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by

Taylor Kubala

May 2018

# GLASS BOX

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A Thesis

Presented to the Faculty of the

School of Art

Kathrine G. McGovern College of the Arts

University of Houston

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In Partial Fulfillment

of the Requirements for Degree of

Master of Art History

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## Abstract

Although the white cube has served as the institutional standard for exhibiting modern and contemporary artworks and continues to be utilized for its perceived neutrality, it does not serve every medium of art equally well. Through the critique of the white cube exhibition model I analyze an equally significant model which I have termed the “glass box.” By applying the glass box model to exhibitions in recent history such as Andy Warhol’s Bonwit Teller window display in 1961, Yayoi Kusama’s *Infinity Mirror Room – Phalli’s Field* (1965), Dan Graham’s *Half Square/Half Crazy* (2004) and Kusama’s Louis Vuitton store display in New York City in 2012, I investigate the various ways in which the properties of this model affect viewer experience. While the glass box is not a fixed utopian ideal of how one should experience contemporary art, its accessibility becomes more apparent in the context of everyday life.

## **Acknowledgements**

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## Introduction

This thesis investigates the spatial structures of current contemporary art exhibition spaces. I will begin by comparing the “white cube” exhibition model to what I term the “glass box” exhibition model. After describing their parallels and their important differences, I apply the glass box model to the critique of various exhibitions in recent history. These critical examples, among others, will be discussed within three sections which include Andy Warhol’s Bonwit Teller window display in 1961, Yayoi Kusama’s *Infinity Mirror Room – Phalli’s Field* (1965), Dan Graham’s *Half Square/Half Crazy* (2004) and finally Kusama’s Louis Vuitton store display in New York City in 2012. Through these case studies, I aim to highlight the properties of the glass box and analyze how they affect viewer experience. The glass box provides an alternative way to think about the exhibition context of contemporary art. A curatorial component will be explored in conjunction with this thesis that both examines and embodies the glass box exhibition model.

## The White Cube

In 1976, artist and critic Brian O'Doherty wrote the now well-known text assessing contemporary exhibitionary practice called *Inside the White Cube*.<sup>1</sup> O'Doherty analyzes the white cube based on the structure of the exhibition space, the role of the spectator and where this model fits among social classes. By focusing on the viewer experience and neutrality, O'Doherty highlights the primary considerations informing the construction of this model. The "white cube" model was specifically developed based on the way modern and contemporary art was exhibited at the time, and the form modern and contemporary art took - mostly based on the mediums of painting and sculpture. It is still a common model used today. With this model, the display of art was essentially sequestered from the rest of the world, inside highly controlled, seemingly neutral gallery spaces. The white cube model arose simultaneously with a certain aesthetic regime of modern art itself focused on abstraction and the materiality of painting.

The white cube is rigid and structured. Its interior walls are generally white, with bare floors and lighting that streams in from overhead. The white walls and white ceiling enhance its neutrality, compared to the rich wall colors in gallery models that exhibit older works and are meant to reflect domestic spaces.<sup>2</sup> Works within the white cube are typically spread apart from each other with a sense of sparseness, or breathing room, that allows for the works to stand alone without any particular dialogue regarding what is next to them. O'Doherty unmasks these conventions and breaks down the basic principles of

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<sup>1</sup> Brian O'Doherty, *Inside the White Cube* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1999), 15.

<sup>2</sup> Paula Findlen, "The Museum: Etymology and Genealogy," in *Museum Studies: An Anthology of Contexts*, ed. Bettina Messias Carbonell (Hoboken: Blackwell Publishing Ltd, 2012), 34.

the white cube and its thoughtfully constructed setting. Since the white cube model has become the standard for modern and contemporary art's display, it is the best comparative example to the glass box because it establishes key tropes for viewer experience in a gallery space.

Each characteristic of the white cube is purposely implemented to affect the spectator's experience within the space. "The outside world must not come in," O'Doherty says, which implies that the white cube is an artificial place that should be kept separate from the outside.<sup>3</sup> The white cube is a bare space, bright and clean.<sup>4</sup> Here, a visitor encounters works of art as O'Doherty describes, "mounted, hung, scattered for study," and the space is stripped of any extraneous information that might distract the viewer from the art.<sup>5</sup> The walls are white, while the floors are carpeted for quiet strolling or covered with pristine polished wood, or most commonly today, polished concrete. Skylights or artificial light fixtures are mounted on the ceiling to illuminate the space and eliminate shadows that could distract from the work on view. Ideally, there is nothing in the space that could interfere with the visitor's contemplation of art, such as advertisements, or traffic noises. This formula depends on a sealed-off space, isolated from the rest of the world, so that a viewer can experience the constructed environment of the white cube without distraction.

Once a visitor enters the white cube, he or she becomes one of O'Doherty's gallery figures, the "Spectator" or the "Eye." The Spectator, in O'Doherty's characterization, feels, notices and moves.<sup>6</sup> He or she is aware of the space, which is

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<sup>3</sup> Brian O'Doherty, *Inside the White Cube* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1999), 15.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid., 39.

clarified not “only in the picture, but in the place where the picture hangs – the gallery.”<sup>7</sup> Much like the frame of a painting becomes a marker for containing the work, the gallery also becomes a distinctly clarified and sealed off space. The Spectator navigates the gallery and searches for the content of the works. O’Doherty’s other, more theoretical figure, the ‘Eye’ is the “snobbish” cousin of the Spectator,<sup>8</sup> because it seeks balance, resolves, observes, discriminates, and perceives.<sup>9</sup> He makes an important distinction between the Spectator and the Eye by saying the “Eye can be trained in a way the Spectator cannot. It is a finely tuned, even noble organ, aesthetically and socially superior to the Spectator,” because the Spectator has a “touch of male obtuseness.”<sup>10</sup> By this, O’Doherty means that the Eye is sharply observant of surroundings while the Spectator is less sensitive. In the simplest of terms, the Spectator is a passive participant in the gallery, while the Eye is more active. O’Doherty was not the only voice describing this paradigm. Art historian Caroline Jones in her book *Eyesight Alone* investigates art critic Clement Greenberg’s fundamental approach to understanding modernism which he believes is achieved through “eyesight alone.”<sup>11</sup> Much like O’Doherty’s theoretical figure, the Eye, Greenberg proposes that the disembodied Eye, which was a metaphor for the self, was necessary in reading an artwork.<sup>12</sup>

O’Doherty suggests that when presented with a gallery space to navigate and understand, the role of the Eye and the Spectator highlight the fact that we become

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<sup>7</sup> Ibid.

