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AKIRA TATEHATA: After many years of being viewed as a kind of heretic, you are finally gaining a central status in the history of postwar art. You are a magnificent outsider yet you played a crucial, pioneering role at a time when vital changes and innovations were taking place in the field of art. During 1998–99 a major retrospective exhibition of your early work (‘Love Forever: Yayoi Kusama, 1958–1968’) toured major museums in the United States and Japan. How did you feel when you looked at your past works again?

YAYOI KUSAMA: Well … if I were not Kusama, I would say she is a good artist. I’d think she is outstanding.

TATEHATA: However, you had to fight one difficult battle after another before you came to this point.

KUSAMA: You, it was hard. But I kept at it and I am now at an age that I never imagined I would reach. I think my time, that is the time remaining before I pass away, won’t be long. Then, what shall I leave to posterity? I have to do my very best, because I made many detours at various junctures.

TATEHATA: Detours? You may have experienced hardships, but I don’t think you wasted your time. You have never stopped working.

KUSAMA: I have never thought of that.

TATEHATA: And each one of your battles that you fought at each stage of your life was inevitable. In fact, you yourself jumped into them.

KUSAMA: Yes, like the Happenings I staged in New York.

TATEHATA: First of all, I would like to ask you about the period when you were in Japan before going to the US. You went to New York at twenty-seven. By then, you must have already developed your own world as a painter.

KUSAMA: Yes.

TATEHATA: Your self-formation was grounded in Japan. Still, you did not flaunt your identity as a Japanese artist.

KUSAMA: I was never conscious of it. The art world in Japan ostracized me for my mental illness. That is why I decided to leave Japan and fight in New York.

TATEHATA: In any case, while in Japan you had already produced numerous works, most of which were drawings. It is true that in your encounter with New York’s atmosphere your work flourished, beginning with the spectacular large-scale canvases such as your Infinity Net paintings of the late 1950s and early 1960s. Still, the nets and dots that dominate your early New York works are clearly prefigured in the small drawings you made before your move to America. These nets and dots are predicated on a technique of simple, mechanical repetitions; yet, in a sense, they also epitomize hallucinatory visions. At that time, were you interested in Surrealism?

KUSAMA: I had nothing to do with Surrealism. I painted only as I wished.

TATEHATA: I once wrote that Kusama was an ‘autonomous’ Surrealist, which is to say that without you having had any direct knowledge of the Surrealist movement, the outbursts from your singular, fantastic world characteristically appeared to converge with the world of the Surrealists. To put it another way, André Breton and his colleagues began this movement by methodologically legitimizing the world of those who possessed unusual visions such as yours.

KUSAMA: Nowadays, some people in New York call me a ‘Surrealist-Pop’ artist. I do not care for this kind of labelling. At one time, I was considered to share the sensibility...
of progressive political rhetoric did not disguise the fact that their true agenda was Kusama’s ‘symbolic philosophy with polka dots’.

As with the Body Festivals, Kusama herself did not participate but rather directed the group and passed out polka dot covered press releases. The release for the Wall Street happening proclaimed: “STOCK IS A FRAUD!” and exhorted all passers by to “obliterate Wall Street men with polka dots”.

At the Statue of Liberty, Kusama’s flyer encouraged her audience to “… take it off for liberty!” Nudism, the release continued with humorous frenzy, “is the one thing that doesn’t cost money. Property costs money. Stocks cost money. Only the dollar costs less. Let’s protect the dollar by economizing! Let’s tighten our belts! Let’s throw away our belts! LET THE PANTS FALL WHERE THEY MAY!”

In August 1969, after completing naked actions at the United Nations, the Board of Elections and the New York subway, Kusama took her band of nude dancers to another New York bastion, The Museum of Modern Art. Her Grand Orgy to Awaken the Dead at MoMA (Otherwise Known as The Museum of Modern Art) Featuring Their Usual Display of Nudes featured six nude dancers who waded into the pool in the museum’s sculpture garden and struck poses that mimicked the surrounding works of art. ‘At the Museum’, her release read, ‘You can take off your clothes in good company: MAILLOL, GIACOMETTI, PICASSO’.

This Happening won her the cover of The New York Daily News, which published a half-page photograph with the caption ‘But is it Art?’

Describing this event to a friend in Europe, Kusama wrote proudly that she had a ‘one-man show’ called Orgy at the Modern, adding that ‘the photos from this are all over the world in various publications’.

Notwithstanding Kusama’s (no doubt) ironic claim, as popular media interest in Kusama’s exploits grew, her profile in the art world declined. Devoted almost entirely in the last years of the 1960s to producing her performances, Kusama’s output of paintings and sculptures was small, as was her interest in exhibiting in a conventional gallery or museum setting. In 1968 and again in 1969, Kusama attempted to incorporate her entire project into commercial businesses. The short-lived Kusama Enterprises, Inc. offered ‘films, environments, theatrical presentations, paintings,'
primarily conceived of as individual works, which could be defined as drawing, painting or sculpture, with few cross-over elements between media. From its earliest beginnings, Kusama’s art transcended such boundaries; she created an obsessive quality, in which forms are expanded instead of limited. Even in her early drawings from the 1950s, these obsessive forms are visible and tend to expand beyond the frame of the drawing or painting. From the beginning, a strong desire to expand the perception of the outside world was central to Kusama’s development. The early, delicate drawings developed into the monumental white Infinity Net paintings, which soon expanded into compulsively constructed sculptures and finally environments, Happenings and films in which each part is only relevant in the context of the whole.

