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Life's Form and Formlessness: Translating Yayoi Kusama's Infinity Net

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Life's Form and Formlessness:

Translating Yayoi Kusama's Infinity Net

Yayoi Kusama is a world-renowned multidisciplinary artist from Nagano Japan. Her signature mirror rooms have flooded social media websites like Instagram and Twitter. Her strong personal brand and iconic fashion sense has helped solidify her presence as a pop cultural icon throughout the world. She has also played a role in several social movements in America and abroad. Currently, she is arguably the most popular and well-known living female artist in the world. Her captivating work is distinctive due to its trademark forms, hues, silhouettes and patterns. While her work is immediately recognizable, much of its meaning remains enigmatic. For example, in the United States where Japanese is not commonly spoken, language accessibility often limits communicative efficacy especially within fast-paced popular culture. However, there is also the intricate nature of mental illness that makes discussion of Kusama's artwork even more complex. Regarding evocative artwork, much of an artist's memories, desires, and fears allow for the manifestation of intimately unique pieces. Kusama's work encapsulates the often messy, disjointed and oppressed emotions in her life, but she does so in a way that invites others to engage as well. By looking at her work and the cultures that surrounded her life experiences, one can gain a slightly more coherent understanding of the role art plays in both portraying and shaping our beliefs. One can also see how the popular forms of Kusama's artwork today are the potent culmination of her lived experiences.

1. Early Life

Yayoi Kusama was born on March 22, 1929 in the provincial town of Matsumoto in Nagano, Japan. This rural town was surrounded by mountains and the animals that inhabited them. Her family was prosperous and successful in the seed-selling business; they also owned flower nurseries.¹ Kusama recalls visiting flower fields often as a child.² She had an affinity for art from a young age. Some of her early drawings feature realistic renditions of flowers that displayed her dedication and attention to detail. While she was determined to create artwork, Kusama's mother, Shigeru Kusama, was a stern, conservative, and authoritarian figure in her memory.³ Kusama's mother did not support her talents. Rather, she had encouraged her daughter towards a more traditional and domestic life of marriage and family. It was thought of as unladylike and unbecoming for a woman to have staunch career ambitions at all, let alone those of an artist.⁴ Kusama's mother reinforced those ideals by referring to her artistic endeavors as pointless and fruitless.

Kusama also recalls the social climate of Japan as suffocating to her creative ability. For most of her childhood, Japan had been involved in the Fifteen Years War with China (1931-1945). Japan had experienced a rise in militarist, nationalist and imperialist thought that would consume much of the country before boiling to a head in World War II. This was a difficult time to be a young girl trying to pursue individuality in an artistic career. Like many other children, she was pulled from school to spend long hours working to create military equipment; Kusama had mostly worked in sewing parachutes and gaining skills in handling cloth. Kusama has

¹ CAOIMHÃ-N, "Planting A Seed: Yayoi Kusama at Tate Modern II"

² Ibid.

³ Munroe, "Obsession, Fascination and Outrage: The Art of Yayoi Kusama," 13

⁴ Yoshimoto "Into Performance: Japanese Women Artists In New York," 48

commented “I couldn’t escape this militarism because the government wanted it and the schools wanted it...I suffered. It killed my mind.”⁵ Struggles pertaining to depersonalization and self-actualization frequent much of her work. This is seen in her morbid piece entitled “Accumulation of Corpses (Prisoner Surrounded by the Curtain of Depersonalization),”⁶ which was created in what she refers to as her era of mental breakdown.⁷ Her work continues to show elements of anti-authoritarianism and anti-war sentiments.

Kusama’s mother viciously critiqued her ambition. Kusama recalls instances where her mother had snatched away and destroyed her drawings. However, Kusama continued to make art even as it was destroyed. The turbulent marital relationship between her parents also was a destructive force in Kusama’s life. Kusama recalls her parents’ incessant fighting and how her father would often leave for Tokyo for months at a time.⁸ Her father, Kamon Okamura, had many affairs that enraged her mother.⁹ Kusama’s mother had used her to spy on her father’s affairs and this early vision of sex was traumatic. It began an overwhelming fear and fascination with sex and genitalia. This is even portrayed in her early drawings. She would often escape the physical abuse of her mother by retreating into the bathroom where she would create drawings.¹⁰ Some of these drawings depict flowers resembling male and female genitalia.¹¹ These overwhelming fears and obsessive fascinations carry through her life work and arguably changes in function over time, as seen in her later fashion and activist endeavors.

⁵ Munroe, “Obsession, Fantasy, and Outrage: The Art of Yayoi Kusama,” 13

⁶ Yoshimoto “Into Performance: Japanese Women Artists in New York,” 50

⁷ Munroe, “Obsession, Fascination and Outrage: The Art of Yayoi Kusama,” 15

⁸ Kusama, *Infinity Net*, 120

⁹ Ibid

¹⁰ Kusama, *Infinity Net*, 121

¹¹ Ibid.

As a young child, Kusama began experiencing the first symptoms of her psychosis. Her mental illnesses and worldview are often mentioned in discussion of her work because they trace back to the early and formative days of her childhood. She recalls being in a field of flowers and being overtaken by anxiety. Her psychosis involved hallucinations that were both visual and aural. She recalls her own voice sounding like that of a dog, talking flowers with human like faces, and even talking pumpkin at one point.¹² Her visual hallucinations were particularly jarring. She recalls an episode where a pattern she had seen in a tablecloth would not leave her vision; the pattern extended all around her before it enveloped her body.¹³ She felt in this moment that she had begun to “self-obliterate” into nothingness and fall into frightening endlessness of space and time that had suddenly sprawled out before her.¹⁴ Terrified, she fled up the stairs and entered a period of disattachment as her inability to communicate her visions to her family made her feel incredibly isolated.¹⁵ She even recalls at a young age feeling markedly different from experiencing a world that others could not relate to.¹⁶ She was alone with a myriad of other disturbing, jarring, and disorienting hallucinations such as the instance where a lake had tried to coax her into drowning, unrelenting dots swarming her vision, or nets that obscure her sight. These visions left a lasting impression on her worldview and her understanding on infinity.

In attempts document and communicate these terrifying images, Kusama struggled conveying them through art. She would repeatedly draw her visions in attempt to reconcile with them. She recalls drawing countless, minute cell-like structures and chains of indivisible objects.¹⁷ She referred to the practice as “art-medicine” as art came to have another valuable

¹² Munroe, “Obsession, Fascination and Outrage: The Art of Yayoi Kusama,” 13

¹³ Munroe, “Obsession, Fascination and Outrage: The Art of Yayoi Kusama,” 14

¹⁴ Ibid

¹⁵ Ibid

¹⁶ Ibid

¹⁷ Yamamura, “Kusama Yayoi’s Early Years in New York: A Critical Biography,” 29

meaning in her life. Her depictions of her hallucinations are visible in some of her childhood drawings, such as a portrait of her mother. Kusama had drawn this image when she was about ten years old; the portrait depicts her mother, but she is covered in numerous small polka dots as per Kusama's vision. She would later be diagnosed with depersonalization syndrome.¹⁸

2. An Artist in Japan

After the Fifteen Years War had ended, she had attended the Kyoto Municipal School of Arts and Crafts to study traditional Japanese *Nihonga* painting, a painting style coined during Imperial Japan.¹⁹ Despite *Nihonga's* integration of Western art elements such as perspective, it made use of specific materials and themes that helped differentiate it from Western artforms.²⁰ However, Kusama quickly realized that she disliked the strict artform and patriarchal hierarchies. Additionally, several artforms in addition to *Nihonga* had become highly politicized as they were called upon to create work depicting war victory and martyrdom.²¹ Instead of continuing in only *Nihonga* painting, she began exploring her interest in Western avant-garde and abstract expressionism, through which she begins a period of prolific art creation. Even at her young age, she continued to hone her artistic skill. By looking at the optical illusion and depth in pieces such as her early painting entitled "Onion,"²² one can see her painting prowess is much more than simply being able to affix polka dots to varying surfaces. In her "Onion" painting, three realistic onions are strategically placed on a checkered background whose pattern highlights the form and prominence of each onion. The checkered pattern also adds a sense of undulating

¹⁸ Yoshimoto "Into Performance: Japanese Women Artists in New York," 50

¹⁹ Yamamura, "Kusama Yayoi's Early Years in New York: A Critical Biography," 25

²⁰ Yamatane Museum of Art, "What is Nihonga"

²¹ Munroe, "Obsession, Fantasy, and Outrage: The Art of Yayoi Kusama," 15

²² Yayoi Kusama, *Onion*, 1948

motion to the piece, displaying her ability to capture and convey movement. Akira Tatehata had said this background “unmistakably foreshadows Kusama’s later net paintings.”²³ Even her *Nihonga* drawings of flower sprigs and pumpkins from this time period testify towards her technical skill as an artist.