<sup>8</sup> Ibid., 41.

<sup>9</sup> Ibid., 42.

<sup>10</sup> Ibid., 41.

<sup>11</sup> Caroline Jones, *Eyesight Alone: Clement Greenberg’s Bureaucratization of the Senses* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2005), 314.

<sup>12</sup> Ibid., 321.

critical of “looking at ourselves looking” at art.<sup>13</sup> O’Doherty describes a kind of self-consciousness, in which we begin to concern ourselves with how we look when we are contemplating a work in the gallery space. According to O’Doherty, it is this contemplation, acceptance, or realization of oneself that occurs when observing a work of art. He writes: “any certainty about what’s ‘out there’ was eroded by uncertainties of the perceptual process,” and so the Eye and Spectator were developed as a method to stand in for that perceptual process when viewing modern art.<sup>14</sup> The white cube space reinforced the perceptual process that certain kinds of modern art foregrounded and depended upon. Therefore, the Eye and the Spectator became a way to evaluate or even justify how the viewer experienced the white cube. This system, arguably, continues to be the perceptual standard into the contemporary period.

In the white cube the spectator is expected to understand what they are looking at without context in labels or architecture. There are no educational guides or extensive label texts in the white cube, which means that viewing work within this model becomes intimidating if one does not have prior knowledge to inform their experience. O’Doherty explains, “the spectator is invited into a space where the act of approach is turned back on itself,” which means that the artwork is now confronting the visitor, instead of the other way around.<sup>15</sup> Here, the work simply exists in the gallery space without any provided context. Compared to a former exhibition model like that of the French Salon where works were displayed in a hierarchical context, O’Doherty suggests that the neutrality of the white cube facilitates the Spectator’s response to the work inside the gallery

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<sup>13</sup> Brian O’Doherty, *Inside the White Cube*, 61.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*, 61.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*, 76.

regardless of any given information. The Eye, meanwhile, embodies a particular form of participation that is only available to those who have access to art historical knowledge. Unlike older environments for viewing art, the architectural elements of the white cube intentionally cultivate a neutral seeming environment that not reference anything. For example, when seeing Titian's sixteenth century *Annunciation* painting within its context of the San Salvador church in Venice, the viewer is directly connected to the religious theme of the painting through its equally religious setting. However, the neutrality of the white cube and the work's lack of connection to its spatial environment is meant to elevate the work by allowing the viewer to focus their attention on the artwork and not the space.

In many ways, the white cube reinforces elitism by excluding viewers from the general public. There is a particular connotation of elitism associated with the white cube as a space where modern and contemporary art is presented, as well as the social class who understands the work inside of it. Consequently, O'Doherty uses three adjectives in association with the white cube which, are exclusive, expensive, and difficult. Because the white cube is associated with these three attributes, the space becomes a symbol of class and knowledge for those who have access to it. O'Doherty proposes that one needs the social, financial and intellectual privilege to understand art in this setting, as the white cube is a place not only to look at expensive art but also to purchase it, which elevates its social status. In fact, O'Doherty says the "excluded visitor" even became a motif for the white cube, because in addition to being compelled to contemplate the art, the visitor was compelled to contemplate the modernist aesthetics of the gallery. These responsibilities

could overwhelm a person who typically does not find themselves in an art gallery and further, drive them away from visiting a white cube.<sup>16</sup>

In 1960, in an attempt to reduce or at least respond to the exclusiveness of the white cube, artist Armand Arman created *Le Plein*, an installation presented in the window of Galerie Iris Clert, in Paris. For this installation, Arman filled the entire gallery to the ceiling with junk, making it impossible for visitors to enter the gallery thus entailing that viewers engage with the work from beyond the gallery's walls. With this gesture, Arman was commenting on the fact that anything inside the gallery could be art — even trash — because the context of the white cube was such a definitive trope of viewing modern art, while also undermining the white cube as a context for art viewing. Instead of standing before a white wall or pedestal, visitors were forced to view the installation through a single window which was filled to the brim with garbage (the art installation). By filling the gallery space with trash and making the inside inaccessible, Arman's gesture was both an acknowledgement and a critique of the exclusivity of the white cube as well as the work typically shown inside.

While the model of the white cube continues to be used in galleries and museums alike, I would like to observe and name an equally significant model that competes with the white cube: the glass box. The glass box can be characterized by a few fundamental elements. First, it is contextual because it establishes a relationship between the audience and environment, even to the point of invitation. Anyone can simply pass by and discover this model because it is integrated within the urban environment. While many examples of the glass box are found within everyday surroundings and are meant to be viewed in

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<sup>16</sup> Ibid., 94.

passing, they also contain participatory aspects that sometimes invite the viewer to become part of the work. In some cases, the work becomes an immersive environment for those who wish to take part.

The second component of the glass box is its inclusive nature. This model competes with the distractions of the outside world. In the white cube, certain and consistent spatial relationships are defined, such as standing directly before the artwork, being an arm's length away, viewing from a prescribed position. The spatial relationships established when viewing work within a glass box differ from the white cube because there is no one position or angle from which to experience the work inside. As opposed to the white cube where works are placed in a particular position on a wall or a pedestal for viewing, there is no prescribed viewing point for the glass box. This means that viewers can stand as close to the structure or as far away as they choose, which allows for various perceptual experiences.

The glass box consists of architectural elements and materials that are specific to its model which differ from the white cube. Unlike the sealed off space of the white cube, the glass box faces the outdoor environment or is implemented within the outdoors and involves either a glass window incorporated within the facade of a building or is constructed entirely of materials such as glass and steel which are typically resilient to weather most conditions. This glass can be manipulated in a variety of ways to provide qualities particular to the artist's goal, such as complete transparency, semi-opaqueness, ranges of color, and levels of reflection and refraction. Glass is a fundamental material of the glass box because it either acts as a window between a closed space and the outside



world or it transforms the environment when it comprises a stand-alone structure that is separate from the storefront and far-removed from the gallery space.

The viewer is inclined to participate with the glass box model. Because the glass box model is presented in public spaces it asks the viewer to acknowledge its existence by inserting itself within an existing environment or presenting the viewer with an occasion to peer inside a window. This aspect is specific to the glass box because one is inclined to either navigate the space with one's eyes or with one's body, upon encounter. Unlike the white cube model where the gallery space emphasizes the value of artworks by implementing a set of silent rules that consist of not touching the art objects or even the walls, the glass box is equipped for interaction which does not demand previously acquired knowledge to understand the object. In some cases, the value of the work exhibited through the glass box model might even equally reside in the viewer's experience with the object, that is the power of the object is relational, rather than inherent.

