YAYOI
KUSAMA
A Retrospective

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Obsession, Fantasy and Outrage: The Art of Yayoi Kusama

Alexandra Munroe

Critical Issues

Yayoi Kusama arouses controversy in the art world. The qualities which make her original and distinct are appreciated by artists, but some critics and art historians tend to regard her work as peripheral, bizarre or derivative. The problem of how Kusama relates to the modernist critical canon can be attributed in part to a valid confusion about just how to assess her art, and where to place her.

There is little precedent for arguing a position in art criticism and history for an artist who is both inside and outside of the academic definition of a particular artistic movement or school. Recent studies of Lucas Samaras and Eva Hesse—both, like Kusama, eccentric, obsessional and foreign-born artists—offer an example of alternative attitudes for the appreciation of “independent” artists within mainstream of criticism. Like Samaras and Hesse, Kusama’s work shares certain formal properties with specific modernist styles, yet her use of those devices, like theirs, remains idiosyncratic and even at odds with the theoretical polemic. Claes Oldenburg, who knew Kusama in the early sixties and lived in the same building as she for several years in lower Manhattan, has commented on her relationship to contemporary trends:

“My impression of Kusama was that she didn’t have the kind of mind that identified with movements. She just went her own way. But she probably also picked up things that were around her without realizing it, or maybe she came to the same conclusions.”

In her painting, sculpture, environments and Happenings, Kusama exploited the art styles occurring around her to express her individual aesthetic. The art world is her costume trunk. She grabs what strikes her fancy, shoves aside what bores her, wears styles in unheard of ways. In order to determine which strategies Kusama “picked up,” which she bypassed and which she came to independently, we must relate her work to avant-garde movements with which she intersected. This includes her interaction with postwar Surrealism and the anti-art movements in Japan; with Pop, Op, Minimalism and Psychedelic art in New York; and with monochrome painting and the Zero, Nul and Nouveaux Réalistes groups in Europe during the 1960s. Ultimately, Kusama is best understood as an original, independent artist whose work prefigures some and relates to several styles, but resists fitting in with any one modernist movement.

Another problem in assessing Kusama’s art is her mental illness and the insistent psychological content of her work. Kusama has lived in a psychiatric hospital in Tokyo since 1977. In her statements and interviews over the last forty years, she has ascribed the origin of the repetitive vision so basic to her imagery to certain hallucinations she experienced as a child, and intermittently ever since. She has frequently spoken of her art-making as both the symptom and cure for her “obsession” and more recently calls her work “psychosomatic art.”

The formalist critic would ignore an artist’s emotional and psychological biography. The traditionalist might discredit a madwoman’s art as naive, unschooled and ultimately isolated from art-historical discourse. A more philosophical and romantic critic would take R.D. Laing’s side in his classic study, The Divided Self: An Existential Study in Sanity and Madness, which proposes that it is the family and society, not the patient, which is destructively mad, and those whom society labels as insane are, in fact, artists and poets who are creatively reworking the insanity which surrounds them. Recent literature on Outsider Art, Art Brut and the art of the mentally ill, however, has established a polemic that posits the qualities of “otherness” and “marginality” as a challenge to the art-critical canon. Art Brut “does not answer to the customary dialectic of art,” Henry-Claude Cousseau has written, “it is not expressed in terms of historical evolution, but rather opposes to it ‘an other art’...[which] arises from a strictly individual creativity and rejects the social proprieties of language and concepts.”

The exact diagnosis of Kusama’s illness beyond the most obvious obsessive-compulsive and hysterical tendencies
and certain solipsistic and narcissistic features cannot be known to the lay public. I believe that Kusama's condition as she explains it in interviews and writings relates fundamentally to the imagery and method of her art. The recurring motifs of interconnecting nets and proliferating phallics are the projection of the artist's delirious imagination upon mundane reality. These fantastic forms break out like a rash across the room, signs that the self has erupted. The conditions of the psyche—outrage, perversity, desire and love—are released. But Kusama is not simply notating her madness as it comes to her; she is inventing an art to channel and express it. The insistence of her creative will over the degenerate forces of her illness is the fight to stay alert to what is happening in her unconscious. The awesome physical energy she applies to her art-making also proves a force of mind necessary to defend herself from madness through creative activity. The complex and meaningful balance between the artist's psychological obsessions and her aesthetic control over them is, in fact, the subject matter of her art.

Other questions about Yayoi Kusama's art can be answered best by introducing a feminist critique. Outrage against patriarchy and authority are, for example, basic to Kusama's art. Her ambition for supremacy over men and over sexuality is relentlessly expressed in her repetitive and aggregate use of the phallic form, which can be interpreted as an aggressive will and fantasy to defy oppressive male power by possessing it symbolically herself. Kusama's art also relates to an archetypal memory of woman as passive prisoner, alienated from the world and resigned to monotony and anonymity. Her *Driving Image* environments of the 1960s, for example, demonstrate Kusama's image of woman as depersonalized object defined by sex, food and home. The devoted, mindless, ritualistic repetition of her art-making conjures the traditional motions of women's work. The image of woman as priestess of love, peace and cosmic unity also becomes apparent in Kusama's *Happenings* of the late 1960s.

Until recently, there has been an intellectual resistance to admit painting and sculpture produced by non-Western artists into the modernist canon. In the 1960s when Kusama lived in New York, Japanese art was still generally expected to look ethnic and traditional, to embody certain spiritual or exotic attributes. When it appeared Western or contemporary instead, conservative critics dismissed it too often as derivative. To those modernists who admired the exotic, the Westernization of non-Western countries was regrettable and the artists who had broken from their cultural heritage as a result of history and progress to "imitate" Western art had lost what was original and most valuable for artistic expression. Indeed, international modernist styles practiced in the rest of the world outside Europe or America have generally been thought of as pale attempts to "catch up" on a visual education which was not inherently transmissible.

The consequent absence of a critical framework for the appreciation and interpretation of non-Western modern art can be attributed in part to the patrimony of European modernism and the concept of originality in determining the avant-garde ideal. Another factor is the confusion over the socio-historical and cultural context of non-Western modern artists. In dealing with the question of how Yayoi Kusama relates to modernist critical history, we must first recognize her significance in the history of the Japanese avant-garde and learn to integrate 20th century Japanese culture into our broader understanding of the international history of modern art.

"It's well known," Susan Sontag wrote of the modern artist, "that when people venture into the far reaches of consciousness they do so at the peril of their sanity, that is, of their humanity." Yayoi Kusama has ventured far and deep: Her risks compel us to know more about her.

**Childhood and Adolescence**

"I don't consider myself an artist; I am pursuing art in order to correct the disability which began in my childhood."

Yayoi Kusama's art is fundamentally about obsession and the need, born of anxiety, to repeat certain acts in an attempt to free herself from that obsession. Since childhood, her art-making has been a private, atavistic ritual, a necessary inducement to repetition that leads to catharsis. The basis for her method and imagery is the psychological and somatic troubles she developed as a child in reaction to her family and the social and political conditions of prewar and wartime Japan. Simultaneously, she felt fury at others and fear of separation from reality, omnipotence of self and negation of selfhood. Only later, when she was in her early twenties, were these feelings and their symptoms recognized and treated by psychiatry.

Yayoi Kusama was born on March 22, 1929, the youngest of four children and the second daughter born to Kamon and Shigeru Kusama. Proud, conservative and well-to-do, her family lived in a large, traditional-style residence in Matsumoto City, a provincial castle town and the capital of Nagano Prefecture in central Japan. Among Japanese, Nagano is considered a rural countryside, confined by mountains and socially convention-bound.

Yayoi was born when the family's fortune which had grown during the early decades of Japan's modernization following the Meiji Restoration, was on the verge of decline. The world depression that followed the 1929 New York stock market crash contributed ultimately to a widespread wave of poverty and sense of crises in Japan, especially in the rural areas. During the 1930s while Yayoi was growing up, economic stress forced the Kusama family to gradually sell off much of its property. As in
thousands of other households, hardship and austerity prevailed in Kusama's.

Depression was only part of the bleak, tense background of Yayoi Kusama's childhood. The political climate of Japan also changed radically in the 1930s. Hirohito's ascension to the imperial throne in 1926 coincided with the rise of aggressive ultranationalists whose sentiments were anti-capitalist, anti-Western and ultimately militarist. When Japanese forces overran Manchuria in 1931, acting without prior knowledge of the civilian government, the course of military imperialism which eventually led Japan to World War II was initiated. For Kusama, Japan's nationalism and imperialism were oppressive and detestable forces. "I couldn't escape this militarism because the government wanted it and the schools wanted it," she has remarked. "I suffered. It killed my mind."9

During the war, Kusama, like many Japanese schoolchildren, was recruited to work in a military factory. She recalls having to make parachutes (perhaps that is where she learned to use a sewing machine and work with fabric), and hating it. When Japan surrendered in 1945, she remembers feeling "so happy, so relieved." She decided then, at the age of sixteen or so, to leave Japan. "I immediately wanted to go to New York...to be free, to build up my art, to build up my philosophy."9

Japan's militarism and all it stood for seems to have contributed to the development of Kusama's acute anxieties. To the young child and adolescent, the oppressive regime represented domination and denial, and provoked rage, frustration and emotional instability. The object of her aggression was patriarchal domination and the pressures of social conformity. Outrage at authority and regimes was lodged early in Kusama's psyche and became identical with the expression of her character and in time, of her art. Her iconoclasm, so basic to the modern artist and so untolerated in Japan's early Showa period, thus formed in part as stubborn protest against the restrictive social, economic and political environment of prewar and wartime Japan.

