

Installation art challenges traditional concepts of art and exhibition space—taking "Infinity Mirror Room" as an example

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Abstract. Yayoi Kusama's exhibition Infinity Mirror Rooms as the main case study, the paper starts from the two aspects of artistic creation and spatial expression to analyse how installation art challenges the traditional concept of art exhibition space, and then explores the transformation of audience participation and dissemination under this influence. It also combines with other exhibitions of installation art to further explore the expression and spatial significance of installation art.

Keywords: Installation art, traditional creative methods, exhibition space concepts, "Infinity Mirror Room".

1. Introduction

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The history of art exhibitions can be traced back to the exhibitions of church frescoes and sculptures during the Middle Ages and the Renaissance. The form and content of art exhibitions have changed dramatically since the 20th century, with many new and emerging types of exhibitions such as photography exhibitions, film and theatre exhibitions, dance exhibitions and so on. Installation exhibition is one of them. So, as a novel and unique exhibition form, how does installation art challenge the traditional concept of art and exhibition space?

This paper takes Yayoi Kusama's Infinity Mirror Rooms held in London from 2021 to 2024 as the main research case and analyse it together with other installation exhibitions to explore the breakthroughs and innovations on creation and spatial performance, as well as the impact of such innovations on the audience's participation.

From May 18, 2021 to April 28, 2024, Yayoi Kusama's installation exhibition, The Infinity Mirror Rooms has been held in Tate Modern. Yayoi Kusama (born in March 22, 1929 to present) is a contemporary Japanese female artist working in painting, sculpture, and installation. Her style is distinctive and avant-garde, and she is known for her distinctive polka-dot creations. The exhibition Infinity Mirror Rooms presents the installation art created by Yayoi Kusama. The main works in the exhibition Infinity Mirrored Room - Filled with the Brilliance of life and Chandelier of Grief have two indoor spaces respectively, created by installations such as mirrors and lamps (Tate, n.d.).

With regard to installation art, or can be traced back to the French artist Duchamp, who used readymade objects rather than sculpture, which traditionally requires hand skills, to create his work. Therefore, the readymade objects become a kind of minimal unit of the installation artwork, which is similar to morphemes. These morphemes which form sentences can express meanings according to the artist's will in space, which means the installation artwork. (He, 1999). Taking the Infinity Mirror as an example, Yayoi Kusama used mirrors and lights to create infinite space in the two galleries Infinity Mirrored Room - Filled with the Brilliance of life and Chandelier of Grief. The walls, ceilings and floors of the two galleries are covered with mirrors, and LED lights and crystal lights are placed in each of the two mirror rooms. Through the reflection and refraction of the mirrors, the space and the light points of the lamps appear to multiply. As a result, Yayoi Kusama creates a space of infinite extension (Tate, n.d.).

2. The breakthrough of creative approach and spatial expression

Traditional art mainly includes painting, calligraphy, sculpture, decoration, crafts and so on, whose materials are concentrated in paint, paper, oil cloth, marble and so on, and often require artists to process and deform formally through certain techniques, or reproduce the original to be expressed in other material forms. On the other hand, the media used in installation art includes all possibilities from natural materials to industrial products, and such displays are mainly taken directly from ready-made objects or slightly modified and placed in specific places (He, 1999). In the creation of Infinite Mirror Rooms, Yayoi Kusama used materials such as mirrors, LED lights, and water. The use of these media transforms the traditional painting pattern from flat to three-dimensional space, showing the imaginative world of art more vividly.

Yayoi Kusama's unique imagery of space and graphics that is repetition, infinity and psychedelia can be felt in the exhibition (Zheng, 2021). In the exhibition Infinity Mirrored Room - Filled with the Brilliance of life, the entire space is covered with mirrors, and there is a shallow pool on the ground, with hundreds of small LED lights hanging down from the ceiling. The flickering of the LED lights in the surrounding mirrors and the water create countless points of light which extend indefinitely in the darkened exhibition room. These dots of light are dappled with colors of red, blue, green and orange. And the colors shift over time. As critic Bob Nichols once said about Yayoi Kusama's works, 'These forms come not only from the artist's observation of nature, but also from his inner of thought. These paintings can be seen as reproductions of space, or as images that cannot be easily reproduced that is infinite or hallucinatory.' (Robert, 2009) These unique imaginations are also vividly presented in the exhibition Infinity Mirror Rooms with flickering points of light and infinite mirrors. Through the installation of mirrors and lamps, Yayoi Kusama successfully expresses the theme of infinity within the limited space of the exhibition hall.

