouses for wholesale seed nurseries. With its money Kusama's family supported local artists, and had a solid understanding of the art world. This did not mean they supported the trade within their family. Kusama mentions that "...the prospect of their youngest child becoming a painter was a different matter altogether."⁴ The resistance did not stop Kusama. From a very young age she would draw every day, carrying a sketchbook with her wherever she went.

Growing up in Japan in the 1930s, Kusama was exposed to the aftermath of World War II. Her hometown of Matsumoto sits only 400 miles away from Hiroshima and Nagasaki.

³ Yayoi Kusama, *Infinity Net: The Autobiography of Yayoi Kusama*, The University of Chicago Press, Chicago, 2011.

⁴

Kusama was 16 years old when the atomic bombs hit her neighboring cities. Early watercolors depict dark fields of ink and gouache; resembling aerial views of the cities obliterated aftermath (Fig 1.1).⁵ Kusama destroyed many of her early works as she promised to create “many more and better works than those I destroyed.”⁶ One of the works that survived was a wartime sketchbook that suggests how her experiences of the world war produced psychological trauma at a young age. This trauma remained with her throughout her childhood, evidently affecting her desire to create.

Influenced by her traumatic childhood, Kusama experienced hallucinations where a single pattern would overcome her field of vision. The artist explains one instance where she looked at a tablecloth covered in a red flower pattern “when I looked up I saw the same pattern covering the ceiling, the windows and walls, and finally all over the room, my body, and the universe.” This sense of self-obliteration became a focal point for Kusama’s work. The artist’s Infinity Net paintings and later “Infinity Rooms” attempt to manifest these unique visions. Kusama explained “...the only method I have found that relieves my illness is to keep creating art.”⁷ Kusama’s art cannot be viewed as a direct result of her mental illness but rather the solution. Her later “Infinity Room” installations would attempt to obliterate the viewer just as her dreams did, encouraging visitors to connect through shared experiences.

Kusama began showing her work in Japan in 1952 before traveling to New York in 1957 to establish herself as an artist. During her years in New York, Yayoi Kusama explored performance and body art. She used her own as well as other bodies in performances in public

⁵ Nancy Spiller, “Nancy Spiller: From Here To Infinity: Yayoi Kusama,” accessed October 7, 2019.

⁶ Midori Yamamura, *Yayoi Kusama: Inventing the Singular* (Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 2015).

⁷ “Yayoi Kusama Artworks & Famous Art,” The Art Story, accessed October 11, 2019, <https://www.theartstory.org/artist/kusama-yayoi/artworks/>.

parks, discos, in the press, on television, and in museums.⁸ Scholars have related the use of the body in this manner to a new form of self or group-portraiture, and Kusama was at the forefront. This new form of art only lasted as long as the performance itself. Photography played a key role in documenting the work, now acting as a lasting record of what took place. The sole components of performance art carry throughout Kusama's career. The fleeting aspect of her performance work corresponds to the 45 seconds a visitor is allowed in one of her "Infinity Rooms." Again, photography acts as a memory of the work for the viewer.

Performance art and happenings allowed artists to bridge the gap between themselves and the viewer. The audience became participants in the work itself. Kusama's naked happenings involved groups of naked men and women covered in her signature polka-dots; a politically charged act in New York during a time when the country was at war with Vietnam and the Soviet Union was marching on Prague.⁹ During her performances she would cover herself, others, objects, and even the environment around her with her polka dot motifs in order to obliterate the identity of the figure.

During solo performances, Kusama would pose naked covered in the patterns of her work around her, once again becoming inseparable from her environment. She appears this way in nearly all of the photographs of her work during her time in New York (Fig 1.2).¹⁰ Although her performance work did gain Kusama recognition, it came mainly through media gossip rather than critical praise. According to Lynn Zelevansky, curator of *Love Forever: Yayoi Kusama* at the Los Angeles County Museum of Art, "Kusama wasn't really right for the 60's" but the work

⁸ Bree Richards, "Yayoi Kusama: Performing the Body," in *Yayoi Kusama: Look Now, See Forever*, [Page 1], accessed November 18, 2019, <https://play.qagoma.qld.gov.au>.

⁹ Richards, "Yayoi Kusama," in *Yayoi Kusama*, [Page 1].

¹⁰ Edward M. Gomez, "ART; A 60's Free Spirit Whose Main Subject Was Herself," *The New York Times* (New York, NY), July 5, 1998, digital file.

she created during this time was crucial in her future development as an artist, as well as interactive art forms as a whole.¹¹

Seeing Yourself Sensing

Following performance art, Yayoi Kusama began experimenting with another interactive medium: mirrors. As an easier way to create large quantities of her soft sculpture installations, which became emotionally and physically taxing, she utilized mirrored material as a faster way to allude to “Infinity.” With the inclusion of mirrors, Kusama was able to transcend the laborious limitations of her work. The first “Infinity Rooms” were not far removed from her initial performance work. The mirrors’ inherently participatory nature allow audiences to become the subject of the work in a similar way. At the same time, Kusama continued to perform, this time within her mirrored installations, as a way to activate the space.

As Cristina Albu analyzes in “Mirror Affect: Interpersonal Spectatorship in Installation ” the 1960s saw a resurgence of mirrors in art influenced by “the desire to contest self-focused mode of art creation and reception as well as political and social turmoil during the Vietnam war.

¹² The growing importance of divergent histories caused an exploration of understanding each other’s backgrounds and experiences. Works such as Joan Jonas’s mirrored-performances reflected on the importance of spectatorship and the effects of the gaze between previously segregated groups on people. Mirrors allowed for the departure of the autonomous art object and viewer as they become inherently interchangeable. It became harder to differentiate between canvas or sculpture and two dimensional versus three dimensional works of art. Environments

¹¹ Gomez, "ART; A 60's,".

¹² Cristina Albu, *Mirror Affect: Interpersonal Spectatorship in Installation* (Pittsburgh, PA: University of Pittsburgh, 2012), [Page #35], digital file.

such as Kusama's mirrored "Infinity Rooms" push the boundary between "reality as art object and virtuality as screens."¹³

In 1965 *Phalli's Field*, Kusama created her first "Infinity Room" for the Richard Castellane Gallery in New York as part of her solo show (Fig 1.3). The mirrored room measured around 8 feet high 15 feet wide and was situated on the first floor gallery.¹⁴ Visitors would enter *Phalli's Field* barefoot through a doorway. While inside they would view themselves in the mirrors that surrounded all four sides. Kusama's intention was for visitors to become one with the environment. After constructing *Phalli's Field* on the opening day of her exhibition at the Castellane Gallery, Kusama posed nestled in the soft red and white sculptures on the floor of the infinity room. Wearing a bright red leotard and leggings she became one with the environment she created; a theme that Kusama continued with each "Infinity Room." With these photographs of Kusama interacting with her work, it becomes clear that as visitors we are to do the same. Infinity Rooms such as *Phalli's Field* are separate worlds or realities belonging to Kusama that she creates for viewers to experience for themselves. Art historian Jo Applin acknowledges this dynamic stating that the Infinity Room is "an idiosyncratic world...which we are invited to imaginatively inhabit, albeit for a brief time."¹⁵

Only a year later, Kusama created her second Infinity Room titled *Peep Show-Endless Love* (Fig 1.4). Differently from *Phalli's Field*, visitors were not able to enter this work, but only peer in through a letterbox-shaped peephole placed on either side of the room. Hundreds of flashing multicolored spotlights illuminated the space from the ceiling. Visitors peered into the

¹³ Albu, *Mirror Affect: Interpersonal Spectatorship in Installation*, (Page #38).

¹⁴ Jo Applin, *Yayoi Kusama; Infinity Mirror Room- Phalli's Field* (London: Afterall Books, 2012), [Page 32], digital file.

¹⁵ Applin, *Yayoi Kusama*, [Page 28].

room, viewing themselves in the vast sea of lights, while also observing another person on the opposite end doing the same. Kusama's second "Infinity Room" excluded visitors' bodies, therefore limiting participation. The concept of a peep show references a continuation of the artist's fascination with eroticism as seen in *Phalli's Field*, while also connecting with the exhibition type that developed in 15th century Europe.¹⁶ While Kusama photographs herself inside most of her Infinity Rooms, including *Peep Show-Endless Love*, visitors never get to enter inside the room themselves. Instead, as viewers peer into the hexagonal room, they are met with reflections of their own eyes accompanied by others. Two sets of eyes are fused into one, as they become multiplied by infinity and cast throughout the room.¹⁷ Kusama's *Peep Show-Endless Love* adds another sense of unfamiliarity to her first "Infinity Room" by inviting another viewer to experience the installation at the same time.

While Yayoi Kusama's first "Infinity Rooms" were meant to immerse viewers in a shared psychedelic dream, the development of smartphones fifty years later created a frenzy of selfies within the space. There are definite similarities between taking a selfie on a smartphone and looking in the mirror. Selfies allow people to see others the same way they see themselves in a mirror.¹⁸ We pose for them in the same way, distorting the figure in a way that fits our ego. Jacques Lacan's 1949 essay "The Mirror Stage as Formative of the I Function as Revealed in Psychoanalytic Experience" can be used to describe the interaction between the viewer and Kusama's mirrored works.¹⁹ Lacan's "Mirror Stage" takes place when an infant views their

¹⁶ A peep show can be defined as an entertainment or object that is viewed through a small opening or magnifying glass and is often erotic in nature. *Merriam-Webster.com Dictionary*, s.v. "peep show," accessed March 24, 2020, <https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/peepshow>.

¹⁷ Bishop, *Installation Art*, [Page 45].

¹⁸ Simon Castets and Douglas Coupland, *#Artselfie*, première édition. ed. (Paris, France: Jean Boîte Éditions, 2014), digital file.

¹⁹ Jacques Lacan, *Critical Theory since 1965* (n.p.: Hazard Adams and Leroy Searle eds., 1986).

image in a mirror for the first time, the ego or *Ideal-I* is developed. Once they have viewed their reflections, the infant identifies themselves as a distinct autonomous subject, separate from one's mother or caregiver. From this moment, the child thrives to achieve this *Ideal-I* throughout their life. It is this promise of 'Self' however, which connects Lacan's theories to Kusama's work.

Lacan believed that the act of reflection formed the ego. At a young age we are introduced to stereotypes and gender norms that we ultimately try to fulfill. Kusama's *Narcissus Garden* (1966) acknowledges this innate instinct. Outside the Italian Pavilion at the Venice Biennale, Kusama sold mirrored plastic orbs for two dollars apiece. Beside her stood a sign that read "Your Narcissism for Sale," acknowledging the artist's frustrations with the current art market.²⁰ The mirrored orbs encouraged a confrontation with the self. Outside the Venice Biennale visitors are faced with the same narcissism as the potential art buyers inside. The mirror-balls symbolized the vanity within art consumerism and were meant to intrude the viewer's ego.

In regards to Kusama's "Infinity Room" installations, Lacan also references the effects of multi-mirrored experiences. In this scenario, the reflection does not act as affirming one's sense of self but rather disrupts it. The infinity of one's reflection according to Lacan produces a sense of strangeness and unfamiliarity.²¹ Claire Bishop, a Professor at City University of New York, agrees, describing the reflection of one's reflection as disturbing, stating that to "stare into the eyes that are certainly not anybody else's, but which do not feel commensurate with me." As we look into the infinite world of polka dots and multi-colored lights it appears as though we are everywhere and nowhere at the same time.

²⁰ Andrew R. Chow, "Yayoi Kusama's 'Narcissus Garden' Is Coming to the Rockaways," *The New York Times*, June 18, 2018, digital file.

²¹ Bishop, *Installation Art*, [Page 44].

Artists saw the potential that mirrors offer in the late 18th century. Jaques-Louis David, a French Neoclassicist, used mirrors in an installation more than two hundred years ago. Ewa Lajer-Burcharth, an art historian and professor at Harvard University, uses Lacan in her analysis of Jaques-Louis David's *Sabine Women* (1799). David's politically fueled painting stretched 12 ft by 17 ft and featured the Sabines returning to Rome to rescue their sisters and daughters but instead finding the women with their own families, torn between sides. David knew of the importance of the spectator and wanted them to feel as though they were involved in the revolutionary story being told. Similarly to Kusama in more than one aspect, David charged an admission fee to the exhibition, and only those able to travel and pay the entry fee were able to participate. Additionally, David included a mirror in his installation of the painting. The mirror, set up at the far end of the room, reflected the entire composition of the painting. Viewers would be able to see themselves within the painting and in return became "participants in the history depicted by the artist."²²

As the visitors to David's exhibition saw themselves in the mirror, they saw their reflections next to idealized male bodies. The figure's marble-like quality and idealized physique support Lacan's conception of the "Mirror Stage." As Lajer-Burcharth points out, the side by side comparison between the viewer and the painted figures offers a "seductive, if at the same time alienating illusion of Self as (the ideal) other."²³ Some two hundred years later, Kusama's "Infinity Rooms" offer a similar experience. Visitors to these mirrored chambers view themselves in a fantastic alternate world. While active participants in Kusama's own historical narrative, visitors are also confronted with an idealized form of themselves.

²² Ewa Lajer-Burcharth, *David's Sabine Women: Body, Gender and Republican Culture Under the Directory*, vol. 14.3 (Art History, 1991) 410.

²³ Ewa Lajer-Burcharth, *David's Sabine Women*.

