

## Specular Space Expansion: Yayoi Kusama's Infinity Mirror Rooms Through Hermann Schmitz's Atmospheres

Melissa Gallego Quiroz, Shanghai University, China

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### Abstract

Since the debut of her first infinite room, "Floor Show," in 1965, Yayoi Kusama has used specular space to extend light, shapes, and the viewer's presence, leaving a sense that the perceptual field is transformed. This article analyses Kusama's infinite rooms within the framework of the concrete phenomenon of Atmospheres, developed by the German philosopher Hermann Schmitz. The concept is explored within the emotional space as part of the theory of perception, presented in Schmitz's monograph titled "The Sphere of Emotion" [Der Gefühlsraum], wherein feelings are located in atmospheres. First is describe it the difference between the concept of bodies - *Körpe* and *Leib* - as the atmosphere of feelings needs to be reviewed from the felt body (Leib), secondly we examine Yayoi Kusama's statement of self-obliteration, as she proclaimed with her work "Forget yourself, become part of the environment" and relate it to the felt body, reviewing two of Kusama's rooms, *Souls of Millions of Light Years Away* and *Let's Survive Forever* showing that the infinite rooms as atmospheric spaces allow the visitor to reflect on what is perceived as the perceptual field is transformed and implies a re-evaluation of the experience of the body.

Keywords: Atmosphere, Felt Body, Hermann Schmitz, Space, Yayoi Kusama

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## Introduction

When talking about atmospheres, the most common place would be to think in the space of the layers of gases that cover our earth, that thin layer that keeps us alive and allows us to have oxygen that protects the earth from meteors and solar radiation. One could also think of a cold morning or a sunny day in the park, the sense of temperature of cold or heat that a space can have. The etymological roots of the term – from the Greek ἀτμός [atmos] 'vapor' and σφαῖρα [sphaira] 'sphere' is the space where sensory and affective qualities are. These qualities affect us whether we are aware of it or not. Every environment has some particular characteristics, and those modes dictate how we relate to the environment on many levels. The atmosphere is studied for its affective properties in contemporary studies as widespread sensory and emotional characteristics in an area without surfaces (Schmitz, 2014). This characteristic defines a unique tone that shapes the experience of the environment and is understood as a sensorial place, therefore, tangible to perception through bodily affectations and is mainly the space of feelings.

The term atmosphere has been used as a metaphor in European languages since Goethe (Böhme, 2019) and gained strength in philosophical thought through the philosophical system of Hermann Schmitz<sup>1</sup>, who introduces it in his monograph entitled *The Sphere of Emotion* (1969) [Der Gefühlsraum], mainly because of an interest in taking the introjection of the self out of the division and objectification in which the whole process of introspection takes place in the mind of the subject<sup>2</sup>, where the person divides his world into two, the outer world and the inner world, the division of the outside and the inside. Schmitz likens the inner world to the house, a house with walls and floors, which contains and the psychologism as this house encloses the experience of the person in this inner world (Schmitz, 2007, p. 14). In his quest to overcome the dogma of the inner world, he works on the theory of space, the philosophy of the body and new phenomenology, and the term atmosphere works as an epistemological as well as methodological concept.

Schmitz defines the atmosphere as an occupation of space without surface in the area of what is experienced as present and is the place where affective quality and emotions remain (Schmitz, 2014); this concept has implied a marked acceptance as a new approach to relate to spaces in the last decades. Gernot Böhme, since the mid-90s, has highlighted the importance of atmospheres as a fundamental element for new aesthetics (1993) and these not only from numinous (proposal of Rodolph Otto) but the approach towards the production and creation of atmospheres, an idea welcomed by architects and designers, such as the renowned architect Peter Zumthor, winner of the Pritzker Prize in 2009, who creates his projects focused on the generation of atmospheres, which he considers essential for their emotional characteristics (Zumthor, 2006), as well as Olafur Eliasson, the world-famous artist for his large-scale installations, who sees the atmosphere as an active agent in the creation of artistic works.