Infinity Mirror Rooms is created through the utilization of three-dimensional space and the scientific principles of reflection and refraction of light, which is a special and different medium and method from the traditional ones. Through the use of non-traditional media, Yayoi Kusama creates more possibilities. From depicting to creating the world, installation art promotes the development of artistic imagination towards three-dimensional visualization, which greatly challenges the traditional way of art creation.

In installation art, space becomes the main object of artistic creation. Through arrangement and combination, installation art exhibitions put space, which has been neglected in traditional art exhibitions, into an important position. Since the traditional objects of creation are mainly paintings or sculptures, space is more often used as a carrier for displaying artworks. The artworks are displayed in a certain exhibition hall for the audience to view. In other words, the audience can view these artworks no matter what exhibition hall is which means the space for the artwork doesn't play a main role but just as a container for placing the artwork exists and mainly to serve the exhibits. The artwork itself is the focus of the exhibition.

In contrast to the unimportance of space in traditional art exhibitions (Sun, 2011), in installation art exhibitions, the construction of the overall space is of paramount importance, with the installation and the environment forming an indivisible whole. 'The environment is as important as the object. The artwork is no longer seen as an isolated object but must be viewed in the context in which it is placed' (Thomas, 1961). In Infinite Mirror Rooms, space serves as an object of exhibition and occupies an extremely important part of it. The mirrors that cover the perimeter of the room form a three-dimensional space in which the viewer is immersed. This kind of spatial installation art changes the traditional exhibition mode and brings a different spatial perception experience to the audience.

Installation art utilizes ready-made objects as media to build the overall space, making the installation and the environment one which greatly challenges the traditional way of creation and breaks through the limitations of traditional exhibition space, enhancing the spatial expression.

3. Redefinition of Audience Engagement and Changes in Communication Methods

Traditional artworks such as paintings and sculptures are usually able to be collected and displayed on shelves, and the state they are presented in is relatively fixed. When the audience walks into the exhibition, it is more of a single visual experience, which can appreciate by watching the outside the works. Even if the audience is not at the scene, they can watch the pictures of the artworks online and get the viewing experience. However contemporary installation art constitutes a whole with the surrounding environment, and the space is aimed at the viewer and requires the audience to be present. This breaks the distance between the viewer and the artwork in traditional art exhibitions and creates a full-body art experience that is the viewer not only browses, but also needs to step into the space to feel and participate in it (Claire, 2011). Therefore, installation art has made a strong impact on the recent art practice and art world of being seen as absence. (He, 1999).

As in the exhibition *Infinity Mirrored Room - Filled with the Brilliance of life*, the viewer has to step into the room and feel the LED lights converging into countless round points of light in the surrounding mirrors. As the colors of the LED lights (red, yellow, blue, and green) change, the dots of light repeat, expand, and overlap in the mirrors, erasing the boundaries of the individual and ultimately making the viewer a part of the work. Through the repetition of the dots, Yayoi Kusama makes the viewer a part of the art, blurring the obvious distinction between the viewer and the artwork, and bringing the viewer a unique art experience (Tate, n.d.). As the viewers have to walk and explore within a certain space, the state of the space is constantly changing, which will undoubtedly mobilize more of their sensory nerves, so that the viewers can obtain an immersive experience. Through the installation, *Infinity Mirror Rooms* breaks down the boundaries between subject and object, allowing the viewer to interact with the surrounding environment, adding interactivity and thus promoting the viewer's interest in art. This is in stark contrast to the traditional, passive art viewing experience where the artwork is presented in a completely static manner. In contemporary installation art, interactive installations tend to change dynamically as the viewer actively joins in. Instead of creating a finalized artwork, the artist creates a field of activity where the art event is brought to life by the viewer's interactive behavior (RyszardW and Kluszczynski, 2010). This mode of exhibition provides an immersive, dynamic and immersive platform for the viewer that enhances the overall aesthetic experience. The audience's physical involvement allows for a better psychological connection to the artwork (Kiesler, 1939). It is like a performance, when the audience who is watching from the stage walks on the stage to participate in the performance, the sense of engagement is naturally further enhanced.