Lastly, this model relies heavily on visibility and flexibility, which means that it can be applied to various types of environments and constructed within a multitude of conditions. As artworks produced in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries shift away from traditional mediums like painting and sculpture, the glass box display model becomes even more desirable and widespread because of its flexibility. Meaning that its conditions are more suitable for artworks that seek to incorporate the viewer into modes of installation art. This model is meant to be experienced while on streets, within a public, urban context thereby challenging the institutional norms of contemporary art presentation, especially the standard white cube gallery space.

## Inclusivity

The first historical case study of the emergence of the glass box I will examine is Andy Warhol's Bonwit Teller window display completed in 1961 (Figure 1). Shop windows are one example of the glass box model, where artists or window designers construct scenes to attract passersby, with the goal of selling products through compelling displays. Display director of the upscale Manhattan department store, Gene Moore, commissioned Warhol to design the Bonwit Teller window, in which Warhol installed five of his recent paintings in the midst of mannequins dressed in the season's newest fashions. In Cecile Whiting's *A Taste for Pop*, the scene is referred to as an installed surprise for those strolling down the avenue and window shopping.<sup>17</sup> Which means that the window shopper would experience an unexpected display of art simultaneously integrated within the context of this department store window which was normally constructed to advertise commercial products. While the white cube pretends to not be part of the market by way of its neutrality, the glass box openly acknowledges its place in the commercial sphere. In Warhol's window, one could see Bonwit Teller's products as well as paintings. This theatrical display was itself modeled not only as a staged art gallery but also to give a sense of the artist's studio, with the mannequins arranged as visitors. Four out of the five paintings were mounted as if in a gallery, while one was propped on an easel and the bodies of the "visitors" (aka the mannequins) faced the street. Warhol's paintings are instantly noticeable by their sheer size and eye-catching color schemes. Although the mannequins were much smaller than the works of art, they

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<sup>17</sup> Cecile Whiting, *A Taste for Pop* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997), 9.

were strategically arranged as complimentary figures with dresses and accessories that coordinated with the colors of the paintings.

The mannequins in the window were arranged in various standing positions, but instead of observing the works, they observed the street and the viewer. According to Whiting, the purpose of this display tactic was so that the window-shoppers could “project themselves imaginatively into a theatrical scene and to identify with the mannequins: they too, could aspire to be well-dressed women looking at paintings.”<sup>18</sup> This concept of self-reflection is in one way literal because the shoppers are confronted with a pane of glass from where they encounter the reflection of themselves, but also theoretical because this display perhaps caused them to see a projection of the self they desired to be. This concept relates to the self-conscious viewer found in the white cube, as described by O’Doherty, where the viewer experiences a realization of oneself while viewing an artwork.

The glass box and consumerism are often intertwined, as the glass box is commonly used in retail. In Warhol’s window, the viewer is met with a commercial space that features products of the Bonwit Teller department store as well as products of artist, which ironically emphasize the theme of commercialism. Warhol’s five paintings were representative of consumer culture and the powerful effects of media on self image. From comics, newspapers, cheap back-page ads in magazines to sensational tabloids, Warhol drew his sources from mass culture in order to create work with content that was immediately recognizable. All of the work on display contained visual materials that

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<sup>18</sup> Ibid., 10.

were published between March 18, 1961 and April 2, 1961.<sup>19</sup> This means that the people walking by the window may have been exposed to this material previous to the display. Two of the five works in the display featured fragments of advertisements that poked at self dissatisfaction. *Advertisement* is a collage of newspaper ads that promote quick fixes to look younger and more attractive paired with a popular Pepsi Cola ad, while *Before and After* features the before and after results of a life changing nose job. The remaining three works were cropped and manipulated versions of cartoons with characters from Little King, Superman and Popeye.<sup>20</sup> By incorporating traces of mass-media in these works and placing them in a public space amongst a window display that is in its own form an advertisement, he highlights the overtly commercial aspect of the glass box model and its undeniable position in the consumer world.

With these paintings, Warhol projected fragments of an American culture that was consumed with appearance and included American idols who could save the discontented public. Not only was everyone at least somewhat familiar with the media Warhol appropriated in his paintings, many could likely relate to the constant desire to be the media's rendition of success or beauty. As critic Arthur Danto has described, "the window of Bonwit Teller was a showroom of the world of the passerby."<sup>21</sup> The people who walked by the window were presented a version of their own world in which they strive for unattainable perfection and acceptance. While it is ironic that Warhol presented these topics within a high-end department store that set beauty trends, his staging of a

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<sup>19</sup> Dana Louise Ostrander, *The Bonwit Teller Window: Homoeroticism and Gender Play in Andy Warhol's Early Pop Exhibition* (MA thesis, University of Illinois, 2013), 4.

<sup>20</sup> Ibid., 4.

<sup>21</sup> Arthur C Danto, *Andy Warhol* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2009), 24.

semi-white cube in an outward facing model of curation can be seen as a response to the white cube's formal and social constructs. By mimicking a white cube exhibition in the public sphere, he turned the privacy of the white cube inside out and acknowledged the anti-elitist attitude of the glass box.

In contrast to the perceived elitism of the white cube that O'Doherty theorizes, the glass box presents a near opposite scenario. The class of people who shop at Bonwit Teller, or those who wish to, have expensive taste and possibly an interest in art. By promoting art, the status of the store is elevated, even as the works on display appropriated images from non-elite culture. However, this display also presented art to whomever passed by on the street, while mimicking the less permeable space of an art gallery, allowing passersby to look in on a constructed gallery space that they might normally not have entered. The art was used as a prop to sell the clothing in the window, but it may have been especially effective as a psychological device to pique the attention of pedestrians. Although it was given a secure space, the art within the glass box was not marketed as an exhibition of five works by Andy Warhol in a shop window. In fact, no information regarding the works of art was provided to the street viewers.

Warhol's works were mounted inside a gallery space constructed with the white cube aesthetic in mind, while also rejecting it. The window space alluded to the sterile atmosphere of the gallery with the orientation of the hanging works and nicely dressed visitors, however; the works were placed against a black wall background in the place of a white wall. Instead of the works being evenly mounted and spaced, they were mounted at staggering heights and so close together that two of them actually overlapped. Warhol's presentation of the paintings was atypical for a white cube exhibition. When

paintings are mounted in a white cube they are typically placed with “breathing room” in between each work, which means the works are spaced so that no work invades the space of another. This allows each work to ostensibly be viewed in isolation, if one were to stand directly before it. In this way, other works do not crowd the spectator’s view or interfere with his or her contemplation. In Warhol’s window, the viewer is confronted with large works that are crammed together in a small space which subverts the spare effect of the white cube.

