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Printed in Hong Kong

cover, **Core of Flower**

1991

Acrylic on canvas
73 × 60.5 cm

page 4, Installation, 'Between Heaven and Earth', Fuji Television Gallery, Tokyo, 1991
foreground, **A Boat Carrying My Soul** (detail)

1989

Sewn stuffed fabric, wood
80 × 340 × 160 cm
centre, **Heaven and Earth** (detail)

1991

Sewn stuffed fabric, wood
h. 130 cm
background, right, **Stamens in the Sun**

1989

Sewn stuffed fabric, wood, paint
240 × 561 × 19 cm
Collection, The Museum of Modern Art, Toyama, Japan

page 6, **Yayoi Kusama**, Studio, New York, c. 1963–64

page 32, **Accretions and Compulsion Furniture**

c. 1962–63

Sewn stuffed fabric, furniture, household objects, paint
Works in progress, the artist's studio, New York, c. 1962–63

page 84, **Driving Image** (detail)
1959–64

Sewn stuffed fabric, wood, canvas, mannequins, household objects, paint, macaroni carpet, soundtrack
Installation, 'Driving Image Show', Galerie M.E. Thelen, Essen, Germany, 1966

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1961
Oil on canvas
174 × 126.5 cm

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Laura Hoptman Akira Tatehata Udo Kultermann

Yayoi Kusama



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I. Fame

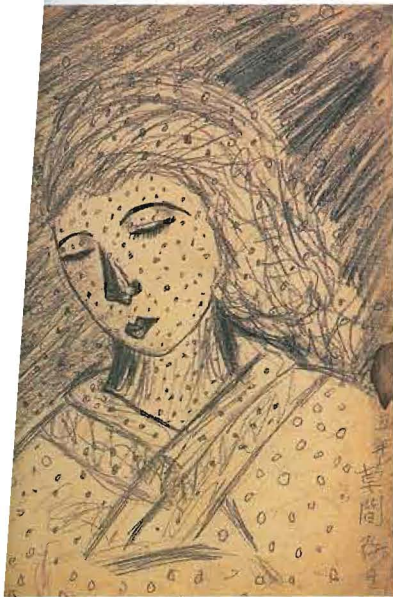
In 1966 Yayoi Kusama wrote to one of her gallerists in Europe, 'I must ... work very hard to be internationally active in an avant-garde manner.' From the very beginning of her long and astonishingly prolific artistic career, Kusama has concentrated on the seemingly impossible goal of spreading her vision like a vast net over at least three continents. It has taken more than four decades of struggle, but she has succeeded.

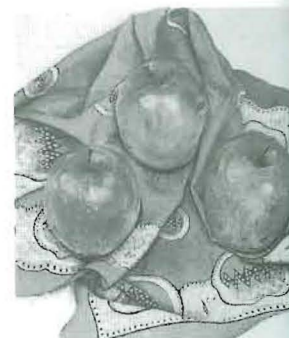
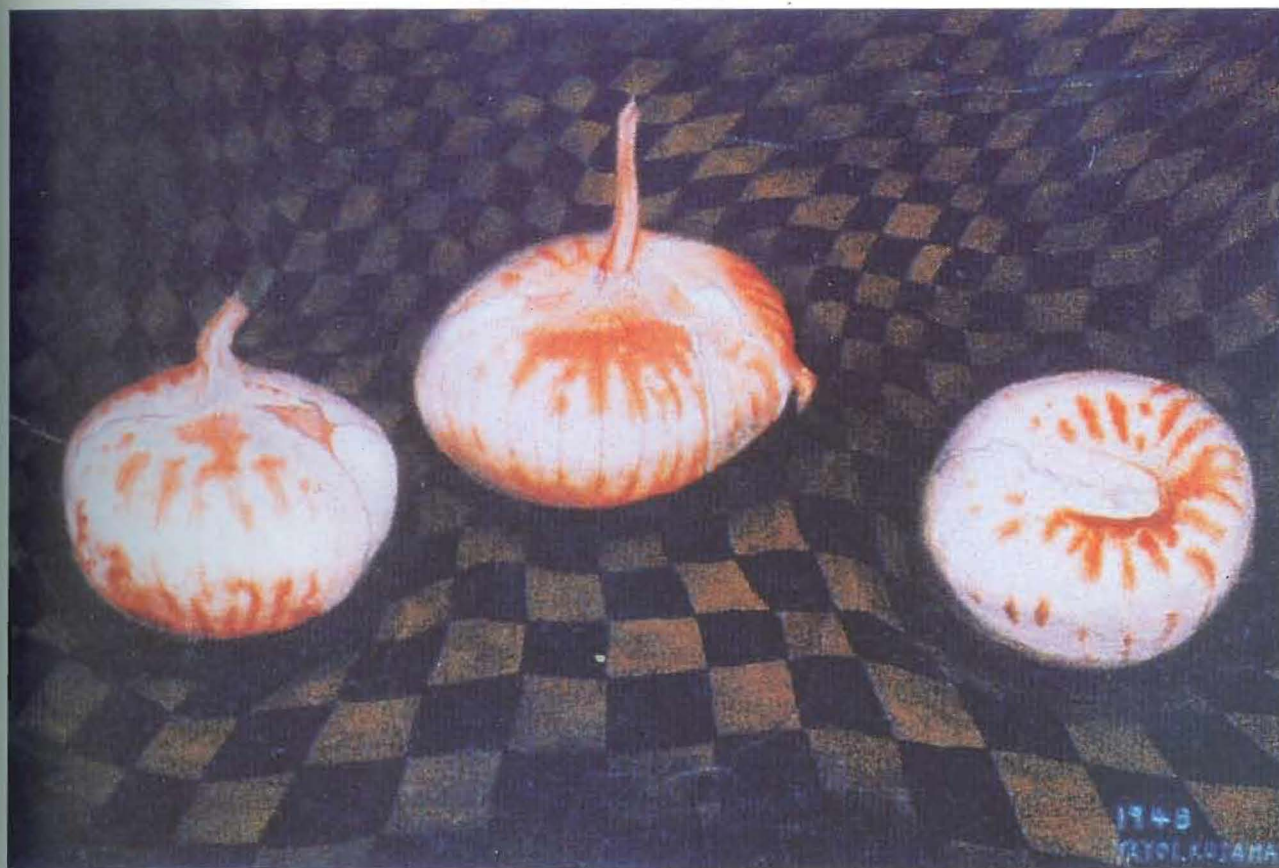
It has been said of many late twentieth-century artists that their lives and their art are inseparable. This is true for Kusama, not in a figurative sense but in a concrete, visceral one. Kusama is the *Infinity Net* and the polka dot, two interchangeable motifs that she adopted as her alter ego, her logo, her franchise and her weapon of incursion into the world at large. The countless artworks that she has produced and that carry Kusama's nets and dots into the world, when seen as a whole, are the mere results of a rigorously disciplined and single-minded performance that has lasted for almost fifty years.

Kusama's work has spread into many media and touched many styles. As a young artist in Japan, Kusama was a painter in both traditional Japanese and European idioms. During the decade of the 1960s, when she was based in New York and exhibiting throughout Europe, she made paintings and sculpture, drawings and collages, kinetic installations, Happenings and even a film. Back in Tokyo in the early 1970s, she continued to paint and sculpt while also producing ceramics. In the second half of the 1970s she began writing novels, short stories and poetry. Most recently Kusama has

made a series of large-scale installations incorporating gigantic inflatables, and has plans for a number of monumental outdoor sculptures. All of her visual art, with very few exceptions, shares a common vocabulary of dense, repetitive patterns made from cell-like clusters she calls *Infinity Nets*: polka dots, phallic-shaped tubers, mailing stickers and even dried macaroni. Since the early 1960s Kusama has described her obsession with pattern as a means of self-annihilation. However, her unceasing restatement of the *Infinity Net* is also a re-affirmation of her persona, a defiant 'I exist'.¹ With its dizzying monotony and labour-intensive intricacy, the making of her obsessive works is, paradoxically, both an act of self-obliteration as well as one of artistic transubstantiation through which the physical self is erased only to be re-asserted in the artist's signature patterns.

Psychoanalytic theory holds that serial repetition is the return of psychic material in symbolic form, and Kusama has traced her obsessive use of the *Infinity Net* pattern and its inverse variations, the phallic accumulation and the polka dot, to 'childhood trauma'. Born 22 March 1929 in Matsumoto City, Japan, the last of four children in a prosperous and conservative family, Kusama's crucial years of early adolescence passed while the country was at war. It was during this time that the artist began to experience hallucinations that have plagued her throughout her life, among them aureoles around objects and veils of patterns before her eyes. Kusama remembers that her first drawings date from this period, and this is significant because in Kusama's





left, Onions

1948

Pigment on paper

39.5 x 59 cm

above, Hayami Gyoshu

Apples

1920

Pigment, gold leaf on silk

26.5 x 24 cm

own construction of her artistic genealogy, her mental illness is central to every aspect of her work, from her imagery to her working process. It is a testament to the amount of control that the artist had and has over shaping her own artistic person that the main elements of the mythified Kusama of today – the obsession with a signature net/dot pattern, the supernatural productive powers, the madness – were in place at the very beginning of her career as a professional artist, put there by Kusama herself.

Kusama has traced the origins of the *Infinity Net* and polka dot motifs back to a specific series of hallucinations that first struck when she was ten years old: *'One day, looking at a red flower-patterned table cloth on the table, I turned my eyes to the ceiling and saw the same red flower pattern everywhere, even on the window glass and posts. The room, my body, the entire universe was filled with it, my self was eliminated, and I had returned and been reduced to the infinity of eternal time and the absolute of space. This was not an illusion but*

reality. I was astounded. If I did not get away from there, I would be wrapped up in the spell of the red flowers and lose my life. I ran for the stairs without thinking of anything else. Looking down, I saw the steps fall away one by one, pulling my leg and making me trip and fall from the top of the stairs. I sprained my leg. Dissolving and accumulating, proliferating and separating. A feeling of particles disintegrating and reverberations from an invisible universe ...¹²

Crediting her use of repetitive gestures and motifs to her obsessions, she also attributes her protean production – hundreds of paintings, sculptures and objects, drawings that number in the thousands, prints, ceramics and nineteen published novellas and books of poetry – to her neurotic energy. Kusama's description of the making of her *Infinity Net* paintings offers a chilling picture of an artist physically driven by forces beyond her control. 'I felt as if I were driving on the highways or carried on an [endless] conveyor belt ... to my death', she reported, describing sessions in which she would paint as much as forty to fifty hours at an uninterrupted stretch. 'This is like continuing to drink thousands of cups of coffee or eating thousands of feet of macaroni. This is to continue to desire and to escape all sorts of feelings and visions until the end of my days whether I want to or not ...'¹³

That the work was and is obsessive is doubtless, but hardly, the result of an ungovernable compulsion. Kusama herself has stated that, 'it is hard to say after all, whether these signature repetitions were caused by my disease ... or by my own intention'.¹⁴ Claiming her

illness as a generative force, it is also, in her words, 'a weapon' not only to 'tide over the hardship of life' but to leave her artistic mark.¹⁵

In her paintings as well as in her career as a whole, Kusama has never ceded control – not even to her illness. The symptoms of Kusama's disorder are helpful in our understanding of her imagery but they are not the subject of her work. They are the engine that drives it.