In the so-called "atmospheric turn" it is claimed that feelings are in atmospheres, which have affective qualities that imply the experience of emotion. The atmospheres theory has been

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<sup>1</sup> *System of Philosophy* his work between 1964 and 1980 consist of 5 vol. in 10 books (1964, 1965, 1966, 1967, 1969, 1973, 1977, 1978, 1980a, 1980b)

<sup>2</sup> According to the author, this anthropological paradigm emerged in Greece in the second half of the 5th century B.C with Democritus and Plato. It is characterized by reductionism, psychologism and the paradigm which Schmitz calls "dogma of the inner world". [Innenweltdogma] (Schmitz 2009, p. 14)

embraced in architecture, arts, and disciplines such as psychology, sociology, and nursing (Uzarewicz & Uzarewicz, 2005) to make visible involuntary life experiences and the characteristics and states that imply emotional effects. At one time or another, we have all entered a room or visited a landscape and have felt something about that place, a sensation of that space, which has left us with an emotional response through immediate involvement.

In this pursuit to discover a space's emotional involvement, this research paper relates the concept of atmosphere in Herman Schmitz's philosophy to the work of the renowned artist Yayoi Kusama, and it seeks to understand the series "Infinite Rooms". Kusama is the world's most influential female artist and the first woman to enter the top 10 best-selling artists at auction. The artwork of Kusama is complex, and her aesthetic character is compelling. To answer the question "How can Yayoi Kusama's infinite rooms be understood through the concept of atmospheres?", we first describe the difference between the concept of bodies - Körper and Leib - as the atmosphere of feelings needs to be reviewed from the felt body (Leib); secondly we examine Yayoi Kusama's statement of self-obliteration, as she proclaimed with her work "Forget yourself, become part of the environment" and relate it to the felt body (Leib).

### **The Atmosphere Through the Felt Body (Leib)**

This philosophical analysis is based on the way we find ourselves in an environment; from the phenomenological perspective, there are two ways in which the body can be experienced, felt and been as an existing entity in the present moment; one is the body (Körper) as a solid object element, that we can measure, weigh, quantify with different instruments, it is this physical body that we feel owning and controlling through intentional actions. This physical body is at a distance in relation to its surrounding space. The word Körper in German is linked to physical qualities. The body, as an object, that has associations more related to things, with connotations of being an instrument; the word Körper can be found when referring to the body of a mechanical piece, or in physics, you can say "zwei Körper kollidieren", two bodies collide, this word is used to describe mathematical objects, as well as to describe the physical body, what we know as the physical body itself, which can be touched, perceive the surface of the skin, feel the hair and so on.

There is a second way of understanding the body and comprehending that we are here and now, and it is through the felt body (Leib); the German word Leib comes from the etymology of Leben, to live, and Erleben, to experience, refers to the body as experienced the lived body, from the German to the English can be translated as "sensitive body", "living body" and in the majority as "felt body". The spatiotemporal framework of order does not yield the same level (Schmitz, 2011); this body as the experience of life, which is not subordinated to the limits of the physical body, not purely referred to the physical properties of feeling constituted in the solid body but in the experience of feeling itself, and which inhabits through living in the present, in the instant of experience.

Let's think as an example, when a specific sound is heard, such as the passing of a train, the attention is drawn towards the sound of the machinery moving on the tracks. The body of experience is not confined to the physical body but instead expands to the location of the sound, in this case, the train tracks. The kinesthetic properties of sound through touch and movement convey characteristics and actions of one's own while perceiving this sound. The felt body expands to the place of sound, and attention and perception lead to knowledge of that moment through the felt body, which is not just limited to the internal organs.

In the experience of the felt body, the objects of reference are perceived without any apparent physical distance, as there is no distance at the moment they are perceived. This is because the attention serves as the reference point for recognizing their presence. Similarly, in perceiving emotions such as astonishment, that instant remains through the affective implication; there is no need to look at the physical body to recognize that we are present through the affective implication of astonishment (Schmitz, 2011). The felt body is not bound by the house or the limiting walls of the physical body but expands in space through the emotions and affective quality embedded in the atmospheres as a lived and non-geometrical space (Griffero, 2019; Schmitz, 1969, 2007, 2014). In this way, Schmitz considers the felt bodily affective qualities as the primary determinant of understanding the atmosphere, eliminating the boundary between sensory perception and the separation between inside and outside.