The inclusion of the painting on the easel further complicated the traditional white cube aesthetic. This work seems like it would be incomplete because typically works on easels are in the process of being finished in the artist’s studio and the white cube is the destination for the artwork once it is complete and ready for sale. By alluding to aspects of the white cube gallery space, as well as the artist’s studio, Warhol combines two exclusive spaces and puts them on view (he also combines a commercial space of monetary exchange with a working space in which ideas are exchanged). With this glass box model, Warhol was able to take cues from the white cube, such as the mounting and exhibition of paintings for view by well-dressed gallery viewers, while also rejecting its traditional associations by hanging the works in an atypical manner and presenting at least one work that might be perceived as unfinished. Warhol purposely played with the idea of the gallery space as a commercial venue and art as pure commodity with his window installation. The artworks ultimately dictate the entire scene, situating the viewer in this exhibitionary situation. This is ironic because the works shown inside were designed to challenge the elitism of the art world but were nonetheless exhibited next to

expensive attire, presenting an elite space to the general public who might pass by the window.

Although Warhol partly utilized the white cube aesthetic, his display disrupted the isolation of the white cube with an exhibition that was accessible to all viewers on Fifth Avenue. In order to see these works, one simply had to walk by and in that moment, he or she is met with the decision to stop and look — or keep going. There is no dressing up for the occasion, mentally preparing for the act of contemplation or the concern of gallery etiquette. Here, on the side of the street, one could view the work of Andy Warhol and experience a type of self-reflection that challenges the intellectual demands of the white cube. The glass box does not require prior knowledge or education of artwork to understand that art presented; instead, it asks the viewer to observe the glass box's contextual environment to better inform the material on exhibition. In this instance, a viewer has the choice to look at oneself, the stylish mannequins, the works of Andy Warhol and this shop window's overall environment. Instead of leaving everything behind at the doors of a white-cube gallery, viewers bring it all with them, including the backdrop of the street reflected in the windows. These works and the viewer exist alongside all of the movement of the world and the decision to look itself becomes a form of self projection and reflection.

Andy Warhol was not the only artist who used window display as an alternative model to the white cube. During the winter of 1961, the same year as Warhol's window exhibition, Claes Oldenburg staged an acutely different window display. *The Store* was installed in the front window of a rented storefront of a downtown building in East Manhattan — a much less glamorous area than Warhol's fifth avenue window, which

was also Oldenburg's studio space.<sup>22</sup> Instead of selling his work in a traditional gallery space with a gallerist at the other end of the transaction, Oldenburg acted as the storekeeper. He sold artwork to interested shoppers the same way one purchases groceries from a supermarket. His plaster and chicken wire sculptures crudely resembled affordable everyday articles of clothing like underwear and food items such as a hamburgers or sandwiches that challenged traditional art objects as well as the typical white cube gallery space. By selling serious works of art that mimicked everyday items in a storefront of Lower East Side of Manhattan, Oldenburg critiqued the accessibility of the white cube and the artworks that were sold within it.

Oldenburg challenged the pristine environment of the white cube by directly selling his artwork, which was itself gritty and unrefined, emphasized how a commercial gallery space could easily be transformed into in a makeshift store. Visitors were allowed to peruse the store, which was promoting and selling the work of Oldenburg (the typical function of a gallery space). But Oldenburg's storefront was, like Warhol's window, a way to present artwork as a commodity. However, Oldenburg's installation differed from Warhol's because it did not use paintings which were usually shown in a gallery, and was comprised of wonky sculptures made from cheap materials like chicken wire and plaster. Paintings and sculptures in galleries are usually viewed as one of a kind and unique. Both Warhol and Oldenburg used visual imagery that was familiar to viewers, such as newspaper ads (in Warhol's case) and ice cream sundaes or dresses (in Oldenburg's case), and placed them in a scenario that subverted the white cube aesthetic.

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<sup>22</sup> Ibid., 31.



While Oldenburg's storefront was a radical response to the white cube, it was comprised of white cube qualities. Although his storefront greatly differed from the bare and neutral space of the white cube, and even the gallery-like viewership of Warhol's window, Oldenburg's storefront was made of white walls and wooden floors. Oldenburg altered two of the three walls and haphazardly painted splotchy, flesh toned dots on the two white walls that faced each other, and left the back wall totally white, but he did not attempt to paint over the white completely. These alterations produced a space that seemed cluttered and claustrophobic, especially with Oldenburg's unsystematically mounted artworks on the walls. While the walls were not totally white, his choice to use white paint and hang his artworks might have been a gesture to the white cube gallery, in that his work was still being sold in a space that resembled a white cube. If Oldenburg had painted the walls black, like Warhol, his presentation might have lost all connotation of the gallery. Whereas Warhol exhibited paintings in a manner that reminded the viewer of the white cube, Oldenburg cluttered and crammed his objects from floor to ceiling, which left little room for each individual artwork to stand out from the others and directly related to the practice of displaying items in an abundance, which was the common display mode in shops Lower East Side.<sup>23</sup> As opposed to the more visual shopping experience of Bonwit Teller, Oldenburg's presentation of objects imitated a more mundane shopping experience where tactile selection was common practice.<sup>24</sup> Without the white walls and wooden floors, his storefront might have resembled a disorganized, junky storage room, instead of a place to sell art. Although he embraced the glass box

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<sup>23</sup> Cecile Whiting, *A Taste for Pop*, 26.

<sup>24</sup> Ibid.

model, in this case, the white cube helped to reinforce the authenticity of the art viewing environment created by Oldenburg.

## Expansion and Meditation

In opposition to the rigid conditions of the white cube, another model in the 1960s was developed known as the black box phenomenon. Like the glass box, this phenomenon issues an addendum to the white cube because it highlights the white cube's inability to appropriately exhibit art media outside of painting and sculpture. Art historian Andrew Uroskie clarifies this distinction by stating that "consciously or unconsciously, spectators of painting, film and performance have always understood the art gallery, the cinema hall and the theatrical stage as being governed by their own particular conventions of production and reception."<sup>25</sup> While it is true that cinema and theater demand particular environments that are suitable to their artistic medium, the white cube's inherent structure excluded anything outside of the plastic arts. The overhead lighting and white walls were not conducive for dark space cinema required for viewing and an open stage or arena necessary for performance. The idea that cinema could exist outside the black box theater and as a form of art within exhibitionary situations initiated the black box phenomenon, which meant that cinema was forcibly implemented into the white cube gallery space by literally inserting a black box inside the white cube. Artists who participated in the black box phenomenon included but were not limited to: Andy Warhol, Claes Oldenburg, Nam June Paik, John Cage, and Robert Whitman. While the black box's purpose was to provide an environment for viewing film and time-based media, it produced a flexible space that could be incorporated in a variety of white cube situations, therefore; expanding the possibilities of various media in the white cube.

