

‘A moment in a movement’: the indeterminate interior

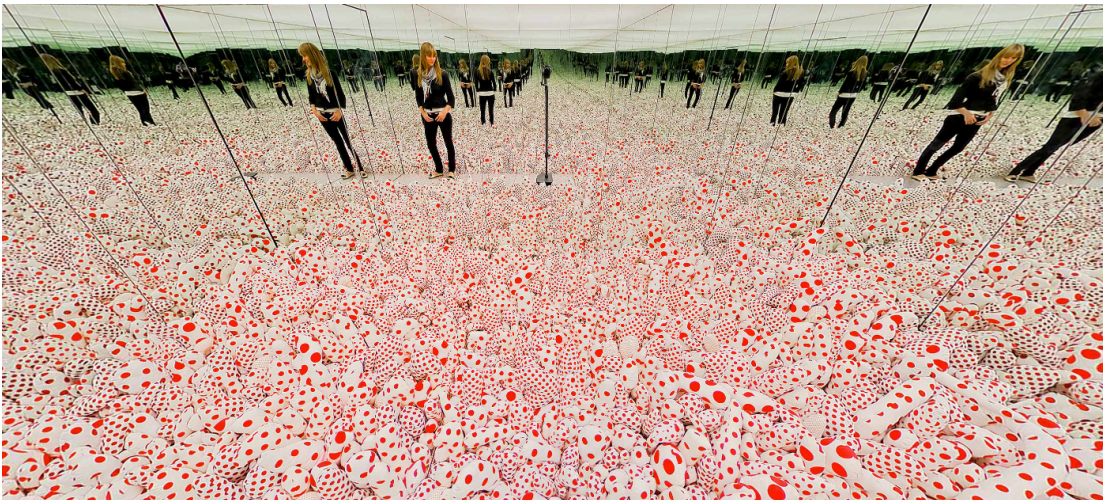


Figure 6: Yayoi Kusama *Infinity Mirror Room – Phalli's Field (or Floor Show)* 2009.
Courtesy: Museum of Contemporary Art, Sydney.

Yayoi Kusama: ‘space without composition, without beginning, end or centre’.

A structure that – paradoxically – contains infinite space; an indeterminate boundary that confuses rather than delimits space; a sense of the self as fragmented and multiple; an exhilarating feeling of floating in infinite space but one worried by a nagging fear of alarming disorientation. All of these are apt descriptors for Yayoi Kusama’s *Infinity Mirror Room*, 2009, pictured here, but they could also just as readily describe our contemporary experience. *Infinity Mirror Room* is an interior fit for now; by endlessly refracting everything it manages – again, paradoxically – to pull into sharper focus aspects of our contemporary experience.

Kusama calls these structures ‘infinity nets’, and they simulate her experience of space as an infinite and unbounded condition that, for her, is often glazed with a bright shimmer of existential terror. Kusama’s experience of space is mediated through a mental illness that causes hallucinations of endless dots. After staring at a red tablecloth with a dot pattern on it one day, she said:

When I looked up, I saw the same pattern covering the ceiling, the windows, and the walls, and finally all over the room, my body and the universe. I felt as if I had begun to self-obliterate, to revolve in the infinity of endless time and the absoluteness of space, and be reduced to nothingness.¹

Kusama’s experience of space, which she performs so beautifully in this installation, is space, as she says, ‘without composition, without beginning, end or centre’.² And, yet, I would posit that our contemporary experience of space is not too dissimilar to this, despite our ability to concoct conventions to steady

¹ Andrew Solomon ‘Dot dot dot’ in *Artforum*, February 1997.

² Yayoi Kusama quoted in *Yayoi Kusama: Mirrored Years Education Kit*, Museum of Contemporary Art, Sydney: p 17.

ourselves (conventions that, for whatever reason, are not as available to Kusama). She, however, is channeling the full force of contemporary space-times, and her description of a space 'without composition, without beginning, end or centre' could be applied to all manner of contemporary social, political, spatial, technological or temporal contexts. After centuries of immersion in spatial practices largely mediated through the tradition of one-point perspective, Kusama's infinitely expanding fields obliterate western conventions for describing space and, instead, situate a radical undecidability. And this feels appropriate. Here is a metaphor for an identity radically displaced by hybridity and multiculturalism; here are the quivering atoms of quantum theory; here is the infinitely expanding universe or the endless virtual space of the internet; here is the disregard for boundaries displayed by global capitalism as digits flicker back and forth across the globe. Here is an interior that describes some aspects of our world now.