The psychological and sexual obsessions Kusama expresses in her art are perhaps also rooted in the troubled relationships she had with her absent father and domineering mother. Kusama's father, Kamon Okamura, was an adopted son-in-law of his wife's family and, upon betrothal, moved into her family household and took on the Kusama surname. This was not an uncommon social custom in Japan. Adoption, however, remains a conflicted fate for many Japanese men despite the nominal position of "head of household" which the wife's family grants to the adopted son-in-law. The subtle complexities of her parents' arrangement are private history, but the marriage was clearly not, according to Kusama, a loving partnership. "When I was born," she recalls, "my father left us." He went to Tokyo for months at a time, according to Kusama, and when he was home her parents "fought

Figure 1. Yayoi Kusama. Untitled. ca. 1939. Pencil on paper. 9 3/4 x 8 1/8 in. (24.8 x 22.5 cm.) Collection of the artist
every day."10

These circumstances probably contributed to Shigeru Kusama's formidable and domineering influence in the household. Kusama's mother appears to have been a demanding disciplinarian, a prudish moralist, and of Yayoi, an unrelenting critic of what was not, in her eyes, acceptable feminine behavior. She opposed Kusama's talent and called her a kawara kojiki or "riverbank beggar," a derogatory term referring to itinerant actors. Kusama remembers occasions when her mother snuck up behind her while she was drawing or painting, and tore the unfinished sheet from her hands. (This sensation still haunts Kusama and might account for why the artist works so intensely fast, as if racing to complete a vision before the chance to realize it is torn away.) Yayoi's eccentric, implacable choice to become an artist and never marry disturbed Shigeru Kusama until well into her daughter's successful career. It seems that each used the other to play out a battle of wills, and that hysteria was their common mode of offense.

Kusama often describes how, as a child, she heard her own voice as a dog's; how she saw and heard violets talking to each other in a field; and that once she felt a dark force beneath a pond "trying to lure my soul...and I almost drowned."11 She was recurrently afflicted by hallucinations, and by visions of repetitive and prolifer-
ating patterns of dots, nets or flowers which spread over her surroundings and threatened to dissolve her own self.

One day I was looking at the red flower patterns of the tablecloth on a table, and when I looked up I saw the same pattern covering the ceiling, the windows and the walls, and finally all over the room, my body and the universe. I felt as if I had begun to self-obliterate, to revolve in the infinity of endless time and the absoluteness of space, and be reduced to nothingness. As I realized it was actually happening and not just in my imagination, I was frightened. I knew I had to run away lest I should be deprived of my life by the spell of the red flowers. I ran desperately up the stairs. The steps below me began to fall apart and I fell down the stairs straining my ankle.¹²

Kusama’s inability to communicate her problems to her family contributed further to her sense of isolation. “I lost the sense of time, speed and distance,” she writes. “I lost words, and would end up locking myself in a room.” The solace and control which she found, early on, was through art.¹³

In a drawing in the artist’s collection which Kusama made when she was in the fifth grade (figure 1), the all over polkadot and net patterns which characterize her later work are already evident. The drawing, which has the typical awkward line and faulty perspective of children’s sketches, depicts a girl in a kimono. It is a “realistic” portrait, yet the entire surface is covered with little round circles, like bubbles in the air. At this young age the repetitive image is already basic to Kusama’s imagination about the structure of reality and constitutes an extreme element in her visual description of it.

Kusama’s hallucinations have been the visual inspiration for much of her art. The subject of repetition and infinite aggregation of one form which interpenetrates objects, self and space has preoccupied her since childhood. Hallucinations not only provided images for her work; they also generated a compulsion to make it.

The Postwars in Japan

Japan in the summer of 1945 was morally and physically depleted. Since the Manchurian Incident, more than three million Japanese had been killed as a result of war, including 800,000 civilians. Incendiary raids had razed its cities to rubble. A third of the people were homeless. Acute food shortages, corruption, and a near-collapse of inland transportation were national crises. With the yen barely a hundredth of its prewar value, industry was reduced to a quarter of its former level. Finally, the two atomic bombs which the United States exploded over Hiroshima and Nagasaki in early August subjected Japan’s population to horror and devastation on a scale unprecedented in the history of human warfare.

Japan’s defeat was not simply military. Its much greater loss was belief in itself. Accepting unconditional surrender was tantamount to disclaiming its entire recent past and the traditional, unspoken belief system with Japanese spirituality at its core. The Emperor’s renunciation of his divinity was part of the bewildered disappointment and collapse in faith which the average Japanese experienced. The American-operated Occupation (1945-1952), whose aims were the demilitarization, democratization and rehabilitation of the Japanese people, contributed to the recovery of the economy and the restructuring of Japan’s political systems. However, the question “What is Japanese culture now?” remained a confusing issue for many Japanese. Ruin, physical and metaphorical, was the subject portrayed by most Japanese artists, writers and film makers in their early postwar work.

When the war ended in 1945, Kusama was just graduated from high school in Matsumoto City. Three years later, in 1948, she repeated her fourth year of high-school at the Kyoto School of Arts and Crafts. This one year in Kyoto was the only formal art education Kusama ever received.

Kusama’s decision to become an artist led her to experiment in Nihonga and yōga styles before arriving at the avant-garde. In Japan, avant-garde (transliterated “abangyarudo” or known simply as gendai bijutsu, contemporary art) refers to a style and form of artistic expression that is outside of, and in opposition to, the Nihonga (Japanese-style) and yōga (Western-style oil painting) academies of modern painting. These two schools of painting were established in the Meiji period (1868-1912) and advanced under the prestigious auspices of the Tokyo School of Fine Arts. While Nihonga painters developed within the existing Nanga, Ukiyo-e and Maruyama-Shijo schools, the new breed of Western-style oil painters looked to Paris for inspiration, technique and innovation. Yet within two or three generations, the once vanguard yōga became stylized and politicized. When Post-Imperialism ceded to Cubism, most yōga painters stopped just short of following the next step of modernism into pure abstraction. Yōga became thereafter synonymous with the painting style of the Ecole de Paris and, lead by such influential artists as Ryūzaburō Umehara and Tsuguji Fujita, became the dominant and official school of modern Western oil painting in Japan.

However accomplished, the yōga school was no longer a viable alternative for those artists, writers and intellectuals who were involved with or interested in the ongoing aesthetic revolutions of European modernism. Thus, an avant-garde affiliated with Dada, abstract art and Surrealism developed in the Taishō period (1912-1926) and remained remarkably active throughout the 1930s. The Surrealist poet Shūzō Takiguchi (1903-1979) was the undisputed mentor of this emerging group, and his book
of essays, Kindai geijutsu (Modern Art) published in 1938, was its bible. During the war, all three groups—Nihonga, yoga and avant-garde—were forced to disregard their respective artistic theories for a single nationalist ideology and to depict, wherever possible, scenes of Japanese war victory and martyrdom.

When the war was over, numerous new democratic arts organizations were formed and previously-established ones were revived. The avant-garde movement was undoubtedly the most international. Between 1945 and 1955, two individuals emerged to direct the reconstruction and define the political and philosophical position for the avant-garde artist in the postwar world. One was the painter Jirō Yoshihara (1905-1972), founder and patron of the Kansai-based Gutai Art Association which led the action painting and Happenings movements in Japan; the other was Shūzo Takiguchi, who upheld and advanced Surrealism and later, Neo Dada and conceptual art. Though Kusama was not officially affiliated with either side at this time, she was more naturally inclined to Takiguchi’s Surrealist group and is sure to have been informed of, if not influenced by, his writings.

Her 1950 oil painting, Accumulation of Corpses (Prisoner Surrounded by the Curtain of Depersonalization), establishes the artist’s preoccupation with psychological phenomena and confirms her affinity with Surrealist art (figure 2). She describes this work as an illustration of the sickness she experienced at the time the painting was executed: nijin-shō, depersonalization or the sense of oneself separated from others and reality. The work also shares the idea of deformity and horror which preoccupied so many postwar Japanese Surrealists.

The image is of a plowed field, rising up in a wave she describes as “a world of dead atmosphere.” It creates a whirlpool-tunnel effect separating the viewer from real life, symbolized by the two trees and the light in the distance. The swirling, repetitive imagery composed essentially of one unit (here, the tubular scale-like forms making up each ridge of earth) and the interest in an all-over pattern establish the basic, recurring formal language of Kusama’s mature work.

In the sensation of vertigo and claustrophobia, Kusama’s painting anticipates On Kawara’s (1954-55) Bathroom Series, a set of twenty-eight drawings depicting a metamorphosis of half-human forms into a conglomeration of dismembered human, and finally nonorganic, mechanical parts. But unlike Kawara, whose content is partly satirical and political, Kusama’s only reference is herself. In its focus on death and the decay of landscape, Accumulation of Corpses also relates to Nobuya Abe’s (1949) Starvation (figure 3). But, whereas Abe’s and Kawara’s imagery is symbolic and fantastic, Kusama’s is the least self-conscious and thus the most genuinely nightmarish.

Kusama remembers this period of her life as “my era of mental breakdown.” Images of death, severe reality-distortion, isolation from others and fear of her surroundings combined to make her feel “a prisoner surrounded by a curtain of depersonalization.”