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<sup>25</sup> Andrew Uroskie, *Between the Black Box and the White Cube* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2014), 11.

Yayoi Kusama's, *Infinity Mirror Room – Phalli's Field* (1965), moves away from aspects of the white cube by utilizing characteristics of the black box and becomes a transitional phase through which to explore the glass box model. While the Andy Warhol window presented work to viewers, street-side, it was still employing familiar aspects of a white cube gallery space. Kusama's installation removed most formal notions of the white cube by forming a closed off environment inside the white cube, an approach utilized in the black box phenomenon, to create a participatory kaleidoscopic chamber that was separate from the gallery space.

Here, the perceptual experience of the spectator transitioned from being merely the viewer of a work to now, the subject within the work. In Kusama's *Infinity Mirror Room*, the viewer is directly confronted with his or her reflection in the room of mirrors. Kusama uses mirrors to construct a space, housed within an institution, and provides the illusion of infinity. In this installation, she used four mirrors as four walls and covered the floor with small, stuffed phallic sculptures (Figure 2). Each sculpture was made with white fabric and painted with red dots that varied in size. The mirrors provided infinite planes of dots and hundreds, even thousands of phalli. While the outside world is excluded from this installation, the visitor is faced with his or her own presence within the work, making it a personalized, inhabited experience. In this sense, no one will ever see the same reflection in the mirrors in the same way, ever again. The viewers' reflections become an ephemeral, but specific, stamp on the work for as long as they occupy the space; a time-based phenomenon that evokes the same time-based environment constructed in the black box.

Unlike Warhol's window, Kusama's installation is not one that is merely stumbled upon in the outside world; however, it establishes a spatial relationship with the viewer and demands visitor participation to experience it. Yet unlike the white cube, the architecture of which exists independently of viewers but also governs how a visitor experiences the work, Kusama's work opens another level of interaction and navigation. Other than the obvious inclination to enter the space, Kusama leaves the rest of the experience up to the visitor. According art historian Jo Applin, a central theme of the work is a "psychologically charged mode of encounter."<sup>26</sup> Instead of discovering this work within an urban context, a viewer encounters oneself or the company of other visitors inside a constructed space, within a museum institution. The welcomed participants are met with dislocation as they enter a constructed environment within a white cube - reminiscent of the black box, as well as uncertainty, or perhaps a sense of freedom within their endless reflections.

When entering Kusama's space, one literally enters a box and becomes a product of its properties and its environment. While the white cube provokes a level of self consciousness, Kusama's infinity rooms produce the ultimate self reflection. On the one hand, in the white cube, one is aware of the ambulation of other spectators (who are assumed to abide by the same unspoken rules of contemplation and silence) and the perceptual process that goes into viewing artworks within a gallery space. On the other hand, in the glass/mirrored box, the spectator is aware of the competing environment, which is part of its experience. Both lead to different experiences of self consciousness and reflection. However, in Kusama's infinity rooms, the spectator is more directly

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<sup>26</sup> Jo Applin, *Infinity Mirror Room - Phalli's Field* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2012), 3.

incorporated into the work via his or her own reflection in the mirrored confines of the piece, creating a perceptual experience that cannot be reproduced. Kusama's expanding worlds allow the spectator to be fully engulfed within their environment. Her immersive approach was not only prescient to the idea of art's virtual extension into cyberspace but also signaled a shift from modernist viewing subjects found within the white cube such as abstract expressionism and gave way to experiential multisensory installation.<sup>27</sup>

Communications scholar Fred Turner suggests that although expanding multi-media environments are often associated with counterculture in the sixties, they arose in the forties as result of political dynamics during and after World War II when individual consciousness and the sense of a human collective were forces meant to defeat totalitarianism.<sup>28</sup> The glass box offers a form of democratic experience in relation to artwork that is both individual and collective.

Thus the glass box invites a more embodied and active experience of spectatorship than the more passive experience of the white cube. Dan Graham's *Half Square/Half Crazy* (2004) is a more recent example of expanding planes and reflection, yet Graham removes the work (and the act of viewing) entirely from of the context of the gallery space (Figure 3). This work was made with steel frames and four perpendicular panes of semi-reflective glass, two of which are curved to create a warped square. The structure was placed in Como, Italy, in a plaza in between two of the city's most significant architectural structures, the Duomo di Como, a cathedral built during the years

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<sup>27</sup> Gloria Sutton, "Between Enactment and Depiction: Yayoi Kusama's Spatialized Image Structures," in *Yayoi Kusama Infinity Mirrors*, ed. Mika Yoshitake (Munich; London; New York: Hirshhorn Museum and Sculpture Garden and Delmonico Books/Prestel, 2017), 140.

<sup>28</sup> Fred Turner, *The Democratic Surround* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2013), 8.

of 1396 and 1740 and architect Giuseppe Terragni's rationalist 1936 Casa del Fascio.<sup>29</sup> Here, Graham utilizes the reflective nature of glass and the environment, while inviting the public to participate. Within the four walls, he provided only one doorway for people to enter and exit. This "pavilion"<sup>30</sup> creates what art historian Sarah Lookofsky has described in her essay "Cults of transparency: the curtain wall and the shop window in the work of Dan Graham and Josephine Meckseper," as a "disorienting visual scheme in which viewers see their own reflection, the reflection of others beside them, and their shared urban context."<sup>31</sup> When viewers approach the reflective panes of glass, they are immediately met with their own mirrored image, but also the reflection of everything else in the vicinity of the work, including other viewers and the architectural elements of the surrounding plaza.

Graham's significant placement of this pavilion forces the interaction of two monuments central to Como, in a contemporary setting. The plaza in which it is placed is called the Piazza del Popolo which translates to the People's Square and is situated between two prominent markers of Como's historical past. Because the duomo was built over a long period of time, it is a collection of Medieval architectural principles and Romanesque style, while the Casa del Fascio evokes a Rationalist and Modern approach while confronting Italy's Fascist past. What was once the headquarters of the local Fascist party during Mussolini's Fascist regime is reflected in the adjacent straight panes of glass, while the duomo is reflected in the two curved panes of glass. The pavilion is

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<sup>29</sup> Sarah Lookofsky, "Cults of Transparency: The Curtain Wall and the Shop Window in the Work of Dan Graham and Josephine Meckseper," in *Sculpture and the Vitrine*, ed. John C. Welchman (Farnham: Ashgate Publishing, Ltd, 2013), 218.