Physical bodily emotions are accompanied by a gesture, by a bodily communication, and it is in this bodily immediacy of physical impact that we consider that we have or that we possess a feeling when we are physically affected by an atmosphere with certain characteristics and in which the emotional experience, our physical bodily affect, is involved. Throughout life, we encounter involuntary life experiences; we do not recognize the moment when the physical communication of the effect is given, simply and sometimes with dangerous triggers, we find a person reacting to something, not knowing that this feeling does not belong to himself, but was captured in the reaction of the emotion through his physical bodily connection. In the last years of his academic life, Schmitz highlighted the importance of atmospheres and involuntary life experiences in our everyday life. He stressed the importance of being aware of these affectations and developing and capturing them, the art of capturing and developing atmospheres, which are feelings so people can relate to their physical well-being (Schmitz, 2014, p.27).

### **“Forget Yourself, Become Part of the Environment” – Dissolution and Felt Body**

Yayoi Kusama has used different media for her art; these have varied over the years among these paintings, installations, performances, and sculptures; these media show the expression of patterns that remain through the years, the multiplication and the need for repetition of dot shapes, and "polka dots net" networks through interconnected lines, intertwined lines that create a pattern without any apparent focal point as seen in his paintings in the series Infinity Nets or the repetition with thousands of projections of points of light that expand into the virtual image of the reflection with her series Infinity mirror rooms, is multiplication in the name of infinity.

Yayoi has mentioned on several occasions that she uses the dots as an element to help create a dissolution, "I paint polka dots on the bodies of people, and with those polka dots, the people will self-obliterate and return to the nature of the universe" (Kusama, 2011). The constant repetition of the same figure in a permanent succession in which the physical body is forgotten or tries to subtract itself through the pattern by covering the body with the dots, as a way of detaching the body as a unit, with an intention declared by Kusama to fade this and to integrate us with the environment. "When we obliterate nature and our bodies with polka dots, we become part of the unity of our environment. I become part of the eternal, and we obliterate ourselves in Love."<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> Kusama, quoted in Jud Yalkut, "Polka Dot Way of Life (Conversations with Yayoi Kusama)" in New York Free Press 1, no. 8 (Yalkut, 1968).

Yayoi was sometimes so abstracted in her creative process that she continued to paint outside the canvas:

"I would cover a canvas with nets, then continue painting them on the table, on the floor, and finally on my own body. As I repeated this process over and over again, the nets began to expand to infinity. I forgot about myself as they enveloped me, clinging to my arms and legs and clothes and filling the entire room."(Kusama, 2021)

The painting is literally spread out of the frame, something that we see in the Infinity mirror rooms; the artwork is not subordinated to the dimensions of a canvas; all the space surrounding the physical body is part of the work; it is an immersive installation art on a large scale and as we can relate to what she expressed in her autobiography, the way of the painting process, she was in a state of presence, and at the same time, presumably abstraction of thoughts, only the continuation of the movement of the painting process, maybe, working as an act of meditation in the sense of stillness and agitation of movement.

Infinity mirror rooms are a series of installations in which Kusama uses specular space to reflect environmental elements; these are large-scale catoptric boxes.<sup>4</sup> The series has had more than 20 versions since the mid-1960s, starting with "Floor Sow", which was exhibited in Castellane Gallery, New York, in 1965, the first exhibition in which she uses the mirror as a material, covering the walls with it, founding in the catoptric box an appropriate system for replication; with the properties of reflection, her figures and dots expand beyond the tangible physical forms located on-site and are transferred to virtual space.

Let's examine two of her rooms, *Souls of Millions of Light Years Away* and *Let's Survive Forever*, reviewing how she uses the pattern of the dots, supported by the physical properties of mirrors and what type of atmosphere is created in those. The work *Souls of Millions of Light Years Away* (2013) is a room filled with thousands of small lights hanging from the ceiling at different heights. One step inside and you are welcomed by the reflection of the lights; those lights are reflected on the water floor and mirrored walls, creating an immersive environment of intimacy and a sense of suspension, without any doubt, the iconic image of resemblance "Milky Way Bulge" taken by the Hubble were the sparkling lights of the galaxy come in mind, the pattern of the dots is seen in the replication of the thinnest point of different colour LEDs.