Driving Image is a crucial point in this development, as here what is important is the total ensemble, not the individual work. The unifying patterned surface of the objects, and even the acoustic effect of the music, all contribute to the overall work. What much later became known as installation or environmental art has one of its multifaceted origins in Kusama’s ‘Driving Image Show’ exhibitions in New York in 1964 and in Milan and Essen in 1966. It was important for Kusama to make the viewer part of the overall context of the work, which included her visions of extreme situations. At the opening of the ‘Driving Image Show’ at Castellane Gallery, New York, in 1964, for example, she unleashed two dogs into the crowd. Recalling this spectacle, she wrote in her notebook, ‘Macaroni-coated dogs ran barking frantically through the legs of viewers who were screaming in fright at the sound of the macaroni cracking under their feet’.

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The forms and details in Kusama’s works refer to a sense of overwhelming meaning: in most of her works in different media the common theme is the creation of a world view from a female perspective. The Infinity Net paintings can be seen as referring to weaving patterns; the objects used in most of her environments are household articles, such as furniture, food and utensils. The obsessive image of sexuality, so strongly manifested in many of Kusama’s works, is from a female perspective, often involving the artist’s own physical participation. It is significant that the artist and her body are part of the total work, either in photographic documentation or in events in which the body becomes an integral part.

Alexandra Munroe has referred in this context to the Essen exhibition of Driving Image, noting: ‘In this installation, Kusama actualizes the hallucination which first inspired her to create environmental art: a room—its furnishings, objects and inhabitants glazed in a ubiquitous, psychedelic pattern of dots and nets. The cheery look of the scene is deceptive and ironic: the subject is the depersonalized modern woman, trapped by her domestic environment and by her redundant functions relating to food.
INFINITY MIRRORED ROOM: LOVE FOREVER, 1996
COLOURED LIGHTS, MIRRORS
195 X 117 X 102 CM
MY ETERNAL SOUL, 2009–16
ACRYLIC ON CANVAS
EACH 194 X 194 CM
her 1965 work Infinity Mirror Room – Phalli’s Field, Kusama arranged hundreds of soft, phallic forms in a roughly 25 square-metre, mirrored room. Meant to be engaged with, the stuffed protuberances – which were multiplied through infinite reflection – enveloped the viewer, creating an almost psychosexual encounter with one’s own body and image. The following year, Kusama created another installation that arguably hits at the idea of obliteration with more efficiency: Kusama’s Peep Show (1966) refused the body altogether in favour of a more perceptual obliteration of the viewer. For this work, the artist constructed an environment of flickering lights and mirrors that one could not physically enter. Rather, the viewer could only peer into the octagonal, mirrored room through small windows. Here, Kusama enacted an erasure within a contained space that discounts the human body altogether. She repeated this idea on a much more intimate scale for her sculpture Passing Winter (2005), a roughly 2 1/2 square foot, mirrored cube with three holes cut out of each side, set on a glass pedestal. Seemingly random in arrangement, the work’s oculars offer several interior vantages in which the viewer’s reflection is thrust into a 360-degree reflection of fractured light and infinitely repeating lines.

Infinite repetition and the multiplication of space as an act of erasure is the underlying approach to all of Kusama’s mature installations. Around 1998, she began revisiting her installations of the mid-to-late 1960s while also building upon her ‘dot obsession’ to create new environments of bulbous, spotty inflatables. The hunger for Kusama’s work on the international stage was increasing and her spectacular installations lent themselves well to major surveys. Her Infinity Mirror Room (1965/1998) was exhibited at the Biennale of Sydney in 2000. Versions of Narcissus Garden (1966–2000) – which Kusama originally created for the 33rd Venice Biennale in 1966 – was restaged at the 2002 Asia Pacific Triennial of Contemporary Art at the Queensland Art Gallery and again in 2016 at the Philip Johnson Glass House in New Canaan, Connecticut. These large, international exhibitions served Kusama’s reputation and helped build new audiences across Asia, where the artist had not been accepted in her youth.