<sup>30</sup> Ibid., 218.

<sup>31</sup> Ibid., 219.

placed in this position to directly translate the architectural as well as socio-political concerns of the era when each building was erected. However, because Graham uses glass that not only reflects but also allows for transparency, both buildings are anamorphically meshed into each other. While standing before the panes, one will not only see through to the facade of the Fascist building but also distorted reflections of the duomo across the plaza and vice versa, all while seeing the reflection of oneself. In this situation, the glass box is used as a way to address historical markers of the past in order to bring new experiences in the present, in the sense that historical space and the present experience of the space become mapped onto each other.

The glass box has the capability to expand beyond its environment into an experiential arena that invites viewers to participate but also critically reflect on the significance of their engagement within the glass box's urban context. Graham utilizes this model to change the way we think about our relation to architecture and its historical significance. By placing his pavilion in the plaza, viewers see the two buildings in relation to each other, while also experiencing a new vantage point. He blends two monuments of contradicting architecture that still stand as symbols of the priorities of their historical and cultural eras, in order to present a new, temporary monument that requires the viewer's participation in a reflective nature — literally and figuratively.

Instead of directly responding to the confines of the white cube as Warhol and Oldenberg's installations did, Graham's pavilion highlights the way in which the glass box model can manipulate its surroundings, such as its specific geographical context, by forcing viewers to see distinct historical markers as intertwined, even if in a disoriented manner. Perhaps the disorienting nature of it is simply the physical result of a complex



past that has shaped the present. The title *Half Square Half Crazy* alludes to the somewhat perplexing nature of the piece. The “square,” which is the basis and typical format of the white cube, could either relate to the plaza itself or the the tradition of the square in architecture and its fundamental role in the design of the Casa del Fascio. The use of the word crazy might suggest the overall craziness of the overlapping reflections. In an interview with architect and art historian Adachiara Zevi, Graham suggests that this pavilion, like his many others, is a “walking narrative” of the culture that it reflects.<sup>32</sup> As a viewer walks around or inside the pavilion, he or she is viewing but also participating within an unfolding narrative surrounding architecture that melds two histories with deeply rooted cultural implications and presents them in the contemporary realm.

The flexibility of the glass box is highlighted within Graham’s work because it can insert itself within a particular environment and transform that environment depending on the specific position of the viewer. Graham balances between transparency and reflection which ultimately embeds the viewer within the urban environment. His pavilion exists within a duality of dimensions, the first being its own intervention into an existing environment and the second being that it is creating its own environment while reflecting the visual cues of the environment in which Graham has inserted it. In simpler terms, Graham aims to create a space within a space and at the same time, his space reflects the space around it. This produces a doubling effect which heightens the essential awareness of visitors who immediately become spatialized when viewing themselves and the surrounding urban context. On the one hand, like Kusama’s infinity mirrors, Graham’s work invites the viewer inside, but on the other hand, he allows the viewer to

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<sup>32</sup> Adachiara Zevi “Interview with Dan Graham,” in *Dan Graham Half Square / Half Crazy* (Milan: Edizioni Charta, 2005), 19.

experience the work by walking around it and thus exerts less control over the viewer's experience. While Warhol's window still utilized the conventions of the white cube by presenting his paintings in a glass box that mimicked some kind of art exhibition, Graham's structure is entirely independent of the white cube and becomes the work of art itself. However, both installations contain reflective aspects and the opening up of spatial relationships as viewers are confronted with the reflection of themselves and their environments within the panes of glass.

Graham's use of the glass box also explores the issue of surveillance. Most of Graham's pavilion structures combine the use of four types of glass — semi-transparent, semi-reflective, and two-way mirrored glass — to develop a space that is simultaneously permeable and impermeable. This means that when visitors approach the glass, they see through it, they see themselves and they also see the reflected environment that surrounds them, which is different from viewing through standard transparent glass which does not have the same disorienting effects. Visitors to Graham's pavilion are invited to enter by a single doorway or enticed to walk around the reflexive structure, which evokes themes of dislocation but also surveillance. Oftentimes, two-way mirror glass is used on corporate buildings so that the outside world cannot look in, but those inside the building can watch what is happening outside the building. Graham's work almost reverses this surveilled aspect by incorporating layers of two-way mirrored glass with semi-transparent qualities so that the viewer can look into the glass and see the self, but also see what is on the other side from all angles, making the glass a perceptual opening but also barrier at the same time while simultaneously bringing attention to voyeuristic tendencies. Instead of an

exclusive white cube gallery space or an inclusive, streetside Warhol window display, Graham's work becomes its own reflexive architectural structure.

Although the white cube continues to be the industry standard for presenting all types of modern and contemporary art, it is not always the most successful. The glass box offers more flexibility, as well as more dynamic interactions that are not always feasible within a white cube. While paintings may not be the most suitable for the glass box model, works like Dan Graham's pavilions are not as successful within the white cube because they are stripped of the surrounding environment and its connotations. In an exhibition at Galerie Nicolai Wallner, in 2008, Graham's *Square Bisected by Curve* (2008) was commissioned and installed in this white cube gallery space. The viewer is met with a square made of glass, similar to *Half Square Half Crazy*, here with two entrances on opposite sides. Between the two entrances is another glass wall, but curved and connected from one corner to the other, which essentially bisects the square and results in two warped triangles. When the viewer approaches the piece, he or she is confronted with their own reflection courtesy of Graham's typical two-way reflecting glass, as well as the surrounding white walls. The only factor that really disrupts the reflection of the bare surroundings, aside from the viewer's body and gaze, is the curved wall in the center of the square. This wall adds another distorted perception for the viewer, by creating multiple planes of reflection, but the effect is neutralized by the bareness of the white cube that contains the work.

While this pavilion still calls for viewers' participation, which breaks away from the expected norms within the white cube, it is deprived of its full potential. There is no strategic placing of the work, because the pavilion is inside a building with bare walls

where there is no opportunity for it to interact within an urban context. In a previous indoor exhibition of a similar work titled *Mannerism/Rococo* (2007) at the Marian Goodman Gallery, a wall of windows were bent into refraction within the pavilion's mirrored glass and placed emphasis on the architectural interior of the space. In this case, the 2008 pavilion stands alone beneath a row of lights that line the perimeter of the ceiling in the gallery. The glass box facilitates a participatory and experiential art-viewing environment that the white cube often eschews, which is what we see with Graham's pavilions within the gallery. Within the white cube, Graham's glass box is less effective because it is exhibited within a context designed to appear neutral and uninhibited by its environment. In this instance, Graham's pavilion is not longer in dialogue with its urban context but reflects the white space of the gallery. And when the pavilion is placed within an institution it limits the viewer's involvement with the structure and its environment because of the participatory limits within the white cube.