If we think that the atmosphere represents a perception of reality that more to relate to any concrete sensory perception, what really matters is the way the body feels in the environment (Moraveji et al., 2022), we need to ask what is the felt-body of this experiences. The Smithsonian's Hirshhorn Museum described this room as "an immersive environment that fosters an out-of-body experience,"<sup>5</sup> from a technical approach to the construction of the space, the given visual effect is made by the properties of reflection of the points of light; the image folds on the floor and covers the whole environment, which generates the effect that unifies the space; this implies that one cannot identified clearly where one is, without a clear distinction of the surface as a surface, a wide horizon in extension is observed, and the lights are magnified as a virtual image of the mirrors, where the end of this horizon cannot be

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<sup>4</sup> Heron of Alexandria in the first century A.D. in his catoptric work, he mentions the catoptric machine composed of many flat mirrors see Baltrušaitis, 1988. Also the theatrum catoptricum of Athanasius Kircher in the 17th century exploring the properties of mirrors in different catoptric boxes see Kircher, 1646.

<sup>5</sup> Hirsh Horn Museum, Infinity Mirror Rooms, <https://hirshhorn.si.edu/kusama/infinity-rooms/#souls>

clearly perceived. The body of experience is affective involvement, which implies intimacy with the resemblance of the point of light as starts in the vast sky; only the feeling remains.

So Why out-of-body? When examining the work, the visitor becomes part of it firstly the image of his or her physical body gets replicated in the mirror walls many times and intermingles with the figures of points of light, as again Yayoi uses the replication of forms to subtract, in this case the body of the viewer, the mirror are working as an utopia existing outside of physical reality, a "placeless place" and also as an heterotopia in Foucault sense, this alterity place, a "sort of counteraction on the position that I occupy" (Foucault, 1984) in a way of transcending ourselves, we see our own body there in the space behind the mirror, and thought our own absence from the place where we are, and from that point come back the gaze of ourselves and reconstitute us. Secondly, the body of experience is the present experimented in expanding the perceived space via the atmosphere of suspension and stillness that occupies the whole experience. For a few seconds, we can feel what Yayoi invites in her art statement: "We become part of the unity of our environment".

The second of these immersive artwork is call *Let's Survive Forever*, created in 2017, which generates an optical perspective with multiple layers, levels of projection. The first level is the projection generated in space through the face-to-face effect of the mirrors. Yayoi implements elements directly embedded in the vertical glass walls; aluminium spheres have been meticulously assembled in the mirrored walls, creating a circular reflection that gives the observer the sensation that they are suspended in the air, floating, suspended spheres. In convex reflections, the reflecting surface is curved outwards; when the light hits this surface, the light rays are curved and reflected in a divergent way; as the focal point and center of curvature are inside the mirror, the rays of the object are always creating virtual images, being a convex surface it generates an image with great amplitude, covering a large part of the space.

The second layer is achieved with a second catoptric box located in the center of the space; this is a smaller rectangular structure that does not allow the visitor to go through it with his whole physical body. One must look through some small circular openings to enter and discover its interior. When looking inside, one discovers a thousand reflections of spheres, projected one on top of the other. The reflection of all the spheres is in one; the image of all the small spheres is, in turn, projected into each of them, resembling the story of the pearl necklace of Hindu philosophy in the net of Indra.<sup>6</sup>

The Memorial Art Gallery University of Rochester interviewed visitors who had just experienced this artwork, asking them about their first impressions of this installation. These are some of the viewers' answers: "I was very shocked," "kind of a sense of oneness," "you incorporate your own body into the art," "empowering," "it told such a big story in the sense of how infinite space is," "it's like limitless feeling."

## Conclusion

The atmosphere is the space where sensory and affective qualities are, an emotional place experienced through the felt body that allows us to understand the emotional space of Yayoi

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<sup>6</sup> The metaphor of Indra's Net metaphor originates from the Atharva Veda, and it mean the interconnection between all things in the universe, referring to the fact that all phenomena emerge together in an interdependent network of cause and effect.

Kusama's infinite rooms and to understand the artist's call to "forget yourself...become part of the environment" to transcend *Körper* and become *Leib*.

These atmospheric perceptual spaces allow the visitor to reflect on what is perceived as the perceptual field is transformed. This implies a re-evaluation of the experience of the body, which is the basis of the relationship to the environment, through the felt body as a substratum of the interaction with emotional atmospheres. Heraclitus, quoted by Schmitz, "You will never find the limits of your soul as you wander, even if you walk on all sides", speaks of unlimited space, infinite in the sense that it is not pigeonholed in the introspection of the soul, corporeal subject. On the contrary, it invites expansion, atmospheres as transubjective and shared feelings; it invites us to this.

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