Kusama was trained in *Nihonga* painting, a style that combined traditional Japanese techniques and materials with nineteenth-century European naturalistic subject matter. By 1950 she had begun to experiment with more abstracted natural forms, painting them in watercolour, gouache and oil paint. Over the next two years this more Westernized work was exhibited frequently and received a measure of recognition from both the Japanese art community and the psychiatric profession, two of whose members were interested enough to present papers, not on Kusama's illness, but on the meaning of her paintings. From 1951 until her departure for the US in 1957, Kusama concentrated almost exclusively on works on paper. It was in these works – which Kusama claims number in the thousands – that the polka dot and the *Infinity Net* patterns develop from stylized motifs based on natural observation to autonomous abstractions.¹⁶ The earliest of these muted and graceful works still bear titles that relate them to objects in nature, like *Cosmos*, *Heart* or *Flower*, although their motifs are spare and absolutely abstract. All-over patterns of irregular black ink dots on a background faintly tinted blue or rose, and delicate white balls veined through by

opposite, left, **The Heart**
1952
Pastel, ink on paper
38 x 30 cm

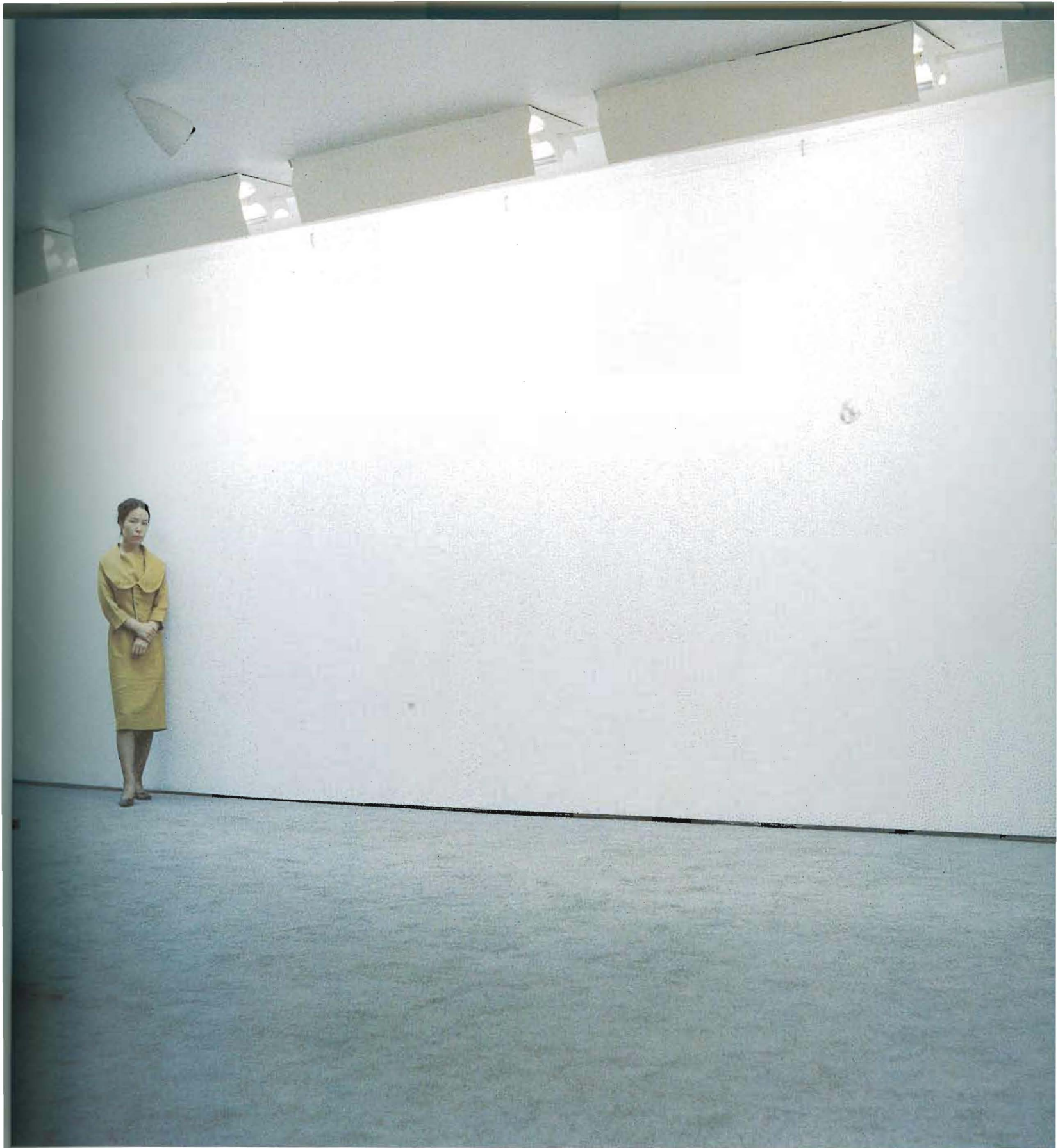
opposite, right, **Untitled**
1953
Pastel, gouache on paper
38 x 30 cm

webs of inked lines and floating balloon-like on a charcoal black background, served as Kusama's *morceau de reception* to the American art world. Three of them were chosen for inclusion in the Brooklyn Museum International Watercolour exhibition in 1955 while Kusama was still in Japan; fourteen of the works on paper were enclosed with letters that Kusama began writing to the artist Georgia O'Keeffe later that same year. That a young, unknown, non English-speaking artist who had no previous connection to the reclusive doyenne of American painting would take such an initiative is a bit out of the ordinary, but Kusama, fiercely ambitious and already determined to emigrate to the United States, was no ordinary young artist. Focused on quickly achieving the success which she felt was inevitable, Kusama seems to have carefully, almost scientifically chosen O'Keeffe because she was successful on a world scale and because she was a woman. In her letters to the older artist, Kusama spent less ink discussing her own work than in asking for concrete advice as to how to find an art dealer in Manhattan. 'I hope with all my heart that I will be able to show my paintings [to] dealers in New York', wrote Kusama, 'I am very optimistic in this regard.' O'Keeffe, who expressed guarded admiration for Kusama's watercolours, counselled against Kusama's plan to go to New York. None the less, she was equally straightforward in her advice: 'Take your pictures under your arm', she wrote bluntly, 'and show them to anyone you think may be interested ...' 'It seems very odd that you are so ambitious to show your paintings here', she added, 'but I wish the best for you'.⁸

II. New York

After a stopover in Seattle, Washington for an exhibition in late 1957, Kusama arrived in Manhattan in the summer of 1958 with more than one thousand drawings and very little money, determined to support herself by selling her work. Despite an initial success and momentary notoriety, it was a goal that was to elude her for the entire period she lived in New York. The decade during which she used New York City as a base for her artistic practice was one of tremendous personal hardship and professional struggle as well as enormous creative output. It was here that within eighteen months she transformed what had been small-scale motifs into a signature style, played out large in endless variation across miles of canvas, houses full of objects, clothes and even people (on film and in real time), in discos, public parks and museums, in the press and even once or twice on television. These repetitive and obsessive patterns of the *Infinity Net*, the polka dot and the stuffed phallic protrusions Kusama called *Accumulations*, as well as her artistic strategy, developed during the first months in New York, of a no-holds-barred promotion of her art/self, remain to this day the primary elements of her remarkably consistent work.

In the newly minted ruminations on Kusama's long career, it is popular to speculate upon her place in any one of the canonical movements of American and European art history of the 1960s – Abstract Expressionism, Minimalism, Pop. It is clear that her large oeuvre can be related at least tangentially to all three movements as well as kinetic art and the European *Nouvelle Tendance*.



above, The artist with 10 metre
white **Infinity Net** painting, solo
exhibition, Stephen Radich
Gallery, New York, 1961

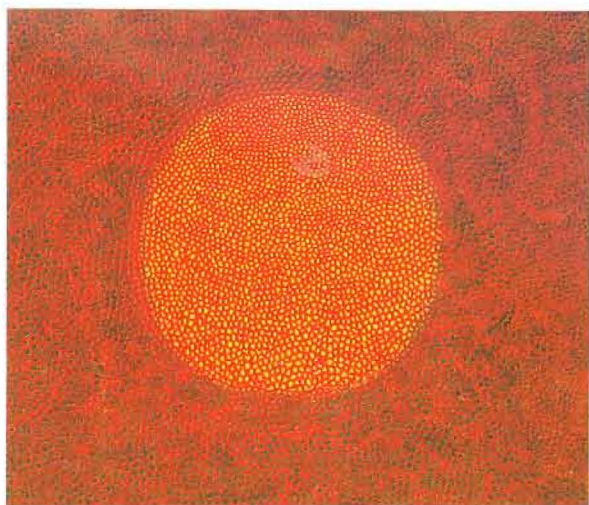
overleaf, No. A.B.

1959

Oil on canvas

210 x 414 cm

Collection, Toyota Municipal
Museum of Art, Japan



Infinity Net
1965
Oil on canvas
132 × 152 cm

However related to these movements, Kusama was never a part of them. During that crucial decade of the 1960s in New York when the contemporary art market as we now know it was born, Kusama moved within the art world with considerable skill.

A member or adherent of no group of artists in particular, she knew virtually all the major figures of the time. A friendly neighbour of Claes Oldenburg, she was acquainted with many of the major figures of Abstract Expressionism and Pop, including Frank Stella, Ad Reinhardt, Barnett Newman, Marisol and Andy Warhol. Kusama had close friendships with both Joseph Cornell and Donald Judd; the former gave her his works to sell when she was most in need of cash, and the latter ecstatically reviewed her first exhibition in New York and bought a number of her works. It was this winning combination of social skills, unquestionable talent, a keen instinct for what was current in the artistic discourse, and finally, sheer nerve, that allowed her, without money, contacts or the language, to gain a foothold in the extraordinarily competitive New York art world in a surprisingly short period.

In October of 1959, eighteen months after her move to New York, Kusama had her first solo exhibition at Brata Gallery, a well-respected East 10th Street artist's co-operative known for championing second-generation Abstract Expressionists, and whose members included the sculptors Ronald Bladen and George Sugerman, among others. In this exhibition Kusama showed five mural-sized white monochrome canvases covered densely and completely with spiraling chains of tiny circular marks, called *Infinity Nets*.

Although she had employed the *Infinity Net* as a motif in her paintings and drawings created as early as 1948, the 1959 *Nets*, with their severely restricted palette and all-over repetitive pattern, were like nothing the artist had previously produced. Painted from edge to edge on enormous canvases that recalled the heroic scale of Jackson Pollock or Barnett Newman, these *Infinity Nets*, though similar in motif, lack the delicacy and the tenebrous emotion of the gouaches made in Japan. Untitled, save for a muscular numeral or letter designating the order in which they were completed, the *Infinity Nets* boldly referenced the New York School and, on its own ground, challenged its hegemony.⁹ Describing the brushstrokes she employed as 'repeated exactly in monotone, like the gear of a machine'¹⁰ Kusama remembers that the painstaking sameness of the composition was a deliberate attempt to find an antidote to the emotionalism of Abstract Expressionism.¹¹

One cannot help but conclude that it was the repetitive quality of the *Nets*, as well as their non-relational composition and what was perceived as their 'profound detachment'¹² that attracted the interest of nascent Minimalists like Judd and Stella, both of whom purchased work from Kusama's earliest painting exhibitions.

As an art critic Donald Judd was an early advocate, admiring, along with other critics, the impassivity of the white monochromes, which he described as resembling slabs of 'massive, solid lace',¹³ and pronouncing them 'advanced in concept'.¹⁴ As a sculptor, Judd was inspired in his own search for a profoundly anti-rationalist but

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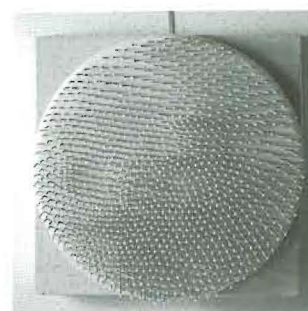
boldly literal system of expressing pure form by Kusama's 'complex and powerful idea' of obsession-driven seriality.¹⁵

It was a similar reading of her work that first brought Kusama to the attention of a number of European artists experimenting with the strategies of monochromy and 'repetitive field structure'¹⁶ in order to achieve a cool, objective art that 'approached the impartiality of graphic data in a laboratory'.¹⁷ Marshalled together under the moniker 'Nouvelle Tendance', groups like Zero, based in Germany, and the Dutch Nul, the French Nouveau Realistes and later the kinetic consortium Groupe de Recherche d'art visuel (GRAV), the Italian Azimuth, Gruppo N and Gruppo T, exhibited together throughout Europe during the first half of the 1960s in large controversial shows designed to counter the influence of American Abstract Expressionism and its pallid European offspring, Informel.