## Static and Rhythmic

The glass box is not a fixed utopian ideal of how one should experience contemporary art, it is a notion that is flexible to various applications. Its parameters exceed those of the white cube, as its accessibility becomes more apparent in the context of everyday life. Similar to the Warhol works in the Bonwit Teller window, the works of Kusama later adorned the shop window of the Louis Vuitton store in New York City in 2012 (Figure 4). While the neutral veneer of the white cube has been previously discussed, it still operates on a commercial level by promoting and selling the art inside. Likewise in these two goals, the glass box utilizes the spectacle of the commercial sphere and caters to consumer culture through the promotion of products and art. In the case of Warhol's Bonwit Teller window and Kusama's window display for Louis Vuitton, the glass box acknowledges art as commodity because it is presented alongside consumer products in the form of a spectacle. In his 1967 book *Society of the Spectacle*, Guy Debord suggests that every aspect of daily life is available and constructed for commodification, which is not only limited to products but also the commodity of human experiences. He writes "the spectacle is the moment when the commodity has attained the total occupation of social life."<sup>33</sup> What Debord means is that all aspects of social life are constructed with the idea of commodification. Because the glass box exists throughout various aspects of social life and urban environment by selling or promoting art, in some ways it embraces and facilitates the notion of the spectacle. In this case, Kusama's window display depends on the activity of window shopping or the attention of the

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<sup>33</sup> Guy Debord, *Society of the Spectacle* (Detroit: Black & Red, 1983), 42. Reprint from original (Paris: Editions Buchet-Chastel, 1967).

passerby to deliver an art experience that is meant to potentially bring the viewer inside the store to make a purchase.

This window display utilizes the glass box model by providing a street-side art installation where the only barrier between the viewer and the art is the window pane of glass. Unlike the Bonwit Teller window, which showcased the season's sought after fashions, Kusama's Louis Vuitton window does not present any Louis Vuitton products. This is significant because the storefront becomes a singular space for only viewing art but also prompts the viewer's interest in the potential Louis Vuitton and Kusama collaborative pieces for purchase inside the store. Instead of showcasing those pieces, however, the window is filled with the Japanese artist's signature dots and tentacle-like sculptures that emerge from the floor and stretch and curve at different lengths, towards the ceiling. This effect creates a rhythmic forest of what looks like nerve endings frozen in their movements, behind glass. Each sculpture is red with white dots that are systematically placed by size and formation. They extend before a white wall, covered in red dots, which also vary in size, yet do not follow a particular pattern. While the dots on the sculpture seem to swell and shrink with the bulges and curves of the formations, the red dots on the wall are static and fixed on an arctic white field. In this example, the glass box establishes a spatial relationship between the viewer and the art and becomes a transformative arena. The glass window pane is the only component between the window display and the viewer, providing no particular position to view or experience the installation. The effect of scale, color and pattern is eye-catching for those who find themselves before the window on 5<sup>th</sup> Avenue. Unlike Warhol's Bonwit Teller window, Kusama intentionally strips the window of Louis Vuitton's luxury products and inserted

another luxury commodity: art. Although Kusama's window installation was not for sale, the brand counted on cross promotion to invite people who are either familiar with Louis Vuitton or Yayoi Kusama.

In most cases, to view an installation by Kusama, a viewer must purchase a ticket at the museum, wait in line for a timed visit inside the installation and deal with navigating through the other visitors who are immersed within the presentation. One of the many facets of these installations is their experiential nature, like her 1965 work *Infinity Mirror Room – Phalli's Field* discussed above. Typically, a Kusama work requires that a body enter the exhibition space and move through a choreographed procession before exiting, which is similar to how one enters and navigates the white cube space except Kusama's work is the space and is conceived to incorporate the viewer in the viewing experience. In the Louis Vuitton scenario, viewers have an open invitation to look for as long as they like, but they are not exactly invited inside. Instead, they are invited to mentally engage in and visually navigate the space. Unlike Kusama's mirror installations where the viewer is inside the work of art, this window display enables participation by promoting viewership from the passersby or persuading them to enter the store. The glass box enables an inherent participatory and experiential art-viewing environment.

Kusama's window display directly confronts the glass box's foundation in contemporary retail. Much like Warhol's window, Kusama utilizes an outward facing model of curation to catch the attention of the passerby in conjunction with the commodity. Yet in this example, all aspects of the white cube gallery space vanish and all traces of Louis Vuitton luxury products are omitted. Typically a window display utilizes

masterful product placement to pique the interest of potential consumers. Here, Kusama only exhibits her signature dots and biomorphic forms as an invitation to what is inside the store. Likewise, the timing of Kusama's window display (unveiled in July) directly coincided with the Whitney Museum of American Art's large scale retrospective *Yayoi Kusama* which was on view from July 12 through September 30, 2012. This exhibition was the result of a collaboration with the Tate Modern in London but financially (and not coincidentally) supported by Louis Vuitton. Thus, while the window display was up, art goers might have potentially viewed the Kusama exhibition at the Whitney and if not, this display possibly provoked viewers unfamiliar with Kusama's work to visit the museum. Louis Vuitton's strategic cross promotion allowed viewers a chance to be freshly exposed to the Kusama exhibition before encountering the window display (or vice-versa), therefore producing a level of familiarity and interest in the artist and the brand. The glass box in this situation could even be considered as a satellite gallery of the Whitney exhibition. While there is not always a coinciding exhibition for the artists in collaboration with Louis Vuitton, the luxury brand has embraced many other artists and designers for their brand-defining campaigns such as Jeff Koons and Takeshi Murakami.