She had several exhibitions while still in Japan. Two of them were solo exhibitions at Matsumoto Civic Hall.²⁴ Dr. Shiho Nishimura, a renowned psychiatry professor from Nagano, had taken note of her work and introduced it to his colleagues.²⁵ He had supported Kusama in her mental health and artistic endeavors by acknowledging her previously undiagnosed illness and encouraging her to pursue her work as an artist. Through her interactions with Dr. Nishimura, she also came to have an interest in psychiatry, a field that would also come to support and inspire her creations and their psychological messages.²⁶

Along with the support of Dr. Nishimura and several well-known critiques who had enjoyed her work, Kusama began planning her journey to America in order to escape the feudal patriarchal context of Japan. For example, while she had gotten praise in art circles within Japan, there was limited growth available to a female artist. Most critics of her work focused on her being a female artists.²⁷ She left in order to gain the freedom to more thoroughly explore her art.²⁸ Her artwork was gaining attention within the surrealist movement as people became fascinated with her process-oriented style of creation. However, Kusama did not describe herself as a surrealist artist.²⁹ Her flexibility and movement between artforms are persistent

²³ Yoshimoto, “Into Performance: Japanese Women Artists in New York,” 49

²⁴ Yoshimoto, “Into Performance: Japanese Women Artists in New York,” 50

²⁵ Munroe, “Obsession, Fascination and Outrage: The Art of Yayoi Kusama,” 16

²⁶ Yamamura, “Kusama Yayoi’s Early Years in New York: A Critical Biography,” 30

²⁷ Yoshimoto “Into Performance: Japanese Women Artists in Japan,” 51

²⁸ Swalinska “Yayoi Kusama: Social Transformation through Infinite Multiplication,” 38

²⁹ Tatehata et. al “Yayoi Kusama,” 4.

characteristics of her work. Among those interested in her work was artist and art critic Shuzo Takiguchi; he had helped organize her solo exhibition at Takemiya Gallery in Tokyo as well as select her work for the 18th International Watercolor Exhibition in Brooklyn. Before this, like many Japanese artists, Kusama had her eyes set on Paris, but this exhibition drew her attention towards America, particularly New York City.³⁰

Kusama been a fan of Georgia O’Keeffe and had written a letter to the famous artist asking for advice.³¹ Kusama had found her New Mexico address in a *Who’s Who in American Art* book. She was exhilarated when she recieved a response from O’Keeffe. She also had a written correspondence with Kenneth Callahan; through his help, she was able to make an agreement with Zoe Dusanne, a prominent modern art gallerist who took quick interest in her work.³²

Kusama had arranged to be in the show in the Zoe Dusanne Gallery in Seattle and had informed O’Keeffe in their ongoing letter exchange. O’Keeffe responded encouraging her to go to New York while warning of the fast-paced and difficult art world. O’Keeffe had told Kusama to “show [your work] to anyone you think may be interested.”³³ Additionally, other people to whom Kusama had written letters to in her lifetime include Rene Coty president of France and Richard Nixon; she had always seemed to have little issue with promoting herself and her craft.

3. Traveling to America

Kusama had taken the arduous journey to America in 1957. She arrived in Seattle where she stayed for about a year after the exhibition at the Zoe Dusanne Gallery. Afterwards, in 1958,

³⁰ Yamamura, “Kusama Yayoi’s Early Years in New York: A Critical Biography,” 26

³¹ Castro “Finding Love: A Conversation with Yayoi Kusama,” 53

³² Yoshimoto, “Into Performance: Japanese Women Artists in New York,” 53

³³ Munroe, “Obsession, Fascination and Outrage: The Art of Yayoi Kusama,” 17

she traveled to New York with little money after spending most of her funds on exhibitions in Seattle. In New York City, she was met with the art scene O’Keeffe had written about. The New York art scene was mostly dominated by white men and several art forms were being carved out of the ether of post-war American culture. Abstract expressionism, pop art, and minimalism were interacting in varying ways that shaped the demand for art. Kusama had interacted with these movements but never subscribed to a single one of them, an early indicator of her traverse nature.

4. Infinity Nets

She faced many difficulties when she arrived in New York. From not knowing anyone, to hospitalization behind mental illness, and living in abject poverty, she had many miserable nights. Even then, she recalls being in so much pain, or experiencing such extreme hunger that she would get out of bed (which was a door she had collected from the curbside) and paint. These paintings would often be her *Infinity Net* paintings that she began exploring in late 1950’s. Her *Infinity Net* paintings involved a canvas covered in a base color. Then, over that she would meticulously paint rings in a contrasting color. When describing painting these rings, she had mentioned painting them “as minute as I could possibly hope.”³⁴ These works catalyzed her eventual success in New York city after five paintings gain immediate attention at her first New York exhibition in the show *Modern Japanese Paintings* at the Brata gallery in 1959.³⁵ These paintings were hypnotic works that explored the value of positive and negative space. They were repetitive, undulating and had no center. These paintings arise from her own emotions and visions. For example, she calls these painting “uninteresting”, but that lack of busy appeal is her

³⁴ Yamamura, “Kusama Yayoi’s Early Years in New York: A Critical Biography,” 29

³⁵ Yoshimoto, “Into Performance: Japanese Women Artists in New York,” 53

self-proclaimed form of silent resistance in a city known as the pinnacle of American competition, advancement and pragmatism.³⁶ This illustrates how her work (despite its highly personal nature) is a reactive part of the environment that surrounds it. However, much like her work even today, it is imbued with such a deliberate nature and character that it effectively stands on its own. For example, after the exhibition at Brata reviews from the showing included phrases such as “dry, obsessional repetitions” and “infinitely expanding compositions.”³⁷

Arguably, much of her work invites the viewer to take part in her world by interacting with it as she does. She can recreate parts of her world in tangible microcosms that can be shown to others.

Donald Judd, a critic with *ART News* who had been sent to review the Brata Gallery, had wrote her a favorable review while noting the power and luring contradiction of her work; he had described the effect of the paintings as “both complex and simple.”³⁸ Those paintings were powerful enough to strongly shape Minimalism in New York and the people who practiced it, such a Judd, whose son stated that Kusama’s work had indicated a direction out of representational painting.³⁹ In other words, these works had notable abstract expressionist and minimalist appeal due to the personal emotions, preoccupations and serial gesture through which they were created.

These paintings were expressionist in the sense they were manifestations of her lived experience. She created countless of these *Infinity Nets* over her long career; the colors, sizes and medium of the nets had changed, but the process has not. The idea of this work is explored in several dimensions. For example, in a sort of annunciation moment, Kusama recalls a painting session in which obsession had overcome her to such an extent that the rings spilled off the

³⁶ Yamamura, “Kusama Yayoi’s Early Years in New York: A Critical Biography,” 29.

³⁷ Ibid

³⁸ Gotthardt, “The Long, Collaborative Friendship of Yayoi Kusama and Donald Judd.”

³⁹ Ibid

canvas, onto walls, the window and eventually even her own body. She continued to paint after reaching the conventional end of the canvas; in this moment she refers to shedding her “painter’s skin”, perhaps reflecting her new approach to artwork—namely her venture into environmental artwork.⁴⁰ This notion of environmental artwork involved expansion past the preconceived boundaries of an art piece. From this experience, her work can be seen as an entity that would continue to spill into all areas of modern life: film, fashion, music, politics, sculpture, painting and spirituality. She experimented with the size of her *Infinity Net* paintings, as several of them were so large, she needed a ladder to complete them; others were large enough to cover gallery walls, providing an even more engulfing viewing that impressively conveyed her net-covered hallucinatory experiences.

5. Accumulation Series

While she was gaining recognition, she still faced many financial difficulties.⁴¹ She had spent most of the money earned from exhibitions for the expensive paints and large canvases for her work. Her continued exploration of art alongside her tough financial restraints resulted in her experimentation with non-conventional art materials such as airmail stickers, muslin, egg cartons, and found furniture.⁴² This helped lead to work such as sticker collages, egg carton wall installations and her famous soft sculpture *Accumulation* series. Based on her calendar entries she started a soft sculpture and egg carton piece around the same time.⁴³ This is interesting in how it shows the duality of her work and vision. For example, the soft sculpture involve hand sewn phallic-like objects affixed to various items. The first accumulation piece was the piece

⁴⁰ Newman, “The Garment as Skin? Yayoi Kusama’s (Un)Clothing of the Body” para. 15.

⁴¹ Yoshimoto “Into Performance: Japanese Women Artists in New York,” 55.

⁴² Hoptman et. Al “Love Forever: Yayoi Kusama, 1958-1968,” 16.

⁴³ Yamamura, “Kusama Yayoi’s Early Years in New York: A Critical Biography,” 32.