Emergence in the Japanese Avant-Garde

In the early 1950s, Kusama became engaged in a prolific production of drawings and watercolor paintings on paper, which reveal an automatist, improvisational drawing process. An ovular central form, suggesting vaginal or uterine imagery, floats in a shallow space. Through the application of color, it becomes the basis for a flower stamen, leaf or other vegetal image. Intricate radial lines like capillaries and dot-like cells are applied in circular
patterns around the central form, creating an overall web-like pattern. In some, an animal or human form emerges from the pen-and-ink design which the artist then extracts and delineates, giving identity to an unconsciously derived image (plates 3 to 8).

In a second group of watercolors, ink dots are applied in half-concentric, half-random patterns across the surface (plates 1 and 2). Objects, hitherto separated in space but interconnected by a web or dot pattern, have disappeared here, allowing the artist's obsession with repetition and accumulation to function autonomously. The "Infinity Nets," as she later refers to her obsession with a pattern of dots, is released here for the first time from its connection to realistic form and operates as the single element (and telling symptom) of her vision.

Coincident with this period of prolific artistic production was Kusama's meeting in the early 1950s with Dr. Shihō Nishimaru, an eminent professor of psychiatry at Shinshū University in Nagano Prefecture. It appears that he saw one or both of her one-person exhibitions at the Matsumoto Civic Hall in 1952 and became interested in her imagery. Soon after, Dr. Nishimaru introduced Kusama's work at a meeting of the Japanese Psychiatry Association.

It was Dr. Nishimaru who first made Kusama aware of her clinical condition; as a result, she began to undergo a measure of psychiatric treatment for the various symptoms which had disturbed her since childhood. That a respectable expert of Dr. Nishimaru's stature recognized both her psychological disorders and her talent profoundly affected Kusama's persona as an artist. From then on, psychiatry gave Kusama what her parents had denied her: justification to express herself and freedom to be mad.

Following her first participation in a public exhibition in 1950, Kusama showed nine times in Japan during these years. Six of these exhibitions were solo, and four were held in Tokyo. The support of certain influential modern art critics, especially Shūzō Takiguchi, Shin'ichi Segi and TakachiyU Umura, contributed to her success. They singled out her work among the younger generation of Japanese avant-garde artists for its "extraordinary, unusual originality" and for its expression of a strong "internal vision."

Kusama's art was usually discussed in relation to Surrealism, a viable and significant movement in Japan well into the 1950s. Shūzō Takiguchi was most influential in establishing a Surrealist critical framework for the appreciation of her art. He organized her one-person exhibition in 1955 at the avant-garde Takemiy Gallery in Tokyo, and was also a member of the jury which selected Kusama for the 18th International Watercolor Exhibition at the Brooklyn Museum. In an introduction to Kusama's second one-person show at the Matsumoto Civic Hall in 1952, Takiguchi wrote:

Her drawings flow unceasingly as if a dam had broken. An artist, whatever his expression, is, has to reveal signs of his own instinctive urges in drawing. Visionary forms or imagery should not be a fabrication but the symbolic appearance of such deep emotion. Here, an artist's breath becomes the natural flow which may be called her handwriting.20

Surrealism's essential preoccupation with the processes of the unconscious mind surely relates to Kusama's drawings and watercolors of the early and mid-1950s. As some Japanese critics mentioned, Kusama's watercolors recall the work of Paul Klee, whose pioneering automatic drawing had considerable influence on the Surrealists. The abstract Surrealism of Joan Miró, who was well-known in Japan through Takiguchi's writings, also relates to Kusama's images of biomorphic forms floating in a shallow, poetic space.

The Surrealists' interest in the art of the mentally ill, following the publication of the art historian and physician Hans Prinzhorn's The Artistry of the Mentally Ill in 1922, also provides useful grounds for comparison. The naïve, nonacademic illusionism and the obsessional, trance-like method of making art reflected in the pictures by patients at the University Psychiatric Hospital in Heidelberg appealed first to Paul Klee, who saw their work as "psychic improvisation," and later to the Surrealists, especially Max Ernst.21 The difference, of course, is that their interest in the art of the mentally ill was largely intellectual and exotic, an inspiration for what Klee called the "instinct [which] drives us downward, deep down to the primal source."22 For Kusama, such purpose and method of art was instinctive. She had always used her art as a form of therapy, as a means to explore and expose the "primal source" of her psyche.

Always fighting conventional labels, Kusama however claimed greater affinity with Symbolism than with Surrealism.23 She expressed her admiration for Odilon Redon, for example, and allied her style—which she called shimp shagi or mysterious and mystical—with the newer mystic tendency of American artists Mark Tobey, Morris Graves and Georgia O'Keeffe.24 By debunking the Surrealist fraternity, by disavowing any involvement with aesthetic theory, by remaining engrossed in herself to the point of being unreceptive to influence, Kusama chose to be a heretic, rather than to have her work anointed by the Surrealists or any other group.

Kusama's staunch independence was only partly naïve. She was a fierce critic of the Japanese art world and, when interviewed by the press, reiterated that she avoided group exhibitions because of the "annoying power conflicts" inherent in their makeup.25 In a story published in the prestigious art magazine Geijutsu Shincho, Kusama expressed her "distrust" of Japanese art critics for their "authoritative and narrow-minded" attitudes.26
you know. I have had all the things you wish to move toward." 27 Two years later, when Kusama had advanced her plans for going to the United States and even arranged to have a one-person show at the Zoe Dusanne Gallery in Seattle, Georgia O’Keeffe wrote her:

When you get to New York take your pictures under your arm and show them to anyone you think may be interested…. Our world changes very fast. You will just have to find your way when you get to New York as best you can…. It seems to me very odd that you are so ambitious to show your paintings here, but I wish the very best for you.” 28

Early Years in New York: Infinity Nets Paintings

Kusama was one of the first Japanese artists of her generation to leave Japan for New York after the war. The emigration of European avant-garde artists to the United States, the rise of Abstract Expressionism and America’s economic prosperity helped establish New York in the minds of many Japanese as the new international art center. The relative lack of Japanese museums, galleries and collectors supporting contemporary art in the postwar recovery years made New York the preferred alternative to a struggle with no future at home. After Kusama, a virtual exodus of Japan’s best-known younger painters, sculptors and performing artists followed.

Kusama arrived in New York at a time when avant garde painting and criticism were undergoing a drastic shift in style, sensibility and definition. Stated simply, Abstract Expressionism was becoming an “academic” legacy and Pop Art and Minimal Art were commanding a neo avant-garde. The ideal represented by Jackson Pollock, of art as a passionate expression of self and psyche—private, non-cerebral, primitive and gestural—was no longer dominant. What Roy Lichtenstein described as the artist’s “apparent impersonality” 29 became, instead, the emblem of the new “cool” art. Frank Stella’s symmetrical black-stripe abstractions of 1959-60, which were devoid of varying compositional elements and which broke the conventional rectangular frame with shaped canvases, posited a new pictorial paradigm of nonrelational arrangement (figure 4). These paintings, together with Andy Warhol’s Campbell Soup cans series of 1962, identified the determined trend of a “radically empirical,” reductive and reduplicable art. 30 The idea and criticism of what a painting is became an objective, formalist concern with the picture as an object, in Stella’s case, or with objects as objects, as in Warhol’s case.

Within a short time after her arrival in New York, Kusama was producing a series of paintings which quickly won her a position in the art world after Abstract Expressionism. These were patterned, monochromatic paintings which she called Infinity Nets or Interminable Nets (plates

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**Figure 4.** Frank Stella (b. 1936). Die Fabne Hoch. 1959. Enamel on canvas. 121 x 73 in. (308 x 185.5 cm.) Collection of the Whitney Museum of American Art, New York. Gift of Mr. and Mrs. Eugene M. Schwartz and purchased with funds from the John I. H. Baur Purchase Fund; the Charles and Anita Blatt Fund; Peter M. Brant; B.H. Friedman; the Gilman Foundation, Inc.; Susan Morse Hilles; The Lauder Foundation; Frances and Sydney Lewis; the Albert A. List Fund; Philip Morris Incorporated; the National Endowment for the Arts; Sandra Pazan; Mr. and Mrs. Albrecht Saalfeld; Mrs. Percy Uris; Warner Communications, Inc.
Donald Judd described these paintings best in his 1959 *Art News* review:

The space is shallow, close to the surface and achieved by innumerable small arcs superimposed on a black ground overlain with a wash of white. The effect is both complex and simple. Essentially it is produced by the interaction of the two close, somewhat parallel, vertical planes, at points merging at the surface plane and at others diverging slightly but powerfully. The merger is achieved by whitening the interstices of the arcs; the divergence by enlarging the breadth of the strokes somewhat and leaving the grey plane untouched. When the size of the arcs is diminished sections of the white plane retreat slightly, and vice-versa. Yet frequently small, dense arcs maintain the surface; the relationships are subtle and depend on the surrounding area. There is a remarkable variety of configuration and expression from point to point across the surface; the small curves coalesce into longer arcs, swell or shift slightly, or form amorphous patterns or partial vertical bands. The strokes are applied with a great assurance and strength which even a small area conveys. The total quality suggests an analogy to a large, fragile, but vigorously carved grill or to a massive, solid lace.31

Kusama avows that the origin of *Infinity Nets* is psychological. She has written of the nets as "curtains which separated me from people and reality."32 She describes how she "came under a spell" and had "an obsessional compulsion" to continue painting nets.33 Indeed, friends who knew her then remember that she worked day and night on these paintings until she literally collapsed from exhaustion.