The mirrored material of Kusama's work has influenced the social media spectacle it has become online. Selfies, like mirrors, can be used as a mode of self-reflection. Mirrors offer fleeting images in comparison to selfies that fix them. While these photos can inevitably be taken in front of any work of art with the ease of a smartphone, mirrors make it that much more desirable. These mirror selfies allow the viewer to see a larger portion of themselves within the space, in this case encompassing the immersive world of Kusama's "Infinity Rooms" along with the full body of the viewer. In 2013, the Oxford Dictionary's word of the year was "selfie." That same year Yayoi Kusama's exhibitions became the most visited in the world. A couple years later Mar Dixon, a museum consultant, created "Museum Selfie Day" in 2015 in order to accept new technology within the museum setting.²⁴

Although the first selfie was not taken until 2003, the "selfie" has arguably been around since 1524 when late Italian Renaissance painter Parmigiano painted an image of himself in a convex mirror.²⁵ Selfies act as a form of self-portraiture, portraying the figure as they see themselves in a mirror, this time at arms length. In 2010 David Colman wrote in the *New York Times* that the selfie was "changing photography itself."²⁶ Many critics and Art Historians agree, starting the selfie has become to constitute its own visual genre. Selfies have become a way for people to paint a picture of themselves that resonates with their own personal ego with a click of a button. We take them to show the world an idealized image of ourselves but the finished product never shows the whole picture. Like art, posted selfies are a public entity. Similarly to the way artists publicize new work, we publish our selfies to social media for our followers to

²⁴ "Museum Selfie Day," *National Today*, <https://nationaltoday.com/museum-selfie-day/>.

²⁵ Jerry Saltz, "Art at Arm's Length: A History of the Selfie,"

²⁶ Jerry Saltz, "Art at Arm's Length: A History of the Selfie," *Vulture*, January 26, 2014, <https://www.vulture.com/2014/01/history-of-the-selfie.htm>.

see. Yayoi Kusama understood the power of the ego back in 1966 when she created *Narcissus Garden*. Each of her new mirrored works acts as a reflection of our inner narcissism and inherent values in the age of social media. As the influence of the selfie continues to grow, the art institution has taken measures in order to encourage the form of photography within the institution.

Kusama's first two "Infinity Rooms" set the stage for her future success. Themes from both rooms are incorporated throughout her career. The soft phallic sculptures in *Phalli's Field* transformed into bright polka dotted balls or pumpkins. The flashing lights from *Peep Show-Endless Love* became LED lights floating from the ceiling. Kusama never had to diminish the quality of her work to appeal to a certain crowd. While some attribute her success to the selfie-obsessed generation, these themes have been part of her work long before social media. Kusama's desire for self-obliteration resonated with visitors as they became part of her unique story and fantasy world.

From the late 1960s until the early 2000s her work traveled around the world, gaining recognition from international institutions. While Kusama created smaller peep-in boxes, she did not make another "Infinity Room" until 1993 when she was invited to represent Japan at the Venice Biennale. Her work saw a resurgence in the United States after this exhibition. In 1996, Kusama created *Repetitive Vision* for Pittsburgh's The Mattress Factory (Fig 1.5). The work incorporated mannequins within the mirrored room, as if to represent the importance of the human body within her environment.

The year 1998 was important for Kusama. The artist exhibited in more than thirty shows. *Love Forever: Yayoi Kusama 1958-1968*, a retrospective of Kusama's time in New York opened

in the Los Angeles County Museum of Art, and then traveled across the country.²⁷ From this point on, many of Kusama's exhibitions traveled from institution to institution, allowing more and more people to see her work. The success and buzz that these exhibitions gained, encouraged other museums to get in on the action. In the year 2000 a traveling exhibition reached Europe. The show titled *Yayoi Kusama* focused on the artist's large-scale installations. Kusama's work toured as many cities as it could, growing her fan base and online presence.

Traveling exhibitions like Kusama's increasingly resemble tours that performers go on. Today, fans have to scalp tickets on Stubhub as well as other ticket resale sites to see her work, the same way you would to buy tickets to see your favorite band. Tickets for ICA Boston's exhibition *Yayoi Kusama: Love is Calling* were sold-out within the first hour and are being resold on Stubhub for inflated prices.²⁸ In 2018, Toronto's Art Gallery of Ontario warned its visitors to be wary of possible scams on scalping sites. Tickets were being sold for \$250 a piece on Stubhub for the Canadian gallery's exhibition *Yayoi Kusama: Infinity Mirrors*. The price surprised many interested patrons, as tickets for this show had a \$30 face value.

Kusama also began to explore new ways of participation after her early "Infinity Rooms" gained recognition. *Obliteration Room* (2002) is an entirely white room filled with white furniture (Fig 14). Visitors are given a sheet of multi-colored polka dot stickers upon entry and are invited to place them on any surface within the room. Since the 1960s interactivity has been a focal point for the artist. In reference to her earlier naked-body performances, once again Kusama focuses on the effects of active participation. The polka-dots act as an equalizer between

²⁷ Yoshitake et al., *Yayoi Kusama*, [Page #209].

²⁸ Caroline Goldstein, "People Are Scalping Tickets to the ICA Boston's Yayoi Kusama Exhibition," *Art World*, October 4, 2019, accessed November 17, 2019, <https://news.artnet.com/art-world/kusama-scalpers-tickets-ica-boston>.

visitors as each person adds their part to the room. The length of the exhibition was recorded on time-lapse photography where it exists to this day. The internet video shows the effects of visitors on the space. At the end of the exhibition the entirely white room is obliterated, as colorful dots encompass the space.

Within the next few years Kusama was invited to exhibit her work at renowned New York City galleries such as David Zwirner and Gagosian as well as worldwide. David Zwirner's exhibition titled "I Who Have Arrived in Heaven," opened in the winter of 2013, and produced enormous groundbreaking crowds, securing her spot as a social media sensation. Anita Ragusa, the manager of David Zwirner's 19th Street galleries, attributed the show's success to social media, stating "Once it hit social media, and people told their friends about it, everyone wanted to make sure to see it."²⁹ The crowd that lined up for hours outside the gallery was not the usual demographic. The photos on Instagram spread to a much younger crowd of students and tourists.

Kusama's fame only increased from here. Photographs of her "Infinity Rooms" were on every social media site. Huge traveling retrospectives allowed fans from across the country to see her work. Galleries and museums all wanted Kusama's work in their institution in order to attract large crowds. In 2017 the exhibition "Infinity Mirrors" brought her immersive rooms to major cities such as Washington D.C, Seattle, Los Angeles, Toronto, Cleveland, and Atlanta. This winter, visitors lined up outside David Zwirner once again in order to step inside Kusama's newest "Infinity Room," *Dancing Lights That Flew Up To The Universe*, for one minute. Ticket for ICA Boston's "Love is Calling," which features a 14 by 28 by 20 ft room filled with Kusama's signature inflatable polka-dot shapes, sold-out in one hour. MoCA Westport, which

²⁹ William, Grimes, 2013, "Lights, Mirrors, Instagram! ArtSensation: In a 'Mirrored Room,' a Setting for Selfies Worth Waiting for," *New York Times (1923-Current File)*, Dec 02, 2.

opened in September 2019, featured two of Kusama's reflective works for its opening, knowing the buzz it would bring. At the entrance of every new show are signs encouraging visitors to post selfies and photos of Kusama's work with specific hashtags. Today "No photography" signs can no longer be expected in contemporary art institutions.

Although her work appears all over the internet, Kusama's "Infinity Rooms" constitute a greater experience in person. Once inside, the outside world fades behind you as you become immersed in the reflective vibrant qualities of her work. Eva Respini, the chief curator at ICA Boston, acknowledges the importance of Kusama's online presence however. "The repeated sharing of photos online echo the deeper themes of Kusama's work: repetition, human connectivity, life, love, death."³⁰ These shared photos can never replicate the physicality of the room. The internet and social media may have fast tracked Kusama's fame, as well as giving it a new-found meaning, but the artist was on the rise fifty years ago without it.

From Art Object to Social Object

The fame that Kusama began accumulating in the 1960s continued to rise at the beginning of the 21st century. At this same time, new technologies were being created. Nintendo's AOL instant messenger was created in 1997 and was deemed the first primary site used for digital communication. A year later Google was created, transforming the internet forever. Social media kept on progressing with applications like MySpace, Facebook, YouTube, Twitter, and continuing with Instagram in 2010. By 1999, there were more than 70 million computers connected to the internet. By 2006, Google averaged 400 million searches per day.

³⁰ Spencer Buell, "Get Your Camera Ready: The Infinity Mirror Room at the ICA Has Arrived," *Boston Magazine*, September 17, 2019, digital file.

Information and news traveled faster than it ever had before. Artists, museums, and galleries were majorly affected. Not only has the internet allowed buyers to purchase art online, but artists were able to promote their work without the interference of a gallery or dealer. With galleries taking 50% of the sales they make, the internet allowed artists to make more money in more ways than one. At the same time, collectors became aware that they could purchase the art straight from the artist for a fraction of the gallery price as well.

Out of all these new social media applications, Instagram may have the most influence on the art world. It has served as a platform for artists to be discovered, and provides more “space” than any physical gallery. With the push of a button, artists are able to bring their latest work to hundreds of thousands of Instagram users. In 2014, 20 billion photos and 200 million visitors used the site per month.³¹ Similarly to the internet, Instagram cuts out the middle man, allowing artists to attract buyers from a post.

For years now Yayoi Kusama has ranked among the highest-selling living artists. From 2013-2014 her exhibitions were the most visited in the world. Her connection to consumerism and her work’s fit for our current Instagram age can be responsible for fame. Kusama is one of the most tagged artists on Instagram with over 80 million posts.³² As the price of “Infinity Net” paintings skyrocketed with her new found fame, enthusiasts were able to take part of her new work home for a modest price through the use of a selfie. Unlike her fan base, Kusama is not on social media. The artist’s own website contains few images of her actual work. Compared to other contemporary artists today with the power of social media in mind, Kusama’s art can not

³¹ “An Instantaneous Medium: How Instagram Is Influencing the Art World,” Artsy, July 24, 2014, <https://www.artsy.net/article/artsy-editorial-an-instantaneous-medium-how-instagram-is-influencing-the>.

³² Doug Woodham, “How Yayoi Kusama Built a Massive Market for Her Work,” Artsy, November 20, 2017, <https://www.artsy.net/article/artsy-editorial-yayoi-kusama-built-massive-market-work>.

be simplified to an Instagram backdrop. As each year goes by, the 90 year old artist continues to create work that appeals to the masses. While she will be unable to continue to make new “Infinity Rooms” forever, her work will always be circulating through cyberspace.

When Yayoi Kusama began creating her immersive installation art before the development of social media she critiqued the commercial success of her contemporaries. Andy Warhol, now known as one of her rivals, became a celebrity artist due to pop art’s connection to consumerism. Kusama viewed pop art as the “national style of America” that neglected to acknowledge the art of other cultures.³³ Her distaste for pop art may have been influenced by her struggles in the New York art scene as a foreign female artist. Compared to her white male counterparts, Kusama had to work much harder to receive recognition. Today, her mirrored works reflect her own narcissistic tendencies as the installations got bigger and more extravagant. As an artist who once struggled with society's views on consumerism and narcissism Kusama has begun to embrace her overall commercial success.

Digital reproductions that surface online change the overall meaning of an artwork. The question whether or not they reduce or enhance the experience of the work of art has puzzled many art historians including Jia Jia Fei. Artists such as James Turrell accompanied Kusama in creating new sensory environments. Turrell emerged from the 1960s California Light and Space movement where artists embraced psychology and technology. The work varied from site-specific installations, including radiant neon lights, projections onto walls, or glowing sculptures. Artists focused on materials that reflected and absorbed light such as glass, acrylic or

³³ Yayoi Kusama and Lynn Zelevansky, *Love Forever: Yayoi Kusama, 1958-1968* (Los Angeles: Los Angeles County Museum of Art, 1998).

resin.³⁴ Although Kusama's "Infinity Rooms" do not belong to the Light and Space movement, she introduced many of the same ideologies on the east coast. The commonality in immersive material has influenced the artists' fit online.

Although vastly different in execution, James Turrell and Yayoi Kusama's artworks are now often discussed together as being similar in immersive nature in the age of social media. Unlike Kusama's "Infinity Rooms," Turrell's light work offers more contemplation in place of reflection. Focused on the perception of light, Turrell's work has developed along with new light-based technology. The immersive installations were never meant to be a photographic image on a smartphone screen, or a post on a social media feed, but rather experienced. Early works were accompanied by signs stating that cameras and phones were not permitted. The Guggenheim took the same precautions in 2013 when an exhibition of Turrell's light work opened within the renowned institution, but were unsuccessful. Throughout the span of the exhibition over 5,000 photos of the work were shared online. The show was the most instagrammed program in Guggenheim's history despite warnings.

Through these shared posts online, James Turrell's exhibition reached millions of people around the world who may have not been able to travel to the actual museum. At the same time, 420,000 visitors attended the Guggenheim exhibition in person because they saw the photos on Instagram. While visitors to Turrell's environments can attest, digital reproductions reduce the actual experience of the work, they also expand online as the art becomes available to the public.

James Turrell's work arguably operates much differently than Kusama's. Once inside an "Infinity Room " the few seconds visitors have are often used to take a quick selfie. Just as

³⁴ Michael Auping and Robin Clark, *Phenomenal: California Light, Space, Surface* ;(Berkeley, Calif.: Univ. of California Press, 2011).

instant and fleeting as social media, her work feeds our desire for immediate gratification.