This paper explores three recent installation artworks that offer interesting provocations for the interior, such as Kusama's exploded, endless interior. Installation art has many historical precursors but really started to gather speed in the expanded art practices of the 1970s. Today, installation art is arguably the ubiquitous model for contemporary art. In her book *Installation Art* of 2005, Claire Bishop wrote:

Rather than imagine the viewer as a pair of disembodied eyes that survey the work from a distance, installation art presupposes an embodied viewer whose sense of touch, smell and sound are as heightened as their sense of vision. This insistence on the literal presence of the viewer is arguably the key characteristic of installation art.³

This idea of 'the embodied viewer' is intrinsic also to interior design. Both interior design and installation art focus on the immersive and the experiential. Installation art can be positioned as a kind of laboratory for new ideas about the interior but, conversely, and importantly, interiors offer much to think about for installation art. Gean Moreno wrote about this persuasively in a recent text entitled *Farewell to Function: Tactical Interiors*. Moreno wrote:

Many of the more prominent artworks produced in the last decade or so are characterized by a recasting of what were once called installations as something closer to interiors ... While various artists may have considered what this 'slouching toward the interior' may mean for art production, few have considered the potential that may be stored in the interior itself as reflexive structure, malleable form, and analytical tool.⁴

Moreno's positioning of interior designs that have reduced their commitment to function in order to ruminate upon other more open-ended questions – what he calls a 'tactical interior' – aligns closely, I would argue, with the three projects explored in this paper. Each of these projects offer an expanded field for the interior, they work with an idea of the interior as 'reflexive structure, malleable form, and analytical tool'. The words 'tactical interior' offer an exciting encouragement to explore the potential for new ideas, new forms and new provocations about interiors. They encourage us to think about how we think about

³ Claire Bishop 'Introduction: Installation art and experience' in *Installation Art: A Critical History* (New York: Routledge, 2005): pp. 8.

⁴ Gean Moreno 'Farewell to Function: Tactical Interiors' in *e-flux journal*, #15, April 2010.

interiors. For space is ideological – we are enculturated with particular spatial norms, we have certain expectations around how spaces will behave and how we will behave in spaces. And, yet, there are opportunities for thinking – and for being – other. Kusama's interior invites us to consider other experiences of space. What are the potentials for thinking altogether differently about interiors? And what other kinds of beings might we become through this experience?

Many of these ideas are enfolded within the title of this symposium – *Interior: A State of Becoming*. With its focus on movement and transformation, this title demands that we move away from the too-neat idea that the interior is easy to define, that it is an easily classifiable region clearly demarcated by an exterior. Rather than a state of stasis, the conference title positions the interior as a dynamic state, one always involved in a process-of-becoming. This has a valuable expansiveness, which seems highly appropriate to our lives now. In order to stay relevant to contemporary conceptions of space and time, and in order to deal with new contexts – such as environmental change, global financial crises the or rapid uptake of new technologies to name just a few – any definition of 'interior' must be able to move dynamically. This focus on the temporal and the transforming within the title *Interior: A State of Becoming* seems highly appropriate to contemporaneity.



Figure 1 & 2: Pierre Huyghe, *A Forest of Lines*, event, Sydney Opera House, 2008.
Photo credit: Paul Green. Courtesy: Pierre Huyghe and Marian Goodman Gallery, Paris and New York.

Pierre Huyghe: 'a moment in a movement'.