The concept of boredom is critical to an interpretation of Kusama’s *Infinity Nets* paintings. She has written:

I did not have any purpose. I felt that art and life were useless. I painted boredom, which is more important in life than the effect of sunlight, which [is what] the Impressionists painted.34

Kusama’s use of boredom as a subject matter symbolizes one archetype female experience of life: monotony and repetition. Kusama’s painting of nets is a fast forward, compulsive activity similar to the age-old, repetitive motions of women’s work such as sewing, stitching and knitting. That Kusama sees the world through and beyond a curtain of nets is also telling. She is barred from action or participation outside of her soft captivity, out in a “man’s world.” Simultaneously, she bars herself in, back from space, inside herself.

“My net paintings,” Kusama once said of this series, “were very large canvases without composition—without beginning, end or center.”35 While paying customary homage to her illness, Kusama here betrays that she is an artist informed of and concerned with the urgent formalist issues of her day: the elimination of traditional composition and the assertion of nonrelational design. Her keen art-critical intelligence and the authority of her aesthetic control reveal the lucidity of Kusama’s artistic mind and her capacity to order her madness through expression. This self-consciousness is what determines the difference between Kusama’s art and the more naïve art of the insane.

Kusama’s *Infinity Nets* paintings are monochromatic, non-hierarchical and nonobjective. They are composed of a single unit which is repeated in a serial pattern that covers the entire surface of the canvas, edge to edge. They are primarily flat, nonspatial; and the image and its making represent a systematic singularity of idea and execution. These features were basic in various ways to the styles of Minimal, Pop and Op art in the United States and to the avant-garde groups in Europe, specifically Zero and Nul. The difficulty in “labeling” Kusama, however, is compounded by certain stylistic and thematic links her work retains to Abstract Expressionism and
haru Murakami in Japan used monochrome symbolically to signify empty space. The no-color or one-color surface functioned equally as a deep space to induce hermetic retreat and as a negation of conventional meanings applied to painting (figure 5).

Opposing this romantic use of monochrome, reminiscent of Expressionism and Symbolism, was the work of early American Minimalists Frank Stella, Robert Ryman and Ellsworth Kelly. For them monochrome was a strategy to reduce and liberate a work of art to just the presentation of itself: one form, one color, one surface, one material. Frank Stella's Jill of 1959, a Masonite board covered with geometrically-arranged metallic tape, illustrates this extreme aesthetic. While we know Kusama admired Stella, his theoretical and formalist aesthetic was not innate to her. What Kusama does share with the Minimalists, and the reasons why Stella and Judd may have been interested in her work (each bought her early paintings), is a systematic, mechanistic and repetitive execution of a work of art. The artist's ego is subverted to the monotony and anonymity of executing a single concept and making a serial form.

A third possibility for the monochrome surface developed in Europe. A new avant-garde was emerging during this period that was exploring non-compositional and serial strategies and reacting against the art informel movement, much as American artists were challenging Abstract Expressionism. The first and among the most influential of these groups to emerge was Zero, which was founded by Otto Piene and Heinz Mack in Düsseldorf in 1957.

The activities of the new European avant-garde and their common use of monochrome was identified in 1960, when Udo Kultermann, then director of the Städtisches Museum, Leverkusen, organized the Monochrome Malerei show. Kultermann's decision to include Kusama in this show, a landmark event in postwar European art, was enormously significant. It was a recognition that her paintings were indeed "newer, more original," as Judd has said,\(^37\) than a lot of other painting in America at that time. Kusama's participation in this event established a connection with the European avant-garde with whom, from 1961 to 1970, she exhibited more frequently and in more galleries and museums than she did in New York or Japan during those same years. She exhibited most often with Zero and with Nul, the affiliated Dutch group which was founded in 1961 by Armando, Henk Peeters, Jan Schoonhoven and Herman de Vries. Among the European groups which were exploring new media and processes of systematization, Zero's approach used fewer scientific and mathematical laws and was generally more romantic. Its use of light, nature and technology and its interest in the play of surfaces and environments were meant to simulate and celebrate the "energy of the universe."\(^38\)

Characteristics of Kusama's Infinity Nets paintings which relate to the Zero and Nul artists' work are monochrome and non-compositional design, as advanced and

Surrealism. These are her use of impasto and interest in surface texture; her dependence on brushstroke, however subverted to serial uniformity; and her insistence on psychological content.

Kusama held her first one-person show in New York at the Brata Gallery, one of the better-known 10th Street cooperative galleries, in October, 1959. Donald Judd, reviewing the show in Artnews, wrote:

Yayoi Kusama is an original painter. The five white, very large paintings in this show are strong, advanced in concept and realized....The expression transcends the question of whether it is Oriental or American. Although it is something of both, certainly of such Americans as Rothko, Still and Newman, it is not at all a synthesis and is thoroughly independent.\(^36\)

Monochrome painting in America, Europe and Japan basically developed in three directions in the late 1950s and sixties. Mark Rothko, Barnett Newman and Ad Reinhardt in America, Yves Klein in Europe and Tomo-
articulated by Yves Klein, a mentor of the Zero group; grids inserted with circular forms, the preoccupation of Enrico Castellani and Schoonhoven; and an interest in visual energy and momentum, demonstrated by Günther Uecker and Piene’s constructions in which light and movement patterns flicker across surfaces composed of multiple units (figure 6).

Kusama’s art differs from Zero and Nul, however, in many of the same ways it does from the formalist rigors of Minimalism. “The Zero artists were engaged by Kusama’s poetic, abstract and subtly erotic work,” Otto Piene remarked recently. “But Kusama’s motivation was different from ours. There is a phobia in her painting, like a compulsive stitching. It is more psychological, more specifically women’s painting.” Kusama is “all sensibility, perception, reception rather than a principled artist working in a deductive fashion.”

Kusama’s Infinity Nets series thus prefigures some and relates to several of the critical and stylistic issues advanced by the major international avant-garde movements which emerged in the 1950s and 1960s as a reaction to the Abstract Expressionist legacy. Yet despite the stylistic affinities or relationships she had with these various movements, she resists all “isms” and remains anomalous and independent.

Collage, Reliefs and Sculpture

In 1962, Kusama left her full-time preoccupation with painting and began working in other media. The outcome of this period of experimentation and exploration was the development of her so-called Accumulation and Compulsion Furniture, the first of her phallus-covered objects in which a common object was covered with protruding phallic forms made of sewn-and-stuffed cloth.

The collage Airmail Stickers of 1962 (plate 21) is composed of a canvas, some six feet high by five-and-a-half feet wide, that is covered with hundreds of red, white and blue “Via Air Mail” stickers. They are attached to the canvas with Sobo glue and applied in tight, compact rows up, down and across the entire surface. The labels obliterate the ground and their overlapping edges create a texture whose pattern hovers just above the flat design of the stickers themselves. The cool and precise process of “tagging” the canvas, the seeming will for serial and concentric symmetry, is violated by areas where the pattern goes askew and zigzags. The contradiction between the countless, identical and machine-made stickers and the unpredictable, hand-crafted makeup of the design is irrational and disturbing. The meaning of the familiar, ubiquitous label is lost, like a clear picture on a television screen disrupted by electrostatic vibrations. Repetition, rather than creating a coherent code, decodes coherence. Kusama’s insistent, obsessive process of art-making transforms ephemera into a dazzling optical episode.

Figure 7. Andy Warhol (1930-1988). Red Airmail Stamps 1962. Silk-screen ink on canvas. 20 × 16 in. (50.8 × 40.6 cm.) Private Collection, Scarsdale, New York

It is inevitable to compare Kusama’s collages to Andy Warhol’s series of the same year: the grids of multiple one-dollar bills, Campbell’s Soup cans, Marilyns and Coca-Cola bottles. Warhol also used images of mailing labels and stamps, as in Handle with Care—Glass—Thank You and Red Airmail Stamps (figure 7).

While Warhol first used rubber stamps directly on the canvas before he arrived at the silkscreen process as the best means for reproducing serial repetition, his refutation of that method is also well known. He said: “In August 1962 I started doing silkscreen. The rubber stamp method I had been using to repeat images suddenly seemed too homemade. I wanted something stronger that gave more of an assembly line effect.” The principal difference between Kusama’s airmail sticker series and the majority of Warhol’s multiples is that Kusama uses the actual object in the modernist collage tradition, whereas Warhol represents it in photographic silkscreen.

If Kusama’s airmail sticker collages are her nearest and most “correct” Pop art, her egg-carton reliefs represent her
purest expression of a Minimalist aesthetic. No. B.3 (plate 26) consists of several square cardboard egg cartons, the sort used for bulk commercial egg deliveries in America in the 1960s and readily found in street garbage. These are sewn onto a canvas some six and one-half feet high by six feet wide. The egg-cartons establish a serial grid relief of multiple concave hemispheres, and function as both the form and means of a nonobjective design. At just this point of refined formalism, though in a Funky and perishable medium, Kusama introduces incongruity and derangement. By sewing skeins of cotton upholstery stuffing recovered from a discarded mattress onto the relief, Kusama makes the mass-produced and the commonplace sensuous, and pure form ugly. Craft intrudes and the obsession to obliterate the authoritative ground (the egg-carton panels) takes over.

It is unclear how many egg-carton reliefs Kusama made in 1962, or if she made others later. They bear strong resemblance to Eva Hesse’s Ištar (1965) and its related Ennead (1966) (figure 8). The latter consists of a monochrome serial grid of convex hemispheres made of papier-maché. Lengths of dyed string, each cord attached to the center of a hemisphere, drapes from the work and hangs to the floor. Hesse’s group of sculptures produced in 1967, in which circular steel washers and grommets are bonded with Sculp-Metal and attached to a wood or Masonite base, also relates to Kusama’s egg-carton series. Hesse’s preoccupation with concentric circles organized into rows and placed within a grid framework developed in part from a series of ink drawings she began in 1966, which again look remarkably similar to Kusama’s early ink drawings of infinity dots.