“Armchair”⁴⁴ for the Green Gallery in Manhattan.⁴⁵ This piece included an armchair covered in phallic-like, hand-sewn and stuffed protrusions. This chair was then placed in front of an egg carton relief wall. The image is eerie and jarring because it illustrates the visual effects of clutter and accumulation. Another contemporary of hers, renowned American sculptor Claes Oldenburg, had noted the common experience of Kusama’s *Accumulation* work- namely the palpable and flagrant anxiety of Kusama’s lived experience.⁴⁶ That lived experience also involved her obsessions that separated her from many of her peers. For example, she would work for days on end, doing monotonous work that she believes others would not be able to manage; however, her mental condition gives her the stamina and focus to complete such work.⁴⁷ She would sometimes enlist the help of peers and Judd, who was also her neighbor in downtown Manhattan, had recalled helping Kusama as “days of unending stuffing.”⁴⁸

The element of accumulation can speak towards many themes and the theme portrayed is heavily dependent on the specific object that is accumulated. For example, the accumulation of rings in her *Infinity Nets* were often viewed as monotonous and engaging in their non-dynamic and listless nature. Conversely the *Accumulation* series was viewed as unnerving and writhing. This is partly due to the extreme switch in medium. The forms in the soft sculpture series have depth in a 3-dimensional direction-namely outward from their anchor point. This can evoke ideas of growth, impatience, invasion, aggression and infestation. Meanwhile, the impressions of the egg carton relief wall send those images and ideas backwards. The notable nature of the egg cartons is their accumulation and repetition of negative space, which can evoke feelings of

⁴⁴ Yayoi Kusama, *Accumulation No. 1*, 1962, soft sculpture, mixed media, Museum of Modern Art.

⁴⁵ Yoshimoto, “Into Performance: Japanese Women Artists in New York,” 56.

⁴⁶ Yamamura, “Kusama Yayoi’s Early Years in New York: A Critical Biography,” 32.

⁴⁷ Hoptman et al “Love Forever: Yayoi Kusama 1958-1868,” 15.

⁴⁸ Yamamura, “Kusama Yayoi’s Early Years in New York: A Critical Biography,” 33.

emptiness, longing, passiveness and decay. Contrary to how a rash lies on top of the skin, the abscesses evoked by the egg carton relief wall suggest infection under the skin. Also, the presence of these two works together evokes the male/female duality which she explored in much of her early work of stamen/penis and pistol/vagina pairings, including the bathroom drawings from her childhood.⁴⁹ In “Armchair,” the two sexes are heavily contrasted, the active nature of the chair and the passive nature of egg cartons come together.

Around this time, she began appearing in exhibitions along side other artists such as Claes Oldenburg, Andy Warhol, and Robert Morris.⁵⁰ She worked with other soft sculpture pieces such as a couch and chair consigned by Richard Bellamy in 1962 and a piece entitled “Suit” that same year.⁵¹ “Suit” involved affixing lump-like phallic objects to a woman’s skirt and jacket before painted the entire piece (hanger included) gold.⁵² However, her first solo exhibition of soft sculpture wouldn’t be until December of 1963, *Accumulation: One Thousand Boat Show*.⁵³ In this exhibition, Kusama further explores the range and function of her soft sculpture. In this piece phallic protrusions were affixed to a boat.⁵⁴ Longer phallic protrusions were present along the inner walls, seats and floor of the boat. The objects even lined the oars of the boat while lump like protrusions were attached the boat’s exterior. In this piece, the protrusions seem anchored to the boat like barnacles, but along the inside, they mimic the repeating facets of a geode, or the form fitting nature of white mold. In photographs of the exhibit, Kusama is seen standing naked behind the boat with her back turned towards the camera. Then, further behind her, is a wall that is covered in repeating photographs of the boat as seen

⁴⁹ Yayoi Kusama. “Infinity Net,” 121.

⁵⁰ Yamamura, “Kusama Yayoi’s Early Years in New York”, 33.

⁵¹ Ibid

⁵² Yayoi Kusama. *Suit*, 1962, mixed media. Moderna Museet, Stockholm.

⁵³ Yoshimoto, “Into Performance, Female Japanese Artists in New York,” 60.

⁵⁴ Yayoi Kusama, *Accumulation: One Thousand Boat Show*, 1963, mixed media.

from above. This photograph wallpaper illustrates her venture into both environmental pieces and new forms of repetition. So, while this work is very much unlike the visual experience of the *Net Paintings* in the Brata gallery, it is similar in its convention- namely the collection of obsessive and expansive repetition.

Also, in this piece, as opposed to “Armchair”, one can see Kusama interacting with her artwork in a personal way. In this piece she interacts with the soft sculpture as she will continue to do throughout her artistic career in New York. Kusama was also known to be a strategic artist, taking deliberate photos of herself and her artwork and even including them when she wrote to newspapers to feature her work.⁵⁵ She was also known as acknowledging her photogenic beauty and making use of it in her art.⁵⁶ The pointedness of documentation is apparent in this piece as Kusama interacts with a source of great anxiety for her. The repetition of this work, like many of her other pieces, illustrate the obsessive and process-oriented nature of her anxieties. As she makes these individual protrusions from hand, she is bringing forth the form that terrifies her. However, through these soft sculptures, she interacts with her phobia through the obsessive repetition she has come to rely on in much of her cathartic or therapeutic artwork (her “art-medicine”).⁵⁷ This speaks towards another effect of accumulation or repetition. While accumulation can materialize the crushing weight of obsession, it can also diminish the potency of the individual forms being repeated. By repeating the protrusions to a mind-numbing and absurd degree, the values of the individual forms are diminished. Through unrelenting exposure, their potency, shock factor, and unfamiliarly softens. In this work, she engaged in a kind of self-created exposure therapy or what she referred to as “art therapy.”⁵⁸ She had said “reproducing

⁵⁵ Yoshimoto, “Into Performance: Japanese Women Artists in New York,” 62.

⁵⁶ Taylor, “Kusama and Fashion.”

⁵⁷ Fifield, “How Yayoi Kusama, the ‘Infinity Mirrors’ visionary, channels mental illness into art.”

⁵⁸ Yoshimoto, “Into Performance: Japanese Women Artists in New York,” 57.

the objects, again and again was my way of conquering fear.”⁵⁹ This idea of repetition and obliteration is also present in her piece “Phalli’s Field” (1965).

Kusama is an artist whose skillset and body of work exhibits expansiveness in many ways. For example, in an Untiled Accumulation series, Kusama combines her many forms of repetition to make a piece that is uniquely hers. In this piece from 1966, Kusama is unclothed but covered in polka dots while reclining on a couch covered in soft sculpture. This couch is placed in front of a wall adorned with net paintings. Kusama does not hop from one art form to another, rather she coalesces and transforms her complex lived experience in a way that perhaps adds to her strong artistic presence in the world today.

The expansion of her themes into the world of soft sculpture (which she pioneered alongside American artist Claes Oldenburg), has led to interesting effects on her work. Kusama’s exploration of materials may also point towards her sensitivity as an artist. The nuances of her construction are also tangible to her audience. For example, the “humanness” of her phallic-object sculpture is engaging in its uncanny nature. Those phallic protrusions are numerous, misshapen, ambiguous, and wildly out of place. This can relate to ideas of expansion and male castration because the objects are collected apart from the male form. The wide array of materials on which those protrusions are found speak towards the unrelenting and pervasive nature of sexual obsession. Rather than only existing on the male body, the phallic objects exist in areas they are thought to not belong, such as tables, ladders, couches, and even clothing. This offers a psychosexual interpretation of her eye-catching work. There is also the ability for cloth to represent the body or the skin in unique ways. For example, stuffed cloth resembles the human body in its softness, they can be prodded and crushed in ways that paint, ceramic, and clay

⁵⁹Whitney Museum Handbook of the Collection, 214

cannot. This helps heighten the uncanny nature of the piece as the cloth can be more easily and readily associated with skin. Along those lines, some of her soft sculpture protrusions make use of her iconic polka dot pattern. This evokes ideas of infestation and decay as colorful repeating patterns on skin is often a sign of illness.⁶⁰ However, polka dots on fabric can also seem playful and joyful, offering a complex and shifting duality to the piece.

The piece is “perverse” in the word’s many definitions. It is socially sexual perverse in its flagrant depiction of sexual obsession. It is perverse in its use of materials. It is also perverse in form as it is a sewed construction. In this piece, Kusama takes a domestic and demure activity such as sewing and transforms it into something that is jarring, impractical and difficult to ignore. Yoshimoto had written, “Kusama’s humorous and yet grotesque domestic scene challenged the patriarchal assumption of the female domain as mundane.”⁶¹ This symbolic acknowledgement of the perceived female domestic sphere was present in much of her work. She often chose domestic objects for her accumulation series; she chose objects that could relate to her everyday life such as frying pans, high heels, dressers, and vanities.⁶² In her piece “Travelling Life”⁶³ a pair of high heeled shoes is shown traveling up a ladder covered in white phallic objects. This piece also shows her acute knowledge of the difficulties women face in a male-dominated society, but also shows her determination to overcome those difficulties. Also, as the female form was often used in pop artwork of the times, Kusama was unique in how hers made use of the male form.

She had acknowledged the role of the soft sculptures in furthering her understanding of obliteration, a philosophy that would give rise to her most famous high contrast and mirror-based

⁶⁰ Yoshimoto, “Into Performance: Japanese Women Artists in New York,” 66.