Pierre Huyghe's *A Forest of Lines*, in which the Sydney Opera House became a quasi-forest for a 24-hour period in 2008, performs this idea of an interior as a 'state of becoming'.⁵ The short timeframe was

⁵ Pierre Huyghe's project, *A Forest of Lines*, was an ambitious commission for the 2008 Sydney Biennale, for which the iconic space of the Sydney Opera House was transformed into a quasi-forest for a 24-hour period. To do this, one thousand living plants were hauled in and a fine mist sprayed throughout the space lending the interior the atmosphere of a living ecosystem. Over the 24-hour period, the audience was invited to wander through this forest. To help them navigate they wore searchlights on their heads, and the lines of light that crisscrossed the space perhaps

important to the project; Huyghe prefers the term 'apparition' instead of the usual 'exhibition' and his works often find their power in their transience. His apparitions are temporary interventions designed to haunt space and ideas about space. They intervene temporarily into a given structure, serving to destabilise our conventions and – to use an architectural metaphor – wobble our foundations. Here, the spatial protocols of two sites – the Opera House and the forest – were displaced and a new possibility offered. Rather than things-we-could-be-sure-of or conditions-we-could-name-definitively, Huyghe drew our attention to potentials and possibilities, on the in-between or the it-could-be. Huyghe is interested in conjuring these liminal spaces, stating of this work:

It is always a state, a moment in a movement, a process. It is not something that is determinate, a closed resolution. ... I don't think there is one interpretation or one way to grab something ... What I am trying to do is to intensify the potentiality, the state of potentiality in a given space.⁶

This determination to 'intensify the potentiality' and to focus on a 'moment in a movement' seems close to this idea of 'interior: a state of becoming'. There is a wonderful poetic openness to these ideas, an encouragement towards a heightened liminal space or a transgression towards another possibility. The words a 'moment in a movement' also prompt me to think of Derrida's idea of *différance*. Derrida described this project as such:

... [f]rom about 1963 to 1968, I tried to work out ... what was in no way meant to be a system but rather a sort of strategic device, opening onto its own abyss, an unclosed, unenclosable, not wholly formalizable ensemble of rules for reading, interpretation and writing.⁷

Derrida's project was notable for its desire to introduce undecidability into systems of thought. He refused to rest in the expected conventions of things and argued instead that undecidability is an inherent and important quality. To demand otherwise is to place a constraint on meaning and, consequently, a limit on experience. He wrote:

This type of device [his strategic devices for interrogating texts] may have enabled me to detect ... a whole set of long-standing constraints. These constraints were practiced at the price of contradictions, of denials, of dogmatic decrees ...⁸

To unwind the constraining logic of conventions, Derrida utilised, as he wrote, 'the play and work of *différance*, whose role is at one and the same time both of constitution and of deconstitution'.⁹ Derrida coined the term '*Différance*' to describe the activity of something undertaking both constitution and

created the titular 'forest of lines'. And, yet, the site was also simultaneously a space that never really gave up its status as an opera hall, something emphasised by the vocalists that took turns performing live in the space. They sang a song, specially written for the occasion, which gave poetic, if slightly nonsensical, directions out of the site. The lyrics began: 'Turn your back on the forest of lines, leave the Opera House behind'.

⁶ Amelia Douglas 'A Forest of Lines: An Interview with Pierre Huyghe' in *emaj (Electronic Melbourne Art Journal)*, Issue 3, Melbourne, 2008.

⁷ Jacques Derrida 'The Time of a Thesis: Punctuations' in Michael Drolet (ed) *The postmodernism reader: foundational texts* (London: Routledge, 2004): p 171.

⁸ *ibid.*

⁹ *ibid.*

deconstitution at once – a kind of intertwined agitational activity that continually and metonymically pulls down what it puts up. Derrida deliberately and interestingly used the French word ‘différance’, which means both ‘to defer’ and ‘to differ’, but cannily changed the spelling, using an ‘a’ rather than the customary ‘e’. Both words are, however, uttered the same. This trickiness with language performs his points, which are, broadly speaking, that slippage is an inherent quality of all systems (nicely enacted by the words sounding the same despite being written differently); that meaning is always deferred (it never actually resides absolutely in something); and that, as Saussure contended, ‘In language there are only differences’ (meaning is relative).