Hesse’s obsession with circles has been related to personal trauma (the death of her father and separation from her husband in 1966), as her notebook entry indicates: “I go in circles, maybe therefore my drawings.” The emotional content of Hesse’s sculptures is expressed in the delicate, tangled and shadowy forms and materials she uses. These elements corrup the Minimalist structure which is their basis and elevate it from impersonal materiality to personal iconography. Hesse’s dyed rope, like Kusama’s skeins of unkempt cotton, set up a
polarity between hard and soft, between long and round, between clean and rigid conformity and ragged, loose and free disarray. Hesse and Kusama thus both embellish the formalist grammar with feminine, sensual and psychological allusions.

Kusama's collages and reliefs of 1962 represent new developments of an old and recurring theme in her art: repetition, aggregation and accumulation. Her new interest in unconventional, common-object materials and three-dimensional construction that followed her Infinity Nets paintings can be attributed to the influence of certain ideas that were being discussed and explored among artists in the avant-garde community. The making of art objects from non-art materials was also the subject of William C. Seitz's exhibition, *The Art of Assemblage* held at the Museum of Modern Art in the fall of 1961. More specifically, Kusama's exposure to the relief and construction work of Zero and Nul artists which used unconventional materials may have opened up for her the possibilities of media other than oil and canvas. Kusama had, by 1962, exhibited six times in Europe and corresponded with European artists. Her friendships with Arman and the critic Pierre Restany, who were founding members of Les Nouveaux Réalistes, led her to the work of Christo, Niki de Saint-Phalle and César, all of whom presented real, found objects in aggregate, fetishistic constructions (figure 9). Another likely influence on the development of Kusama's more Surrealist sculptural work was her friendship with Joseph Cornell.

*Accumulation #1* appears to be Kusama's first phallic-covered object (plate 27). Its base is a large, stuffed armchair which Kusama could have found abandoned in the street. The artist made several hundred individual white cloth sacs on a sewing machine, each measuring
three to twelve inches in length and roughly two to four inches in diameter. She filled the sacs with cotton stuffing until they were full and taut. She then attached them to the armchair, one by one until the entire body was packed with groping protuberances, and finally painted the construction white. "Grandfather's armchair" is thus transformed into an explosive, orgiastic fantasy of multiple and multiplying erect penises. Accumulation #1, the product and vision of obsessive revel, at once assaults and delights. It is aggressive and humorous, repulsive and mysterious, surreal and hallucinatory.

Over the next three years, Kusama proceeded to cover larger and larger pieces of furniture with the same white phallic forms. These included a couch, Accumulation #2; a bureau with mirror; and a dining table some six feet long titled Ten Guests Table. In 1963, Kusama used a tall step-ladder as armature and image for a sculpture. The geometric frame was transformed into an organic tower with high-heeled shoes left climbing the steps, their pointed toes and spiked heels inserted at random into the fleshy, popping growths. Perhaps her best-known object in this series was Boat Accumulation of 1962, a ten-foot rowboat and its two oars which were covered inside and out with gigantic crustaceans. Other objects which Kusama frequently covered were frying pans, tea kettles, watering cans and mixing bowls as well as suitcases, pocketbooks, high-heeled shoes, a baby carriage and coats and dresses (figure 10). What is new in these sculptures is that the unit of Kusama's repetition is no longer a nonobjective circle, but blatantly a penis form.

Kusama's appropriation of the phallus in the Sex-Obsession series can be interpreted as her will and fantasy to possess her oppressor's power. We have already discussed how Kusama's sense of rejection by her father,
her protest against the conformist gender roles and puritanical morals imposed by her mother, and the resentment she felt toward the oppressive patriarchal regime of Japanese society all enraged Kusama from an early age. If the vast majority of women would submit to domination, would allow the denial of their subjectivity, Kusama would not and did not. Through art, her violent possession and control over not one but thousands of penises represent perhaps a victory, the freedom from subjugation, from dependency and the glorious right to dominate back.

Claes Oldenburg began making soft sculptures around the time that Kusama started using sewn-and-stuffed cloth as a medium for making forms with which to cover objects. Oldenburg's first soft sculptures developed from his earlier works made of muslin soaked in plaster over wire frames and were props for the Happenings he staged at the Store, such as Freighter and Sailboat of 1962, which consists of muslin filled with shredded foam rubber and painted with spray enamel. His large-scale soft sculptures, such as Floor-Cake (figure 11), were first shown at the Green Gallery in the fall of 1962. While Oldenburg and Kusama arrived at the concept of making sculpture from sewn-and-stuffed fabric independently, both share the partly-Surrealist, partly-Pop idea of transforming a common object into a parody and contradiction of itself by making it "soft."48 Both artists also consciously exploited the inevitable body references which issued from this new, doll-like medium. Oldenburg remarked recently that, in retrospect, Kusama's white armchair, couch and rowboat sculptures interested him most of her work in the 1960s.

"Those particular pieces stuck in my mind...They were obviously very original...." Stating that Kusama's work was never technically "soft sculpture," Oldenburg explains how his work differs from Kusama's:

She is not making soft sculpture, or, she is, but it is one thing that is repeated. The object is just one way of ending what she is starting. They are devices, and so the subject of the work is not so much the all over form as these individual things repeating themselves and the proliferation. That's very different from my work which is about whole form and which is also related to a certain view of reality, to a realistic view. I'm not sure if it meant much to her what object she covered. To me, that tends to be important....The topic was not the object, [but] the thing that was on the object. Her sculpture is a small thing that covers.

While Oldenburg's perception of Kusama's phallic-covered objects is illuminating, his idea that her choice of object was not symbolic or meaningful is an interesting personal reading.

There are definite themes in Kusama's sculpture which are revealed precisely in the choice of what she covers. Her subject is domesticity (thus, the living-room furniture, the kitchen utensils, the bureau). Another subject is the fetishes of feminine paraphernalia (the high heels, the short dresses, the pocketbooks). The ladder and the rowboat might be unique in Kusama's oeuvre, but each stands for a myth. The ladder, which she titled Travelling Life, is a symbol of ascension, the means for climbing up to heights (figure 12). Literally and figuratively, the ladder belongs in man's domain. Yet Kusama has not only repossessed the ladder by transforming it, but she has placed high-heels on the steps as if to say: "I am climbing too."

Kusama's Sex-Obsession and Compulsion Furniture series of 1962 to 1964 were recognized by critics at the time as representative of emerging post-formalist trends. In Donald Judd's well-known article of 1965, "Specific Objects," he postulated that the new uses of a third dimension afforded an alternative to the structural limits traditionally imposed on painting and sculpture. In describing the use of new or non-art materials, Judd perceived that the "form of a work and its materials are closely related." Most of the new work has "no structure" in the conventional sense, such as Oldenburg's soft sculpture, and has no composition, like John Chamberlain's assemblages. An image "has never before been the whole work, been so large, been so explicit
and aggressive....The quality is intense and narrow and obsessive." Judd cited Yayoi Kusama's work as an example: "The boat and furniture that Kusama covered with white protruberances have a related intensity and obsessiveness and are also strange objects. Kusama is interested in obsessive repetition, which is a single interest."

As Judd's seminal article identified Kusama as one of the artists working to break through the structures of painting and sculpture towards a new three-dimensional form of art, Lucy R. Lippard in 1966 cited Kusama's sculpture as a precedent for what she termed "Eccentric Abstraction." The new work of artists such as Hesse, Kenneth Price, Keith Sonnier and H.C. Westermann freely combined Minimalism's modular or serial grid-like structure and its practice of using non-art materials with autobiographical, psychological and erotic content. Expressionist, Dada and Surrealist impulses were surfacing after years of suppression by the dominant formalist critique. The new work also shared Pop Art's "perversity and irreverence" and introduced "humor into the structural idiom, where angles fear to tread." Lippard wrote: "The makers of what I am calling...eccentric abstraction, refuse to eschew imagination and the extension of sensual experience while they also refuse to sacrifice the solid formal basis demanded of the best in current non-objective art." After the Surrealists Meret Oppenheim, Dali and Yves Tanguy, Lippard cited Kusama's phallus-covered objects as one of the earliest examples of the "sensuous object" which, by 1966, posited a significant challenge to the authority of Minimalist sculpture and determined a new and open direction for "eccentric abstraction." Kusama's baroque and psychosexual sculpture of 1962 to 1964 is thus a significant precursor to post-Minimalist art in America.

Environments and Happenings

Kusama's transition from sculpture to environmental art in 1964 and 1965 was inevitable. The sheer scale of her Infinity Nets paintings reflected an inherent desire, frustrated by structural limits, for room-size, all-enveloping imagery. The phallus-covered objects of the early 1960s were seldom conceived as unique, isolated sculptures, but more often as props within a tableau.

Typically, a new form in Kusama's art originates in a phantasmic incident. An experience of distorted perception becomes the basis for an artistic image; it insists on eliciting from her its creative expression. Kusama has written: "Soon the nets went beyond the bounds of the canvas to cover the desks, the chairs and the floor, and realized, in visible form, the dream of obsessional art I experienced in my childhood." The installation and theatre pieces staged in downtown New York under the aegis of Allan Kaprow, Claes Oldenburg, Jim Dine and Red Grooms were part of the legacy Kusama inherited when she began her own three-dimensional, large-scale installations combining found objects, urban refuse and painting. Since 1957, when Kaprow staged his first environment at the Hansa Gallery, he and other artists had been creating environments which were designed to refute the distinctions between art and life: Theirs was an aesthetic of contemporary, here-and-now reality in all its mess, absurdity and mundane detail. Social and political protest was another part of the anti-art strategy of this group.