⁶¹ Yoshimoto, “Into Performance: Japanese Women Artists in New York,” 58.

⁶² Yoshimoto, “Into Performance: Japanese Women Artists in New York. “57..

⁶³ Yayoi Kusama, *Traveling Life*, 1964, soft sculpture, Louisiana Museum of Modern Art, Denmark.

works. In her soft sculpture pieces, she referred to the positive space of the phalli combining with the negative space in between them. Through that combination she sought obliteration. Her philosophy of obliteration is profound and unique to her world view, leading to its difficult explanation. Much like the hallucinatory visions from her childhood, in expansiveness and combination lies an opportunity to for freedom via returning to what she describes as infinity.

6. Kusama and Hippie Counterculture

This idea of freedom related to her anti-authoritarian ideals, her exploration of sexuality, and her anti-war sentiments. She was an artist who defied strict categorization for the sake of actualizing her belief and philosophy. Her visage, personality, and beliefs had much in common with the hippie countercultural zeitgeist of 1960's New York City. From approximately 1967 until 1972, she took on a series of guerilla styled art performances called "Happenings." While Happening based performances were put on by other artists during this time, Kusama's Happenings led to the remarkable diversification of her strong personal brand. She took her thinking patterns, philosophy, artistic skill and directness into the realms of political activism, music, film, popular art and fashion.

These Happenings were orchestrated by Kusama but were performed by a team of hippie performers. Kusama recalls having teams of dancer performers that had as many as 200 members she could readily call upon for her projects.⁶⁴ Kusama and the hippie scene displayed a mutual respect, fascination, and admiration for one another. Kusama's interactions with this countercultural movement is reflected in her themes and high contrast or psychedelic color use. Much of the sexual revolution evoked the idea of sexual and reproductive freedom alongside a

⁶⁴ Kusama, *Infinity Net*, 117

return to nature. Kusama also explored such themes in her Happenings and common vehicles for expression were polka dots, nudity, dancing and group sex. This unorthodox means of demonstration highlighted Kusama's bold and unashamed uniqueness as an artistic visionary. These eye-catching performances were social demonstrations that showed how Kusama's seemingly peculiar worldview applied to a larger populace. For example, in her Happening at the Museum of Modern art, which she critiqued as a "Mausoleum of Modern Art," Kusama had nude performers pose in the fountain in front of the museum.⁶⁵ With the attention garnered by the event, Kusama stated that the museum has nothing modern about it because it only features long dead artists while truly modern artists die.⁶⁶ The living art of her performance highlighted and criticized the archaic elements of the venerated artistic institution.

Even as a child, Kusama was opposed to the idea of war and ultra-nationalism. Many of her Happenings had been anti-war demonstrations, such as the "Anatomic Explosion Anti-War Happening" that took place on the Brooklyn Bridge in 1968.⁶⁷ This Happening, as well as others made use of flag burning, which also points towards her destabilization of symbols, a trend also present in her soft sculpture and fashion. These Happenings also played a strong role in the broadcast of her message as newspapers and television broadcasts discussed her creations. Resultantly, she received both praise and criticism for her obscenity and iconoclasm. For example, she had been the cover story of the Daily News twice.⁶⁸ The Daily News features her Museum of Modern Art Happening on the front page with the chiding sub headline "But is it art?"⁶⁹ Like many pop artists, Kusama also acknowledged and made use of mass media to

⁶⁵ Hoptman et al. "Love Forever: Yayoi Kusama, 1958-1968," 184.

⁶⁶ Warr and Jones, *The Artist's Body: Themes and Motives*, 82.

⁶⁷ Charlotte Davis, "Yayoi Kusama: The Infinity Artist."

⁶⁸ Kusama, *Infinity Net*, 119.

⁶⁹ Hoptman, "Yayoi Kusama's Return to MoMA."

catalyze and broadcast her work. She included the press, legal advice, and public relations in her work to such an extent that she was criticized for diluting the world of high art.⁷⁰ Her work was highly interactive with the public in how they often occurred in busy public spaces. She recalls receiving threatening phone calls to her studio, but her entourage of hippies were often willing to protect her from violence.⁷¹ News reporters who had wanted to cover her work had recalled her often been seen surrounded by a large group of hippies. This resulted in her becoming known as the “Queen of Hippies.”⁷²

7. Mobilization of Polka Dots

The visual nature of the Happenings often included polka dots, which would come to form one of the key characteristics of her artwork as understood by the modern-day audience. Recently, she has been referred to as the “Princess of Polka Dots” by outlets such as the New York Times and National Public Radio. However, the utilization of polka dots as a vehicle for her visionary message took much of its shape during her Happenings in New York City. Much like the visions that triggered bouts of depersonalization in her childhood, Kusama believed that covering people and objects in polka dots results in obliteration. She had once mentioned, “I find self-obliteration by covering my entire body with polka dots, and then covering the background.”⁷³ During her Happenings, she often painted polka dots on the naked performers. This combination of her polka dots and nudity is interesting because of the significantly strong association between the skin and the self. While the skin drapes the form of a person, Kusama

⁷⁰ Hoptman, “Yayoi Kusama: A Reckoning” 59.

⁷¹ Kusama, *Infinity Net*, 116.

⁷² Kusama, *Infinity Net*, 117.

⁷³ Forrest “Yayoi Kusama on Life, Infinity and a Major Retrospective,” 101.

sought to destroy its shape or form. This effect was particularly visible in demonstrations that involved masses of moving bodies, such as with dancing performances or orgies.

In her Happenings, she also made use of pamphlets and press releases that further carried her political and philosophical messages. This can be seen in her Happening held in front of the New York Stock Exchange. These pamphlets read that people should abandon their reliance on stocks and that all the men of the stock exchange should also be obliterated by polka dots.⁷⁴

Through polka dots, Kusama employs a new varied form of deliberate depersonalization. This philosophy is interesting in how it is perceived by others as well. Polka dots have notable visual effects. For example, as a pattern, they can establish cohesion between separate objects. This is seen in her art installation entitled “Flowers that speak all about my heart given to the sky.”⁷⁵

They can also overlap to give a sense of disorientation or motion sickness. If they are neatly arranged and uniform, they can evoke a sense of predictability. These effects illustrate the versatility in a simple polka dotted pattern. Polka dot (and *Infinity Nets*,) had become signifiers of her work. These icons are so personal to her experience and philosophy that they prove to be an inextricable aspect of her work even today. Her iconic polka dot patterns have been featured on buildings, clothing, vending machines, books, and sculptures.

8. Kusama Fashion Enterprise

Shortly after the creation of her first Happening, she began to branch out into more corporate endeavors to spread her message. Like the hippies, Kusama advocated that love should be free of false and restrictive societal labels. Even today, Kusama mentions that love is

⁷⁴ Kusama, *Infinity Net*, 130

⁷⁵ Yayoi Kusama, *Flowers that speak all about my heart given to the sky*, 2018, sculpture, bronze, Vitoria Miro, London

an eminent theme in her work.⁷⁶ This was the result of her interactions with the conventionally extreme sex culture of New York.⁷⁷ Her group sex Happenings included lesbian, gay, and straight sexual relations. Similarly, in 1968, she staged a “Homosexual Wedding” multi-part Happening in her home in SoHo. For the event she had established the unofficial Church of Self-Obliteration and dubbed herself the “Priestess of Polka Dots”.⁷⁸ Through this she had conducted a gay wedding almost half a century before it became legal in America. She claimed during this Happening that ... love must be released from a society stripped clean of all sexual repression.”⁷⁹ Alongside its progressive novelty, she fashioned a single dress for the newly-wed couple. In “Homosexual Wedding” Kusama had made a single dress meant for both grooms.⁸⁰ In this piece she advocates for free love and the dismissal of gender norms. This dress was also known as an orgy dress as it encouraged sexuality, closeness and love. Kusama’s philosophy would also carry out through her other fashion endeavors.

Her Happenings also included other Kusama Enterprises, one of which her fashion company.⁸¹ Kusama had noted the cultural significance of clothing and her work would critique the nature of the fashion industry such as that visible in the oxymoronic name “The Nude Fashion Company”.⁸² Unlike the fashion industry’s push for consumers to divulge in excess by hyper-fixating on the body, Kusama’s philosophy of obliteration called for a return to nature and obliteration of the self. In her fashion she explored both clothing and nudity. In her new enterprises, much of her goal was the same. In a press release from 1968, she had said that her

⁷⁶ Castro, “Finding Love: A Conversation with Yayoi Kusama,” 53.

⁷⁷ Kusama, *Infinity Net*, 112-114

⁷⁸ Kusama, *Infinity Net*, 132

⁷⁹ Ibid

⁸⁰ Ibid

⁸¹ Kusama, *Infinity Net*, 133.