To utilise this strategy of *différance* – to look at the slippage between states, to hover in the interstitial space of meanings – is an interesting provocation and, for me, a valuable tool to apply to thinking about interiors. Derrida’s ‘strategic devices’ aimed to cleave open conventions to enable other possibilities. The forces working against this are not inconsequential, as Elizabeth Grosz picks up in her text *Architecture from the Outside*:

It is as if the forces of knowledge and power cannot tolerate difference, the new, the unthought, the outside, and do all that they can to suppress it, force it to conform to expectation, to fit into a structure, be absorbable, assimilable, and digestible without disturbance or perturbation. The question remains: How to perturb architecture ... How to infect architecture with its outside? ... How to force architecture to *think*?¹⁰

Pierre Huyghe’s *A Forest of Lines* is an example of architecture infected with its outside. For a 24-hour period, this iconic Australian building did not ‘conform to expectation’. Huyghe’s project disturbed and perturbed conventions. It fluxed between opera house and forest, moving restlessly between these two ideas. This was a space that could not be reconciled – its condition could not clearly be named. It was infected; made to tolerate *différance*. It was crack, cleave, rift – it was architecture in oscillation, it was interior as state-of-becoming. This architectural disturbance was very definitely sought out by Huyghe:

I am trying to allow a shift to happen, to produce a displacement ... [a]nd that shift has to evolve between a reality and its invention. ... I am trying to stand in the moment of transition and of translation, to understand how that process works and to produce a movement. I am trying to open a space of discursivity and experience, a space of potential interpretations.¹¹

¹⁰ Elizabeth Grosz ‘Architecture from the Outside’ in *Space, Time and Perversion: The Politics of Bodies* (London: Routledge, 1995): pp. 130–31.

¹¹ Amelia Douglas ‘A Forest of Lines: An Interview with Pierre Huyghe’ in *emaj* (*Electronic Melbourne Art Journal*), Issue 3, Melbourne, 2008.

One of the provocations inherent in Huyghe's *A Forest of Lines* is its invitation to simultaneously think *both* forest *and* Opera House, rather than – as we customarily do – forest *or* Opera House. This is the tactic of deconstruction in operation, as Jane Rendell writes:

The radical move deconstruction offers is to think 'both/and' rather than 'either/or', putting deferrals and differences into play and suggesting instead 'undecidability' and slippage. Feminist theorist Diane Elam has observed that Derrida's understanding of 'undecidability' is not indeterminate but rather a 'determinate oscillation between possibilities' and argues that by refusing to choose between one and another such a position offers a political potential.¹²

Huyghe's interior here is a tactical one; by creating a determinate oscillation between the possibilities of forest and opera house, he offers us an interior as a reflexive structure, an analytical tool that invites us to think new thoughts, to think of the unthought of these two spaces.



Figures 8–12: Bianca Hester *Please leave these windows open overnight to enable the fans to draw in cool air during the early hours of the morning*, Australian Centre for Contemporary Art (ACCA), Melbourne, 2010.

Courtesy: Australian Centre for Contemporary Art (ACCA), Melbourne.

Bianca Hester: 'Actions will occur intermittently'.

In a text entitled 'Practices of Interiorization', Suzie Attiwill invites new ways of thinking about interiors by offering the following provocation: '*what* is an interior, *how* is an interior, and *when* is an interior' (my emphasis).¹³ These questions draw our attention to the importance of temporality and performativity to our experience of space – that is, *when* a space is encountered and *what* is happening in it. These questions

¹² Jane Rendell 'Introduction: A Place Between' in *Art and Architecture: A Place Between* (London: I.B. Tauris & Co, 2006): p 9.