Kusama's first exhibition which presented a complete environmental installation was the Aggregation: One Thousand Boats Show at the Gertrude Stein Gallery in December, 1964 (figure 13). The viewer reached the installation through several narrow, empty rooms. These led to a small, dimly-lit room where the phallus-covered real rowboat, Boat Accumulation (1962), was installed on the floor. Surrounding it along the walls of this little room, and papering the walls of the rooms leading up to it, were hundreds of black-and-white posters illustrating the boat. (This wallpaper effect of repeating a single large image prefigured Warhol's Cow Wallpaper of 1966.) A critic for Artnews described the installation:

The photographs do not simply play tricks with the spectator by way of startling him when he sees the real thing; they are actually a reiterated extension of the boat, suggesting an infinite expansion of the image, expressing the same feeling of indefinable iteration that Kusama seems obsessed with in the assemblage itself. The power of both the real image and the photographs is an accumulative act of repetitive insistence. Kusama's major work between 1964 and 1966 was a series of environments which she called Driving Image. These room-size installations were presented in galleries in New York and Europe, and featured work from the so-called Sex-Obsession, Food-Obsession, Compulsion Furniture, Repetitive Vision and Macaroni Room series.

The first Driving Image show was installed at the Castellane Gallery. It presented a kitchen, dressing room and guest room. The walls of these rooms were covered with hundreds of the stuffed phallic motif as were the furnishings, which included Ten Guests Table and a bureau. A naked female mannequin entirely encrusted with macaroni wheels hosted this scene.

Her use of dried macaroni in the environments probably related to her perceptions of modern American society:

I feel as if I were driving on the highways or carried on a conveyor belt without ending until my death. This is like continuing to drink thousands of cups of coffee or eating thousands of feet of macaroni...I find myself being put into a uniform environment, one which is strangely mechanized and standardized.
The motif of mass-produced food, real or imaginary, recalls Oldenburg's preoccupation with American fast-food staples and Daniel Spoerri's tabletop still-lives of supermarket detritus. Food, like other perishable junk, was also part of the prop aesthetic of the environments of the New York Happenings.

Kusama's one-person show in 1966 at the Galerie M.E. Thelen in Essen, West Germany illustrates another variation of her Driving Image environments. Here, we see a return of the Infinity Nets imagery and of painting. Large consecutive panels of a blue and red dot painting line the walls of this environment. Macaroni shells carpet the floor. The room features a stepladder with high-heels on it, a kitchen table set for tea, a dressing table, and naked female mannequins including one little girl. Every object is painted in a bright pattern of nets and dots.

In this installation, Kusama actualizes the hallucination which first inspired her to create environmental art: a room, its furnishings, objects and its inhabitants glazed in a ubiquitous, psychedelic pattern of dots and nets. The cheery look of the scene is deceptive and ironic: The subject is about the depersonalized modern woman, trapped by her domestic environment and by her redundant functions relating to food and sex. The interconnecting oneness which binds Kusama's people and things dissolves the distinction between self and other, subject and object, animate and inanimate. The nets represent Kusama's desire for relationship, and simultaneously deny it by denying differentiation.

Another series of environments Kusama created in the mid-1960s was the Infinity Mirror Rooms. These were shown at the Castellane Gallery in New York, a short-lived, uptown, avant-garde enterprise. The first, shown there in 1965, was Infinity Mirror Room—Phalli's Field (figure 14). Viewers entered a room of mirrored walls which trapped their sight in an infinity maze. Soft, bulbous shoots made of red polka-dotted fabric sprang in outrageous clusters from the floor, their forms and patterns multiplying endlessly in all directions. The viewer wandered along a path through this dazzling, grotesque wonderland, watching their own reflections explode across the field of phalluses. In a photograph of this mirrored room, a black and white spotted dalmatian puppy clammers through the patterned-fabric protuberances. Humor and the element of performance are never far from Kusama's art of this period.
Kusama’s second, related environment was Endless Love Show, also called Peep Show, which she showed at the Castellane Gallery in March of the following year (figure 15). Technically the most ambitious of Kusama’s environments, it was also the most conceptual. It consisted of an enclosed hexagonal chamber some nine feet wide, its walls and floors lined with mirrors. Concentric hexagons of multi-colored Christmas-tree lights were inserted into the ceiling and flashed on and off in continuous radiating sequence. Standing outside the chamber, one stuck one’s head through a “peep hole.” (There were two, on opposite sides, so one could experience the sensation of looking inside the chamber with a partner.) The interior was empty. One only saw oneself from all directions reflected infinitely in the mirrors amid the myriad patterns of blinking, swirling lights. “Meanwhile,” Peter Schjeldahl describes in the Artnews review, “a loud tape of Beatles songs blends in your ears with the lively rattle (like metal popcorn) of the light switches, reinforcing your sense of having been removed to another, rather awesome, world.”

Kusama’s use of mirrors, electric lights and kinetics and her manipulation of geometrical and architectural forms certainly could have been inspired by the work of her friends in the Zero Group, who pioneered these ventures in the early 1960s. Otto Piene’s Milky Way, a ceiling-sculpture of lights installed at the Bonn Opera House in 1965, and Heinz Mack’s Silver Dynamo (of 1964), a motor driven montage of reflecting surfaces, demonstrate similar devices (figure 16). What Kusama manufactures from these sarce reflective materials, however, is not so much a rigorous and literal demonstration of optical effects as a theatrical display of psychedelic sensations. Kusama’s Peep Show simulated what the film maker Jud Yalkut called “the mandelic phenomenon” which was part of the “psychedelic revolution” in American art of the late 1960s.

The concept and execution of Lucas Samaras’ Mirrored Room (Room #2), which was shown at the Pace Gallery in the fall of 1966, have striking affinities with Kusama’s Peep Show of the same year. For Samaras, who explains that he makes art “So that I can forget my separateness from everything else,” the mirrored room is both a sanctuary of hermetic alienation and a laboratory wherein he can project his grandiose desire to relate with the environment. The experience of Kusama’s chamber is the same: The self is aggrandized in reflections of itself,
and also splintered and distorted beyond recognition (figure 17).

Kusama’s Narcissus Garden, which she created at the Venice Biennale in 1966, represents an important transition from her environment to her performance and Happenings art (figure 18). Kusama was neither invited to show nor given permission to present her art that year at the Biennale, yet Newsweek and other journals found her outdoor installation most worthy of attention. The Garden consisted of 1,500 identical mirror balls, which Kusama had manufactured at an Italian factory, spread across the lawns outside the Italian pavilion. When one approached the pool of mirror bubbles, one saw one’s image reflected across their surfaces. This outdoor Op, Kinetic and Minimalist environment then became a stage for Kusama: She is photographed lying down in her red leotard on the grass among the silver balls; and, in a gold kimono, throwing the light, plastic mirror balls in the air. Narcissus Garden also became a place to perform a rite of bombastic and humorous iconoclasm: In the most staid and serious international exhibition of contemporary art, Kusama began to sell her mirror balls to the visitors (at two dollars each). The Italian officials finally threatened her, and Kusama had to desist.

We might wonder how, all of a sudden, the Japanese woman we knew as an intense, serious and withdrawn visual artist became so interested in kooky, public performance. First of all, Kusama had always been a beautiful woman: Audacious style was natural to her. During her early years in New York, for example, she was famous for wearing a monkey fur coat and for appearing at openings in kimonos of her own design. She also was given to surprising, spontaneous acts in public. Judd recalls when Kusama grabbed a pregnant cat at a friend’s house and sucked one of its nipples. The Italian conceptual artist Paolo Icaro, who was living for a few months in the loft building at 404 East 14th Street, went downstairs one day to borrow a knife. Kusama opened the door, stark naked, and said “Help yourself. I’m ironing.” There was an aluminum dress on the ironing board, and the knife he borrowed was painted all black.

It appears from photographs taken circa 1960 to 1963 that Kusama was already posing for little street Happenings. In one, she is walking through lower Manhattan in a bright kimono and, in broad daylight, carrying an umbrella decorated both with live and plastic flowers. A few years later, Eiko Hosoe photographed her lying on a red-and-white phallus-covered mattress (a segment of Phalli’s Field) on the sidewalk in the middle of the day outside her loft on East 14th Street. In a series of poses taken at her 1963 exhibition, Aggregation: One Thousand Boats Show installation, Kusama stands nude by the prow of her boat. In a later and famous image, she is lying in the nude on her white phallus-studded couch (Accumulation #2), tummy and breasts pressing upon the orgy of fleshy penises. Her naked body, high-heeled shoes and long black hair are covered with large polka dots (figure 19). Our impression of Kusama must never lose sight of these images, for they typify the sense of humor, good-natured iconoclasm and tendency to exhibitionism which are so distinctive of her being. These characteristics, together with Kusama’s “lust for publicity” as a disen- chanted Village Voice critic put it, were expressed as a total art form in her Happenings.