⁸² Newman, “The Garment as Skin? Yayoi Kusama’s (Un)Clothing of the Body” para. 48

models will rid themselves of excess clothing and come to portray a “Natural Look, responding to the Natural Urge decreed by the Cosmic Forces of the Planet.”⁸³ Additionally, she had set up her own textile factory and created dresses to be sold at her boutique “Kusama’s Corner.”⁸⁴ This boutique was featured in the famous Bloomindaes in Manhattan New York before expanding to stores throughout the nation. She also created a sold department store fashion that had gained a positive reputation; people such as Jaqueline Kennedy had even worn her work.⁸⁵ Kusama’s fashion line continued to grow since its creation.

Her pieces were often covered in her iconic polka dot pattern, but they also made use of nonconventional construction. For example, she had made a single dress that could fit up to 25 people; that single garment sold for \$2000.⁸⁶ In these efforts, she infused fashion with her artistic meaning. Her exploration, fascination and obsession were apparent in works such as her “Homo-Dresses,” “Way Out” dresses, and see-through work.⁸⁷ She designed clothing considerate of the combined effect of cloth and absence of cloth. One such article of clothing would be her “Squid Dress,”⁸⁸ which was a silver hooded garment that resembled a squid. In this piece, the positive and negative space of the garment highlight the human body in unique ways. The dress had two cut-outs that exposed the breasts of the female model. However, the tentacles of the garment draped down to cover the model’s pubic region and the hood of the garment neatly framed the model’s face. The garment framed and highlighted the sexuality and humanity of the wearer through its deliberate coverage and exposure. It is also interesting to note how just two circles of negative space seem to destroy the societal definition of clothing- or the

⁸³ Ibid

⁸⁴ Kusama, *Infinity Net*, 133.

⁸⁵ Ibid.

⁸⁶ Ibid.

⁸⁷ Ibid.

⁸⁸ Yayoi Kusama, *Squid Dress*, 1968, clothing.

idea that clothing is something that covers certain parts of the body (particularly the female body). She also had dresses that even exposed the vagina so that the wearer can engage in sexual activity without disrobing, making it easier for the wearer to engage with their sexuality.

Kusama's venture into fashion can seem rather organic when considering her fashion consciousness and sensitivity present in her other works. Her clothing was also a part of her artistic expression. She has been known to deliberately create, select, and/or wear clothing for her various events. She had often matched the colors, patterns and textiles of her clothing to match the art pieces she was promoting.⁸⁹ "Homosexual Wedding" was not the first time that fashion would constitute these Happenings. For example, in her anti-war Happening held on the Brooklyn bridge, while the performers were nude, she wore a white catsuit she had adorned with polka dots. Other Happenings feature her self-designed clothing such as the dress with a painted *Infinity Net* pattern along the neckline as seen in her Happening in front of the Statue of Liberty.⁹⁰ There was also instance where she had worn a brilliant gold kimono to the *Nul* exhibition in Amsterdam, despite the unspoken dress code for formal Western attire.⁹¹

In the modern day, Kusama's fashion is still unique and eye catching. She continues to gain attention as a fashion designer. In 2012, she had launched a collection in New York. That collection was a collaboration with fashion designer Marc Jacobs who, at the time, was working for the luxury brand Louis Vuitton.⁹² This line brought her image closer to the forefront of American pop culture as this line was seen on celebrities such as Lady Gaga and Kim Kardashian. In this line two iconic patterns were juxtaposed with one another- the high contrast and simple polka dot patterns from Kusama's work lying next to the low-contrast and

⁸⁹ Yoshimoto, "Into Performance: Japanese Female Artists in New York," 62.

⁹⁰ Yayoi Kusama. Kusama's happening at the Statue of Liberty. Yayoi Kusama Studio, 1968, Liberty Island, New York

⁹¹ Yoshimoto, "Into Performance: Japanese Women Artists in New York,"

⁹² Cedrola, "Fashion Branding and Communication: Core Strategies of European Luxury Brands," 172.

sophisticated Louis Vuitton monogram. In modern American fashion, polka dots already have a long-standing connotation of playfulness and youth. While these ideas are still evoked in the American audience, much like the origin of polka dots from the Middle Ages⁹³, the pattern in Kusama's work is much more philosophical, visceral and historical. It also expanded the reach of her artwork as color schemes and patterns in the collaboration are reminiscent of her larger body of work. She had also collaborated with streetwear companies, which introduced her artwork and polka dot concept to a new demographic.⁹⁴

9. Participatory Artwork

As stated earlier, Kusama's interaction with the media gained her praise and criticism in the 1960's. But through this, Kusama illustrated her expansive artistic interaction with the world. Rather than confining to any school of artistic thought or preconceived etiquette, Kusama engaged in artwork as she saw fit. For example, her Happening performances and pamphlets encouraged public interaction with her work. Those Happenings also broaden her artwork from studio art into a form of expression that occurred in a myriad of places with a myriad of people. In this, one can see the deconstruction of authority and elitism in her artwork. Her use of the press to further her message can also be seen at the Venice Biennial in 1966. Uninvited, Kusama had set up a Happening entitled "Narcissus Garden." In this Happening, she sold large, lightweight reflective spheres to passersby beside a sign that read "YOUR NARCISIUM FOR SALE."⁹⁵ With this, she critiqued the narcissism of elite art and art collection. This unauthorized business venture openly undermined the wealthy art collectors who sustained art elitism. This

⁹³ Quito, "The secret history of spots, stripes and other everyday patterns."

⁹⁴ Hsieh, "Yayoi Kusama teams up with cult streetwear brand X-girl."

⁹⁵ Hoptman, "Yayoi Kusama: A Reckoning," 50

stunt also helped her become the most famous artist at an event she was not invited to.⁹⁶ This participation would continue to morph as she explored new art forms such as her *Obliteration Room* and her many *Mirror Room* installations.

Her *Obliteration Room*⁹⁷ had first been featured at the Queensland Art Gallery in 2002.⁹⁸ Later, these rooms would also appear in museums such as the Smithsonian Museum and Sculpture Garden and the Tate Museum. In this exhibition, a plain white room with white furniture is open to museum visitors.⁹⁹ Upon entering, the visitors are given sheets of polka dot stickers of varying colors and sizes to place wherever they would like. Over time, the pristine and cold room is eventually engulfed in a layer of spotted color. This room explores Kusama's concept of obliteration. In this piece, the piling on of polka dots makes the individual forms of the furniture underneath indistinguishable from one another. The polka dots act as a sort of universal camouflage, hiding the once high visible shapes of the furniture. This is reminiscent of Kusama's days of polka-dotted Happenings. This exhibit also is engaging in its highly participatory nature as each visitor, regardless of professional background, gender, or age, contributes to the final form of the piece. In this piece, she expands the definition of artwork to include the random placement of stickers. The final form of this piece is also excitatory and engaging because the color seems to blossom and explode throughout the room. This cheerful and fun community piece illustrates a translated form of the same powerful meaning behind her anti-war protests and her personal struggles with mental health.

Finally, Kusama's *Mirror Rooms* seem to encapsulate much of her artistic journey as well. These rooms are renowned worldwide, as seen in their hour-long wait lines and often sold-

⁹⁶ Yoshimoto "Into Performance: Japanese Women Artists in New York

⁹⁷ Yayoi Kusama, *Obliteration Room*, 2002-present, environmental piece, mixed media.

⁹⁸ Tate Museum, "In the Gallery"

⁹⁹ Yayoi Kusama, *Obliteration Room*, 2012, environmental piece, mixed media, Tate Modern, London.

out tickets. These installations feature a room whose walls are entirely lined with mirrors.¹⁰⁰ Inside of the room, objects such as polka dotted sculptures, lights, balloons and people are placed so they can be infinitely reflected in all directions. These rooms have gone viral online partly due to how their highly visual nature aligns itself with the emphasized visual culture of online communication. As of the closing of her *Mirror Room* exhibition at the Smithsonian in May of 2017, her work had 330 million impression on Instagram and Twitter.¹⁰¹ The interaction and debate between art and social media is similar to the debate between Happenings and the press that surrounded Kusama's work throughout the 1960's. Once again, Kusama has proven to use new forms of communication and cultural symbolism as they arose. While these rooms are popular sites for selfies and photo ops, their striking visual comes from the personal philosophy Kusama has crafted throughout her lifetime. For example, one of Kusama's earliest *Mirror Rooms* was "Phalli's Field" in 1965.¹⁰² Phalli's field can also be seen as an interactive creation featuring psychosexual imagery; one sees their own image infinitely engulfed in an expansive field of spotted and attention-grabbing phallic objects.

After entering one of these *Mirror Rooms*, one can follow a line of reflection until an object is so distant and small that is no longer visible. In this way, one can visualize Kusama's philosophy about the transformative effects of infinity. Infinity is a difficult concept for humans to grasp, but efforts to comprehend infinity have an effect on the spirit. Through her own struggles with infinity, Kusama has come to eventually recreate that experience on the worldly scale; these mirror rooms perhaps being the experiential pinnacle of her artistic world-building- a skill she has been utilizing since the days of her massive *Infinity Net* paintings in the 1950's.

¹⁰⁰ Yayoi Kusama, *Mirror Rooms*, ca. 1965-present, environmental piece, mixed media.