¹³ Suzie Attiwill, 'Practices of interiorization – an inter-story' in Tiiu Poldma (ed) *Meanings of Design. Social, Cultural and Philosophical Essays about People, Spaces and Interior Environment*, (Fairchild Books: forthcoming, 2012).

are central to Bianca Hester's project, pictured here, which emphasises both the importance of the actions performed within an interior and the time in which they are encountered. This is space performed; space as a practiced place.¹⁴

Hester's project *Please leave these windows open overnight to enable the fans to draw in cool air during the early hours of the morning*, 2010, comprised a large gallery space with a loose assemblage of materials. Even dormant, the objects that Hester arranged gave a sense of actions-that-could-be; the basketball, hoop and bicycle were easily imagined into action. Throughout the exhibition, audiences were free to activate the objects as they desired and, in addition, the artist scheduled a series of 'happenings', alluded to by a sign at the entrance stating 'Actions will occur intermittently'. These actions performed the interior: basketball was played over the brick wall, a horse perambulated across the space, a car was driven in, a man lay down under the gold satin sheet. Each time the space changed accordingly, underlying how mutable spaces can be and reminding us how important the 'how' and the 'when' are to the experience of the interior.

How we negotiate space – and how space negotiates us – are enduring interests for the sculptor. This is an artist who understands the poetics of space, but also the politics of space. She states:

Think about how you feel when you approach your house from a different street. The whole world feels entirely different ... If your feet are on the ground, you have a particular relationship to the earth. But if you're in a plane, the relationship changes. It's an aesthetic shift, but it's also political and social one. Being in a plane connects you to a different web of meaning, of relationships and perspective.¹⁵

The decision to merely occupy space can be politically critical, as the various 'Occupy' movements have underlined. Whose space is public space really? Hester's projects can be put to service as political metaphors, prompting us to consider what agency we have in any given environment. What choices are open to us? What can we do and, more pertinently, what we will actually do? In Hester's interior, timing is all, but so is position. Put simply: what you see depends on where you stand but, also, when you were there.

A moment in a movement: the indeterminate interior

Interior Design seems an excellent discipline from which to explore undecidability, indeterminacy and *différance*. Interior Design is an interestingly 'infected' discipline, enfolded amongst other disciplines such as architecture, art and design. The interior is also an enfolded condition, existing in relation to other spatial conditions. This 'enfolded' quality – this sense of already and inherently being about a kind of slippage between disciplines or states – could be a powerfully resonant space. It could be 'tactical'.

¹⁴ Bianca Hester *Please leave these windows open overnight to enable the fans to draw in cool air during the early hours of the morning*, Australian Centre for Contemporary Art (ACCA), Melbourne, 2010. Within the large gallery space at ACCA, Hester arranged a series of objects such as a mound of dirt, a Besser brick wall, swathes of gold material, blue hoops, a basketball, lengths of wood, which were activated at different times over the course of the exhibition.

¹⁵ Bianca Hester quoted in Liza Power 'Real-life art that moves beyond the frame' in *The Age*, August 5, 2010.

Interiors are not easy to locate or define; they are interestingly interstitial. This in-between-ness, this becomingness, this *différance* can perform a kind of opening up or 'determinate oscillation between possibilities'; it carries an expansiveness within it.

There are broad implications here – for interiors, certainly, but for wider political realities too. How can we have more sophisticated ideas for our spaces and our lives? What ramifications would more complex thinking about interior and exterior have for the boundaries of our selves, our houses, and our nation's borders? How can we perform new models of interior/exterior states that start to develop new and more useful ways of living for us? Old boundary lines can be limiting; to start to look for 'the unthought', for unexpected ideas and so far unrealized possibilities might, as Huyghe describes, serve to 'intensify the potentiality'.

Rather than define the interior as a static container, each of these projects positions the interior as a state of potential. Bianca Hester's project offers an assemblage of possible actions-that-could-be; Huyghe's confounds the expected spatial protocols of an iconic building and offers a new possibility; and Kusama's offers an experience of space that, I would argue, aligns more closely to contemporary experience than traditional models of western one-point perspective. Each project allegorises the idea of an interior as 'a state of becoming'. Each puts forward (to borrow Derrida again) 'a sort of strategic device, opening its own abyss, an unclosed, unenclosable, not wholly formalizable ensemble of rules'. Each simultaneously unleashes the activities of 'constitution and deconstitution', performing a simultaneous implosion and explosion of concepts conventionally used to demarcate interior space. By focusing on a state of becoming – on a 'moment in a movement' to borrow Huyghe's elegant phrase – they offer us a liberated or tactical interior, they offer us some 'unthoughts' for interior.