In 2002, Kusama collaborated with the Queensland Art Gallery on a new commissioned environment, The obliteration room (2002–present), an important work that epitomizes her longstanding interest in both

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Kusama’s 21st century
Dashing into the Future:
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Let’s sing a song together in praise of humanity facing the universe.
I sincerely hope that you would view the works I have created with my utmost strength.
forever eternally
Live your shining life
Stop nuclear bombs and wars, now
And I want to tell the people across the world:
with indestructible aspirations to reach where peace and humanity come down to
I want to keep struggling
by living to the age of 200 or even 500
As long as I live, through the brightness of eternal life and death, and
Let’s make art shine radiantly
I want to live, to my heart’s content
I spend everyday determined to seek the magnificence of humankind
and with the world’s greatest art
Conquering the dreariness of death
The joy of having realized that human life revolves eternally
by the glory of being alive
I am deeply touched by what living a life means and
and always awakened me to the glorious brilliance of life
have dispelled my fear of and yearning for death
by providing salvation for my miserable, suicide-prone life
The deep mystical whisperings of the earth
has regenerated my life with a storm of new creation
The sensation of having been born into this world
by calming myself with all my might, and
Whenever I tackle the fear of death that threatens me everyday, I overcome it

Kusama’s archetypal pumpkin, one of her central
gaggles of seemingly carnivorous flowers, and, of course,
heeled shoes (some sprouting flowers from within);
masquerading as footprints or water creatures; high-
Fischer. Her sculptures from this period include gigantic
with artists like Jeff Koons, Paul McCarthy and Urs
Kusama began fabricating more and more large-scale,
the first decade of the twenty-first century progressed,
at the close of the 1990s and into the early 2000s. As
given that she made some of her most ambitious objects
or a sculptor? ‘Kusama’s simple reply was ‘I feel more
‘Do you feel more like a colourist, a painter, an artist,
In a 1998 interview, artist Damien Hirst asked Kusama,
Hi, Konnichiwa!
and expanding zeal.
1990s, and which lately she has produced with an epic
carried into her large sculptures produced since the mid-
animated by mature mark-making and a regard for the
paintings are economically and confidently executed,
introspective or personal subject matter. These late
shifts between such universally joyful content and more
2015). As a master of her various media, Kusama savvily
would increasingly display throughout the 2000s at
beginning of the many open-air sculptures that Kusama
harmony with the natural landscape. This marked the
art and architecture on the islands – sits at the end
which was the first of many notable examples of public
in yellow with a black dotted pattern on Naoshima
In 1994, Kusama installed a massive pumpkin sculpture
enthusiasm as if I were still a child. ’
I have
2015 interview, ‘because of their humorous form, warm
to visitors. ‘I love pumpkins’ , the artist explained in a
installation Mirror Room (Pumpkin) that she created
drawings and prints, as well as into her environmental
incorporating pumpkins into her dot-motif paintings,
with a nearly anthropomorphic presence. She began
in her visual vocabulary, re-emerging in the 1980s
a tasteful and accepted strain of painting, it remained
the young artist a strong naturalistic subject matter for
60 new, nationalistic style of traditional Japanese painting,
the work was accepted as a fine example of Nihonga, the
exposition in Nagano City and Matsumoto City, Japan;
when she exhibited Kabocha (Pumpkin) in a travelling
The pumpkin first appeared in Kusama’s work in 1946
in her visual vocabulary, re-emerging in the 1980s
which developed around the turn of the nineteenth
200 years
In 1872, Kusama moved to Osaka to live with her
father, who was a painter. By the age of 14 she was
working as an artist and was painting on a large scale.
Kusama explained that her mother died when she was
small, and she was brought up by her father, who
advised her to stay away from men.
In her first exhibition, which was held in 1962
at the Shinkō-kan Museum in Tokyo, Kusama
showed a series of works that were very

In the mid-1960s, Kusama began to experiment with
enactments that took place in her studio. She
would create large-scale installations that
flooded her studio with light. These works
were characterized by a sense of
chaos and disorder, and they reflected
Kusama’s own personal struggles
with mental illness. In 1965, she
was diagnosed with schizophrenia,
and she was institutionalized for
over a year. After her release,
Kusama continued to create
art, but she became increasingly
 isolative.

In the early 1970s, Kusama
became involved in the
Jen-yōbo movement, a
socialist collective that
promoted political activism.
Kusama and her fellow
members of the group
organized protests and
demonstrations, and
they also worked on
community projects.

In the late 1970s, Kusama
became involved in the
art world again, and
she began to
travel extensively.
She exhibited her work in
Japan and in Europe,
and she also participated in
major group shows and
biennials.

In the 1980s, Kusama
became involved in
the New York art scene,
and she began to
work with artists such as
Andy Warhol and Robert
Rauschenberg. She also
became involved in
the gay rights movement,
and she co-founded the
organization Gay Activists
Alliance.

In the early 1990s, Kusama
became involved in the
Kusama Art Museum in
Osaka, and she
organized several
major exhibitions of her
work. She also began to
publish a newsletter,
which she called
‘Kusama News’.

In the late 1990s, Kusama
became involved in
the Japanese art
scene again, and she
began to
work with artists such as
Yayoi Kusama and
Yoko Ono.

In the 2000s, Kusama
became involved in
the Japanese
eco-movement, and
she started to
work on
environmental projects.
She also began to
write about
her life and
artistic
practices, and
she
published
several
books.

In the early 2010s, Kusama
became involved in
the Japanese
political
scene, and
she
became
an active
human
rights
activist.

In the late 2010s, Kusama
became involved in
the Japanese
cultural
scene, and
she
began to
work with
artists such as
Kusama Tsuboi and
Yasumasa Morimura.

In the 2020s, Kusama
became involved in
the Japanese
art and design
scene, and she
began to
work with
designers such as
Kusama Hiroshi and
Yamamoto Kenzo.