During the decade of the 1960s, Kusama had more exhibitions in Europe than in the US, virtually always under Nouvelle Tendance auspices and much of the time as a participant in Zero, originally a troika of three German artists, Heinz Mack, Otto Piene and Günther Uecker. The artists shared an interest in exploring the material and visual properties of individual components of surface, colour and light in an attempt to create an art that was anti-metaphoric, non-relational and empty of any reference except to itself. By 1960, Group Zero had grown to become a flexible consortium of loosely allied European artists that exhibited together from 1960 to 1965.¹⁸ With no manifesto to guide them, it was understood that

those who showed with Zero shared an involvement with the problem of representing an object in space without resorting to illusionism. To this end, they used a wide variety of strategies with a precision that recalled scientific investigation, but most deployed a single colour across the surface of their work or organized identical geometric forms or found objects within the rigorous confines of a grid.¹⁹ Because they freed painted surfaces or objects from any relationships between their elements, monochromy and monomorphism were ideal formal strategies to strip colour and composition from their traditional descriptive and metaphorical tasks.

While it is not difficult to see why Kusama's *Infinity Nets* might have attracted the interest of American Minimalists like Judd and Stella and the European Zero artists, Kusama's work is utterly different from her Minimalist and Nouvelle Tendance counterparts in its execution and in its *mode d'emploi*. Despite her description of her brushstroke as 'mechanical', and of the paintings themselves as 'empty'²⁰ one does not have to believe that the *Infinity Nets* are direct transcriptions of hallucinations in order to understand them as highly personalized expressions of the artist's persona. Most obviously, however rote the specific repetitive action used in putting paint to canvas, the result is insistently handmade. Whorls of chain-linked circular forms accumulate in a kind of painterly crochet around a few central nodules strewn at random across the surface, creating an unsystematic pattern as varied as those found in nature, and as personal as

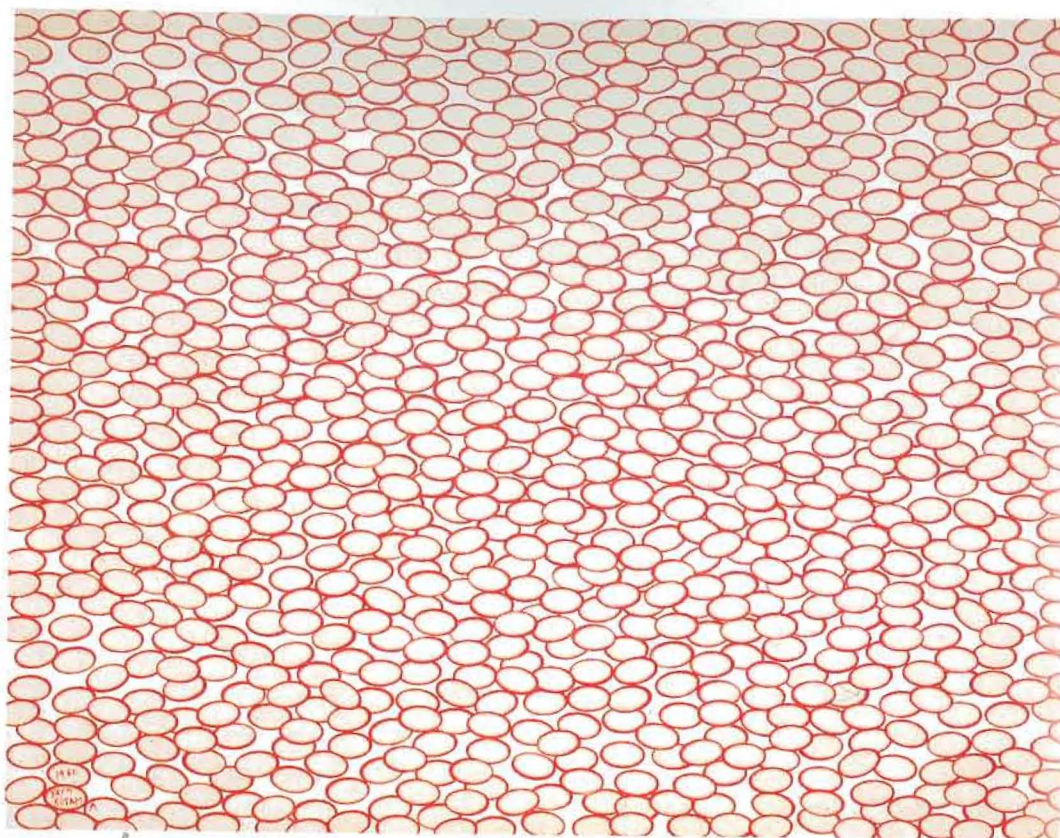


Günther Uecker
Lichtscheibe
1965
59 × 59 × 2 cm



above, Andy Warhol
Red Airmail stamps
1962
Silkscreen on canvas
51 x 40.5 cm

right, Accumulation No. 15 A
1962
Collage on paper
51.5 x 65.5 cm



a signature. It was this planned chaos of the *Nets*, and later, the phallic protrusions in the *Accumulation* sculpture, that caused the critic Lucy R. Lippard in 1966 to cite Kusama's work as a refutation of the coolness of Minimalism and a precursor to a sensuous 'eccentric' abstraction, brought to fruition in the late 1960s by artists like Eva Hesse, Jackie Windsor and others.²¹

This kind of conscious revolt against the emotionless mechanics of the minimal is most evident in a series of collages from 1962 that featured brightly coloured mailing stickers

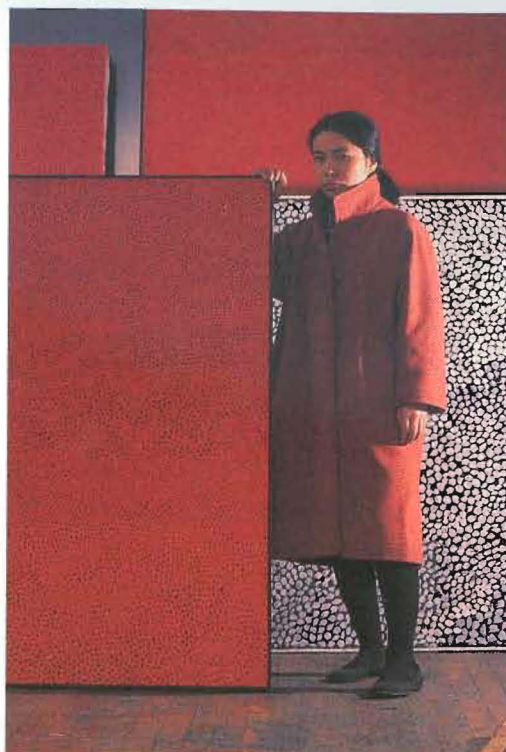
arranged more or less in a raster formation. Although they might conform to the literal definition of serial repetition, they are not so in spirit. The key element – the thrum of sameness that delivers the pleasure of a repeated pattern and the chillingly *Unheimlich* possibility of an endless march of perfect simulacra, is missing.

There is insistent imperfection in all of Kusama's works, but in all the sticker *Accumulations*, with their slipped or missing stickers, gaps and ragged edges, the grid is deliberately ruptured, our pleasure interrupted



above, left, The artist with
Infinity Net painting, double
exposure photograph, early 1960s

above, right and opposite, The
artist with **Infinity Net** paintings,
studio, New York, c. 1961



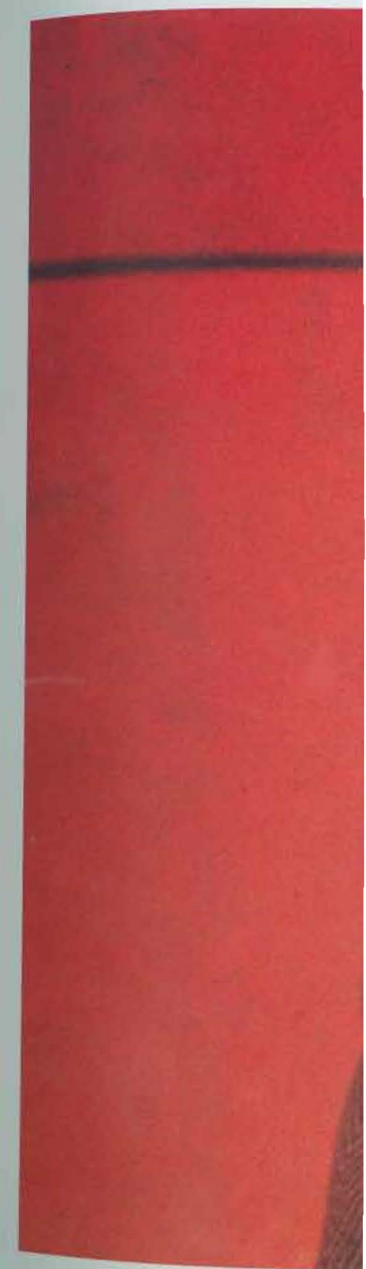
by the artist who reminds us of her fallible,
human presence.

That Kusama's works were insistent if not
flamboyant in their emphasis on the process was
evident to all who followed her work, even to those
who praised it for entirely different reasons. To see
a show by Kusama, wrote Judd in 1964, is to see
'a result of Kusama's work, not a work itself'.²²
From her earliest exhibitions it was clear to her
contemporaries that Kusama herself was 'headed
... into the peculiar world of performance art'²³
well before the phrase was coined and she herself
began to experiment with Happenings. With the
largest *Infinity Net* measuring 33 feet (10 metres)

in length and over 6 feet (1.85 metres) in height,
the sheer acreage of canvas covered with the
Infinity Net pattern stands as inescapable evidence
of the frightening acts of endurance that it took to
make them. Kusama saw the process of making the
Infinity Nets as integral to the works themselves,
and the physical and emotional energy that she
poured into them as an imprint of her physical
being. Within the first year of her arrival in New
York, and in the direst of financial circumstances,
she found the resources to hire professional
photographers to document both the act of
creating these paintings *cum* environments, as
well as the acting out of her spiritual, emotional
and almost physical association with them.

So consciously did Kusama want the viewer
to make the connection between her physical self
and her work that, to the annoyance of some
researchers, it is difficult to find a photograph of
an *Infinity Net* that does not also include the artist
herself standing in front of, on, above or below it.
In some instances, Kusama poses in front of her
Infinity Nets dressed in clothes that mimic their
colour or intricate pattern. Other photographs
reveal her crouching amidst the paintings as if
trying to physically merge with them.

In one extraordinary undated and unsigned
double exposure a negative image of an *Infinity
Net* is superimposed over a full-length portrait
of the artist; through the grid of paint the artist's
image is fractured into a thousand tiny pixel-like
dots. Transformed into pattern before our eyes,
the merger between artist and work of art
is complete.