Although still time sensitive, once inside Turrell's lightwork, visitors have more time to sit and contemplate the space around them. Installation shots of Guggenheim's Turrell exhibition show that visitors still use this time to snap photos, either of themselves or of the work. Aspects of both Kusama's and Turrell's work have set them up to be instagramable artists. In a way, the audience that is drawn to Kusama's work does not fit the mold for Turrell's vision of his work. While Turrell has acknowledged his avocation for slow art, "taking time to see and absorb," especially in a world where art-goers are bustling to see a popular work of art, visitors are still inclined to snap a photo of the spectacle and put it online.³⁵

³⁵<https://www.theguardian.com/artanddesign/2015/nov/11/james-turrell-more-people-have-heard-of-me-through-dra-ke-than-anything-else>

Chapter Two

The Contemporary Art Spectacle

The term “spectacle” surrounds us, its different meanings taking form, and inspiring us in reactions of awe. The exaggeration of the ordinary intrigues us, enticing curiosity in the event we are experiencing. Coming from the Latin *spectare*, meaning to watch or look at, the term has developed over time, taking on various forms of entertainment and commerce. From Roman chariot races to the Super Bowl the human desire to make any ordinary event extraordinary has yet to cease. Along with entertainment, artists have been attached to the idea of spectacle in different ways. Many Renaissance artists were credited with painting the spectacle. Their tragic biographies painted the picture of the artist with gifts from God to create art in his image. An earlier example in 1502, Heironymous Bosch's *Last Judgement Altarpiece* can be discussed as a “Salvation Spectacle,” as viewers were so overwhelmed by the spectacle of the work that the essential message of the painting was lost.³⁶ In these cases the spectacle accompanies an illusion of the real. The larger than life spectacle distracts us, overstimulating our senses with its impact.

With any new development of the spectacle comes critiques of it. The idea that the spectacle turns viewers into passive consumers distracting them from “the real” has been analyzed through Plato’s *Allegory of the Cave* and was later developed as the leading critique of the radical European group Situationist International. In the *Allegory of the Cave*, Plato analyzes how people perceive reality based on their preconceived knowledge of the world.³⁷ Similarly to

³⁶Alec Scungio, "Salvation Spectacle: The Judgment Paintings of Jheronimus Bosch," *Providence College Art Journal*, digital file.

³⁷Plato’s *Allegory of the Cave* focuses on human perception. As Plato imagines himself as one of three prisoners in a cave, he watches as one prisoner frees himself only to realize that the shadows on the cave wall that they assumed were real people were just cast by the fire behind them. The freed prisoner then goes into the real world and discovers human life and sunlight...

Plato, the Situationist International saw mass media in the same light, forming how we understand the world around us. Developed in the mid 20th century, SI formed from European avant-garde artists, writers, and poets, led by Guy Debord. Credited with conceiving the “spectacle” in the modern context, Debord explains society’s shift towards consumerism. In *The Society of the Spectacle*, he emphasized that we live in a consumer culture, full of capitalist-driven imagery, stating that the “spectacle reduces reality to an endless supply of commodifiable fragments, while encouraging us to focus on appearances.”³⁸ Debord believes that society has been engineered by the images in the media and what we see through technology, hiding the divide between real and representation, especially in art. It can be argued that every man-made image derives from some aspect of society, striving to connect or critique in some way. Therefore the contemporary art spectacle aims less for meaningful content but for grandeur, reflecting the image-saturated consumer culture we live in.

While Debord’s and other critiques have exposed the spectacle for its falsities, the spectacle also offers a way for people to connect in a shared experience. According to David Rockwell, an renown American architect, the spectacle involves a lived experience, “they induce a heightened state that can only be experienced in the flesh.”³⁹ The spectacle does not have to be a solely virtual experience influenced by mass media and new technology but rather one that must be lived. The “true” spectacle offers a sense of community, or a unity in experience. Spaces

When he goes back into the cave to relay what he saw to the other prisoners, they deem him crazy refusing to believe what he saw.

³⁸Guy Debord’s critiqued contemporary art for its connection to consumerism in the Capitalist economy. He viewed Dadaism and Surrealism as the end of modern art. In *Comments*, Debord claims that “art is dead ” referring to the art practices at the time and believed art was another aspect of culture that would be consumed by the spectacle. Although Debord never reveals what form the spectacle takes he describes it as “the autocratic reign of the market economy”. His original publication can be applied to the effects of the current age of technology and social media on the art world.

³⁹ David Rockwell, *Spectacle*, Phaidon, 2006.

like Coney Island, Las Vegas, the Grand Canyon, and even the Sistine Chapel encourage visitors to experience them in person to understand their full visual impact.. The spaces make you feel small at the same time as making you feel expansive or becoming something greater than yourself. Rather than falsities, the spectacle offers a sense of salvation through its wonderment.

Today, our media-obsessed society has created an oversaturation of the spectacle. With the rise in scale and intensity of both mass media and consumption art has aimed to become more impactful. Many artists create work for the “wow” moment in order to draw big crowds and media attention. A spectacle describes an event, scene, or image, in regards to its visual impact. In the age of the internet and social media, visual impact can also be measured by the amount of “likes” on a photo or the attention a work gets online. Contemporary art fairs and biennials have fast tracked the spectacle in art. Sites where capitalism, art institutions, and entertainment meet, a spectacle of contemporary art emerges. Here, the artist has become an entertainer in a way, creating work in order to receive a memorable reaction. Bigger has proven to be better at contemporary art fairs. With thousands of works within these commercial spaces the scale of the work has deemed it to be the most memorable. Art fairs such as Art Basel and The Armory have even created designated spaces for large-scale works within the past couple of years. Walking through these bustling art fairs, taking in all the colorful images, surrounded by thousands of other spectators, the arena has become the main way of consuming art.

As installation art became more popular and new technological developments gave artists the opportunity to create these larger works more easily, bigger museums, galleries, and outdoor spaces were needed to house the art. Tate Modern’s Turbine Hall, which houses large scale work that fills the 85 feet tall ceiling and 35,520 square feet of gallery space, has

encouraged the creation of such spectacles. Installations such as Olafur Eliasson's *The Weather Project* (2003) and Rachel Whiteread's *Embankment* (2005) attempt to fill the huge space, creating environments that draw big crowds. Large works such as Anish Kapoor's *Marsyas*, James Turrell's Roden Crater, and more recently Bruce Munro's *Lights at Scenario* catch the eye in a dramatic public display. Works like these create viewer curiosity as they seem larger than life. Whether it be the pure scale of the work such as Kapoor's giant red trumpet, or the contemporary man-made wonders like Turrell's Roden Crater, or Munro's amusement park of mesmerizing field of lights, these works of art aim to entertain the viewer.

Creating Heaven on Earth: James Turrell's Roden Crater

Roden Crater, an extinct volcano with an interior crater on the edge of the Painted Desert near Flagstaff Arizona, comprising twenty-one viewing spaces and six tunnels, was first spotted in 1974 by James Turrell as he was flying overhead (Fig 1). What began as a stairway to the sky has developed into countless interactive light-experiences underneath the Arizona desert. Although the project has yet to be completed, Turrell's initial dream has been finished. A stairway leading to an oval portal letting in the light of the Arizona sky was Turrell's vision of heaven on earth. Aiming to fascinate the public with his hyper-real experience of celestial vaulting, Turrell redefines the modern art spectacle. Celestial vaulting has been Turrell's mission with many of his land-art sites. The eastern portal of Roden Crater acts as a camera obscura, as the natural hole in the earth acts as a telescope to view the light of the universe.

As one stands above the crater's red rim there appears to be nothing but vast skies, a slight indication of other craters within distance, and endless red sandstone desert.⁴⁰ Created between 600,000 and 165,000 years ago by a series of eruptions, the crater spans two miles, stretching a mile long in diameter along the desert floor, and 700 feet to the rim. Within a span of 1,800 square-miles of volcanic field, it is one of few cone-shaped craters in Flagstaff. In order to create the immersive experience within the crater, Turrell had to excavate 1.35 million cubic yards of dirt, lower 660 tons of steel, and pour 5,500 cubic yards of concrete. Although the quantity and quality of materials makes Roden crater seem quite permanent, the site's potential threat of new eruptions and erosion by desert storms makes it fragile.

As you stand above the site, you are then invited to descend into the bowl from a staircase into what Turrells calls the east portal. Here the "Alpha tunnel" greets you, its entryway matching the red of the volcanic sand and cinders. The key shaped walls are lined with steel to reflect the light of the sun and moon. Depending on the time of day, the tunnel will appear bright and yellow or dark and blue. You emerge into the "crater's eye." The white walls slope inward as neutral-toned accents line the outer rim of the circular chamber. In the center a flat white disk opens up the eye into the Arizona sky. You are meant to observe the changing amounts of daylight, leaning back on stone benches and staring up into the sky as it shifts from pale blue, to red, then violet to purple, and finally a dark midnight blue.

Although not finished yet, the sun and moon chamber, on the east end of the site, can be accessed through a hole in the side of the crater and through a tunnel the length of three football fields. The round antechamber will be lined with white marble with a triangular slab emerging

⁴⁰ Paul Trachtman, "James Turrell's Light Fantastic; The innovative artist has devoted his life to transforming," Smithsonian Magazine, May 2003, digital.

from the center reflecting the sun and moon during certain celestial events. Turrell has managed to project the image of the moon 120 feet underground. As you leave the circular room you re-enter the tunnel, walking uphill back towards the east portal. Viewers are able to see the Arizona sky in the far distance, growing larger as you get closer. The ellipse of the opening appears circular through the tunnel due to simple geometry. Similarly to the crater's eye, white walls and stone benches line the ellipse shaped room of the east portal. The main difference being the handrail-less bronze staircase in the middle of the portal. The 10 by 29 feet ellipse of the portal invites you to climb upward back into the Arizona sky.

James Turrell never imagined that Roden Crater would become his life's work when the artist arose from the California Light and Space movement during the 1960s. Coming up with light artists like Bruce Nauman and Robert Irwin, as well as land artists Michael Heizer, and Robert Smithson, James Turrell has often been understood in the context of these other artists since it wasn't much later that Turrell stumbled upon Roden Crater while flying crop-dusting and mail planes over Southern California.⁴¹ But the artist does not credit Roden Crater's influence to any of the art during the 1960s, instead he aligns himself with ancient architects that built similar structures to view celestial events.

Megaliths

The celestial events that Roden Crater highlights are exclusive sights that don't happen every day. Ancient man-made sites such as Maeshowe in Scotland, Newgrange in Ireland, and Abu Simbel in Egypt were made thousands of years ago to experience the same celestial events.

⁴¹ Trachtman, "James Turrell's,".

In hopes to be remembered for the indefinite future, Turrell has made a work that can only be experienced during specific times and dates during the year. By comparing Roden Crater to other man-made sites such as Maes Howe in Scotland, Newgrange in Ireland and Abu Simbel in Egypt he elevates his work to that of other ancient wonders. These ancient Earth art sites mediate between humans and the vastness of space and time. Maes Howe in Scotland was built around 2800 BC as a chambered tomb or burial site. The passageways allow light to shine in during the winter solstice filling the chamber. The site is known as one of the greatest architectural achievements of Scotland.⁴² Newgrange in Ireland, also known for its illuminations during the Winter Solstice, was made 5,000 years ago during the New Stone Age, and may be the oldest known “deliberately aligned structure” anywhere in the world.⁴³ Turrell also compared Roden Crater to Abu Simbel in Egypt. Ramses II built a temple at the site so that the internal chamber would light up two times a year, on the anniversary of his ascension to the throne and on his birthday. The site has turned into a tourist attraction for its modern light shows that highlight the history of Egypt.

People from all over the world travel to these sites to view the light phenomenons. In order to see the site at Newgrange, people have to submit their names to a lottery as there are limited spots to view the solstice within the chamber each year. By comparing Roden Crater to these man-made celestial wonders, Turrell elevates the site to a work that can survive the challenge of time. The spectacle of the site will last for the indefinite future, even if unfinished, as photos of the interior exist online, already perpetuating the exceptional experience. Ancient

⁴²"Maes Howe," Scotland's History, <http://www.sath.org.uk/edscot/www.educationscotland.gov.uk/scotlandshistory/earlypeople/maeshowe/index.html>

⁴³ National Museum of Ireland, "Newgrange and the Winter Solstice," Our Irish Heritage, <https://www.ouririshheritage.org/content/archive/place/miscellaneous-place/newgrange-the-winter-solstice>.

man-made wonders fascinate us because they exclude our current moment, as we are unable to fully comprehend the context in which they are created. They appear perfect to us as it becomes hard to imagine how they were made in a time without modern technology. Images of Roden Crater induce the same feeling, eliminating all aspects of production to reveal the hyper-real spectacle.

Within these spaces, viewers become dreamers, spectators, and even consumers.⁴⁴ Once entered, you become increasingly aware of your position within them. Turrell's mission has been dedicated to the human perception of light. Similar to immersive installation work, the spectacle requires submission. In order to fully experience the artwork, viewers must give in and become passive spectators, allowing the light to materialize around them. The materiality of light within Roden Crater entertains the viewer as they walk through the different tunnels and spaces, experiencing the light bouncing off the man-made walls within the crater. The aesthetic experience of each space becomes the function of the commodity. Drastically different than Yayoi Kusama, Turrell mentions that you can't take anything else home from Roden Crater besides the experience itself.

The scope of Roden Crater has made it one of Turrell's biggest dilemmas but has also heightened the fascination with the site. Although large donations in recent years have assisted with funding, the site remains closed to the public. According to the project's architect, Paul Bustamante, Roden Crater's challenges evolved from the architecture to the engineering, art, astronomy and overall construction⁴⁵ Roden Crater was originally set to open in 2000 but

⁴⁴Hal Foster, *Recodings: Art, Spectacle, Cultural Politics* (Port Townsend, Wash.: Bay Press, 1985), [Page #82], digital file.