In installation art exhibitions, space and audience input are utilized to become works of art. This creative process includes not only the creativity of the artist, but also the collaboration between the artist and the viewer. As a result of this interaction, the artwork will respond to the viewer. Thus, the artwork acquires form and meaning through the participation of the viewer (Esma, Thijs and Rob, 2021), and the viewer becomes an important component of the artwork (Julie, 2001). The immersive and interactive experience brought by installation art allows viewers to participate more deeply, breaking the traditional way of visiting art and making the exhibition more interactive and interesting.

Moreover, the dissemination of traditional art exhibitions mostly relies on the single method like TV, newspapers, books, and roadside light boxes to carry out a dynamic form of movie and television or even a flat static form, which attracts relatively limited to art lovers. In the advertising of installation art, due to the further interaction between the work and the people, the audience's emotional response and behavior also become elements of the work, and become part of the publicity, which will attract a wider audience (Zhang, 2014).

As in the Yayoi Kusama exhibition, because of the unique experience of being in a mirror room and the visual effects of mirror reflections, many visitors took photos and videos and posted them through social media platforms such as Facebook, Instagram and Youtube. As a result, the exhibition gained more attention. The novel viewing experience brought by this kind of installation art exhibition will form the Internet celebrities' effect through the spread of social network platforms. Therefore,

many experiential and interactive installation exhibitions that produce strange visual experiences often evolve into popular exhibitions, attracting a large number of viewers, especially young viewers to visit the exhibition (Wei, 2023), which greatly broadens the scope of dissemination. Installation art allows viewers to gain a new and immersive way of experiencing art from it. Its sharing and dissemination cater to the mass media's communication principle. The mode of dissemination has shifted from the traditional offline advertising and promotion to the online social platform.

Installation art redefines audience participation by creating an active space and bringing the audience a unique viewing experience. Moreover, posting and sharing of the unique experience of the exhibition space on social platforms also promoted the further dissemination of the exhibition.

4. Other Installation Art Case Studies - Changes in Spatial Perception

Through the combination of installations, installation art causes the viewer's perception of space to change. In addition to Yayoi Kusama's Infinity Mirror Rooms, other installation art exhibitions such as Graham Dan's *Present Continuous Past(s)* and Caitlind RC Brown's *Clouds* also reflect the changes in spatial perception brought by installation art.

Present Continuous Past(s) (1974), Graham's early work utilizes mirrors to reflect the space of the present, while a camera on the opposite side records and plays out through a monitor eight seconds earlier (Figure 1). Through this installation, the artist hopes to reflect the connections and changes of time, aiming to encourage the viewer to explore alternative ways of seeing and understanding themselves (Graham, 2009).



Figure 1. “*Present Continuous Past (s)*”, curated by Graham Dan, 1974, Paris, Centre national d'art et de culture Georges-Pompidou

Caitlind RC Brown's *Cloud* (2012) consists of light bulbs that form the shape of a giant cloud (Figure 2). The viewer participates in the completion of the artwork by pulling the light bulb on and off with a string. Through this installation, the artist metaphorically refers to the subtle and complex relationship between collective action and individual will (Elena and Natalia, 2022). Through spatial installations, *Present Continuous Past (s)* and *Clouds* allow the viewer to step into a unique space created by the artist for an immersive experience. In participating and observing the dynamic changes of the installation, the audience rethinks the meaning of individual or collective.



Figure 2. “CLOUD at Nuit Blanche Calgary”, curated by Caitlind RC Brown, 2012, photo by Doug Wong.

Through the above examples, we can see that installation art interacts with the audience by shaping an active space that is very different from the real world, allowing the audience to truly participate in the creation of the artwork and become a part of the artwork, so that they can better perceive and realize the changes in the art space and the cultural significance behind it.

5. Conclusion

Yayoi Kusama's Infinity Mirror Rooms installation at Tate Modern is a departure from traditional art creation by using mirrors, LED lights, and other installations, and utilizing the special functions of these objects to create infinite space. The objects and the environment together constitute the art creation, which makes a breakthrough in the traditional concept of space in the exhibition. At the same time, it also breaks the distance between the audience and the works in traditional exhibitions, and enhances the audience's sense of experience. And the unique form of the exhibition also promotes its further dissemination on social platforms. Besides Graham's Present Continuous Past(s), Caitlind RC Brown's Cloud, installation exhibitions fully utilize installation art to create an art activity space, so that the viewer immersive experience.

To summarize, installation art, as an emerging art form, challenges the traditional concept of art and exhibition space. Artists create more spatially expressive artworks through different creative methods than in the past. This leads to further audience participation and facilitates dissemination which may be a possible way for art to realize innovation, and provides a model for future exhibition activities.

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