III. Sex

These photographs make clear not only Kusama's desire for her physical 'self-obliteration' by her graphic metonym, but also her desire for her signature pattern to bleed off the canvas and overrun the environment. At the same time as Kusama was completing her largest and most austere *Infinity Net* paintings, she also began to produce sculptures that consisted of household objects – from sofas to chairs to bedpans – covered with profusions of small, stuffed phallic tentacles. Called *Accumulations*, the earliest works were painted white like the first *Infinity Nets*, and can be seen, in a sense, as a psycho-sexual inversion of their dot-like voids. Humorous and frankly sexual, Kusama's phalluses, which, flaccid and erect, joyfully overrun such symbols of feminine

domesticity as irons, baking pans, kitchen tables and ladles, or peak coily from the inside of shoes and shoulder-bags, also offer a none too subtle commentary on a world absurdly if suffocatingly dominated by the male gender. Playful, they are also angry, suffused with what were no doubt Kusama's personal frustrations as a struggling female artist and foreigner in a chauvinistic and tightly circumscribed art community. If Kusama's use of high heels stuffed with phalluses are her most unnuanced jibe at the male fetish and its quintessential double,²⁴ close observation of the encrusted surfaces of other works from the period reveal wickedly funny anecdotes that belie the surface impression of all-over pattern. In the 1963 *Ironing Board*, a heavy iron rests on an impudent protuberance, and in *Travelling Life*, among

Installation details, 'Love Forever: Yayoi Kusama, 1958–1968', left and right, Los Angeles County Museum of Art, 1998, centre, Museum of Contemporary Art, Tokyo, 1999

foreground works, I. to r., *Ironing Board*

1963

Sewn stuffed fabric, iron, ironing board, paint

112 × 142 × 70 cm

Collection, Storm King Art Center, Mountainville, New York

Travelling Life

1964

Sewn stuffed fabric, women's shoes, wooden stepladder, paint

248 × 82 × 151 cm

Collection, National Museum of Modern Art, Kyoto

Baby Carriage

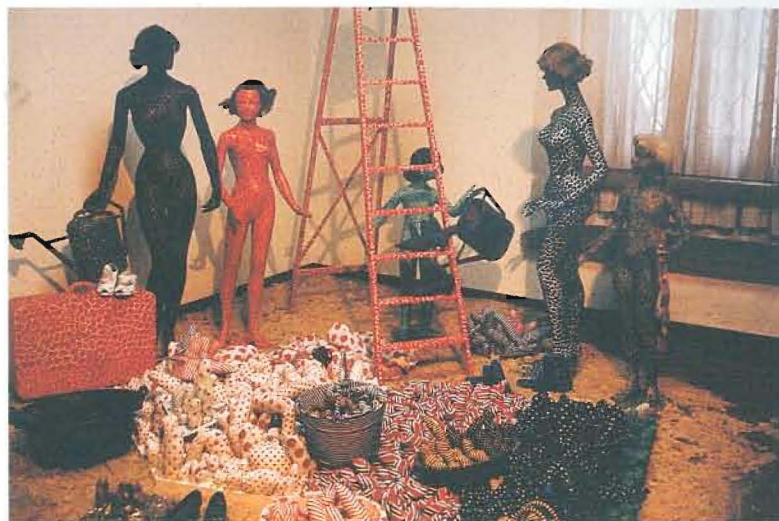
c. 1964–66

Sewn stuffed fabric, baby carriage, stuffed toy kangaroos, paint

96.5 × 59 × 102 cm

Collection, Allen Memorial Art Museum, Oberlin College, Ohio

Driving Image (details)
 1959–64
 Mannequins, furniture, household
 objects, macaroni, sewn stuffed
 fabric, paint
 Dimensions variable
 Installation, 'Driving Image
 Show', Galleria d'Arte del
 Naviglio, Milan, 1966



Kusama's most important works from the period, three pairs of high heels are poised in the midst of their upward scramble, crushing the stuffed phalli in their wake with careless and cruel abandon.²⁵

Kusama clearly saw the *Accumulations* – and their sculptural offspring, the related phallus-covered *Sex-Obsession* objects; the *Food Obsession* series carpeted with dry macaroni; and the *Compulsion Furniture*, covered with the *Infinity Net* pattern painted in Day-Glo colours – as another addition to an ever expanding environment of pattern. Heretofore theoretical, enacted only in her studio and in photo-collages made for promotional purposes, in 1964 Kusama was able to realize her dream of a full-blown environment at the Castellane Gallery in New York. Called 'Driving Image Show', the exhibition consisted of a room full of *Accumulation* furniture set up in a living room tableau, phallus-covered clothes and mannequins overrun with dried macaroni. Dried macaroni was also scattered on the floor, and the walls were lined with *Infinity Net* paintings. As one astonished critic noted, so overwhelming was the sensory overload that the room seemed to shimmer and buzz; 'separate, distinguishable things tended to dissolve in their all-over texture'.²⁶ Although nothing sold, the exhibition caused a sensation, with stunned visitors ogling the thousands upon thousands of phalluses, while the macaroni crunched uncomfortably beneath their feet.

The *Driving Image* environment in New York served as a model for two subsequent installations of the same name, as well as a set for a series of performances for the camera. Photographs and

Photo collage for 'Driving Image
Show' exhibition poster (detail)
c. 1963
No longer extant, dimensions
unknown

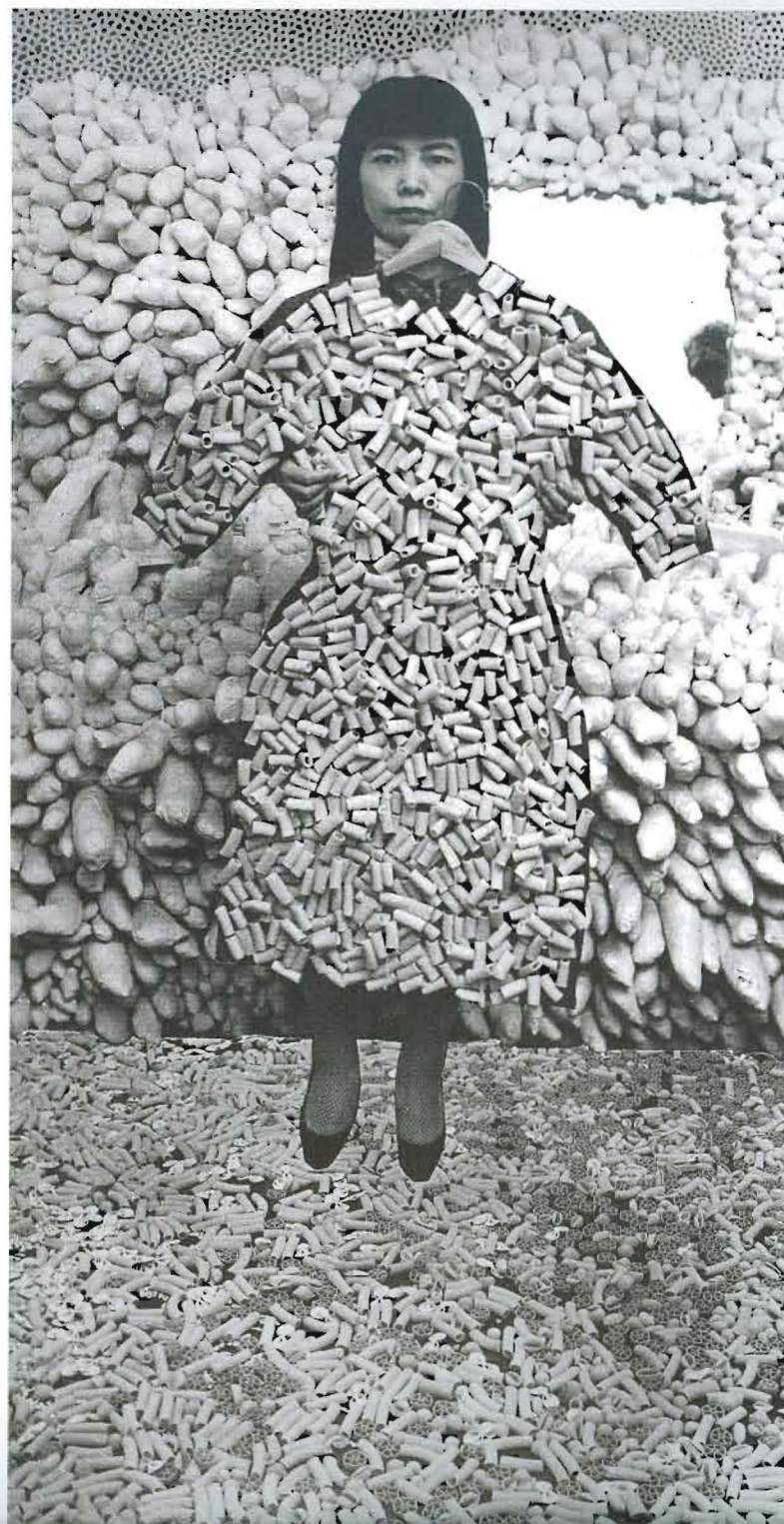


photo collages of the artist cavorting on, under and amidst her two- and three-dimensional works were meant not only for publicity purposes but also as works unto themselves – stop-action performances in which artist and artwork are indistinguishable. They are also, in their way, self-portraits. In one series in particular dating from 1964, Kusama, wearing a crocheted blouse and fishnet stockings, does a credible imitation of one of her own works, standing frozen next to a similarly posed pasta-covered mannequin surrounded by *Infinity Nets* and *Accumulation Furniture*. In a photo-collage cobbled together most probably from shots from the same photo session, she gravely holds in front of her a dress stiff with macaroni. The dress obscures Kusama's body completely leaving only her expressionless face and her fishnet-clad gams dangling like the appendages of a paper doll. In perhaps the best-known photographic image of Kusama from the period, the artist, naked save for a spray of stick-on polka dots and a pair of high heels, drapes herself provocatively, centrefold style, across *Accumulation II*, a couch that bristles with erect phalli.

As has been pointed out eloquently by others,²⁷ with her straightforward allusions both to little girls and to pin-ups, Kusama toys with the clichés of femininity, consciously satirizing them but at the same time using them to promote her self and her work. Indeed, throughout her career Kusama has consciously assumed a series of clichéd sexual, ethnic and psychological roles that simultaneously acknowledge and send-up the stereotypes that have accrued to her. Although she

never stated it explicitly, Kusama was very aware of her position as a mentally ill, female 'non-American' artist at 'a time when American developed national pride ... that did not allow them to acknowledge or to recognize what they were doing in other cultures'.²⁸ To exaggerate indeed to capitalize on her exotic status, Kusama, who never wore a kimono while living in Japan, habitually sported traditional Japanese dress at her own exhibition openings, and used a kimono in at least one of her early Happenings. Glorifying accepting the moniker 'Dotty', from the tabloid press in the late 1960s, more recently she has donned flowing sorcerer's robes and peekaboo witch's hats for performances, no doubt in reference both to her age and the mental illness that has plagued her.

Much has been written recently about Kusama's bold and prescient confrontation of feminist issues before the vocabulary of feminist critique was born. Kusama's militancy, though goes beyond essentialist feminism and into sexuality itself. What Alexandra Munroe has called Kusama's exercise of 'the glorious right to dominate back'²⁹ can be extended to include the glorious right to make banal what is almost sacred in its profanity, namely the phallus. In the face of Kusama's ferocious use of the phallus as a symbol of feminist anger against male domination, it has been justly celebrated for its brio, but she is also to be admired for her unflinching use of overt sexual imagery and themes that began with her *Accumulations* and continued through her so-called 'orgy' performances, as well as her novels and poetry.

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The introduction of such baldly sexual imagery
 into the streamlined cool of New York in 1962
 might have been expected to cause a sensation,
 if not a scandal, but it is a measure of Kusama's
 ability to shock that the initial reaction of critics
 and spectators was to ignore the phallic content
 of the *Accumulations* and assimilate their form into
 the vocabulary of the time. Kusama herself seems
 to have been loath to give a specific name to her
 forms. When asked by the New York critic Gordon
 Brown in a 1964 interview for radio: 'Miss Kusama,
 are the stuffed sacs with which you cover all those
 household objects really phallic symbols?'
 Kusama's uncharacteristically coy response was,
 'Everybody says so.'³⁰

Everybody might have been talking about
 Kusama's phalluses but nobody was doing so
 in print. From the first appearance of the
Accumulations in 1962, critics and curators had
 a difficult time discussing their irreverent
 sexuality, so mostly they avoided it – often with
 comic results. Referring specifically to these
 works, the eminent art historian Sir Herbert Read
 took a strictly biological tack, noting that Kusama
 'with perfect consistency ... creates forms that
 proliferate like mycelium and seal the conscious-
 ness in their white integument'.³¹ A critic writing
 in 1966 could gaze upon a room full of Kusama's
 bristling members and declare them – *pace* Donald
 Judd and the whole of the New Tendency – a prime
 example of 'the semantics of monosurfacing and
 multiplied elements'³² while in the same year, one
 of the largest *Accumulations*, a six-foot rowboat
 now in the collection of the Stedelijk Museum in
 Amsterdam, could be included with Kasimir