⁴⁵Mackenzie Chase, "Flagstaff architect sees Roden Crater through from beginning to end," *The Arizona Daily Sun* (Flagstaff), February 2019.

Turrell's vision grew. Back in 1999 he was quoted stating, "It will be the world's biggest, boldest, most sublime public artwork...I believe this is finally going to happen."⁴⁶ Every new article published has the opening date pushed back. Now with the funding from musician Kanye West, Arizona State University, more recently billionaire Mark Pincus, the artist hopes to have portions open to the public in 2024.⁴⁷ The wait has become one of the site's biggest fascinations.

Roden Crater, James Turrell's life's work that has spanned his entire professional career, has created high expectations for its finished product. The way in which his light-works are referred to as salvational, it seems only fitting that Roden Crater elevates that expectation in some way. Turrell's ambition to create the next world wonder has cost him more than just money. He has noted that two marriages and a relationship have ended due to Roden Crater's enormous pressure.⁴⁸ Working tirelessly day in and day out, Turrell has had to live on the site in Arizona and even sell the plant that makes the concrete when funds were low in 2008-2011. While sacrificing many aspects of his life for Roden Crater, Turrell has not lost hope. But has the anticipation due to high media coverage oversold the mission of Roden Crater to the general public? Who will be able to afford to see the man-made wonder? Turrell has discussed on-site accommodations for visitors to view the project at night, as Arizona's dark skies are essential to the experience.⁴⁹ An invitation to a fundraising event for serious patrons of the arts was released in 2015 to raise money for Roden Crater. In order to attend, a \$5,000 donation to the Skystone

⁴⁶Jonathan Jones, "Arts: Immortal longings; James Turrell makes installations using volcanic craters and the light cast by stars; his fans say his work has the power to change people's lives. Jonathan Jones meets him," *Guardian* (London), July 8, 1999.

⁴⁷Chase, "Flagstaff architect".

⁴⁸ Chris Harvey, "JAMES TURRELL After more than 40 years, James Turrell is close to converting his extinct volcano into an observatory, finds Chris Harvey," *The Daily Telegraph* (London), February 22, 2020.

⁴⁹ Harvey, "JAMES TURRELL," .

Foundation is required along with another \$1,500 for hotel and food accommodations.⁵⁰ A \$6,500 price tag for a fundraising event makes you wonder what the actual price for admission will be when Roden Crater actually opens. Each new article, interview, or photo of the site adds to the anticipation and near spectacle of Roden Crater.

The concept of time surrounds the now extinct volcano. In an era of technology we expect instant gratification. Spending over forty years on a work of art seems infinite when the internet allows people to find anything with a click of a button. Critics of Turrell's on-going project see this as a problem, questioning the purpose for Roden Crater's prolonged construction. In return, Turrell again compares his work to ancient man-made sites that took hundreds of years to build, noting that we have "gotten away from the joy of appreciating that sense of time."⁵¹ Along with Roden Crater, time plays a key role in each of the three works Turrell mentions, as they incorporate existing land. The now-extinct site existed before he discovered and began working on the project. The crater was in the process of being made for thousands of years before the artist Turrell took interest in it. Along with the ancient man-made sites that took hundreds of years to build, Roden Crater's time was indeterminate. The aspect of time connects to the celestial events that each of the sites highlight as well. The sites measure time by the celestial cycle of the year. The limited allotted time to see the phenomenon increases the exclusivity of the experience they offer.

Many of these sites deem themselves "pilgrimage-worthy." People travel from all over to experience the light phenomenon during the winter solstice. While physically getting to these

⁵⁰ M.H Miller, "James Turrell Allowing Limited Visitors to Roden Crater for \$6,500 a Person," *ARTnews*, February 2015, <https://www.artnews.com/art-news/news/james-turrell-allowing-limited-visitors-to-roden-crater-for-6500-a-person-3634/>.

⁵¹ James Turrell, "James Turrell with Alex Bacon," interview by Alex Bacon, *Art in Conversation*, <https://brooklynrail.org/2013/09/art/james-turrell-with-alex-bacon>.

sites is not easy or affordable for most people, the promise of the spectacle has encouraged people from all over the world to make the trek. The site's ability to induce a heightened state can only be experienced in person, requiring the travel to get there. Even once you get to the site Turrell has mentioned that the full experience takes at least 24 hours if not longer. "The main thing is to make a journey...It would be wonderful if visitors could spend at least 24 hours, but it would be better to stay longer."⁵² The journey extends beyond an external pilgrimage to the site as the emotional aspect of the work transcends the viewer in a comparable way. Similarly to the site at Newgrange, the exclusivity of the experience will only make people want to make people want to see it more. Once Roden Crater opens it will operate the same way.

Roden Crater compares to these ancient sites in a theoretical way as well. Although the initial purpose of all three sites have changed, they have become a sort of exclusive theme park, or destination spot for the theatrics they reveal. Turrell has acknowledged his role as an artist being theatrical stating "of course it is, I'm doing a show and artists are exhibitionists."⁵³ The immersive nature of Turrell's work requires spectators to interact with the space. Although his early environments only require your own perception and the light within them they have become theatrical events. Roden Crater's show will incorporate the same materials as these earlier works in addition to the celestial events of the sky. Although only forty miles from the nearest city, Roden Crater would not have been as powerful as the open space devoid of civilization allowed Turrell to really capture the celestial vaulting of an unaffected sky. The isolated nature of the site adds to the artist's mission but also to the spectacle.

⁵² Mark C. Taylor, *Refiguring the Spiritual: Beuys, Barney, Turrell, Goldsworthy* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2012), digital file.

⁵³ Turrell, "James Turrell," interview, *Art in Conversation*.

Celebrity and pop-culture have increasingly influenced the spectacle of the site. Kanye West's donation as well as his video for "Jesus is King" within Roden Crater gave the site publicity and elevated our fascination. Pop culture instinctively associates itself with the spectacle, as Debord wrote.⁵⁴ As figures of the commodification culture we live in, they bring attention to the overly lavish aspects of society. Parties and fundraising events have been thrown to raise money for the site's advancements and famous figures have attended, conceding their allegiance with Roden Crater and James Turrell. Celebrities exploit the same fascination and exclusion as spectacle does. By association Roden Crater appears more exclusive than something the average individual cannot encounter. With the specific interest in Roden Crater by celebrities it elevates the project from an exploration of light perception to that of the spectacle.

With all media attention that Roden Crater has received, the opinion of the site has been created based on the photos, videos, and articles promoting its opening. Images in the media, as told by Debord, produce only illusions of the authentic, and the spectacle is the relation of people mediated by these images. Today, almost nothing remains untouched by Debord's spectacle, Roden Crater included. The site has become something other than its authentic intention due to the media images and press surrounding it. Everyone wants to get a closer glimpse at the underground phenomenon that has been forty-six years in the making. The competition for access between news sites, TV networks, talk radio broadcasts, and social media blogs, has created the media spectacle. They are often dramatized and exaggerated as physical spectacles do to grab viewers' attention. Since the introduction of new technology and social platforms, mass media has had to become more dazzling and eye catching. With this overabundance of

⁵⁴ Debord saw celebrities as another manifestation of capitalist driven phenomena, alienating the individual, and embodying commodities. Celebrities themselves were manifestations of the spectacle, as they are icons of the profit-driven culture we live in.

information that all it has become hard to determine the real or true from the spectacle. The sensationalism around Roden Crater makes determining this much harder.

While James Turrell publicised Roden Crater with photos, videos, and tours, an aspect of mystery still exists in the work. The indeterminate opening of Roden Crater, the constant remodeling of the interior spaces, along with the funding setbacks, make the project uncanny (word choice). Spectacles draw on either curiosity or contempt. By attracting the viewers attention they become fascinated or disgusted in what they see. Unsure of what our experiences will be within Roden Crater, we become curious. The photographs online only convey so much; as Turrell mentions his work requires the experience itself not simply observing it from a screen. Celestial events arouse our sense of curiosity as well. The ancient sites around the world show that the natural phenomenons have been impressing civilizations for thousands of years.

The salvational aspect of Roden Crater adds to the curiosity. Turrell wanted to be able to experience heaven on earth, so he created the light at the end of the tunnel leading to a golden stairway into the sky. Turrell was notably interested in what goes on after life, and rather than waiting to find out he decided to make it himself.⁵⁵ Although he may appear to be playing God, Turrell does not do anything magical. Every aspect of the site is purely geometrical, mathematical, and astronomical, shaping and reshaping the dome of the crater in order to experience the light just right. In the same spiritual way that a cathedral lets light in through its windows to symbolize the presence of something greater, Turrell manipulated the natural hole in the earth to do the same. Turrell's magic trick fools the eye, making us believe that what we are experiencing is something supernatural. The undiscovered or unknown realm of the world

⁵⁵"Letting in the light: ASU, artist James Turrell to partner on masterwork in the desert," video file, Herberger Institute for Design and the Arts, <https://herbergerinstitute.asu.edu/roden-crater>.

surrounds the curiosity of the spectacle. As David Rockwell notes, the experience of spectacle can make you feel something greater than yourself. Roden Crater aims to do just that.

Perception and the Spectacle

Most of Turrell's work plays on our innate curiosity of something we are unconsciously unaware of: perception. The awareness of one's surroundings through the senses has been a focal point of his career. Before becoming an artist, Turrell studied the Psychology of perception at Pomona College during the 1960s. During this time he analyzed how beams of light can transform depth perception and appear to materialize within a room. Our own natural perception of light does not appear noticeable in the everyday. There is an illusion that the sky and world around us remains untouched by our senses, that its color and luminosity appears exactly how it is seen.⁵⁶ In reality it is our own perception of light that originates within our own mind rather than out in the world that gives Turrell's Arizona sky its color. Similar to Debord's theory of the spectacle, and Plato's *Allegory of the Cave*, Roden Crater is formed by our preconceived notions of the world. Without our own perception of color the spectacle of the sky within the crater would not appear so fascinating.

According to the French philosopher Maurice Merleau-Ponty, we cannot separate ourselves from our perceptions of the world around us.⁵⁷ Our time in history, culture, and society all develop an individual's perception through the "phenomenology of origins" or "genetic phenomenology," as Merleau-Ponty calls it. One's perception of the world and how the world actually exists are not the same as there are innate limitations. Merleau-Ponty uses the concept of

⁵⁶Patrick Beeveridge, "Color Perception and the Art of James Turrell," *The MIT Press* 33, no. 4 (2000): digital file.

⁵⁷ Maurice Merleau-Ponty and Donald A. Landes, *Phenomenology of Perception* (Abingdon, Oxon: Routledge, 2012).

“lived perception” as an entry point to reality but acknowledges there are still certain aspects to account for. By acknowledging the existence of the limited perspectives and becoming aware of their effects on the lived perception one has the ability to overcome them. By understanding their limitations Merleau-Ponty’s theories can be used as a basis for information processing. In other words, human experiences can be understood through the processes of making sense of one’s perceptions. James Turrell draws on Merleau-Ponty’s methods of seeing and cognitive science through his design of Roden Crater.

Taking from Merleau-Ponty’s definition of “phenomenology of origins” or “genetic phenomenology,” one’s experience of Roden Crater cannot be completely pure due to limited perceptions based on one’s place in time. Similarly to Debord’s definition of the spectacle, everything we see is contingent on something else, whether it be society or our experiences. At the same time everyone who enters the site will have different experiences even with the same perceptions. Depending on one’s perception of color, the light within the room may appear different. By understanding this limited view one becomes aware of Merleau-Ponty’s “lived perception” and how what we see varies from person to person.

Once inside Roden Crater, any prior scientific knowledge about space and light becomes impertinent. The way James Turrell uses light to connect with people in a deeply emotional way creates a sublime sensation. According to James J. Gibson, author of *The Senses Considered as Perceptual Systems*, the changes of the physical properties of light that generate nerve cells are felt, not seen.⁵⁸ Merleau-Ponty also agreed that light could not be considered an object stating that “Light, lighting, shadows, reflections; colour, all the objects of his [the painter’s] quest are

⁵⁸ J.J. Gibson, *The Senses Considered as Perceptual Systems* (Boston, MA: Houghton Mifflin, 1966);

not altogether real objects; like ghosts, they have only visual existence.”⁵⁹ Although Turrell would not have agreed with Gibson’s or Merleau-Ponty’s theories on the visibility of light, the sensation created by Roden Crater has been described as a full body experience rather than simply visual. Sublime experiences like these make a person feel bigger or smaller than themselves, inducing a heightened state and therefore explaining the sensational aspect. Sublimity can be viewed as a branch of the spectacle, transcending greatness or beauty to the observer.⁶⁰

Roden Crater forces a person to engage with the sky and light in different ways than they normally would. By capturing light from the sun, planets, stars, and moons, Turrell has managed to create an immersive work of art that challenges the way we see the world. The project makes the viewer question whether what they are experiencing exists in the physical world or in their head. While work has been done to debunk James Turrell’s perception theory, his work undeniably contains a phenomenon unusual to the human eye. Visitors have acknowledged the way he has been able to materialize light in order to create a sublime sensation that stays with you long after you leave. The artist has expressed his disinterest in scientific readings into his work stating, “My works don’t illustrate scientific principles, but I want them to express a certain consciousness, a certain knowing.”⁶¹ Through this Turrell makes clear that his work depends on a person’s perception and should be more about self-exploration rather than scientific understanding. By using the sky, earth, and light from natural phenomena Turrell has succeeded in creating a spectacle reliant on physical experience in more ways than one.