¹⁰¹ Targeted News Service, "Hirshhorn's 'Yayoi Kusama: Infinity Mirrors' Breaks Records," 1

¹⁰² Yayoi Kusama, *Phalli's Field*, 1965, environmental piece, mixed media.

Infinity has an ability to effect how people view themselves. Much like with the accumulation series, the unrelenting repetition of self-image in the mirrors contributes to both their inspection and their decrease in significance or value. Also, these *Mirror Rooms* are often small. Normally one or a few people can enter at a time; some rooms are so small that people can only peer inside through a tiny window. Therefore, there is a discrepancy between the physical space of the exhibit and its perceived virtual space. It also shows an interesting interaction between the physical world of tangible objects and their corresponding virtual world. These rooms are often described of as surreal and cathartic by museum goers. However, they are noted for their experiential nature as it allows the viewer to become a part of the art piece. Kusama displays her unique visionary capabilities through these pieces. For example, rather than an art piece only occupying a small space in the viewer's world, the viewer gets placed into the center of the cultivated world that is the art piece. These rooms also carried her philosophical message in a way that engages with the public.

In 1973, for the sake of her mental health, Kusama had moved back to Japan, where she had begun voluntarily living in a psychiatric hospital in 1977.¹⁰³ While she was living in the United States, she mentioned feeling that Japan was cold towards her artwork as evident in her lack of acknowledgement in exhibitions such as the Venice Biennale in 1966. Therefore, when she returned, she had to rebuild much of her career. However, Japan has since come to appreciate and value the creativity and vision found within her work. This is shown by the many awards and honors she had won since her return. Amongst those would be the Order of Culture, an award granted by the Imperial Family.¹⁰⁴ Kusama was the first female artist to win the award

¹⁰³ Yamamura, "Kusama Yayoi's Early Years in New York", 33.

¹⁰⁴ Victoria Miro, "Yayoi Kusama received the Order of Culture."

in drawing and sculpture.¹⁰⁵ Additionally, in 1979, she was officially chosen to represent Japan at that year's Venice Biennale.¹⁰⁶ Her work can also be found all throughout Japan, particularly in her hometown of Matsumoto and in the Yayoi Kusama Museum which had opened in 2017. This museum holds two exhibitions each year in hopes to "share widely the message of world peace and love for humanity that Kusama has promoted, while also engaging people from all backgrounds with contemporary art."¹⁰⁷

Her Mirror Rooms are often mentioned online for the "Instagrammability" because their highly visual nature melds well with the highly digitized world of today. Her concept of infinity still enraptures many people's imaginations. The constructed infinity of Mirror Rooms is striking and can leave an impression independent the artist's biography. However, these rooms also relate to her worldview that advocates for love, all while pulling elements from her life's work. Oblivion and infinity have appeared in Kusama's work since she began experiencing hallucinations as a young child. The polka dot motif that strings together much of her art is linked to her psychosis. Her accumulation of objects ranging from pumpkins to hand sewn phalluses is partly a manifestation of her obsessions. A prominent obsession of hers is seen in her need to make art. Currently, she continues to go to her nearby studio every day to paint. She is not the only person to experience the repetition of her work; the world has seen her repetition as well, and much of it has responded with recognition of her iconic work.

Kusama has installation exhibits that have attracted millions of audience members due to the beautiful way they immediately engage the senses; however, underneath the superficial understanding of an art piece lies a more incomprehensible truth. Her work is filled with personal

¹⁰⁵ Victoria Miro, "Yayoi Kusama received the Order of Culture."

¹⁰⁶ DiPietro, "Yayoi Kusama: Lost and found in art."

¹⁰⁷ Yayoi Kusama Museum

contradictions worth discussing. Kusama's artistic journey exemplifies how art can be multifaceted and therapeutic. Therefore, approaching an artist from one perspective is limiting and dangerous.

Appendix

1. Translated Excerpt from Yayoi Kusama's Autobiography *Infinity Net* (pages 112-137)

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Most of the males around me at the time were also avid homosexuals. I had a homosexual assistant, a homosexual manager, a homosexual camera man-everyone around me were people who were homosexual in a very enthusiastic manner. Moreover, whenever I produced a *Happening*, the journalists who would gather to cover it would also be homosexual.

I had a dancing nudist group called the "Kusama Dancing Team" whose members ranged in age from about 16 to 20 years old; all of whom were homosexual.

I had this group living together in my studio in East Village, in downtown New York. They would sometimes bring some boys into the room and have sex.

"Let's get naked together..." They would speak gently to one another and kiss. With that, when they would get more excited, they would perform a certain kind of ritual in which sounds would emanate from their mouths such as a 'hiss' that I have heard many times. These were cries of joy. This was a cry of joy.

The young men who were 'made' in this manner, often lived together with their companions and partners. When looking on it from the outside, this truth might seem strange, but this homosexual behavior became widespread in all of America. At Columbia University in New York, a homosexual club was formed, and the university pretended to not take notice of it.

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So, can we say that there was only homosexual behavior in the US? That's not so. The most extravagant and crazy orgy parties consisting of men and women were also in full bloom.

Manhattan Fifth Avenue, the heart of New York, is home to the world-famous Hotel Plaza and the Pierre Hotel, both favoured by the upper class; the luxury apartments around these hotels also held orgy parties.

These apartments are occupied by the upper class of New York, but the scale is completely different from that of Japanese apartments. The apartment with 15 luxurious rooms is the Zara; the gorgeousness of the room's Arabic-styled interior display would make even royalty feel jealous. Many famous Hollywood actors and actresses had apartments in this neighborhood, but an actress named S who had been to Japan also lives here was known for her wild sexual behavior. She was the owner of a manufacturing company, and would secretly visit the orgies of Mr. K, a man who had produced a huge fortune in one generation. Her target was a black saxophone player in a Broadway nightclub, with whom S was often immorally compromised. I have seen S's white body being squeezed by muscular black bodies as if being tortured but screaming with joy many times.

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In addition to this, I have known some famous actors who also participated in homosexual behaviors and have seen them participate ecstatically with black partners. Reason, morality and so forth were trite and unnecessary at these parties. It is because these were the most primitive human desires.

Once a 48-person tourist group of nobles from a certain country came to United States, and they participated in an auction at the famous Mark Bennet Gallery on Madison Avenue in New York.

On that occasion, I was there as well and a noble man from the group whispered in my ear during the auction, "I am interested in participating in the New York Body Paint Parties, would you invite me to one?"

Their wives were very ladylike, but they were also inquisitive and curious. It is needless to say in what flirtatious ways they behaved that night.

Of course, the orgy parties were not only attended by upper class people. In the black towns, the parties that were organized could also be called masterpieces. Skin to skin in black light, enveloped in strange odors, their animalistic sexual techniques even had my, who is not so shy in these matters, breath taken away.

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Also, there was a New York Newspaper Company's Social Affairs Reporter, P, who was known for constantly playing pool with beautiful women and introducing himself to upper class gentlemen. Due to his profession, P would be surrounded by famous and unknown models who would be willing to do anything to get established.

That journalist P would often act as mediator between those women and businessmen and wealthy travelers. P would often boast to me that amongst these women there would always be around 30 well-known on television.

Creating Art with the Naked Body

If I were to cite such examples there may not be an end to them, there are many kinds of sex agencies in NY that include homosexuals, lesbians, orgies, high class, popular, etc. However, it was the hippies who controlled these sexual behaviors. Since this kind of foundation existed, “Kusama Happening” was so passionately received, and I myself became a part of the hippie cult.

The journalists in New York used various adjectives to name my “Kusama Happenings”- ‘Fierce’, ‘Exotic’, ‘Talented People’, etc. They then wrote several articles about my life and my “Kusama Body Painting Events.”

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Then, they gossiped about my life, articles about the “Kusama Body Painting Happenings” began to circulate.

There were also perceptions about me in these articles, but misunderstandings and speculations also appeared, these things were all mixed together. Apparently, the existence of “Yayoi Kusama” had transformed into an inexplicably enigmatic person. However, no matter how slightly enigmatic my own means and efforts were, I did not think of them as mysterious. Of course, in regards to my Happenings, every time about 10-15 American laws would be broken. However, this was because those laws were pre-established ideas and my art was unrelated to such things.

People had sex in public, burned the American flag, and these so-called horrible things were truly horrible. Although, there was a way of receiving pre-established ideas. Everywhere I

went, I had police follow me, but I was indifferent to them. I had also hired 5 or 6 legal advisors but, that was because I felt it was a compromise between law and art that reflected who I was.

Also, I always had many hippie bodyguards. I would get many protesting and threatening phone calls in my studio; these hippie groupies would protect me from any possibility of violence.

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Because of that, within journalism, I was thought of as “The Queen of Hippies”; there were many people that believed I was a woman who would sleep with anyone. However personally, I had no interest in drugs, lesbians or sex. Resultantly, I was noticeably distinct from other members of my group. They called me “Sister”. “Sister” was a religious title. It did not refer to a woman or a man. That is to say, it was genderless, sexless. I was a person who did not have sex.