Installation, group exhibition
 including works by Yayoi Kusama,
 Robert Morris, Claes Oldenburg,
 James Rosenquist, George Segal,
 Richard Smith, Andy Warhol;
 Green Gallery, New York, 1962

background, right, *Accumulation*
No. 1
 1962
 Sewn stuffed fabric, paint, chair
 frame
 94 × 99 × 109 cm



above, Andy Warhol
Cow Wallpaper
1966
Serigraph printed on wallpaper
115.5 x 75.5 cm

opposite, Aggregation: One
Thousand Boats Show (detail)
1963
Sewn stuffed fabric, wooden
rowboat, paint; 999 silkscreen
images on paper
Boat, 265 x 130 x 60 cm
Installation dimensions variable
Reconstruction of original
installation, 'Love Forever: Yayoi
Kusama, 1958-1968', The Museum
of Modern Art, New York, 1998
Collection, Stedelijk Museum,
Amsterdam

Malevich, Josef Albers and Frank Stella in an international exhibition survey of monochromy and seriality.³³

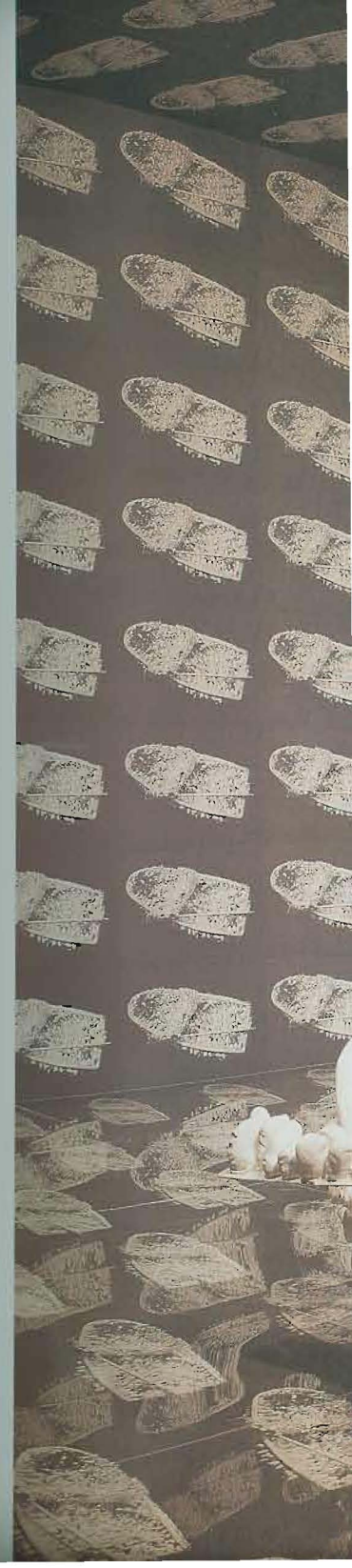
As uncomfortably as Kusama's raucous *Accumulations* fit with the controlled monotony of the grid and the hard edge, they are not quite Pop either, although an attempt was made to make them so. *Accumulations* were included in two of the defining exhibitions of American Pop Art in New York at the Green Gallery in 1962 and 1963, as well as in Lucy R. Lippard's definitive anthology *Pop Art* published in 1966. In the same way that her *Infinity Nets* hovered on the outer edge of Abstract Expressionism and the Nouvelle Tendance, serving in retrospect as a commentary on both, Kusama's *Accumulations* have a peripheral connection to certain elements of Pop but in fact contradict its very essence.

Pop's object-orientation and its adoption of techniques like silkscreen and airbrush that mimicked the clean lines of industrial and commercial art were for Kusama the embodiment of what she called the increasingly 'mechanized and standardized' environment of 'highly civilized America'.³⁴ If her counter to the slick perfection of machine production was her emphatically handmade seriality, her critique of the ever-more commodity-oriented milieu of the New York art market lay in her increasing devotion to the creation of environments.

Kusama's *Aggregation: One Thousand Boats Show*, exhibited at the Gertrude Stein Gallery in New York in 1963, had been the first publicly exhibited installation of her career, and her strongest statement to date against those values

that she saw embodied in Pop Art. The *Boats Show* consisted of an eight-foot rowboat and two oars covered completely with white phallic accumulations and 999 black and white poster-sized photo reproductions of the sculpture. Visitors entered the installation through a small dark corridor, papered floor to ceiling with the boat image. The effect of the vast number of repeated images in such a confined space was vertiginous and oppressive. At the end of the hallway, lit by a white spotlight and waiting like a reward, was the original boat, beached in all its splendour, surrounded by its pale simulacra. Like seeing a movie star in person, the thrill of confronting this one-thousandth boat eloquently – if theatrically – argued for the superiority of the original over its eminently reproducible copy. At the same time that the installation argues against mass (re)production of an art object, it is also a succinct testament to the power of advertising and promotion. This distinction, between the commodification of the object by outside market forces and the use of the media for promotional purposes, for Kusama boiled down to an issue of retaining authority over one's own production. 'Anything mass-produced', she told a reporter in 1968, 'robs us of our freedom. We, not the machine, should be in control.'³⁵

Perhaps because of her prescient use of wallpaper in the *Boats Show*, or the 1962 collages incorporating airmail stickers and labels, the Pop artist most often compared to Kusama is Andy Warhol. Although never close, the two artists knew one another and travelled in the same downtown circles.³⁶ Their interaction, it seems, was minimal.





'We were like two mountains', noted Kusama recently.³⁷ Warhol's entire oeuvre, exemplified by the cool remove of the medium of silkscreen, exhibits what the art historian Robert Rosenblum has called 'a shoulder-shrugging indifference to direct and unique experience',³⁸ as well as a celebration of the annihilation of the authorial hand. Environments like Kusama's *Boats Show* offer an argument against anonymous, industrial seriality and champion process over object, experience over consumption. This neat privileging of the original over its endlessly reproducible simulation runs counter to the very idea of Warhol's Factory, where industrial production and mass marketing merged seamlessly and sensationally with contemporary art.

IV. Fame

What Kusama did share with Warhol was a fascination with the mass media and an appreciation for the possibilities it presented for promotion and distribution of her ideas. As it did with Warhol, celebrity crops up as a theme in a number of her works in various media beginning in the mid 1960s. Two years after the *Boats Show*, in which the theme of publicity is only obliquely referenced, Kusama experimented with the visual seduction of kinetic art to promote the aphrodisiacal qualities of fame in an environment called *Peep Show* or alternatively *Endless Love Show*. A mirrored hexagonal room with coloured lights that flashed in time to piped-in rock and roll, *Peep Show*, like its bawdy namesake, was experienced by viewers through slots located at eye level.³⁹ In an onanistic twist, rather than ogling an anonymous 'star' on

the *Peep Show*'s stage, the only image one saw was one's own – reflected *ad infinitum* in the mirrored walls, surrounded by blinking lights, for all the world like a kinetic marquee.

Mention has already been made of the well-known 1966 photo-collage that features a nude Kusama sprawled on phallic sculpture, but it is important to reiterate that this kind of work was not only a self-portrait, or a stop-action performance, but an important part of a publicity package that, along with promotional materials like artist's statements, critics' testimonials and press releases, accompanied all of Kusama's projects, beginning with the earliest *Infinity Net* paintings and continuing today.⁴⁰ This archive of still photography, film and video, press releases and newspaper clippings, documents the ongoing performance that encompasses all of Kusama's voluminous body of work as well as the artist's very life. More importantly perhaps, this material was used to advertise that life, as art, to an audience outside the confines of the contemporary art community. By the later half of the 1960s, Kusama's ongoing project had burst the tight confines of the art magazines and, with the artist's encouragement, spread to the general press – so successfully that by 1967, Kusama could claim that she had more newspaper clippings than Warhol himself. As with Warhol, Kusama's engagement with popular media proved unpopular with an art world which, after the advent of Pop Art, was particularly sensitive to the encroachment of mass culture into the realm of high art.⁴¹ Complaints concerning Kusama's excessive self-promotion and 'lust for publicity' began at this



time and have followed her throughout her career. Mirroring the popular assumption that Kusama's mental illness drove the artist helplessly to make her obsessive works, critics of her single-minded pursuit of media attention fail to understand its significance for her project as a whole. In retrospect, it is clear that Kusama's sustained complicity with the popular media was and is an elaborated parody; her acts of brazen self-promotion are a bald-faced challenge to the most enduring paradox of the avant-garde from the 1960s until now: the reconciliation of the rank commercialization of contemporary art with the anti-commodity call to merge art with everyday life.

Kusama's infamous *hors concours* participation in the 1966 Venice Biennale offered her the biggest international platform in her career to date from which to work her subversion. Given space on the lawn in front of the Italian pavilion by her Italian dealer, Renato Cardazzo of Galleria d'Arte del Naviglio in Milan, Kusama intended, as she wrote in a grant application, to 'reveal an important creative new idea' that would 'show the true nature of the avant-garde'.⁴² To her sponsor, she merely explained her plan for an installation called *Narcissus Garden*, that would consist of 1,500 mirrored plastic balls spread across the lawn like a kinetic carpet. The biennial was roundly pronounced 'weak and insipid',⁴³ but Kusama's 'way-out exhibition of mirror balls'⁴⁴ caused less of a visual sensation than an outright scandal. No sooner had the *Narcissus Garden* been put in place than Kusama, dressed in a kimono, began to hawk the individual balls to passers-by

under a sign that read 'Your Narcissism for Sale, Lira 1,200'. Organizers, horrified at the impropriety of selling 'art like hot dogs or ice cream cones at the Venice Biennale', called the police, who ordered the artist to desist from selling off her installation, which she did. Instead, she passed out self-promotional flyers that featured an over-ripe testimonial to her 'images of strange beauty' that 'press ... on our organs of perception with terrifying insistence' penned by the art-historical eminence, Sir Herbert Read.⁴⁵

The news stories about the *Narcissus Garden* caper that appeared in an array of international publications expressed shock at the artist's crass reminder of the economic undercurrent of international exhibitions like the Venice Biennale. All were accompanied by cheesecake photos of Kusama cavorting amid her installation, minus the kimono but clad fetchingly in a bright red leotard. Like the post-scandal photo sessions that produced these pictures, the entire media ruckus was orchestrated by Kusama and was clearly the centrepiece of her plan to 'reveal an important new creative idea'. As its title announces, *Narcissus Garden* was as much about the promotion of the artist through the media as it was about the dematerialization of a sculptural object through the selling off of its elements. Explaining that the wholesaling of her sculpture was a logical result of the development of contemporary art towards commercial product, she told the Italian magazine *D'Ars Agency* that 'in the past, one used brushes, colours, chisels. Today, the work of art is produced exclusively by the artist's sensibility. One is no



Narcissus Garden
1966

Plastic mirror balls
1,500 balls, ø 20 cm each
Installation, XXXIII Venice
Biennale

The artist selling mirror balls to
passers-by



14th Street Happening
1966
Performance, New York,
documented with colour slides by
Eikoh Hosoe

longer obstructed by the difficulties of the occupation. Today, the artist only has to have an idea for an object.' 'Artists', she continued, 'should integrate themselves into economic life by making their work inexpensive and accessible enough to be bought like items in a supermarket.'⁴⁶

Over the next several years Kusama's emphasis on publicity proved to be even more radical in its ambition than the mere parody of the craven hypocrisy of the contemporary art world. In 1967 Kusama began to concentrate on public performance, and it is at this moment in her career that it became clear that her sustained bid for notoriety was an attempt to harness fame as a *strategy* – a vehicle through which to achieve her goal to inundate the world with her artistic persona, or its alter ego: the net and the polka dot.

As the hybrid nature of *Narcissus Garden* indicates, Kusama's experiments with Happenings occurred almost simultaneously with her forays into kinetics. For Kusama, both participatory kinetic installations and performance were logical steps in a progression from her environment-sized canvases and rooms full of sculpture, to photographic simulation of activities staged in real time, to actual interaction with the public. 'Everything', Kusama emphasized in a 1968 interview, 'originated from polka dots on a canvas'.⁴⁷ Executed on the streets of New York, with an audience that consisted of a hired photographer and any passers-by who might happen upon the artist – as she walked a prescribed route in a full dress kimono, or lay prone on top of an *Accumulation* sculpture – Kusama's earliest actions seemed to have passed unnoticed. The so-called 'naked

performances' that began in outdoor locations all over New York City in 1967 and continued through 1969, succeeded in transforming her into a media personality.