⁵⁹ Merleau-Ponty, Maurice, *Eye and Mind*, in the *Primacy of Perception*, ed. James M. Edie, Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1964.

⁶⁰ Merriam-Webster, "Sublime Definition," Merriam-Webster Dictionary, accessed March 1, 2020, <https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/sublime>.

⁶¹ Beeveridge, "Color Perception,".

James Turrell's life long work in the Arizona desert embodies the modern spectacle. While underneath the earth, the sky touches down through the crater's eye as it lifts you up making you feel like you are greater than you are. As you become overstimulated with the materiality of light your perception of the space heightens. Turrell specifically framed the experience within Roden Crater to appear hyper-real in order to create the spectacle. With the site's connection to celebrity culture he relates Roden Crater to a part of society that is full of illusions as he creates one himself. While our own perception of light appears uninfluenced, it shapes the way we see the world. The growing anticipation of Roden Crater has been forty-six years in the making in hopes that the current media spectacle will open its doors to the public, becoming the next social media phenomenon.

Chapter Three

The Experiential Museum

New immersive “playgrounds” or “Instagrammable pop-ups” have emerged overseas and throughout the country. As they’re influenced by the immersive qualities of science museums, pop-up culture, video games, and artists like Kusama, they offer a very similar experience. Destinations such as “Zerospace,” “The Color Factory,” and “The Museum of Ice Cream” in New York City, The Museum of Dream Space in Los Angeles, and the Wdnr Museum in Chicago have become increasingly popular. They attract their visitors by advertising an “immersive art experience” by using photos of people posing within the space to entice visitors. These digital playgrounds attract the social media generation just as Kusama’s work did, by encouraging visitors to view themselves within an alternate environment.

The pop-up concept arguably began in 1961 with the institutional critique movement. Claes Oldenburg opened his own “pop-up” space to sell his own work called “The Store” in a gallery in New York City’s East Village (Fig 3.1). The space blurred the divide between the individual and global art market system.⁶² Many of the artists during this time saw alternative spaces as an opportunity to critique the functions of large art institutions. Since the economic collapse in 2008 many commercial spaces were abandoned and arts organizations inhabited them, in return creating pop-up spaces for artists and art collectives.⁶³ According to John Zarobell, the Department Chair of International Studies at the University of San Francisco, the concept of a pop-up is fundamentally opportunistic for the artists. In order to build the pop-up,

⁶² Carmen Winant, “Young Art Spaces Flourish Far From the Mainstream,” *WNYC*, September 2011, digital file.

⁶³ John Zarobell, *Art and the Global Economy* (University of California Press, 2017), digital file.

artists must work with property developers and landowners. By bringing their work out of the white cube, artists were able to survive in the wake of the financial crisis. These alternative spaces gave way for experimental art forms as the lack of conformity opened up for creativity.

The pop-up phenomenon has rapidly expanded within the past decade. Evidence from the *Trendswatch* in 2012 published by the American Association of Museums shows that these low-risk museums are a great way to experiment with a potentially permanent space.⁶⁴ Pop-up models utilize underused locations such as commercial spaces, vacant factories, and even restaurants, theaters, and libraries. These spaces have emerged throughout the United States and the United Kingdom, where the economy thrives on a “disposable culture.” Disposable cultures generate constantly rotating goods based on the short term needs of the population. It only makes sense that the pop-up museums have flourished in these countries. With any short term product comes exclusivity. Pop-up museums operate only for a short duration, making the experience exclusive to the consumer and a “do not miss” phenomenon.

Although referred to as museums, the original pop-ups challenge the idea of the museum as a permanent institution. Pop-up “museums” offer the potential for permanent institutions to experiment with temporary locations, alternative spaces, or create satellite locations. In 2011, the Guggenheim BMW Lab was created in a New York City park in order to actively engage with the city’s residents (Fig 3.2). The space allowed the institution to experiment with rotating curation of games, panels, and group activities within a mobile environment. With the ability to constantly change out exhibits and locations the institution was able to easily and quickly meet the needs of the audience.

⁶⁴American Association of Museums, “TrendsWatch 2012; Museums and the Pulse of the Future,” *Center for the Future of Museums*, 2012, https://www.aam-us.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/12/2012_trendswatch.pdf.

These first pop-ups aimed to engage communities by creating participatory exhibits while generating exposure to the institution. Michelle DelCarlo has been credited with the creation of the pop-up back in 2011. Her blog *The Pop Up Museum* has been utilized by museums in order to create their own unique temporary spaces. DelCarlo's original concept explored theme-based events where visitors were invited to bring an object of meaning and create their own wall label describing the piece. The museum-like space provoked conversations between participants evoking a feeling of community through shared stories. Since 2011 the pop-up method Decarlo coined has come full circle. Although the new pop-ups still focus on creating personal experiences involving active participants, they encourage conversation via social media rather than in person. This is where the Instagrammable pop-up came to fruition.

The Instagrammable Pop-Up

In 2016, The Museum of Ice Cream opened its original location in New York's Meatpacking district (Fig 3.3). Across the street stands the Whitney Museum of American Art. Immediately there became this strange dynamic between the two "museums" whose purposes could not have been more different. The Museum of Ice Cream was painted a bubblegum pink, each room contained an abundance of its own ice cream themed objects. Each space acted as a separate interactive stage set, inviting visitors to engage with the Instagram bar codes and cheerful employees eager to take your picture. It wasn't long before the pop-up reached an infamous status online. A year into its opening, The Museum of Ice Cream had 241,000 followers on Instagram and 66,000 posts of visitors posing within the picturesque installations

using the #museumofficecream hashtag.⁶⁵ It became evident that the pop-up's fame came from its cult following on social media.

By simply walking through the Ice cream wonderland, you are only partially experiencing the space. Similarly to participatory installation art, and Nicolas Bourriaud's theory of "relational aesthetics", the visitor is there to complete the work.⁶⁶ While the ice cream themed props are fun to see in person, they are really made to be seen through a digital screen. Cofounders Manish Vora and Maryellen Bunn coined the term "Experium" or "spaces and places for people to reconnect with themselves and those surrounding them" to describe the pop-ups they create.⁶⁷ While the title of their space contains the word museum, they felt that it was not the right word to describe the space.

Social media has increased this "fear of missing out" or "fomo" in today's society and it has allowed exclusive experiences such as pop-up museums generate interest. These "museums" move from city to city every four to six months, carrying media buzz with each different location. They entice visitors through their temporary nature, emphasizing that if you wait too long you'll miss the chance to see and experience the space for yourself. In these temporary spaces, Instagram-worthy exhibits have become the most popular due to their fit online. Just as Yayoi Kusama's "Infinity Rooms" aimed to engage the viewer in their captivating mirrors, pop-up museums create installations or stage sets in order to capitalize on the same idea but with

⁶⁵ Arielle Pardes, "Selfie Factories: The Rise of the Made-for-Instagram Museum," *Wired*, 2017, digital file.

⁶⁶ Nicholas Bourriaud, a French art critic, coined the term "relational aesthetics" in the 1990s to describe the tendency to make art based on, or inspired by, human relations and their social context. He believed that art was completed upon the audience's interaction.

⁶⁷ Sarah Cascone, "The Museum of Ice Cream Is Opening a Supersized Permanent New York Flagship, With a Three-Story Slide and a 'Hall of Giant Scoops,'" *Artnet News*, August 2019.

different goals in mind. But what do these spaces offer their visitors? They provide an experiential escape for the purpose of social media. By inviting visitors to snap a photo of the immersive displays including lights, mirrors, and backdrops, the pop-up museums receive a form of free advertisement as the images spread through the internet.

As The Museum of Ice Cream gained recognition they not only more than doubled the admissions price from \$18 dollars in 2016 to \$38 but founded Figure8, a parent company solely focusing on creating “experiums”. The price of admissions for the Instagrammable art experience appears hefty compared to the nearby Museum of Modern Art and The New Museum, which have prices of just \$25 and \$12. In 2015, a study done by the American Alliance of Museums found that the average admission price of a museum in North America was eight dollars and as of 2012, 37 percent of all museums were free.⁶⁸ Visitors to the Instagrammable pop-ups, however, are willing to pay almost 375% more to wait in line to stand in front of Instagrammable backdrops and snap photos on their smartphones for an hour. The way art institutions and galleries are competing with these social media museums is by bringing in blockbuster exhibitions from artists such as Yayoi Kusama and James Turrell.

With Figure8’s \$200 million valuation, Bunn saw the potential of the pop-up museum and the exponential increase in appetite for photo-ready immersive experiences.⁶⁹ The Museum of Ice Cream’s popularity influenced the creation of countless imitators. The CADO or an avocado themed pop-up opened in June 2018, The Color Factory opened in 2017, Wndr Museum in 2018, and the Museum of Dream Space along with Zerospace in 2019, all taking their spin on

⁶⁸ David Whitemyer, "Say Cheese! 3 Ways Museums Can Compete with Instagrammable Pop-Ups," *American Alliance of Museums: Exhibitions*, January 2019, digital file.

⁶⁹ Cascone, "The Museum,".

the immersive Instagram ready attraction. Each new pop-up appears derivative of the other, appropriating similar ideas to draw in the photo-op obsessors. While the Museum of Ice Cream takes pride in being the first of these Instagrammable pop-ups, either knowingly or unknowley, the space is really taking the ideas of artists like Yayoi Kusama and James Turrell through their immersive installations.

Some of the pop-ups take responsibility for their appropriations. The Wdnr museum, an immersive art experience in Chicago acknowledges its influencers as Yayoi Kusama and Richard Prince. With an actual “Infinity Room” within the pop-up it is clear to see the similarities between Kusama’s *Let's Survive Forever* and the other rooms nearby (Fig 3-4). Along with Kusama, Wdnr uses one of Richard Prince’s Instagram works within the space. The Richard Prince selfie is covered with neon lights stating “We are all artists” as if to say that social media has allowed for this sort of appropriation, as we are constantly posting and sharing other people's ideas.

Along with the Wndr museum, MODS or the Museum of Dream Space, in Los Angeles, California, advertises its connection to Yayoi Kusama as well as the rise of digital art. The title of the museum itself pays homage to the Japanese artist’s main concept. As MODS welcomes its viewers to its website, its opening statement reads “The design concept of MODS is inspired by art design from Yayoi Kusama...and the development of digital art.”⁷⁰ Similar to other Instagram pop-ups, countless images of selfie-takers within the museum cover the website. While the pop-up attempted to cover its tracks by admitting to using Kusama’s ideas, The Museum of Dream Space has even been accused by teamLab, a Japanese art collective, for stealing their

⁷⁰ Atavion, Museum Of Dream Space, <https://modsla.com/>.

ideas instead. Museumgoers have also noticed the similarities. Reddit users have reviewed MODS as a cheap ripoff of most of the teamLab exhibits. But at the same time, some of teamLab's mirrored designs replicate Yayoi Kusama's Infinity Room, creating an endless cycle of immersive appropriation.

The Instagrammable pop-up has become so popular that it has become its own art form. In hopes to create the next Museum of Ice Cream, countless other spaces are popping up throughout the country, many of which are falling short of this goal. Zerospace, an immersive art playground in New York City takes simple video projections and places them on cheap alternatives of famous art installations by artists like Yayoi Kusama, Olafur Eliasson, and Felix Gonzalez-Torres (Fig 3-5). In order to see these appropriations visitors have to pay a price between \$25 and \$38. The pop-up includes a mirrored room full of flashing LED lights, a lit chandelier, and an interactive installation of string hanging from the ceiling. These replicas of living artists that are shown for free in galleries throughout the world are now targeting a new crowd. Although Zerospace advertises its installations to be artist-based, there appears to be a completely different purpose behind the work. The goal of these "artists" is to make the rooms as picturesque and immersive as possible in order to end up on social media and fit this Instagram pop-up trend.

Similarities between Kusama, Turrell, The Museum of Ice Cream, and other emerging immersive pop-ups are undeniable. Their success has a lot to do with the sensory and interactive quality of the work. In the 21st century, thanks to technology, people want to be overly stimulated. When people spend their day looking at phones, playing video games, or watching tv, they are going to want the same type of stimulation in other aspects of their lives. In Kusama's

work, visitors are stimulated by the light-filled reflective rooms. In some “Infinity Rooms” visitors would experience a multisensory environment through the use of sounds.

Instagrammable pop-ups operate on the same field. As visitors are allowed to sit and climb through the work, the collective appeals to all the senses. Visitors are required to walk barefoot through water and light installations while the lights and sounds respond to their movements.⁷¹

Multisensory environments create a more memorable experience and can be “more effective in inspiring action in the future,” says Ed Daly, managing director of Seeper.⁷² Seeper, a creative studio and research lab out of London, acknowledges that the more memorable the experience the more successful it becomes. Ed Daly has acknowledged the influence of James Turrell for the advances in the interactive immersive environments. He cites the work at Roden Crater for its ability to embody an immersive experience through natural interactive phenomena. When creating work at Seeper, Daly focuses on projections to fully immerse visitors. “Unless all the senses are accounted for, then the illusion of immersion breaks and the brain’s attention is drawn to what’s wrong and not what’s tight.”⁷³ If the person can hear, touch, and see the environment the brain becomes convinced that what they’re experiencing is real. This concept was also perfected by Kusama, as her goal was “obliteration.”

Instagrammable pop-ups also reflect the human desire for social experiences. While people are flocking to these immersive museums and documenting their experiences on their smartphones, the technology is the tool that allows people to get what they’re really after.⁷⁴ For

⁷¹ Naomi Rea, “teamLab's Tokyo Museum Has Become the World's Most Popular Single-Artist Destination, Surpassing the Van Gogh Museum,” *Artnet News*, 2019, digital file.