I had a sex aversion disorder from the time I was a young girl that permeated my experienced and my environment. I detested having sex with men. I also detested it with women. Both were a source of terror for me. But because of that itself, that dislike, that hatred, that fear, was what I worked constantly with and that became the source of my artistic expression. In that way, the creation of a new self-took place, it was what I called “psychosomatic art.”

So even in “Kusama Happening”, I would use naked men and women as my tools for my art. I only directed the creation, I never entered it. That was my expression.

Around that time, I had met the “Kusama Dancing Team” with fifteen main actors and about as many as 200 hippie performers. They were always ready to assist me for my Happenings.

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There were many among them who would ask me, “Sister why won’t you sleep with me?” with leering eyes, and there were those who would was my underwear with pleasure, but I wouldn’t, no matter the person, ever have sex with anyone.

Even then, if I would get close to even one person the “public lynching” would start.

“That guy is flattering Sister, trying to get on her good side!”

“He is trying to monopolize her attention!”

They would yell, strip naked, whip and kick, and make a giant fuss. I would also at time chastise men who would court me like that. The sound of the whipping and the bruises on their white skin would create an inexplicably pleasant sensation.

Because of this situation, whenever guests came to my studio, the homosexual boys would watch every move of that person wondering whether the guest would join in the act.

In this way, I would create one hour-performance after another with these boys and girls. Painting polka dots onto their naked bodies called “Self-Destruction” and body painting called “Body Festival” were performed not only in New York but all over the US; which became the talk of the country and through these I became the “man of the hour.”

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As evidence of that, in a single year, I have been on the cover of “The Daily News” twice, something with which many Broadway actresses struggle and cannot manage to do.

My Happenings, as usual, used naked people in the artistic creation, but its origin lay perhaps in my girlhood. While I enjoyed climbing trees as a tomboy, I was a girl who spent all her time indoors just painting.

During that time, when summer vacation arrived, I would spend the night at a relative's house. Then, at night, with my grandmother, cousins and others, gather in the corner of the room and dance naked. Of course, we were completely nude.

In my self-composed poetry, I have written a nonsensical section about someone holding a yellow fan with both hands and waving it around, frantically dancing. With everyone's applause, I would give a standing ovation. However, when that continued on into the middle of the night, as one would expect, everyone started to doze off. But at that point, I would shake them awake, imploring them, "There's one more play, please watch it?"

My naked dances suddenly became widely-known amongst the neighborhood boys and they would pester me saying. "Let me see. Let me see. Let me see you dance naked." I made one of my cousins my manager and collected a "entrance fee." On top of a rolled-out mat in the garden, I would perform dances which I would improvise with my own music and song. The boys would gladly gather and contently watch my nudity.

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In the moment, I realized how-men long for women's bodies.

However, this experience is also linked to bitter memories. My mother, who knew of this incident, had beaten me until I was half unconscious. My memories of my mother involved me being continuously scolded, from morning until night, and she always angry with me. "If people

have four kids, about one of them will be a worthless child,” my mother would often calmly say this in front of her youngest son and maid.

My mother would fight with my father all year round. The root of the fight would always be how my adoptive father sought out the entertainment of geishas. It was because there was never a time he did not have a concubine. Once he had hired a geisha, abandoned our family in Shinshuu (Nagano) and moved to Tokyo. After that, he contracted lung disease, and then he came home from Tokyo. Then, for ten years, he was taken care of by my mother, and before he recovered from his illness, he became frustrated and confused.

My family tree was very much like father like son, men spent all day playing with women, grandfathers and fathers competed over women. Men were practitioners of unconditional sexual freedom, while women had to endure in the shadow of that. When kids grew up under this situation, they would often wonder if this ‘inequality was a good thing?’ and be filled with a strong sense of resentment and anger. I think this experience strongly affected my beliefs.

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The strong disgust and attachment of the naked human body, especially of male and female genitalia, can be said to have originated in this female childhood experience.

From a young age, I liked to finely cut up clothing, paper, books, etc. and was often scolded by my mother. Also, I liked to throw rocks and hammers at windows and mirrors, breaking them to pieces. Now I think that was probably a sign of my hunger for love.

I used to viciously cut off only the heads of flowers, dig holes and throw them inside – and enjoy hundreds of those collections. Then, I would draw pictures of round flowers in full bloom on four pieces of paper. Those flower petals always looked like female genitalia. The point drawn in the center of the flower petals was intended to be the male genitalia.

When my mother would scold and chase me, I would always escape into the bathroom. I would throw away my pills inside the bathroom and felt that there was no place as safe as the bathroom. From inside the bathroom, I could continue drawing many of those sex flower petals.

Paintings of a worn-out vaginas being eaten by dogs, and men whose penises are dripping from cat excrement, etc... I called those creations “toilet art.”

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Later at the, at solo exhibition at Tokyo’s Guryudo Hall Gallery, Yasunari Kawabata, the famous writer, who bought my works of fantasy such as “Phosphorescent light,” and “Stamen’s sorrow” were some of the ‘ugly’ drawings I had made in the bathroom.

This hatred and attachment with sex that I had since I was young was undoubtedly a radical driving force to the “Kusama Happenings”.

Body Paint Events Throughout Europe

With the momentum from New York, my Happenings in America started spreading abroad. In October of 1967, I went to Holland, and at the opening of my solo exhibition in

Amsterdam, I attempted to create a bold statement by painting fluorescent paint on the skins of naked men and women. When the lights were turned off, the paint would light-up.

When our group attempted to take off our clothes, the people gathered at the venue immediately began to scream and create an uproar. At that time, I understood how sexual repression leads to war. I asked the audience, “Which is better – War or Sexual freedom? Do you think war is better?” The audience would instantly become quiet. My visit turned many people amongst the conservative people of Holland, seemed to have their eyes opened to the value of sexual liberation.

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Moreover, the church director who arranged our venue was fired because of it. Soon after that, in the beautiful ancient city of Delft, a student center with Catholic history became the stage for one of my Happenings. It was entitled “Music and Love.” At first, I had the people in the orchestra perform naked. Then the writers, film makers, and journalists who gathered there for my reception were encouraged to undress as well. Ultimately, most of us were naked, except for a few museum employers that had ran away.

Then, until morning, we smoked marijuana, Gogo danced, and frolicked and partied. I walked around and one by one, colored people’s entire body with red, blue and yellow polka dot painting.

Around five o’clock in the morning, when the police officers came and raided us, most of the people went to their apartments to have an orgy.

This style of my work became publicized through television throughout Holland, Belgium and Germany.

The student center that became a Happening venue was shut down by the police; the naked musicians unfortunately, had their entertainment licenses temporarily suspended.

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As a result of this crackdown, the avantgarde artists started protesting with slogans such as “Why is being naked bad?!”, “Holland is conservative” which was no surprise.

Next, I organized a Happening entitled ‘The Love and Nude Body Anti-war Parade’ at ~~the venue of~~ my solo exhibition in the Rotterdam art museum, where I called out ‘Come on, let’s body paint!’ on the altar of the church inside of this art museum.

At that time, someone called out that the police were here, to which others yelled out to not be afraid and keep on going which caused a huge commotion like stirring up a wasp’s nest. I climbed up onto Christ’s altar and shouted, “People of Holland! We all have only one life and only one body!-Despite that, our history has forced us to trample this love and beauty through constant war. Now, the body displayed in this Happening is showing respect to the beautiful life that cannot be destroyed by bombs or guns.”

After that, we had performed similar nude painting Happenings in countries such as Belgium and Germany, and in those places we always had clashes between audiences who would yell ‘Go on!’ “Cancel this! Stop!”

I always escaped from the police, but I did that kind of performance so many times that, I had got arrested by the police in New York. When I was held at the detention cell, I also had experiences where a constable brought in a friendly elevator boy saying, “Kusama, Kusama, Wake up! This is my friend, shake hands.”

Also, many police officers would come to look at me, pointing out that ‘this is Yayoi Kusama’, ‘she isn’t so small’, etc. Since I always slept there when I was arrested, they might have become interested in me. However, there were also very kind police officers who when I got hungry and requested them for cake and coffee would have handsome policemen get it for me even when it was 2 in the morning.

Besides, around that time I was well known as “Hadaka Paint Kusama”, I would get requests from all around the prison, “Next time, when you do a body painting event, please add me!, etc”, Which is why the police didn’t treat me badly saying, “You are too popular.”

For promoting my Happenings, I prepared leaflets and press releases and had them carry the following slogans:

“Please the Body” 「身体を喜ばせよう」

“50% is Illusion and 50% is Reality” 「50パーセントは幻影、50パーセントは真実」

“Learn, Unlearn, Relearn” 「学び、忘れ、また学べ」

“The Body is Art” 「身体は芸術だ」

Also, during this year, I produced a movie that I directed myself, titled “Kusama’s Self-Destruction”. This movie began with me in Woodstock in New York painting polka dots on horses, fields and ponds (in the case of ponds, I painted on the surface of the water with a brush and paint), and then it shifted to a scene of a polka dot body painting Happening in an art studio.