Kusama had experimented with body-painting bikini-clad models in the winter and spring of 1967,⁴⁸ but during the months that followed she held a series of 'Body Festivals' every Saturday and Sunday in city parks, where the public was invited to strip and be 'made into art'⁴⁹ by Kusama's busy application of polka-dotted body paint. These events were heavily publicized by press releases sporting slogans like 'Please the Body' and 'Learn, Unlearn, Relearn!' They were well attended and, most importantly, covered by the general media, who quickly dubbed Kusama 'The Priestess of Nudity',⁵⁰ or more succinctly 'Dotty'.⁵¹ In an effort to increase her visibility, Kusama collaborated with the underground filmmaker Jud Yalkut on *Self-obliteration*, a twenty-three-minute 16mm film that documented the entire summer of naked Happenings. Set to music by Joe Jones and the Tonedeads, accompanied by a chorus of almost thirty amplified frogs, the work begins with Kusama painting polka dots on flora and fauna (a passing cat) in a natural setting and concludes with a somewhat hilarious 'orgy' scene in which naked hippies, smeared with fluorescent poster paints, nuzzle and grope one another while lying in one of Kusama's mirrored installations.

The year 1968 saw the birth of Kusama's 'Anatomic Explosions', a more directed variation on the Body Festival in which three or four naked dancers covered with polka dots gyrated to rock 'n' roll music in front of public buildings like the New



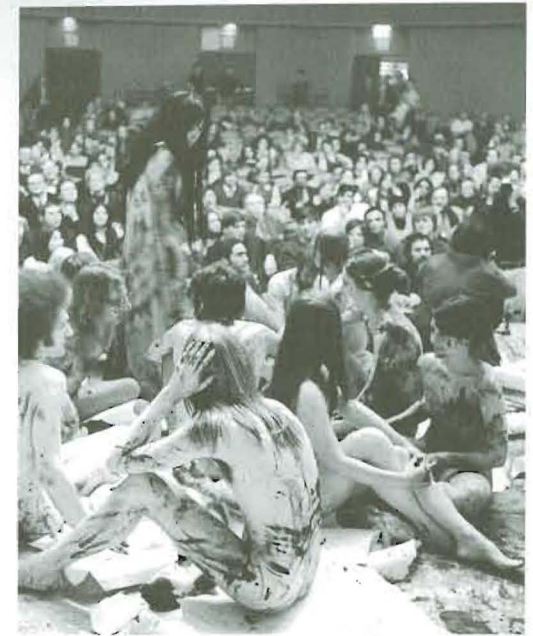
York Stock Exchange, the Statue of Liberty and the Alice in Wonderland Statue in Central Park until they were forced to stop by the police.⁵² Kusama called her performances during this period 'social demonstrations'⁵³ but their thin veneer of progressive political rhetoric did not disguise the fact that their true agenda was Kusama's 'symbolic philosophy with polka dots'.⁵⁴

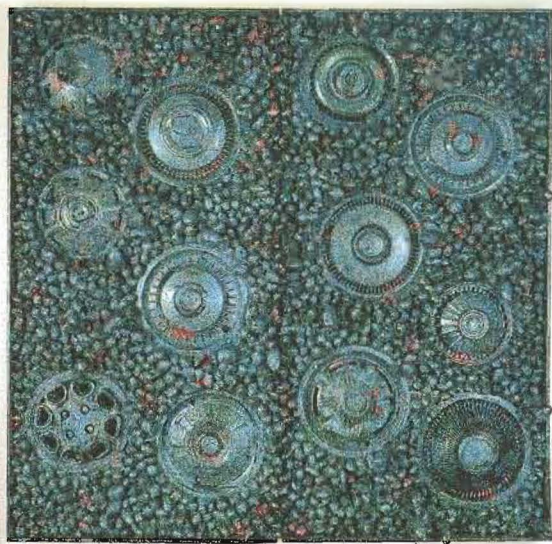
As with the Body Festivals, Kusama herself did not participate but rather directed the group and passed out polka dot covered press releases. The release for the Wall Street happening proclaimed: 'STOCK IS A FRAUD!' and exhorted all passers-by to 'OBLITERATE WALL STREET MEN WITH POLKA DOTS'.⁵⁵ At the 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!'.⁵⁶

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'.⁵⁷ 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'.⁵⁸

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 situation. 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, sculpture, Happenings, events, fashions and body painting'.⁵⁹ The equally ephemeral 'Kusama's Fashions' (with its affiliate, the 'Kusama Fashion Institute'), and the 'Kusama Poster Corporation', touted clothes and posters painted with the artist's *Infinity Net* pattern. Other dubious business ventures included the 'Kusama Orgy' and 'Studio One', billed as a body painting concern, that offered 'young beautiful models, male and female'.⁶⁰ Struggling financially and facing waning enthusiasm for her performances in New York, Kusama returned to Japan in 1970 to stage a series of naked Happenings in Osaka and Tokyo, all of which were stymied by vigilant authorities. The early 1970s seemed to have been a





The Sea Bottom
1983
Sewn stuffed fabric, found
objects, lamé powder
184.5 × 186 × 22 cm

time of transition for Kusama in which she concentrated less on the visual than on a new interest, writing fiction. Featured in more than one hundred and fifty articles in 1968, by 1971 Kusama's battle to 'obliterate the world with Polka Dots' was in hiatus. During that year, her archives reveal that not a single word was written about Kusama; after more than a decade of intense involvement with the New York art community and with the media at large, less than two years after her last public Happening she had been forgotten. In 1973 Kusama left New York and returned to Tokyo for good.

V. Japan, Again

Yayoi Kusama's time in New York constituted a decade-long gap in a life and career led primarily in Japan. Although the narrative of her experience abroad is extremely important to emphasize the continuity in Kusama's career, America and Western Europe lost sight of her for approximately two decades. 'I was thought to have been forgotten in the world', wrote Kusama in 1992. '[but] it was only because my information had not reached them.'⁶¹

Kusama began to show work again in Japan in 1975, but her first important solo exhibition at a major Tokyo gallery occurred seven years later, in 1982. As Alexandra Munroe, in her fine overview of the period, has noted, although Japanese critics had warily followed Kusama's exploits in New York, during the artist's first years back in Japan they had some difficulty assimilating her work into the post 1960s artistic milieu that existed there.⁶² In the two years between her return to Japan and

the re-establishment of her visual arts career, Kusama also began to write novels, short stories and poetry. Her first novel *Manhattan Suicide Addict* was published in 1978; since that time, she has published eighteen more. Munroe has argued that Kusama's visual production and her fiction are 'different forms of the same repetitive production of traumatic, phantasmic and transcendental experiences that obsess her',⁶³ and indeed, it was through her writing that Kusama was re-introduced in Japan to an enthusiastic literary public, thrilled by her novels' explicit sexuality, graphic violence and hallucinatory description of the exoticism of Manhattan subculture. During these first years of her resettlement in Japan, Kusama had undergone periodic treatment for mental illness at the Seiwa Hospital, a private facility specializing in art therapy in the fashionable Tokyo neighborhood of Shinjuku. In 1977, she moved there permanently, retaining a private apartment as well as a studio within close proximity to the facility.

In the early 1980s, Kusama returned to painting and to the creation of large-scale *Accumulation* sculptures and installations. Like many artists of her generation, Kusama has anthologized her own work, recreating with her signature obsessive will to repetition, the net, the dot and the phallus in seemingly endless variation.⁶⁴ So closely do some of her *Infinity Nets* of the 1980s resemble those of the early 1960s that works completed in Japan are still mistaken for those made almost thirty years before in New York.⁶⁵

This kind of confusion notwithstanding,



1988
Acrylic on canvas
91 x 73 cm

opposite, top, **Star Dust of One
Hundred Million**
1989

Acrylic on canvas
Triptych, 194 x 130 cm each panel
Collection, Museum of
Contemporary Art, Tokyo

opposite, bottom, **Yellow Flame**
1995

Acrylic on canvas
Triptych, 194 x 130 cm each panel



Kusama does not, like the aged de Chirico, copy the same 'classic' painting over and over again. Her work of the past twenty years differs from that of the 1950s and 1960s because until very recently it has lacked two important qualities – her insistence on an aesthetic of the handmade over that of the machine and, concomitantly, the self-referential abstraction inherent in her signature motifs.

In these later paintings, nets, dots and biomorphic shapes proliferate over multiple canvases that form polyptychs of room-sized dimensions. Painted in acrylic with a consistency of pattern that could pass for the results of a stencil, these paintings approach the perfect seriality that the *Infinity Nets* of the early 1960s

never had. The surfaces of the recent works have also changed markedly. Kusama's best net paintings and gouaches have always had an optical, shimmering quality; she had achieved this effect in the early *Infinity Nets* by creating unsystematic circular colonies of cell-like clusters that seem to spiral forth from their painted surfaces. All of Kusama's New York paintings were executed in oil, and her liberal application of the paint gives the best works a luscious if uneven texture and a delicious sense of the artist's touch. The paintings of the 1980s and 1990s have a mute, acrylic flatness, and although they too have an optical dazzle, it is created by the juxtaposition of processed colours and their complements. If the early *Infinity Nets*, with their thickly painted cock-eyed lace work, stood as Kusama's signature, the hard-edged and ruthlessly patterned paintings of the 1980s and 1990s are more like displays of her logo. It is as if Kusama has realized that her identity has finally been established and the time has arrived for its free proliferation and franchise.

However inorganic in execution, the imagery in the late paintings is much less abstract than the paintings of the 1960s, and thus much less about the pattern itself. As if recalling her earliest still lifes from her first Japanese period, in which a nascent net pattern could be discerned in a pile of seeds, the repetitive motifs in many paintings of the past decade have a visual relationship with the dot, the net and the phallus, but are identifiable as forms in nature. Sperm-like sprouts squiggle across these canvases and translucent polka dots of varying sizes are suspended in colourful backgrounds like bubbles in liquid. Whereas works





from the 1960s were named by number or letter, these works bear titles that emphasize their metaphorical quality. An enormous multi-panel canvas with a spring green background squirming with bright red spotted lady bug forms is called *Awe of Life*. Another equally large work from the same year called *Star Dust of One Hundred Million* features a network of raspberry coloured veins veiling a lemon yellow background; superimposed are stripes of white bubble-like dots. The whole reads like an entire ecosystem. Similarly, the stuffed phallic *Accumulation* form has continued to colonize found objects, but in the 1990s these forms have lost their generalized, overtly sexual shape and become elongated and tentacular, draping and curling around objects like sea creatures, snubbed and rounded off so that they may be stacked together like so many potatoes, or pear-shaped and bulbous in the guise of gigantic, vaguely anthropomorphic inflatables.

VI. Fame, Again

In Japan appreciation for Kusama's work has grown steadily and in 1993 she was honoured by being chosen as the first individual, and the first woman, to represent Japan in the Venice Biennale of that year. The commissioner of the Japanese Pavilion, Akira Tatehata, organized a mini-retrospective of Kusama's career, and included early *Infinity Nets* as well as recent paintings, her first sculpture, *Accumulation I*, along with more recent *Accumulations*, the 1964 *My Flower Bed*, an enormous hanging sculpture made of stuffed gloves and bedsprings tinted a lurid, bloody red, and a number of box sculptures from the 1980s and

1990s. However different this recuperative homage might seem from her contentious début at the Biennale twenty-seven years earlier, there was an element of continuity; once again, Kusama, never separated from her work, which was incomplete without her presence, staged a performance in *Mirror Room (Pumpkin)*, an installation created for the exhibition. A neat conflation of two of her mirror installations from the mid 1960s, the *Peep Show* and the *Infinity Mirror Room*, the 1993 *Mirror Room (Pumpkin)* consisted of a large gallery papered floor to ceiling with a yellow and black polka dot pattern. In the centre of the space stood a mirrored box the size of a small room, with a single window in a manner reminiscent of the 1965 *Peep Show*. In a nod to the *Infinity Mirror Room* also of 1965, through that window the viewer could gaze on what seemed to be an infinite field of papier mâché pumpkins, all of which sported the same yellow and black polka dot design as the exterior gallery.