From 1967 until her return to Japan in the early 1970s, Kusama made fewer and fewer objects and turned
increasingly to staging absurd theatre, political and social protest, and demonstrations of sexual liberty. The central manifestation of these events was body-painting: Kusama, dressed in a costume of her own design, painted or sprayed polka dots on the naked (or half-naked) bodies of models she hired or hippies who volunteered. As the “Priestess of Polka Dots,” she directed the nudist events she created but rarely participated herself in the nude. Disregarding props, she focussed more and more on the outrageous theatrical elements that were inherent in her environmental installations. She replaced representation with the real, live thing: Nude people replaced mannequins and bodies replaced soft art. She also exploited the positive, cosmic and mythical aspect of her obliteration fantasy. In 1968, she said:

The polka dot has the form of the sun, signifying masculine energy, the source of life. The polka dot has the form of the moon, symbolizing the feminine principle of reproduction and growth. Polka dots suggest multiplication to infinity. Our earth is only one polka dot among millions of others...We must forget ourselves with polka dots! We must lose ourselves in the ever-advancing stream of eternity.

Kusama staged at least seventy-five Happenings between 1967 and 1970. The majority of these took place in New York, though she also performed elsewhere on the East Coast and in Europe and Japan (where she returned briefly in 1970). Her Happenings can be categorized as two types: indoor “orgies” and the outdoor naked demonstrations. Related to these were Kusama Enterprise, a company she founded to produce her Happenings; Kusama Fashion Co., Ltd. which sold nudist fashion (“orgy gowns”) designed by Kusama; and Kusama Orgy, a newspaper which reported on her events and disseminated her philosophy which claimed “Self destruction is the only way to peace.” The obsessive solipsism of her early work developed into compulsive narcissism in her Happenings. Likewise, the aggressive sexual fantasy expressed in her environments became, with real bodies, a playful act of free love.

Kusama’s “Love Happening” or “Orgy” events were staged in various studios in lower Manhattan (figure 20). Installed at one end of the space was the hexagonal mirrored chamber, with some walls removed so people could see in, and the Christmas-bulb ceiling salvaged from her Peep Show. (At times the mattress popping with red-and-white penises from Phalli’s Field was also used.) Each of the orgy events held there was planned and organized in advance: Kusama and her manager, James Golata, a part-time actor and artists’ model, selected the themes (usually anti-Establishment and anti-war), sent out press releases, called in photographers and hired models to participate. Gordon Brown, editor of Arts Magazine, was also actively associated with these events. Once everyone had arrived, the models took off their clothes and walked onto Kusama’s mirrored stage. The Christmas-tree lights flashed to the rhythm of rock ‘n’ roll, and the orgy participants began to caress each other while the press took photos and interviewed Kusama. “Unity in Nudity!” Kusama wrote to promote “A Plan for Public Orgies for the Relief of Anxieties and Frustrations.” Dressed in fashion of her own concoction, Kusama then proceeded to paint polka dots on everybody else’s nude body, and they would occasionally start painting polka dots on each other. As a backdrop or prop, Kusama used an American flag, a poster of President Johnson, a poster of the Mona Lisa and other icons of the Establishment.

Golata, who also participated in Kusama’s Happenings, feels that Kusama’s orgies “failed as orgies” when the media were present in the sense that couples rarely actually made love. What sex transpired (kissing and fondling) was more about “liberation” than “arousal.” The situation, lights, cameras, audience, noise, “precluded being aroused” and was instead a kind of “erotic play...an overall sexuality versus a genital sexuality.” Kusama “encouraged nutty behavior, like three-year-olds playing.” Moreover, Golata recalls, the “aesthetic was always very important.”

The second type of Happening was the outdoor naked demonstration. Kusama called these Self Obliteration or Body Festivals. For these events, Kusama tried to maintain a company of four or five dancers. They would meet at an appointed hour at a specific site. The New York Stock Exchange (figure 21), the Statue of Liberty, St. Patrick’s Cathedral and the Museum of Modern Art garden, for example, were all used once by Kusama and her troupe. The press would be there, waiting. Kusama, the “Priestess,” would signal when the models should take off their clothes. They would strip and then begin to dance, stark
naked in the open air, as passers-by would gather and stare. Kusama then would take paint brushes, enamel spray cans or round stickers and dot the dancing bodies. The performance would usually last fifteen minutes or so, until the police came and they would scurry back into their clothes.

The central issues for Kusama during these years as a Happening artist were protest and publicity. Like many artists in the late 1960s, Kusama was attracted to radical social and political causes. In her statements about her Happenings, Kusama’s message was explicitly antia war and anti-Establishment. Nudity represented love, peace and nature at a time when the media was bringing home daily the horrors of the Vietnam War. Kusama was not alone in her sentiments. Believing that art could be an effective form of social and political protest, artists in New York began organizing various antiwar activities, including a week-long protest event in 1967 called Angry Arts.

While Kusama’s nudist demonstrations were never activist, they were conceived as a means to denounce and challenge publicly the status quo—capitalist materialism, political imperialism, patriarchy and “uptight” sexual culture. She aimed her fire at the art establishment as well. These concerns had preoccupied Kusama since she was a child in militarist Japan: Her loathing for war and all it stood for was deeply ingrained. Happenings provided a stage where she could, through actions and words (her press releases were integral to the performance), flaunt her shocking near-libertine radicalism. Carolee Schneemann, whose naked Meat Joy performance in 1963 revolutionized performance art and led the battle for a liberated and feminist sexuality in the arts, considers Kusama’s Self Obliteration nude Happenings among the earliest and most critical to “penetrate the inherited meaning of culture.”

If protest was Kusama’s message, publicity was her medium. She staged her Happenings for front-page coverage (she got it often), and even called her events “Press Happenings.” She claimed that “publicity is critical to my work because it offers the best way of communicating with a large number of people” and suggested that “avant-garde artists should use mass communication as traditional painters use paints and brushes.” Kusama’s blunt confession recalls Warhol’s ideal of the artist as celebrity and his similar exploitation of mass media to promote his own image. In fact, Kusama consciously competed with Warhol for the most press coverage.

“I was god,” Kusama says of the role she played. As in some massive cathartic rite, the Happenings exorcised her lifelong fear of repression. Her ambition, which had been denied as a child, was now prohibited nothing. She could be as outrageous as she wanted or needed to be. It was a time in American culture, and in Kusama’s life, to explore delirious new freedoms. Outlandish fashion, radical politics, sex and drugs were all acceptable, even encouraged.

Yet, as an intellectual remarked of the new breed of rebel-celebrities: “Every thrust at the jugular draws not blood, but sweet success…fame and affluence…Yesterday’s underground becomes tomorrow’s cliché.”

By 1970, Kusama’s reasons to make Happenings, to make Daily News fame, seemed outdated, tired. The art critics too had grown weary of her ploys. The Village Voice reviewed her Homosexual Wedding Happening:

Kusama, whose gross lust for publicity never leaves room for taste, managed to put on the year’s most boring freak show for members of the press this week... Kusama is definitely suffering from over-exposure of over-exposure.

Kusama must have realized herself that her subject was used up, that her time was over. “A limit in art is reached when an artist’s work comes as close as possible to being non-art,” Irving Sandler wrote in 1969, predicting
defeated by the debacle of World War II and then resumed on new premises in the postwar Showa years, was approaching the prospect of post-modernization. Japan had succeeded, if not exceeded, its goals of reform. Great wealth and prosperity, an unprecedented phenomenon in Japanese history, was a palpable reality. Yet modernization was a dream which the Japanese had worked towards for so long that they were unprepared for it when it came about. It demanded a new self-consciousness and challenged Japan’s deeper identity. The questions of where and how to proceed with an ancient, hybrid culture in the late 20th century and how to be a world power among Western superpowers were vexing. Yukio Mishima’s public suicide in a military headquarters in Tokyo in 1970, in part a protest against the debased materialism Japan seemed headed for and in part a nostalgic rite glorifying the inviolable Japanese spirit, intimated the end of an isolationist history. But to most Japanese, Mishima’s nationalistic protest was bizarre, futile and embarrassing. The cultural and political identity of the Japanese had to integrate its past, but not so literally, while participating in the global affairs of the contemporary world. Internationalization was, it seemed, the inevitable course to follow.

The 1970s was also a decade of change for the Japanese avant-garde. Jirō Yoshihara, founder of Gutai and a patron and mentor to many artists in the postwar generation, died in 1972. Shūzo Takiguchi died in 1979. The anarchistic and anti-art aesthetic which they both had fostered—Yoshihara among the Gutai artists and Takiguchi among the Neo Dada, Hi-Red Center and Conceptual artists—was no longer the dominant trend. Multi-media arts on one hand, and the Minimalist Mono-ha sculpture on the other, were emerging independently. Unlike Japan’s avant-garde art of the fifties and sixties which developed primarily on the basis of actions and ideas, the art of the seventies and even eighties developed on the basis of specific styles.

Kusama’s decision to return to Japan forced the question upon Japanese critics of how to treat her within the context of the postwar Japanese avant-garde. Her prodigious achievement abroad was irrefutable: While she did not have the critical success of Shūsaku Arakawa or On Kawara nor the celebrity status of Yoko Ono, she had, nonetheless, achieved considerable notoriety. Yet, since leaving Japan in 1957 and throughout her years of pro tease activity in New York and Europe, not one Japanese critic, dealer or curator had supported her work consistently. Yoshiaki Tono, the influential critic of Dada and Pop art in Japan, acknowledges that Kusama is “handicapped” in the eyes of the Japanese art and social establishments. “She’s Japanese, she’s a woman, she’s an artist and she’s avant-garde,” he explained recently. “These are the worst conditions.”

Another factor which has adversely affected Kusama’s reputation at home was the press coverage of her Happen-
nings. Unappreciated by the art or theatre critics, Kusama's naked outdoor demonstrations and libertine Happenings in her New York studios were topics of scandal in the Japanese gossip press. She still bears a "scandal queen" stigma among her contemporaries in Japan.