⁷² Ed Daly, “Why People Love Immersive Interactive Experiences-and How You Can Create Amazing Ones,” *Digital Arts*, July 2015.

⁷³ Daly, “Why People,”.

⁷⁴ Whitemyer, “Say Cheese!,”.

the most part, the photos taken at the pop-spaces are not just sitting on the smartphones never to be seen by others. The selfies and backdrop photographs taken within the spaces are used for the social purpose to say “this is what i'm doing”. This is one of the reasons as to why social media has become such a success. Psychological research finds that we love to talk about ourselves and when we share our experiences the reward-seeking part of the brain becomes activated.⁷⁵ In the age of social media the quality of our experiences has become a form of currency. The unique experiences visitors get while inside an “Infinity Room” or within a space full of giant ice cream cones encourage people to document the events and share them with the world.

The Experience Economy

The internet, social media, and immersive artists like Yayoi Kusama and James Turrell have had a major effect on the type of art people want to see. Along with the desire for multi-sensory stimulation, what has become known as the “experience economy” can be used to explain why people are spending \$25-\$38 on timed immersive art experiences and waiting in line for hours outside David Zwirner when other art institutions offer cheaper or similar experiences nearby. When goods and services no longer satisfied the consumer, experiences became the purchase of choice. In the age of social media, we search out these experiences to share them online. The goal is to show the world these experiences as if to say “Look at what I just did” and “See where I just went”. Therefore the more “Instagrammable” the experience the even more likely people are to spend their time and money taking part.

⁷⁵ Prakash Sutradhar, "Psychology of Sharing: Why Do People Share On Social Media?," *LinkedIn*, 2017, digital file.

In 1998, B. Joseph Pine coined the term *Experience Economy* in an article with James H. Gilmore to describe the shift in consumer needs. Following the agrarian economy, industrial economy, and service economy came the new experience economy. The internet has caused the greatest increase in commoditization within all these economies, allowing people to compare prices with a click of a button. In return, goods and services are no longer enough. Pine argues that people care more about the experience that a good or service can give them than the thing itself.⁷⁶ Back in 1998, the experience economy was mere speculation and anticipation of what was to come. Over 20 years later, Pine and Gilmore have confirmed that it is no longer what's next, but rather "it's fully arrived."⁷⁷

Within the new economy, consumption is a theoretical act. A company uses "services as the stage, and goods as props, to engage individual customers" according to *Harvard Business Review*.⁷⁸ The concept of selling experiences has spread beyond theaters and amusement parks, now into our everyday lives. To create a distinctive valuable experience, it must be memorable and personable, as each company is competing for a customer's time, attention, and money. Today companies have gone above and beyond to ensure the experience a person receives while with their product is a memorable one. Starbucks made their experiences personal by writing your name on the product you purchased. Other companies have memorialized experiences by giving the visitor something worth taking home with them. Ticket stubs, photo-op spots, and social media-worthy content gives consumers something to document and therefore remember

⁷⁶ B. Joseph Pine and James H. Gilmore, *The Experience Economy* (Boston, MA: Harvard Business Review Press, 2011), digital file.

⁷⁷ James H. Gilmore and B. Joseph Pine, "The Rise of the Experience Economy," interview by Convene Magazine, PCMA Webinars, last modified February 2020, <https://www.pcma.org/experience-economy-change-event-design/>.

⁷⁸ B. Joseph Pine II and James H. Gilmore, "Welcome to the Experience Economy," *Harvard Business Review*, August 1998, digital file.

their experience by. Whether it be online, or in a store, consumers are opting for experiences rather than goods or services when it comes to spending money.

In prior economies, consumers were looking for time well saved. Now, the time a person spends during an experience must be valuable to them. Or in other words: time well spent. One way to ensure this is to make an engaging experience so visitors can't help but give you their attention. Guest or visitor participation, as well as absorptive and immersive properties, engage viewers to ensure "time well spent." Yayoi Kusama was one of the first artists to grasp every aspect of the experience economy through their work, contributing to her success over the past decade. In 2013 the visitors outside David Zwirner's "I Who Have Arrived in Heaven" believed that one minute inside the "Infinity Room " would be valuable to them. Therefore, the four hours they spent online was time well spent. Following her model, immersive art museums or art playgrounds cash in on the same ideas. The 38 dollars a person spends on the Museum of Ice Cream is worth the one hour spent wandering through a maze of social media stage sets.

Social media has accelerated the demand for experiences. The "likes" on Facebook, Instagram, and Snapchat have equaled a type of social currency as we search for ways to elevate our status and satisfy the reward-seeking part of the brain. This quest for likes has influenced the need for social media approved experiences. Mundane images rarely occupy social media feeds, but rather photographs or videos of concerts, fancy dinners, or beautiful landscapes fill our screens. When it comes to art, small paintings or sculptures are less likely to warrant a photo than a spectacle installation or large scale work. Today, the experiences that are the most profitable are the ones that have the most social media attention or satisfy Instagrammable expectations.

The internet was the first and greatest contributor to the development of the experience economy. Pine and Gilmore saw the internet as an “inherently active medium.” Unlike television which is passive, the internet actively connects and converses; forming interactive relationships. The internet provides a social experience and the introduction of the first social media platform (AOL Messenger) understood this. Chat rooms, buddy lists, and personal profiles all allowed for what Pine describes as “escapist experiences.” The escapist experience involves immersion and actively involves participants, allowing an escape from a normative state. The consumer is meant to shape or contribute to their experience, whether it be by simply snapping a photo or physically engaging with their environment. Immersion in escapist experiences allows for fully “occupying customers’ attention” making them more memorable. The multi-sensory environments of Yayoi Kusama, James Turrell, and Instagrammable pop-ups capitalize on this idea as people seek these experiences as a way to escape reality. Here, viewers transform from spectators to contributors to their environments, relating to the participatory quality of the internet.

Frank Rose, a senior fellow at Columbia University School of the Arts, agrees with Pine and Gilmore, stating that the web, “is inherently participatory...an instigator constantly encouraging you to comment, to contribute, to join in.”⁷⁹ Viewers no longer want to just sit and look. The average time spent in front of a painting at a museum is around 20 seconds, making the esthetic experience in Pine and Gilmore’s model secondary to escapism. Through an esthetic experience, individuals are immersed but do not affect the environment they occupy. Along with simply observing a work of art at a gallery or museum, CityWalk in Los Angeles embodies this idea. Visitors pay admission to walk around a collection of retail shops, movie theaters, and high

⁷⁹ Frank Rose, *The Art of Immersion* (New York, London: W. W. NORTON & COMPANY, 2011), digital file.

tech rides. Los Angeles was not known to have these kinds of public spaces, making CityWalk a solely esthetic experience.

In an attempt to emphasize the qualities that constitute a greater memorable experience, an exploratory study done at France's "Paleosite," aimed to distinguish whether or not immersive technologies add value for museumgoers.⁸⁰ The results concluded that the value of a visitor's experience was dependent on the quality of the cognitive, emotional, play, functional, and escape aspects of the work. Each of these immersive qualities encourages a sense of elsewhere, emphasizing that you have left the real world around you. As sources of fun and play, or forms of active participation, immersive installations grab visitors' attention and engage them in sensational experiences. The results showed that not only do immersive aspects add value to installations, but they also induce curiosity which inevitably increases visitors to the site.

Robert Morris, an influential American conceptual artist at the forefront of minimalism, recreated a version of his 1971 exhibition *BODYSPACEMOTIONTHINGS* at Tate Modern in 2009.⁸¹ The exhibition's transformation emphasizes the effects of the experience economy and desire for play or participatory qualities in art (Fig 3-6). While the original installation was shut down after four days due to safety concerns, the recreation of the exhibition with sturdier material indicates newfound expectations for interactive experiences within a museum setting. In 1971 Morris used beams, weights, platforms, rollers, tunnels, and ramps, which visitors were allowed to engage with. Visitors' immediate enthusiasm and overuse of the materials resulted in the exhibition's termination. Thirty-eight years later the exhibitions reinstallation with sturdier

⁸⁰ Isabelle Collin-Lachaud and Juliette Passebois, "Do Immersive Technologies Add Value to the Museum Going Experience? An Exploratory Study Conducted at France's Paléosite," *International Journal of Arts Management* 11 (2008); digital file.

⁸¹ Ralph Rugoff, "Experience Economy," *In Terms of Performance*, digital file.

materials allowed for the work to become a sort of family playground, inhabiting the values of the experience economy. Along with Morris' reinstallation, other museums have responded to the sensation driven world by designing their buildings with spectacular architecture that become destinations in themselves. Critics such as Hal Foster found these spectacular museums as overshadowing the contents and artists inside, stating that "the institution may overshadow the work that it otherwise highlights: it becomes the spectacle, it collects the cultural capital, and the director-curator becomes the star."⁸² In a way artists whose work fits this new economy become experience curators.

Along with interactive installation art, and spectacular museums, performance has seen a rebirth during the rise of the experience economy. In comparison to traditional painting or sculpture, performance demands a different investment in a visitor's time, whether or not it be for the work's full duration. The Australian Experimental Art Foundation, established in 1974 by a group of artists and theorists, aimed to encourage new approaches to the visual arts as well as creating transformative contemporary art experiences for artists and audiences.⁸³ Within the last ten years or so, the collective saw a resurgence in appreciation for performance art. AEAF Curator Anne Marsh credits the experience economy for this new wave. Performance art is now the preferred medium for biennials and other large museum shows. Also, two years in a row a performance piece won the top prize at the Venice Biennale. A surplus of interactive experiences has elevated the desire for performance art along with immersive installations. Immersive theatre companies have combined live actors with virtual reality, stimulating the senses, and blurring the line between virtual and real.

⁸² Kyle Chayka, "WTF is... Relational Aesthetics?," *Hyperallergic*, 2011.

⁸³ ACE Open, "Vision and Mission," The Australian Experimental Art Foundation, last modified 2020, <https://aceopen.art/vision-and-mission/>.

As Ed Daley realized, the market for experiences is a lucrative one. Brands that used to support museums are now putting their money into experiences. Reebok and Revlon sponsored 29Rooms, another interactive art experience based in New York and Chicago.⁸⁴ The Museum of Ice Cream made deals with American Express, Target, Tinder, and Sephora. The museum even charges \$180,000 for private events. Owner Maryellis Bunn understood the importance of experiences. Instead of offering ad space to her sponsors, she created experiences within the museum dedicated to the companies she was working with. You can answer a series of questions and get your ice cream profile on Tinder or buy an ice cream inspired Sephora makeup line.⁸⁵ In the Los Angeles location, every museum visitor receives a Dove chocolate as part of an entry into a contest. With this, Dove saw a 9% increase in sales within the one month MOIC was open in Los Angeles.

Along with social media and the internet, video games contributed to the closing gap between the experience economy and immersive art. Frank Rose, mentions how these new technologies have programmed people to want a more interactive experience.⁸⁶ Video games, in particular, create interactive immersive experiences because they evoke a spatial presence that causes users to feel as though they are actually “there” or within the virtual environment. The immersive worlds of video games are similar to Kusama and Turrell’s environments as they all take years to artistically craft and perfect, ultimately letting visitors in for an escapist experience. Yet a stigma around video games reveals the technology as considerably not “art”.

⁸⁴ Naomi Rea, "As Museums Fall in Love with 'Experiences,' Their Core Missions Face Redefinition," *Artnet News*, March 2019, digital file.

⁸⁵ Susan Adams, "The 25-Year-Old behind the Museum of Ice Cream," *Forbes*, May 19, 2017, digital file.

⁸⁶ William, Grimes, 2013, "Lights, Mirrors, Instagram! ArtSensation: In a 'Mirrored Room,' a Setting for Selfies Worth Waiting for," *New York Times (1923-Current File)*, Dec 02, 2.

Within the past few years, VR or virtual reality and AR or augmented reality began to break down this barrier as a way to create compelling experiences within a museum setting. Now, with these new immersive technologies, the way museums engage visitors has changed. Virtual or augmented reality developed as a way to create life-like environments that can visually tell a story but have shifted into opportunities for museums to appeal to the experience economy trend. These immersive technologies create a deeper understanding, cultivating an emotional and memorable experience for the participants. As Pine and Gilmore predicted, these qualities have proven to be the most successful in the experience economy. Rather than just learning about science or art, audiences become transported into realistic worlds to experience it first hand.

Along with new immersive and participatory technologies come new storytelling techniques. According to Maggie Burnette Stogner, the Executive Director of the Center for Environmental Filmmaking at American University, these technologies give museums new opportunities to engage with the community and tell the artist's own story. Museums have introduced virtual website tours, podcasts, and e-books to engage visitors.⁸⁷ Thomas P. Campbell, former director of the Metropolitan Museum of Art, has mentioned how these new stimulating ways of engaging visitors can be problematic: “We’ve got to keep people in a heads-up mode, to make sure they are looking at art.”⁸⁸ There has to be a balance. Stogner proposes that there should be co-produced experiences in the sense that the museums act as a platform for connectivity, encouraging visitors to critically think and engage with the work. As Frank Rose confirms, people want to get involved in the story. “To carve out a role for

⁸⁷ Maggie Burnette Stogner, *The Journal of Museum Education*, vol. 36, *Communicating Culture in the 21st Century: The Power of Media-Enhanced Immersive Storytelling* (Taylor & Francis, 2011), digital file.