At the opening of the exhibition Kusama appeared in the room dressed in a long sorcerer's robe and peaked hat, both of which matched her surroundings and caused her to merge with them in a manner that recalled early interactions with her *Infinity Nets* and *Accumulations*. Visually a part of the installation, Kusama was also an active agent, offering tiny yellow and black polka dotted pumpkins to anyone who entered the space. These little pumpkins were a direct reference to the 2,000 lire mirror balls that the artist had outrageously hawked from her *Narcissus Garden* at her first Venice Biennale. The piecemeal sell-off of the installation in 1966 had been planned as

opposite and overleaf, **Mirror Room (Pumpkin)**
1991
Mirrors, wood, papier mâché,
paint
200 x 200 x 200 cm
Collection, Hara Museum, Tokyo
left, The artist in the installation





Installation, 'Yayoi Kusama: Now',
Robert Miller Gallery, New York,
1998
foreground, **Dots Accumulation**
1995
Acrylic on canvas
287.5 x 226 cm

background, **Repetition**
1998
Sewn stuffed fabric, wood, paint
120 pieces, 38 x 25.5 x 15 cm
each

a protest and as a punishment of a closed and commodity-obsessed art world. The souvenir giveaway in 1993 was on one hand a gracious acknowledgement of her arrival at the pinnacle of success and on the other a familiar bid to popularize and promote her work to a wider audience.

In her most recent exhibitions Kusama has returned to ideas that she introduced in her *Driving Image* installations in the mid 1960s; mural-sized paintings cover the walls and serve as backdrops for *Accumulation* furniture, and mannequins are overrun with *Infinity Nets*. This re-assimilation of the handmade qualities of work from the 1960s has appeared concurrently with the revival of interest in the United States and Europe in Kusama's work from that period. The return of Kusama's work to the United States after a twenty-year absence started with a little publicized but much seen exhibition at the short-lived Center for

International Contemporary Arts in Manhattan in 1989,⁶⁶ and culminated in an in-depth assessment of her New York period organized by the Los Angeles County Museum and The Museum of Modern Art in New York in 1998.⁶⁷ These exhibitions and countless smaller ones emphasized Kusama's most austere and minimal work from her Manhattan years – her large monochrome *Infinity Nets* and her first white *Accumulation* sculptures in particular.⁶⁸

It is possible to credit the popularity of the handmade, minimalist Kusama to a lack of familiarity with her ephemeral performance works of the mid 1960s, but it can also be linked to a general tendency identifiable over the past several years, in the US and in Europe, to revive the tropes of Modernism, but in a more humane form. This tendency which, not surprisingly, often uses the Minimal as the metonym of the Modern, is evident in interior design and even in fashion but is most apparent in the work of a younger generation of artists who enlist Minimalism's cool geometries in the service of institutional critique or ironic self-abnegation,⁶⁹ and its objective strategies like the use of serial repetition, monochromy and the grid as vehicles for identity-based narrative.⁷⁰ This reconsideration of the Modern also includes the retrospective enrichment of the Modernist canon by the inclusion of those artists like the Brazilians Hélio Oiticica and Lygia Clark and the Italian artist Piero Manzoni whose work (consciously or unconsciously) fits visually within its parameters, but remained unrecognized until the onset of a more global consideration of the history of postwar art. The happy coincidence that these

now-included Modernists-in-retrospect are, like Kusama, often women, people of colour and/or people from non-Western backgrounds serves to reinforce the warmth of this recently refurbished Modernism.

Looking at the early work of Yayoi Kusama helps us begin to understand the history of the 1960s in visual culture – a history that is still under construction. It would be a mistake, however, to allow our appreciation for Kusama's achievement in the 1960s to leave us with the ultimately false impression that 1960s Modernism had a feminine and multicultural face, or that in the 1990s, the decade in which Kusama's work has come to maturity, represents any more than a single chapter in an ongoing project that has lasted forty years and counting. There is no doubt that certain elements of Kusama's early work – will to repetition, its monochromy, its use of materials – were in sync with what was going on in New York, Milan and Amsterdam during the 1960s. Viewing her entire oeuvre, however, it is immediately clear that hers is an aberrant Modernism: a Modernism run wild; brash and repetitive, kitschy, often tasteless, sometimes ugly. Barely four years into a promising gallery career, Kusama jettisoned her monochromatic restraint; the restrained gesture, running wild over every surface, was transformed from a passive into an active motif that could spread like an epidemic. It became only a means by which to cover larger and more varied surfaces with eye-popping pattern but, finally, a strategy of incursion into our very world. What has euphemistically been called the 'unevenness' of Kusama's oeuvre is not just a

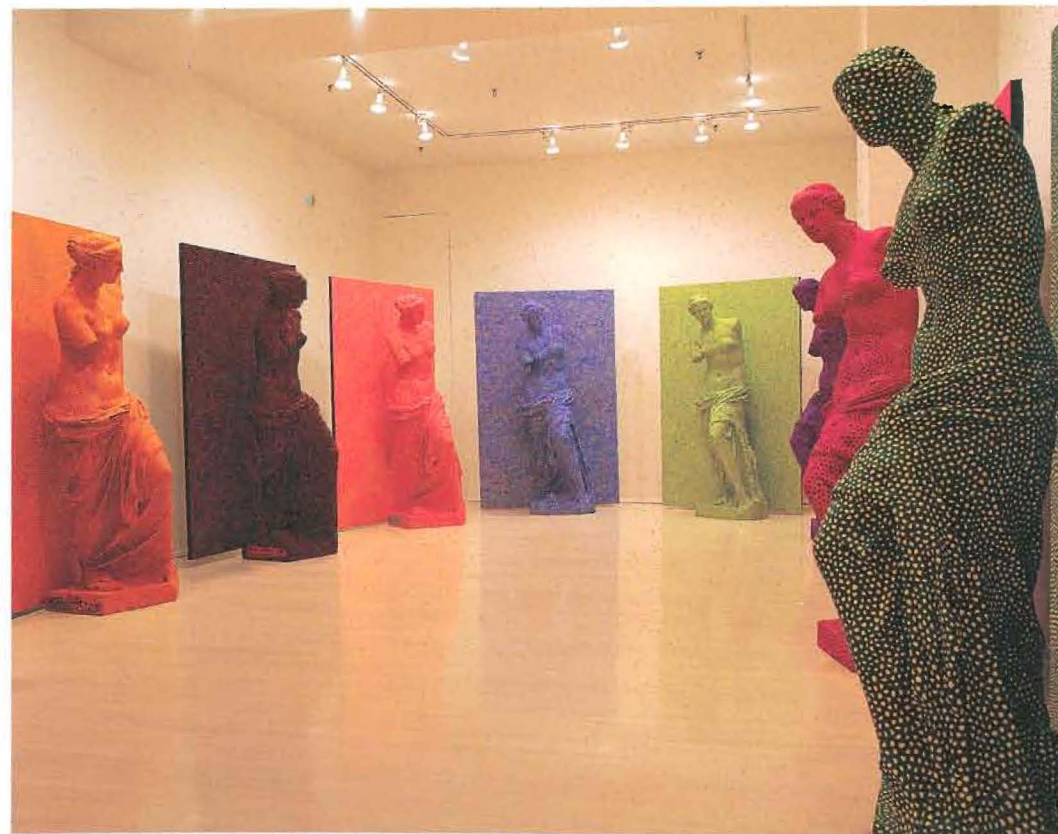
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What has euphemistically been called the 'unevenness' of Kusama's oeuvre is not just a

matter of our own inability to assimilate certain aspects of it. Rather, it can be seen as evidence of the artist's ongoing resistance to assimilation into any movement, any canon. The great glory of Kusama's work, from her earliest drawings to her newest offerings, is that it remains, because the artist wills it so – every bit as gauche and as angry, as difficult and as aggressive as it was when it was created and when it first flew in the face of an art world too square to grasp its visual and sensory overload, its egoism, its raunchy sexuality.

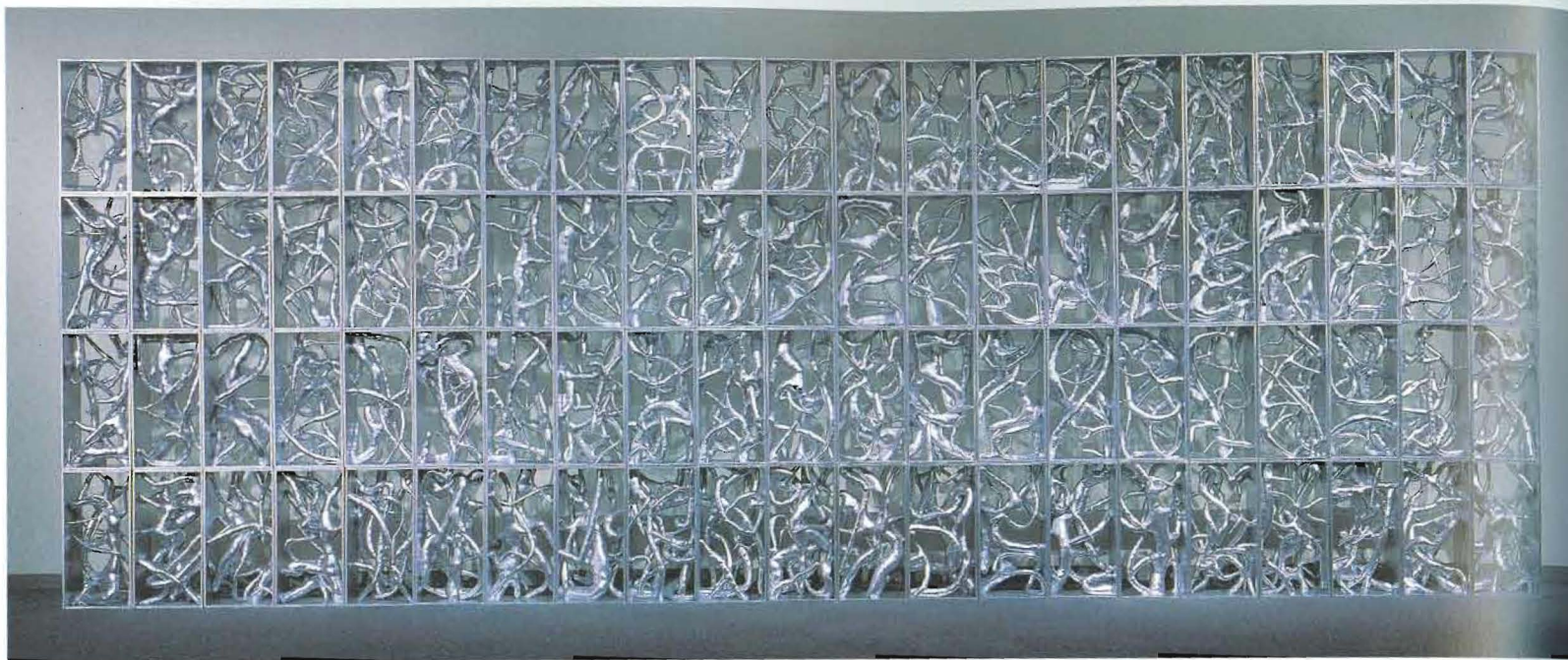
Its mixture of optical illusion, 1960s camp and



Installation, 'Yayoi Kusama: Now',
Robert Miller Gallery, New York,
1998

foreground, works from the series
*Statue of Venus Obliterated by
Infinity Nets*
1998

Wood, canvas, mannequins, paint
227.5 × 145.5 × 60 cm each



Shooting Stars

1992

Sewn stuffed fabric, wood,
metallic paint

320 × 840 × 30 cm

Collection, Niigata City Art
Museum, Japan

biomorphic ghoulishness is not to be expected from a 'minimalist' – handmade or otherwise. One can, however, find this hybrid of body-oriented, consciously referential work in the studios of young artists worldwide. Kusama's work from the 1960s might serve us well in our newly multicultural retrospective revisionism, but her newer work with its all-out visuality and conscious anti-innovation speaks directly to our sensibilities of the late 1990s.