This movie won awards first in 1968 (43rd Year of the Showa era) at the Fourth “National Short Film Festival” (Belgium), then at the Second “Ann Arbor Film Festival”, then at the Second “Maryland Film Festival” award, and then from January of 1968 it was shown at discotheques, gymnasiums, palm gardens, etc., throughout America, with a 2 dollar admission fee, and became widely talked about.

The Polka Dot Priestess

Then in 1968, I performed many more body paint Happenings compared to the previous year, but by this time it wasn’t just an artistic performance, but became more and more reflective of the environment that had become anti-war and politically critical.

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In other words, not only did the frequency of Happening activities increase, this genre became known widely and extensively, and its qualitative power of being recognized.

The performances around this time could be roughly divided into three categories:

The first category was is the so-called usual “artistic” type. The second category was the so-called ‘social’ that reflected my interest in the anti- Vietnam war and the presidential election that marked the turbulent times of this period.

The third type was connected to fashion and musicals which would be connected more and more to my business enterprise which I can call “Enterprise’ Happenings. Of course, all my happenings were more or less, had connection with all these three categories.

It is something that goes without saying, I wasn’t just working on these Happenings alone, but continued to hold solo exhibitions and contributing to group shows in the US and all over Europe. The United States has held solo exhibitions all over Europe and has also negotiated exhibitions at group shows.

Among the countless Happenings from this year, if we were to focus on some main ones:

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In February, in a church on New York’s Wall Street, I held an antiwar demonstration called “Body Paint Festival”. During this event, I was arrested and put on trial.

From July until November, I had a new series of Happenings called “Human Explosion” that was continuously performed in various places.

In July, we performed in front of the George Washington Monument in American National Taxation Bureau across the way from the Wall Street Stock Exchange. This was a “Anti-tax Happening’ conducted by professional dancers where four male and female performers

had polka dots sprayed on their bodies and danced around the statue, but within a few minutes when the police arrived and the Happening ended.

During this time my slogan was, “Being naked doesn’t cost any money. Clothing costs money. Forget oneself, become one with nature, lose oneself, transcend eternity. Let me cover your body with polka dots. Self-Destruction is the only way out.”

Regarding that Happening, “Daily News” featured the following headline: “Naked People Dancing on Wall Street. Police Unable to Arrest Them”.

In July, we performed in front of the Statue of Liberty. The flyers for this time read as follows:

“Remove your clothing, Be Free! Being naked doesn’t cost any money. Clothing costs money. Property costs money. Taxes cost money. Stocks cost money. Let’s tighten our belts! Let’s throw away our belts! Let’s leave our pants on the ground! Forget oneself, Become one with nature! Through paint polka dots let’s self-destruct!”

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In August, I carried out a performance in front of the “Alice in Wonderland” statue in New York’s Central Park. The slogan at this time was “I am Kusama, and my group of mad nude dancers’. How about a short trip to Central Park? To the bottom of the magical mushroom in the Alice and Wonderland statue. Alice is the ancestor of the hippies. Alice was the first person to take a happy pill when she was depressed. I am the modern day Alice in Wonderland.”

Like Alice passing through the mirror, I, Kusama (who had lived in the famous and unique mirror-filled rooms for many years) opens the door to a fantastic world of freedom. Even you can participate in this adventurous dance of life.”

In September, I did one in front of New York’s United Nations Building, but this time I burned 50 America Flags.

In October, In New York’s Wall Street, I held a “Naked Demonstration” where this was printed on the flyers:

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“Stock Certificates are a sham! /stocks are unrelated to Blue collar life/ Stock are fake like capitalists! I want to quit this game already! Money earned in stocks continues War, Brutality, Greed! Protest Usage of Bond Used for War! ”/Burn up the stock certificates.....Burn up Wall Street too/ the Wall street bond men should convert to farmers or fishermen/Wall street bond men should immediately stop this cheating business/ the Wall street security bond men should be erased by polka dots/ The naked wall street security men should be erased by polka dots/ Join us....naked, naked, become naked.”

In November, I carried out a performance in front of the American Election commission. There, I submitted “A Public Questionnaire to Nixon.”

“The Earth is like one of countless tiny polka dots in the celestial body’s polka dot pattern. In a peaceful and quiet celestial body, the Earth is full of hatred and strife. With everyone, I will change everything and create a new world; let’s make a Garden of Eden.

To my dearest Richard, let us forget our own existence and reunite with God. Let's gather naked and become one. Only by drawing polka dots on our bodies can we go high into the great sky, and by destroying our ego in an eternity without end, we discover the truth that violence cannot be wiped out with violence."

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Caption: "The Happening that took place in front of New York Central Park's Alice in Wonderland Statue. 1968."

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Then, in November, I set up a 'Church of Self- Destruction' in a rented spacious loft on Walker Street in New York, and conducted a Happening entitled "Homosexual Wedding".

On the invitations and press release for this wedding ceremony I wrote promoting the event, "The Polka Dot Priest" Kusama will officiate the ritual. And added the following words to it: "The purpose of this wedding is to reveal what was until recently hidden...that love should be free now. However, for love to be completely free, love must be released from a society stripped clean of all sexual repression."

In this ceremony, a homosexual male couple together wear one wedding dress that I had designed. This costume will later become the forerunner of the unisex "natural costumes' that I would design later on.

From Wayout Dresses to Musicals

In order to widen my genre of activities, from this year until the following year, I established many different kinds of businesses (enterprises). Those businesses, they can be roughly categorized in the following four ways.

The first emanated from the the planning and execution of many of my happenings and musicals which is why I call them Kusama Enterprise, Kusama Polka Dot Church, and Kusama Musical Production.

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My second fashion endeavor involved establishing a Kusama Fashion Co. Ltd, and selling dresses and textiles that I designed.

I invested \$50,000 in the factory, which produced materials in high quantities, and we set up a Kusama's Corner at New York's premiere department store Bloomingdale's and also at 400 department stores and boutiques all throughout the United states.

Party dresses which could fit 25 people was priced at \$2000; a "Homo" dress with no back was \$15, 'evening dresses with no bottom or front was priced as priced up to \$1200. Then, for see-through dress and a "Way Out" dresses there were considerable orders from prestigious ladies such as Jackie Onassis. Then in April of 1969 I opened a fashion boutique on 8th Street and 6th Avenue in New York. The clothes I designed and produced, of course, covered in polka dots.

As my third venture, I established Kusama International Film Co., Ltd, was established, and directed films about Happenings and others. Also, I directed new works self-directed works such as “Flower Orgy” and “homosexual Orgy” were to be shown in various locations all throughout the United States. Furthermore, these were also shown at museums all over the world.

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The fourth undertaking I did included establishing Body Paint Studio Co., Ltd, hiring models, and establishing the “Homo Social Club “KOK”. KOK is an abbreviation/acronym that spells the initials of “Kusama Omophile (Phallic) Company” if the “C” was changed to a “K”.

During this year, I appeared in body paint on the popular televisions program the “Johnny Carson Show”, as well as the similarly popular Allan Burke Show. During that time, the body paint Happening were performed by a three female and one male group.

Then, in December, we were booked for a show in the 4000 seat Filmore East Theater. As ~~in~~ the part of the show called “Kusama Self Obliteration Opera,” a Musical, we conducted a Happening in which we painted a nude picture. At the time, the musical had a song which had the following lyrics:

Intoxicated Drunk God

Before the phantom spirit reaches the seminal vesicles (sperm).

Even if it dies in agony through its neurosis,

It always seems to be relaxed

Yet somehow busy.

My frustrated penis

The ovaries seem to be lazy

An afternoon's love affair is just sleepy

The sperm comes when you forget

Pokes its head from the devil's hole ~~that comes out of the face~~

Without forgetting, noisily

Comes to greet, repeating history

So the men become gay

And women become lesbian.

(repeat)

Aren't the gears different

Mating is just getting in the way

Love and death are lonely

The water of the heaven left behind

Has dried up hasn't it

The recollected visitation

Despite trying to make love flourish

It's okay, when it is time to give up

Neck muscles are blood stained vas deferens,

Therefore, let the men become gay

And the women become lesbian.

(repeat)

The corpus cavernosum struggles against a sea of fire

Hate the turtle's vulgar nerves

Sperm is always attacking

Hey, even in the midst of love

The night of the vagina

Furiously goes mad

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Standing on Staten Island

The Statue of Liberty's underwear is torn off

Even if you complain that it is terrible,

Even if the bouquet wasn't from two people from the beginning,

Therefore, let's have the men become gay

And the women become lesbian.

(repeat)

If God happens to come,

Sprinkling silver powder,

Even if men and women with shady sexual desires sleep together,

Thrust in the dry ice,

Cool head and ride together

Somehow, a crazed world,

Plan to prosper for a million year

Splitting the snake into eight pieces

Woman's womb is hell's entrance

Therefore, let the men become gay

And the women become lesbian.

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