⁸⁸ Burnette Stogner, *The Journal*, [Page 190].

themselves, to make it their own.”⁸⁹ Immersive art installations do just that. A commonality or shared experience that visitors can relate to allows participation in these new spaces.

Science museums have already embraced this participatory concept. At the New York Hall of Science, an exhibit titled “Connected Worlds” immerses museum visitors in an animated world.⁹⁰ This work not only actively involves the visitor but educates them on the environment. The exhibition was created by Design IO, a graphic design company specializing in immersive interactive installations. They use experimental approaches to storytelling using new technology and techniques. Similar to amusement parks and experiential art installations, exhibits like the ones produced by Design IO offer an escapist experience. The difference, however, comes from the promise of discovery, or intellectual gratification.⁹¹ Compared to the esthetic experience that traditional art exhibits offer, science museums focus on education and discovery. Using virtual reality visitors can learn about aspects of the scientific world using immersive visual imagery rather than reading about it in a book or online. Along with Pine and Gilmore, the study that was done at France’s “Paleosite” proves that intellectual discovery adds memorable or personal aspects to a visitors’ experience.

The experience economy has encouraged art museums and other cultural institutions to accelerate the integration of interactive forms of discovery in recent years in hopes to draw in more visitors. While museums were formally phone-free zones, smartphones and headsets are the primary forms of technology being used to transport visitors through immersive experiences.

⁸⁹ Frank Rose, “The Art of Immersion: Why Do We Tell Stories,” *Wired.com*, March 8, 2011, <http://www.wired.com/epicenter/2011/03/why-do-we-tell-stories/all/1> (accessed October 24, 2019).

⁹⁰ “Connected Worlds,” New York Hall of Science: Design Make Play, accessed November 18, 2019, <https://nysci.org/home/exhibits/connected-worlds/>.

⁹¹ Collin-Lachaud and Passebois, “Do Immersive,” TK.

Whether it be snapping a picture, taking a selfie, or downloading an app to enhance the experience, smartphones have become an essential tool for viewing art. Augmented reality has been one of the most innovative tools in enhancing these experiences on smartphones through vision, touch, and hearing. Users can download apps and use their phones to become active participants of the art. Some apps even allow people who are unable to make it to the actual museum experience the exhibit from home. While the internet and smartphones have made it easier to view art without ever leaving home, the experiences that are offered in-person through exclusive pop-up exhibitions, traveling virtual reality performances, and augmented reality enhancements have encouraged people to continue to go out and view the art first hand.

The 1960s produced movements that have led to this increase of Instagrammable pop-ups and immersive technology in art that we have today. Institutional critique inspired artists to take to alternative spaces rather than residing in museums or galleries. Vacant commercial lots have turned into some of the most successful pop-up art museums in the country. New technological advancements inspired artists to experiment with immersive and interactive art forms. Just as Yayoi Kusama and James Turrell understood, immersive art creates personal connections with the viewers as they become active participants of the work. Therefore, memorable experiences of seeing the work have become more important than the work itself. The “Instagrammable pop-up” has been argued to have been created for the sole purpose of the perfect photo. While some of these pop-up spaces may have not been designed specifically for social media, their immediate online success has only created a deeper craving for these sensational experiences.

Epilogue

COVID-19 and a New Digital Art World

In light of recent events, the conclusion of this thesis will analyze how the art world has utilized experiential technology in response to the global pandemic of COVID-19. When the coronavirus spread through China in late December 2019 and January of 2020, the rest of the world remained hopeful that the problem would stop there. Little was done to prepare for the catastrophic repercussions of the pandemic within the United States and its economy, forcing business to act fast once the second wave hit. As the virus began to spread from Seattle to California to New York, businesses began to close, forcing workers to either work from home or be laid off. Within 12 hours, businesses within the art world were split between those who could stay afloat by shifting online to those who were too small to afford it. As of April 8th, three quarters of the art museums around the country have closed.⁹² Innovative companies responded to the global conflict by releasing new online platforms, instagram exhibition accounts, and virtual reality tours to maintain visitor engagement without the use of physical space. While it is unclear to what extent the art world will be changed once the pandemic has subsided, it has become evident that major effects have already taken place.

One of the most surprising effects of the coronavirus pandemic on the art world was its influence on the Metropolitan Museum of Art, which projected it would lose \$100 million dollars due to closure from March until July.⁹³ This came as surprise to many within the art

⁹² *The Art Angle*, "The Art Angle Podcast: Three Ways Coronavirus Will Transform the Art World," hosted by Andrew Goldstein, aired March 2020, on Artnet News.

⁹³ Robin Pogrebin, "Met Museum Prepares for \$100 Million Loss and Closure Till July," *The New York Times* (New York, NY), March 18, 2020, digital file.

world, causing smaller museums to lose hope. A third of all museums within the United States were operating close to or within the red before the pandemic hit. If the Metropolitan Museum of Art will be so affected, how will smaller museums across the country survive? Although they have a \$3.6 billion dollar endowment and an operating budget of \$320 million, 14 percent of all revenue came from admissions. Pay cuts and layoff are inevitable, while many museums that have closed because of the coronavirus will not reopen.

Along with museums and galleries, biennials and art fairs around the world have canceled their event's physical locations to slow the spread of COVID-19. While David Zwirner gallery was ahead of the curve, releasing its online viewing room in 2017, other galleries and major exhibitions have had to adapt to the changing time by creating their own versions. Fairs such as Art Basel Hong Kong developed online viewing rooms for their 235 exhibitors.⁹⁴ While fairs have used online portals in the past to grant early access to VIP clients, attempting to replicate the entire experience online was a whole new experiment. Overall the online viewing room fair was a success for Art Basel and for exhibitors who did a good job at promoting their galleries' participation.

Yayoi Kusama was one of the many artists with exhibitions cut short due to the coronavirus shutting down the respective institution. The Broad museum's director of audience engagement Ed Patuto and associate director of events and programs Darin Klein, released a project called "Infinite Drone" to maintain visitor engagement in the wake of the pandemic. Now, with the Broad closing its doors, Kusama's "Infinity Room" *The Souls of Millions of Light Years Away* (2013) can only be experienced through online videos. Each video will be paired

⁹⁴ Benjamin Sutton, "What Sold at Art Basel in Hong Kong's Online Viewing Rooms," *Artsy*, March 26, 2020, digital file.

with audio from local Los Angeles artists and musicians to evoke the feeling of serenity and contemplation that they believe connects to aspects of Kusama's work. Other museums have joined the movement online incorporating the hashtag “#MuseumMomentofZen”.

The first video was released on March 26, and uses music from Geneva Skeen for the “A light and sound experience.” The 14 minute long Instagram video allows users to experience Kusama's work in a rarefied way. While there are advantages to viewing the “Infinity Room” this way, they accompany profound differences from experiencing the work in person. While the digital version allows people to skip the line and view the work for more than 1-3 minutes, you are no longer able to see yourself reflected in the mirrors, removing the narcissistic satisfaction of the experience. Instead, a tripod stands within your phone screen on the platform across from you, pre-recording your experience. On the other hand, galleries and institutions that represent James Turrell have yet to release an online experience of his work since the pandemic hit.

The New York Botanical Garden has also been preparing for a blockbuster summer exhibition featuring works from Yayoi Kusama's archive that have never been shown. While tickets had already gone on sale in preparation for the 250-acre garden exhibition, the venue released a statement on April 2nd that the opening will be rescheduled for the following year.⁹⁵ While Kusama's works won't be visible until next May, the New York Botanical Garden encouraged plant lovers to view the garden through their online site.

While the course of this paper outlines how the internet has become the art space of the future, the current pandemic accelerated the process in a matter of two months. With institutions no longer relying on ticket sales or foot traffic to retain revenue, many have turned to the internet

⁹⁵ Chadd Scott, "Yayoi Kusama's New York Botanical Gardens Exhibit Postponed Until 2021," *Forbes*, April 2020, digital file.

to keep their businesses afloat. Prior to the coronavirus crisis, art galleries and institutions were constantly questioning whether the internet was reductive or expansive to the experience of art. Now, with no other option, countless major institutions are putting their work online. Google Arts & Culture, formally Google Art Project was created in 2011 through Google's Cultural Institute initiative. While the initial project did not seem to grab the world's attention, today, Google Arts & Culture has seen a significant resurgence and has become a crucial resource for visitors from around the world to explore collections from leading institutions. Users can tour over 500 art institutions such as the Guggenheim, London's National Gallery, and Amsterdam's Rijksmuseum. Other institutions joined the project earlier this month to continue the exhibits that were currently on display before they closed. While these virtual museum tours do not generate revenue, they provide education and engagement material for the community stuck inside.

As the virtual tours on Google Arts & culture are free, museums are finding it hard or nearly impossible to continue making money while their physical locations are closed. The Color Factory, the Museum of Ice Cream, and other experiential museums are in the same boat. 90% of the Color Factory's employees have been let go.⁹⁶ Unlike art museums, the experiential museums are having a hard time recreating the experiences online. Although social media pop-ups like the Museum of Ice Cream and the Color Factory argue against the narrative that they're created for our photo-ops, they have been unable to thrive without the presence of visitors to the physical space.

⁹⁶Ashley Carman, "Instagram pop-up experiences lay off employees as the business tanks," *The Verge*, April 1, 2020, <https://www.theverge.com/2020/4/1/21202081/instagram-museum-pop-up-color-factory-museum-ice-cream-lay-offs>.

The art world has also grappled with this drastic change by rising awareness on social media with hashtags like #CongressSaveCulture and accounts such as “@socialdistancegallery” which has taken the responsibility of hosting canceled BFA and MFA exhibitions.⁹⁷ Another Instagram account, “@artistinquarantine” has become a platform for 12 artists that live in high-risk areas of Italy. For many of these artists, residencies and exhibitions have been canceled, drastically decreasing their opportunity for exposure. Italian curator and founder of “@artistinquarantine,” Giada Pellicari, mentions her desire to counteract the moment where “art and the artists become at risk and appear to be more fragile”.⁹⁸ While the account will publish some works made specifically for the Instagram platform, it is interesting to analyze whether or not the artists give into social media’s needs as Yayoi Kusama did.

While institutions have become extremely willing to participate in digital spaces in the age of the coronavirus, the same questions of accessibility and copyright arise. Some wonder if net-based art would have a resurgence or take on a different meaning with the entire world forced to go digital. Artists Eva and Franco Mattes, two Italian artists living in New York City made a name for themselves in the 1990s with net art that questioned the emotional, political, economic, and environmental advantages or disadvantages of cyberspace. Their work “Life Sharing,” which put the entire contents of their computers online, proves that not all accessibility is beneficial (Fig 1). With the current pandemic, and everyone online, there has been an increase in cybercrimes. As Eva and Franco point out, we should proceed with caution as the pandemic erodes our privacy.⁹⁹

⁹⁷ Tina Rivers Ryan, "No Fun," *Artforum*, March 30, 2020, digital file.

⁹⁸ Annie Armstrong, "Museums, Curators, and Artists Find Innovative Solutions for Showing Art in a Pandemic," *Artsy*, March 2020, digital file.

⁹⁹ Ryan, "No Fun,".

Along with new ways of exhibiting art, the Coronavirus pandemic has also influenced the content of art being created and shared. Barbara Pollack and Anne Verhallen co-curated an online exhibition to express the feelings of unease that have been circulating throughout the art community and world at large. The works within the exhibition titled “How Can We Think of Art at a Time Like This?” evoke themes of the fragile body, loneliness, health, and pain. In comparison to Art Basel’s online viewing rooms “How Can We Think of Art at a Time Like This?” does not aim to gain funding. Instead, Pollack and Verhallen hope to create a safe space for artists to share anxiety in the current global crisis. While social distancing measures have caused many to feel alone or separated from the world around them, the site encourages discussion through an open comment section. Art enthusiasts from around the world have visited the site to share experiences, review the exhibition, and voice concerns. As Pollack notes, the best part of these online exhibitions is that “it’s a global exhibition and accessible to everyone.”

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In times of crisis, art plays a crucial role in how we cope and get through it. In the current coronavirus crisis the split between the essential and non-essential worker has caused a widespread debate on what professions should be considered important. Health-care, delivery, and food workers have all been labeled as essential or necessary to work despite the risk. But where do artists fit in? While they are not on the front lines saving lives, or providing a necessary service, art offers something different. Digital artists are creating work to spread the awareness of important safety measures such as handwashing. Medical illustrators created a digital reproduction of the coronavirus that has become the poster image for the pandemic (Fig 2). Other

¹⁰⁰Barbara Pollack and Anne Verhallen, *How Can We Think of Art at a Time Like This?*, 2020, online exhibition.

artists such as David Hockney have released works of flowers in bloom made on an iPad in hopes of raising spirits (Fig 3). In times of crisis, art can become an emotional outlet, for those who create and for those who experience. For that reason, people are viewing artists as essential workers for their ability to help others cope. During the AIDS crisis, and the weeks following 9/11, artists came together to offer “solace...resistance, and rebellion.”¹⁰¹ At the same time, through these hardships, art has provided people a place in time and a feeling of being a part of history. The artwork being created during the COVID-19 pandemic aims to do the same.