In a sense though, it is inaccurate to say that Kusama's time has come, because Kusama has not waited for anyone or anything, but rather has barrelled through the decades to represent her self and her work in endless variation, not to an art-going public, but to the world.

- 1 This point was made by Akira Tatehata in 'Magnificent Obsession', Japanese Pavilion (cat.), XLV Venice Biennale, Yayoi Kusama, Japan Foundation, Tokyo, 1993
- 2 Yayoi Kusama, quoted by Akira Tatehata in 'Magnificent Obsession', p. 13
- 3 Unsigned article, 'A Woman Makes Her Way in the International Art Scene', *Geijutsu Shincho*, Vol. 12, No. 5, Tokyo, 1961, pp. 127–130

- 4 Yayoi Kusama, 'My Holy Land of Dreams for a Bright Future', Yayoi Kusama: *Printworks*, Shuichi Abe, Tokyo, 1992, p. 140
- 5 Yayoi Kusama, 'Driving Image: Why Do I Create Art', *Driving Image: Yayoi Kusama*, New York, Tokyo, 1986, n.p.
- 6 See Naoko Seki, *In Full Bloom: Yayoi Kusama, Years in Japan*, Tokyo Museum of Contemporary Art, 1999. Based on close study of what seems to be Kusama's earliest surviving work as an adult, *Untitled*, a still life from the late 1940s painted in Nihonga style, Seki argues that the *Infinity Net* pattern can be traced to Kusama's stylized rendering of rows of corn kernels and seeds.
- 7 Yayoi Kusama, letter to Georgia O'Keeffe, 1957, quoted by Bhupendra Kania, *Yayoi Kusama: A Retrospective*, Center for International Contemporary Arts, New York, 1989, p. 73
- 8 Georgia O'Keeffe, letter to Kusama, 1957, Yayoi Kusama archive
- 9 By 1959, in art circles in New York, Abstract Expressionism was, if not academic, clearly no longer the vanguard movement.
- 10 'A Woman Makes Her Way in the International Art Scene', op. cit., pp. 127–130
- 11 Yayoi Kusama, quoted by Akira Tatehata, 'Magnificent Obsession', op. cit., p. 12. This did not stop critics like Sidney Tillim and Donald Judd from comparing Kusama's paintings to Jackson Pollock, Clifford Still, Mark Rothko and Barnett Newman.
- 12 Sidney Tillim, 'In the Galleries: Yayoi Kusama', *Arts Magazine*, New York, October, 1959, p. 56

- 13 Donald Judd, 'Reviews and Previews: New Name: Yayoi Kusama', *ARTnews*, New York, October, 1959, p. 17
- 14 Ibid.
- 15 Donald Judd, 'In the Galleries: Yayoi Kusama', *ARTnews*, New York, September, 1964, pp. 68–69
- 16 Jack Burnham, *Beyond Modern Sculpture: The Effort of Technology on the Sculpture of This Century*, George Braziller, New York, 1968, p. 254
- 17 Ibid., p. 354
- 18 Otto Piene, 'The Development of Group ZERO', *The ZERO Group: A Supplement*, London, Thursday, 3 September 1966, p. 10. Piero Manzoni and Lucio Fontana also appeared in the group as adherents.
- 19 The grid as a ready-made, all-over organizational structure, the creation of a 'non-compositional' field in which the elements were elided in a visual special effect that served the quality of the New Tendency, as reported by Enrico Castelloni in the introduction for the exhibition catalog, *Monochrome*, Städtische Museum, Essen, Germany, 1961.
- 20 Yayoi Kusama, interviewed by Gordon Brown, *WALL*, June 1964; first published in *De nieuwe stijl/The new style*, *de internationale avant-garde*, Vol. 1, De Bezige Bode, Amsterdam, pp. 163–64. Reprinted in this volume, pp. 100–101
- 21 Lucy Lippard, quoted by Alexandra Munroe, 'Obsession: The Art of Yayoi Kusama', *Yayoi Kusama: A Retrospective*, op. cit., p. 25. Lippard's article, 'Eccentric Abstract: Yayoi Kusama', *Art International*, New York, November, 1966, pp. 100–101
- 22 Donald Judd, 'In the Galleries', op. cit., pp. 68–69
- 23 Hans Haacke, telephone interview with Alexandra Munroe, December, 1988, unpublished
- 24 Yayoi Kusama in a recent interview with Lynn Zelevansky, 'These works as "the doubling of the fetish". See Yayoi Kusama in New York', in *Love Forever: Yayoi Kusama, 1939–1998*, Los Angeles County Museum of Art/The Museum of Modern Art, New York, 1998



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chi Abe, Tokyo, 1992, p. 140
nage: Why Do I Create Art', *Driving Image*:
Tokyo, 1986, n.p.
loom: Yayoi Kusama, *Years in Japan*, Tokyo
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eries: Yayoi Kusama,' *Arts Magazine*, New
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- 13 Donald Judd, 'Reviews and Previews: New Names this Month',
ARTnews, New York, October, 1959, p. 17
- 14 Ibid.
- 15 Donald Judd, 'In the Galleries: Yayoi Kusama', *Arts Magazine*, New
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- 16 Jack Burnham, *Beyond Modern Sculpture: The Effects of Science and
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- 17 Ibid., p. 354
- 18 Otto Piene, 'The Development of Group ZERO', *The Times Literary
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- 20 Yayoi Kusama, interviewed by Gordon Brown, WABC Radio, New York,
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de internationale avant-garde*, Vol. 1, De Bezige Bij, Amsterdam, 1965,
pp. 163-64. Reprinted in this volume, pp. 100-105
- 21 Lucy Lippard, quoted by Alexandra Munroe, 'Obsession, Fantasy and
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cit., p. 25. Lippard's article, 'Eccentric Abstraction', was published in
Art International, New York, November, 1966, pp. 34-40
- 22 Donald Judd, 'In the Galleries', op. cit., pp. 68-69
- 23 Hans Haacke, telephone interview with Alexandra Munroe and Reiko
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- 24 Yayoi Kusama in a recent interview with Lynn Zelevansky described
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Los Angeles County Museum of Art/The Museum of Modern Art, New
York, 1998
- 25 See Lynn Zelevansky, 'Driving Image', op. cit.
- 26 Ed Sommer, 'Letter From Germany: Yayoi Kusama at the Galerie M.E.
Thelen, Essen (May)', *Art International*, Lugano, October, 1966, p. 46
- 27 See Lynn Zelevansky, 'Driving Image', op. cit.
- 28 Hans Haacke, op. cit.
- 29 Alexandra Munroe, op. cit., p. 24
- 30 Yayoi Kusama, interviewed by Gordon Brown, op. cit.
- 31 Flyer published for 'Driving Image Show', Castellane Gallery, New York
- 32 Ed Sommer, 'Letter From Germany', op. cit.
- 33 'The Inner and the Outer Space', Moderna Museet, Stockholm, 1966,
featuring over fifty artists from Malevich to Frank Stella, attempted to
unite the monochrome tendency, serial repetition of primary
structures and the technological experimentation of kinetic art under
the Nouvelle Tendance umbrella. Dividing twentieth-century art into
two divergent streams defined by Duchamp's Readymades on one
hand and Malevich's white on white Suprematist compositions on the
other, the show attempted to trace the trajectory of contemporary art
along the lines of the latter. Along with works by Max Bill, Josef
Albers and Enrico Castellani – clearly devoted to the exploration of
opticality and spatial phenomena – the phallus-covered rowboat was
chosen, rather than an *Infinity Net* painting. Thus, extraordinarily,
this found object covered with thousands of squirming sexual forms
found company next to the austerity of Albers' *Homage to the Square*.
- 34 Yayoi Kusama, interviewed by Gordon Brown, op. cit.
- 35 Al van Starrex, 'Some Far-Out – With and Without Clothes,' *Mr*, New
York, July, 1969, pp. 38-39, 41, 61
- 36 Kusama, for example, staged a Happening at Warhol's East Village
discotheque, The Electric Circus, in 1967
- 37 Yayoi Kusama, interview with Laura Hoptman, March, 1998
- 38 Robert Rosenblum, 'Warhol as Art History', in Kynaston McShine, ed.,
Andy Warhol: A Retrospective, The Museum of Modern Art, New York,
1989, p. 29
- 39 *Kusama's Peep Show* premiered at the Castellane Gallery in March
1966, several months before Lucas Samaras showed his better-known
mirrored environment, *Room 2*, at the Pace Gallery, New York

- 40 For all public appearances, Kusama is accompanied by a still photographer and a videographer who record her activities for press reproduction as well as for her personal archive.
- 41 In 1968, 161 articles were published about Kusama, only one of which appeared in an art-related publication.
- 42 Yayoi Kusama, letter to Porter McCray, 11 March 1966, Yayoi Kusama archive
- 43 Norman Narotzky, 'The Venice Biennial: Pease Porridge in the Pot Nine Days Old', *Arts Magazine*, New York, September–October, 1966, pp. 42–44
- 44 Ibid.
- 45 Sir Herbert Read's words were written in 1964 in response to Kusama's 'Driving Image Show' in New York and were originally published by the artist in flyer form on that occasion.
- 46 Gordon Brown, 'Yayoi Kusama', *D'Ars Agency*, New York, June, 1966, p. 140
- 47 Jud Yalkut, 'The Polka Dot Way of Life: Conversations with Yayoi Kusama', *New York Free Press*, New York, 15 February 1968, pp. 8–9
- 48 At the Black Gate Theatre, a experimental multi-media space and subsequently at Andy Warhol's discotheque the Electric Circus.
- 49 Jud Yalkut, 'The Polka Dot Way of Life', op. cit., p. 8
- 50 Rolf Boost, 'Yayoi: Priestess van het naakt', *Algemeen Dagblad*, Rotterdam, 21 November 1967, p. 11
- 51 Alfred Carl, 'Call Her Dotty', *New York Sunday News*, New York, 13 August 1967, pp. 10, 31
- 52 Kusama remembers vividly having been arrested only once. (press conference with Kusama, The Museum of Modern Art, New York, 1999)
- 53 Jud Yalkut, 'The Polka Dot Way of Life', op. cit., p. 8
- 54 Ibid.
- 55 Press release, 'Wall Street Anatomic Explosion', New York, Fall, 1968
- 56 Press release, 'Naked Event at the Statue of Liberty', New York, July, 1968
- 57 24 August 1969
- 58 Letter to Dr Udo Kulturmann, quoted in Bhupendra Karia, ed., *Yayoi Kusama: A Retrospective*, op. cit., p. 95
- 59 Ibid., p. 90
- 60 Ibid., p. 91
- 61 Yayoi Kusama, *Yayoi Kusama: Printworks*, op. cit., p. 141
- 62 Alexandra Munroe, 'Obsession, Fantasy and Outrage', op. cit., pp. 32–33
- 63 Alexandra Munroe, 'Between Heaven and Earth: The Literary Art of Yayoi Kusama', *Love Forever: Yayoi Kusama, 1958–1968*, op. cit., p. 71
- 64 Warhol, Johns, Lichtenstein, to name three of the most obvious examples. See Robert Rosenblum, 'Warhol as Art History', op. cit., p. 32
- 65 See *Yayoi Kusama: A Retrospective*, op. cit., Figure 19, *Accumulation*, painted with acrylic on what appears to be new canvas mounted on stretchers made in Japan, but dated 1960.
- 66 'Yayoi Kusama: A Retrospective', curated by Alexandra Munroe, Center for International Contemporary Art, New York, 1990
- 67 'Love Forever: Yayoi Kusama, 1958–1968', co-curated by Lynn Zelevansky, Los Angeles County Museum and Laura Hoptman, The Museum of Modern Art, New York; toured to the Walker Art Center, Minneapolis, and the Museum of Contemporary Art, Tokyo.
- 68 Although not exclusively, except in the case of *Love Forever*
- 69 For example, furniture and environments by the New York-based sculptor Jorge Pardo, which adopt the look of modern design but remain for the most part non-functional.
- 70 For example, the work of Félix Gonzalez Torres.

Pumpkin

1994

Plastic, polyurethane paint

200 × 250 × 250 cm

Collection, Naoshima

Contemporary Museum, Kagawa,
Japan