## Screen as Glass Box

The glass box not only invites participation in physical form, but also in the form of social media. Although Kusama's installation revolves around its reflective properties, it highlights the opportunity of visibility that exists when utilizing the glass box model. Unlike Warhol's display window, Kusama's infinity mirror rooms do not appear within the typical urban contexts of the glass box. However, her works can readily be discovered through social media browsing and viewed through the glass screens of phones in the palm of a hand. Since *Infinity Mirror Room – Phalli's Field* (1965), Kusama has constructed a multitude of environments with her signature infinity mirrors. While her initial installations were not created in the age of social media, her more recent exhibitions provoke a communal and cultivated social media response. Whether one enters the space alone or with a group of visitors, it has become a ritualistic tendency to photograph oneself within Kusama's twinkling and limitless worlds. From here, her installations become prime photo opportunities that exist within screen-oriented spectacles shared between hashtags on Instagram, Twitter and Facebook. The repetition of the self that is reflected within the mirrors, becomes a common motif in social media selfies, when searching (the often museum encouraged hashtag) #infinitekusama. Contrary to O'Doherty's excluded visitor of the white cube, the Kusama visitor exists within the shared world of the internet and the use of the hashtag connects and amplifies viewers' experiences with the piece. Therefore, what appears as an isolated experience within a museum becomes increasingly inclusive and interconnected by result of social

media exposure. Furthermore, the museum promotes and encourages such networked participation, which in turn promotes exhibition viewership.

Like Kusama's infinity mirror rooms, the next level of participation that occurs with Dan Graham's pavilions is the immense photo opportunity that arises with his reflective environments. By searching #dangraham or #dangrahamselfies on Instagram, one will find his structures and his spectators participating within a pattern of documenting their experiences in this glass box model. The aspect of social media makes Graham's pavilions even more inclusive than their original public context. While his structures greatly differ from the sparkling lights and mirrors of Kusama's installations, they shift the perception of space from Kusama's otherworldly construction to a multi-layered module of lived space that invites viewer participation. In this way, photos accentuate the way the audience is visualized with Graham's structure because it functions as a still from the viewer's moment of participation. Selfies have the potential to add perspective and also put the spectator on display instead of purely emphasizing art objects like in the white cube.

Although the far reaching abilities of the internet gives the glass box model a great deal of exposure, the provocation for viewers to use social media and take selfies while interacting within the glass box is not always a positive aspect. Because glass box models allow for photography, viewers get caught up with experiencing the work through their phone screen instead of physically interacting with it. Also the opportunity to take a stellar photo for social media can potentially alter the way viewers approach and think about the space. Recently, a work from Kusama's 2017 exhibition at the Hirshhorn Museum in Washington, D.C. was broken by a presumed selfie taker who fell onto one of

the many dotted pumpkin sculptures in *All The Eternal Love I Have For Pumpkins* which caused the exhibition to temporarily close.<sup>34</sup> Because of the hordes of selfie-takers, Kusama heightened the security measures for her installations.

Because the white cube has served as the institutional standard for exhibiting modern and contemporary artworks and continues to be utilized for its perceived neutrality, the early critical potential of the glass box has not been carried forward or fully realized in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. This constructed neutrality potentially deprives types of artworks that might be better exhibited in a more relational environment. The glass box provides exhibitionary situations that depend on the artworks' placement and context to reach their full potential. Because of its inclusiveness, visibility, and participatory aspects, it serves as a flexible structure that creates a dialogue between its audience and the environment it occupies. Since the glass box takes on a variety of forms, it proposes a multitude of possibilities but also reveals its limits, which come down to its inability to exhibit mediums of art that *sometimes* require the white cube setting, such as painting, sculpture, and film. Unlike the white cube, the glass box highlights the impact of exhibition contexts, as any given environment can alter the engagement and interpretation of the work presented through this model.

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<sup>34</sup> Brian Boucher, "Selfie-Taker Smashes Kusama Pumpkin at Hirshhorn," Artnet News, last modified February 27, 2017, accessed October 3, 2017, <https://news.artnet.com/exhibitions/selfie-smashes-kusama-pumpkin-hirshhorn-museum-873071>.

## Figures

Figure 1. Andy Warhol's window display at Bonwit Teller department store, 1961. Photograph by Nathan Gluck © Estate of Nathan Gluck. Courtesy of Luis De Jesus Los Angeles.



Figure 2. Yayoi Kusama, Installation view of *Infinity Mirror Room—Phalli's Field*, 1965, in Floor Show, Castellane Gallery, New York, 1965. Courtesy of Ota Fine Arts, Tokyo/Singapore; Victoria Miro, London; David Zwirner, New York. © Yayoi Kusama.





Figure 3. Dan Graham, Installation view of *Half Square/Half Crazy*, 2004, Como, Italy.  
Photograph by Paolo Rosselli.

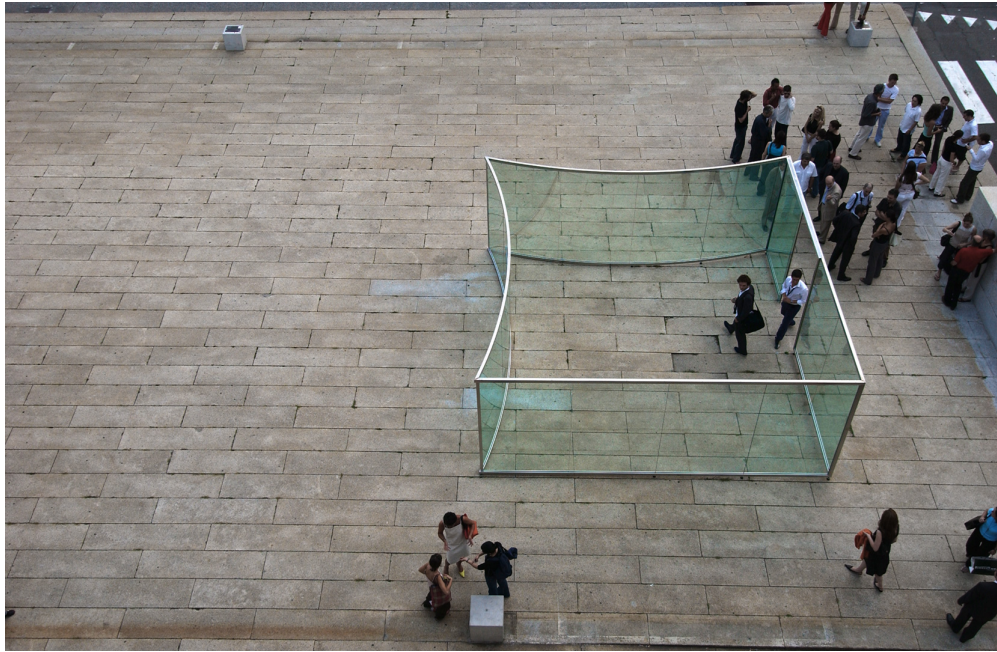


Figure 4. Yayoi Kusama's window display at Louis Vuitton NYC 5<sup>th</sup> Ave, 2012 ©  
Photograph by Lynn Hughes Photography.



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