Despite all of the uncertainty and fear circulating the world, artists are finding ways to fill the new digital art world with bits of humor. Shing Yin Khor, an installation artist and sculptor, who had never played the Nintendo social stimulation video game *Animal Crossing* before the pandemic, has recreated infamous works of art within the virtual world. Despite being stressed and confined to her home, Khor created famous works such as *The Artist is Present* performance piece by Marina Abramovic in hopes to build her own virtual museum within the game (Fig 4). Her reproductions have received praise from the art community for their ability to evoke joy and other real emotion within a digital world during a painful time.¹⁰² Artists Jeff Roy and Drake Paul have also responded to the pandemic with humor. While their site, “theartofquarentine.com” has a serious message behind iconic reproductions, there is a humorous side to the previously figure filled compositions. The two Bay Area artists have digitally removed the figures from paintings such as Leonardo Da Vinci’s *The Last Supper*, George

¹⁰¹ Pollack and Verhallen, *How Can We Think*.

¹⁰² Sarah Cascone, "A Witty Installation Artist Is Recreating Famous Artworks Inside the Wildly Popular 'Animal Crossing' Video Game and It's Kind of Amazing," *Artnet News*, April 6, 2020, digital file.

Seurat's *Sunday Afternoon on the Island of La Grande Jatte*, and Grant Wood's *American Gothic* to reinforce the importance of social distancing.¹⁰³

Social distancing will also have a major effect on how we interact in public spaces after the pandemic subsides. Our general comfort of being in a crowded museum lobby or in a small projection room in a corner of a gallery will change.¹⁰⁴ The overall perception of space in relation to our body and to others will be on the forefront of everyone's minds for years to come. Will people still want to wait in line for hours to see an "Infinity Room" or pay \$39 dollars for a participatory experience that thousands of other visitors have interacted with before them? Or will we emerge from our quarantined spaces with a renewed appreciation for these spaces? There has already been talk of rethinking the ways that public spaces are designed in order to consider social distancing measures. Maryellis Bunn and the Museum of Ice Cream have begun reconceptualizing their business model in response to the pandemic. People will be ushered through the spaces in a private tour model.¹⁰⁵ According to Phillip Kennicott, a writer for the Washington Post, "Attendance at live events has been decreasing for years."¹⁰⁶ The question now becomes: how will the current spike in online engagement add to this statistic? The response will either be an eagerness to get back to cultural public spaces that we are being forced away from, or the surge of online presence will further this depression in attendance.

While the art world has been slowly progressing online for years, with influences from Yayoi Kusama, James Turrell, and Instagrammable pop-ups, the current coronavirus pandemic

¹⁰³ Jeff Roy and Drake Paul, *The Art of Quarantine*, 2020, website, San Francisco, <https://www.theartofquarantine.com/>.

¹⁰⁴ *The Art Angle*, "The Art Angle."

¹⁰⁵ Carman, "Instagram pop-up,".

¹⁰⁶ Philip Kennicott, "The arts will recover from the coronavirus, as they did after Sept, 11 - but they might look a lot different," *Washington Post*, March 19, 2020, *Gale Academic OneFile* (accessed April 8, 2020).

has exacerbated this process in a matter of two months. Virtual reality which had an initial burst of interest in 2015, has remained ultimately niche. Today in the wake of the coronavirus, it has been experiencing something of a renaissance. The digital sphere has been treated as “an afterthought for institutions, allowing them to expand beyond physical space.”¹⁰⁷ Now, digital spaces are the entire priority. Institutions who already have virtual spaces have a head start in this new art world while the others will need to adapt or vanish in the coming months. As each day goes on, a new form of digital engagement surfaces. Whether it be a virtual reality platform called Artlab produced by Hauser & Wirth in order to continue display exhibitions and residencies, Zoom art classes, or online art clubs, people are looking to stay connected to the art world. While it remains unclear to what extent the art world will change after the coronavirus, past world events have shown art’s resilience to come out the other side, this time it may just be online.

¹⁰⁷ Laura Feinstein, "'Beginning of a new era': how culture went virtual in the face of crisis," *The Guardian*, April 8, 2020, digital file.

Figures



Fig 1.1

Yayoi Kusama; Early Watercolor

Image courtesy of: [Whitney Museum of American Art](#)



Fig 1.2
Yayoi Kusama
Untitled 1966 /
Image courtesy of: [Ota Fine Arts](#)



Fig 1.3.
Yayoi Kusama
Phalli's Field
1965

Image courtesy of : [Hirshhorn Collection](#)



Fig 1.4
Yayoi Kusama
Peep Show-Endless Love
1966
Image courtesy of :[Hirshhorn Collection](#)



Fig 1.5
Yayoi Kusama
Repetitive Vision
1996

Image courtesy of :[Mattress Factory](#)



Fig 1.6
Yayoi Kusama
Obliteration Room (2002)
Image courtesy of :[Tate Modern](#)



Fig 2.1
James Turrell
Roden Crater
1977-Present
Image courtesy of :[Skystone Foundation](https://www.skystonefoundation.org/)



Fig 3.1.
Claes Oldenburg
The Store
1961
Image courtesy of :[MoMA](https://www.moma.org)



Fig 3.2
Guggenheim
BMW Lab
2011

Image courtesy of : [BMW Guggenheim Lab](#)



Fig 3.3
The Museum of Ice Cream
Maryellis Bunn and Manish Vora
2016
Image courtesy of : [The Museum of Ice Cream](https://www.museumoficecream.com/)



Fig 3.4
Let's Survive Forever
Yayoi Kusama
WnDr Museum
2018
Image courtesy of : [WnDr Museum](https://www.wndrmuseum.com/)

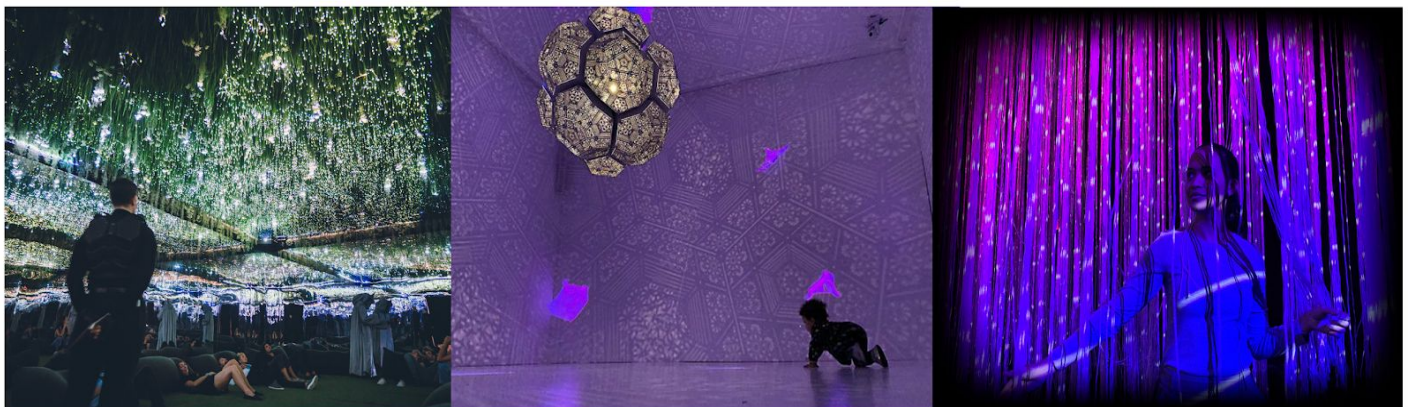


Fig 3.5

Top: From left to right- Yayoi Kusama, Infinity Mirror Room *Dancing Lights that Flew Up to The Universe* (2019), Olafur Eliasson, *Yellow Atmosphere Projector* (2018), Felix Gonzalez Torres "Untitled" Golden (1995).

Bottom: Zerospace installations

Images courtesy of : [Zerospace](#), [Olafur Eliasson](#), [Ota Fine Arts](#), and [Felix Gonzalez Torres Foundation](#),



Fig 3.6
Robert Morris
BODYSPACEMOTIONTHINGS
Tate Modern
2009
Image courtesy of :[Tate Modern](http://www.tatemedern.org.uk)

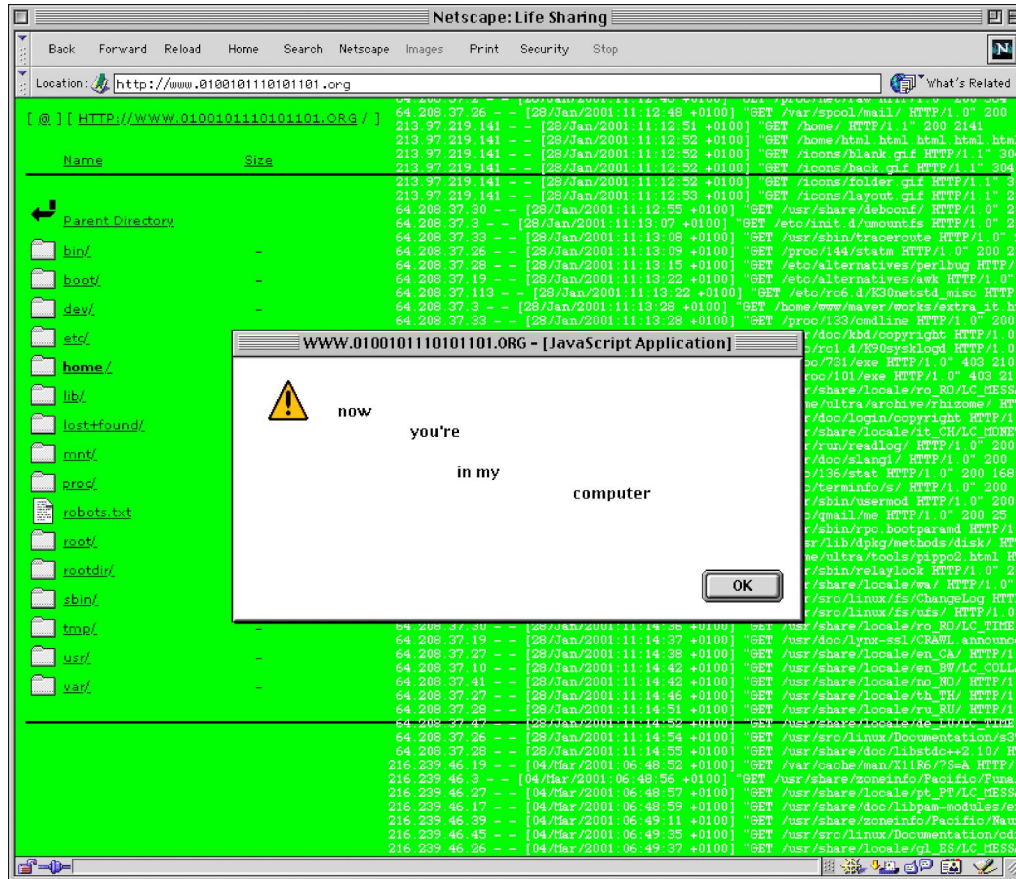


Fig E.1
 Eva and Franco Mattes
Life Sharing (2000-2003)
 Image courtesy of [Eva and Franco Mattes](#)

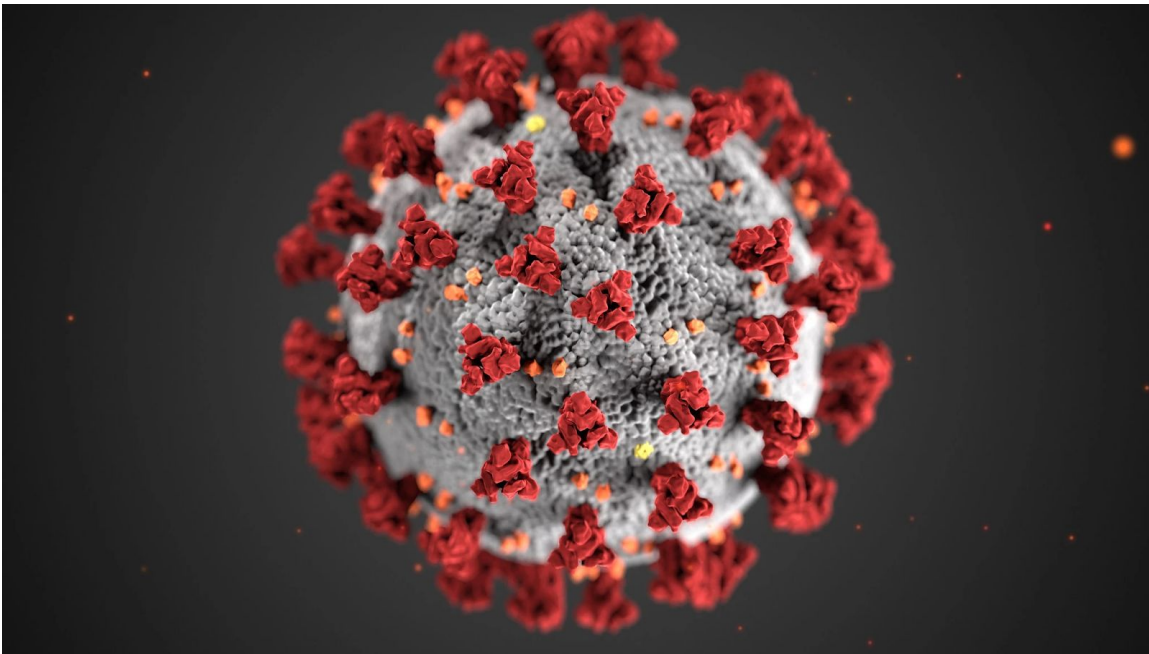


Fig E.2

Alissa Eckert and Dan Higgins

Coronavirus Illustration (2020)

Image courtesy of : [Alissa Eckert, Dan Higgins/CDC](#)



Fig E.3
David Hockney
Yellow Daffodils (2020)
Image courtesy of :[David Hockney](#)



Fig E.4
Shing Yin Khor
The Artist is Present (2020)

Image courtesy of : [artnet News](#)

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