In Japan, the artist, and particularly the modern artist, has traditionally been considered aberrant precisely because he or she acts outside rules and conventions. The avant-garde in Japan has achieved its modernist aims since its beginnings in 1910 largely because it has been organized as a succession of kai and ha, Japanese terms which variously refer to a political faction, artistic guild, association or clique. The history of Japan's postwar avant-garde, for example, considers certain outstanding individuals chiefly in relation to the group they founded or of which they were members. Only after an artist reaches sixty can he transcend his identity with a specific group and assume the individual status of a master, or sensei.

While Kusama was a member of the prestigious Nika artists' association in the early 1950s, she was never a member of any critical and influential avant-garde fraternity. It's not that she was rejected by the groups; she simply never joined one. In fact, she made a point of avoiding affiliation with any of them and, as early as 1955, was publicly criticizing the politics of the Japanese art world.99

Tōno attributes Kusama's relative lack of critical support in Japan during the sixties to the fact that she was considered, while living in New York, an "expatriate from the Japanese art world." But the anti-art artists, Arakawa, On Kawara and Ushio Shinohara, who moved permanently to New York in 1961, 1965 and 1969, respectively, were by no means treated as drop-outs by the Japanese art community. On the contrary, their reputations at home, where they are regularly discussed in the context of Jasper Johns, Beuys, Duchamp and Rauschenberg, have perhaps benefited from their success abroad, and their expatriate status. One reason for this may be that each belonged to an established artists' group in Japan before his departure for the United States.80

According to Tōno, the more difficult challenge of fitting Kusama's art into the scheme of modern critical history is that while an artist's work usually lets us return to history, Kusama's work is too personal to be historical, or rather it is ahistorical. While Tōno does not deny Kusama's innate originality, he attributes her resistance to accept herself as part of art history to the Japanese education system which "concentrates on making art, not on teaching visual experience."

The question of Kusama's position in the Japanese avant-garde of the 1960s is thus a complex issue. Yet, Kusama's art does compare in uncanny ways to the work produced by Tokyo's anti-art movements in the early 1960s. The Neo Dada Organizers, a group founded in 1960 by Ushio Shinohara and Masanobu Yoshimura, consciously reacted against the art informal painting that was dominant in the Japanese avant-garde scene. It responded by making objects—assemblages of junk—and staging political Happenings on the streets. The Neo Dada Organizers, together with the Hi Red Center group which was founded in 1963 by Jiro Takamatsu, Genpei Akegawa and Natsuyuki Nakanishi, led the wave of junk-art and conceptual installations in the annual Yomiuri Independent exhibitions, the most active and influential showcase for contemporary art in Japan since its founding in 1949.

The objects created by the members or affiliated artists of the Neo Dada and Hi Red Center groups bear strong thematic and conceptual affinities with Kusama's phallus-covered objects of the early 1960s. The theme of metamorphosis is, for example, basic to Tetsumi Kudō's distorted bodily sculptures (frequently phallic) made of found materials. Kudō's grotesque imagery of body parts which have been disembodied and which function as autonomous organs in a state that is neither living nor dead recalls Kusama's Sex Compulsion series, in which hundreds of bodyless phaluses seek desperately to connect. A similar obsession with a sensory organ transplanted out of the human body into a disturbing contemporary symbol is demonstrated by Tomio Miki's series of ear sculptures of circa 1963 until his death in 1978 (figure 22). The sexualizing and dehumanizing of Miki's single or multiple ear sculptures recall Kusama's similar manipulation of the phallus. The elements of torture and self-torture, wounded and disfigured bodies, of distorion and transformation by odd, unnatural forces which recur in the work of these artists, including Kusama, seem to express an aspect of horror related to the atom bomb. The objects each artist presents are a form of creature, half human, half machine. They reveal a world of atom bomb survivors, where nobody is left intact, where a new breed of humans are victims of man-made catastrophes, where art is an ironic and fantastic horror show.
Kusama’s re-entry in the 1970s to the Tokyo art world was slow. She held her first one-person exhibition in 1975 at the Nishimura Gallery, a small gallery with a reputation for sponsoring the work of younger artists. The Osaka Formes Gallery, also into Tokyo, presented her second show in 1976. Both were quietly but well-received in the press.

In 1977, Kusama moved into a private psychiatric hospital in Tokyo, well-known for advancing art therapy in the treatment of atypical neuroses. She has kept her studio in a nearby apartment and has also set up working space within the hospital itself. She is probably the only patient of that mental institution to pay her medical bills with income earned from work in residence. At any given time, she employs one to five assistants who regard her as a mentor. Her single room is hardly bigger than the bed and desk it fits. Her costumes hang at one end of her bed against the dingy concrete walls of the cubicle; art and literary magazines are piled high beside her pillow; and the desk is a foot deep in papers. Yet Kusama has been prolific in this environment.

During the 1970s, Kusama explored new media for her artistic expression. This included a series of ceramics and collages, as well as writing novels and poetry. Since the late 1970s, she has published seven novels and written numerous poems. One novel, Kuriitofu danshokukutsu (Christopher Gay Brothel) received the Yasei Jidai award for emerging writers. Her writing, a kind of magic realism narrative of the underground sex life of downtown New York City, has been recognized by important contemporary novelists. Kusama’s easy success in Japan’s literary world is curious testimony to the fact that avant-garde literature has traditionally been more appreciated and supported in Japan than the visual arts.

Kusama also returned to making phallus-covered objects in the mid-1970s. Ceremony for Suicide of 1975-76 (figure 23) is among the first to signal the artist’s return to her early sculptural motifs. The full installation features thirteen pieces and includes a suitcase, a sofa, cooking utensils, clothes and a shovel covered with soft-phalIuses and sprayed silver. It is the suicide of originality: In resurrecting her early art, she recognizes the death of its originality. Yet Kusama’s return is honest, brave and liberating. Like the later art of other artists (consider Jasper Johns’ Four Seasons, for instance) it becomes autobiographical simply because its elements are familiar vestiges of past work.

A new period of critical success for Kusama began in 1982 when she held a solo exhibition at the Fuji Television Gallery in Tokyo. Other solo exhibitions followed there in 1984, 1986 and 1988. She has begun to show more frequently in galleries throughout Japan and has been included in major group shows in Tokyo and Kyoto. In 1987, the Kitakyushu Municipal Museum of Art organized the first Yayoi Kusama retrospective, complete with a catalogue. Through these activities, Kusama has gained the support of influential individuals in the Japanese contemporary art world. These are Susumu Yamamoto, founding director and president of the Fuji Television Gallery; Shigeo Chiba, curator at the National Museum of Modern Art, Tokyo; and Toshiaki Minemura, a prominent art critic and a professor at the Tama Art University. After some thirty-five years of being an outsider in the art world of her own country, Kusama is now beginning to be appreciated by the most influential members of the Japanese art world.

It is little wonder that, in a country which has such little tolerance for madness or genius, especially in women, it has taken so long for Kusama to achieve this degree of recognition. One factor in this success might be her age. Kusama, who is sixty this year, might yet become venerable. Another related point is that the contemporary art world in Japan has changed for the better in the 1980s. Though artists still complain, there is more activity, more pluralism and more support for the arts in recent years than there ever was in the Shōwa period. Younger artists, especially women, admire Kusama as a model crusader. Her influence is now detected in the work of younger avant-garde Japanese artists, such as Shōko Maemoto (figure 24).

After producing a series of phallus-covered objects which represented the reworking of her sixties’ art, Kusama broke into a whole new area of sculptural imagery and form in the 1980s. Sleeping Stamens of 1985 is a celebration of fecundity (plate 41). The familiar repetitive pattern and organic tubular shapes no longer connote monotony and aggression but rather abundant growth. Each of the fifteen boxes contain soft, snake-like limbs which entwine in self-embrace. Bunches of grapes are interspersed, enhancing the image of cornucopia. Like the lovers on a Hindu temple frieze, these fleshy forms writhe and climb in ecstatic union with one another.
Kusama also began painting again in the mid-1980s. These include single or multiple panel two-color acrylic paintings of an all over pattern. Sprouting (The Transmission of the Soul) of 1987 (plate 44) reveals sperm-like forms swimming furiously in a green sea. The main difference between these and her earlier paintings is the use of dark, high-contrast background color which creates an illusion of deep, shining space. Far from being the claustrophobic or dizzying images of her early work, these are simple and celebratory. In the late 1980s, Kusama's world is opening up.

Two final questions about Kusama's art bear reflection. First, are there any specific formal or conceptual qualities in her work which relate to traditional Japanese art? American critics were once eager to read such exoticism into her work, and described her Infinity Nets paintings as an expression "of the void so germane to Buddhist thought" and as a "Zen vigil." Kusama herself discounts conscious influence of Zen in her work. It is not that the philosophical affinities are not profound; rather, Kusama's understanding and experience of them are not culture-specific, but reveal a universal, archetypal transcendentalism.

What Japanese influence is present in Kusama's art is less aesthetic than socio-historical. The development of her imagery is more related, as we have discussed, to her reaction to the oppressive militarist regime, patriarchal society and gender-defined social systems of the prewar and postwar Showa periods. She was born in an age of modernization, and her art reflects and holds up to international influences.

The second crucial question in assessing Kusama's art is, is she insane? Certainly, her art reflects, at one time or another, all of the neurotic and psychotic "symptoms" which she has described in writings and interviews for the last forty years. Yet the precise diagnosis eludes us. Is this only because of the confidentiality inherent in a doctor-patient relationship, or because her illness is an inexact psychosomatic condition, somewhere between the result of some emotional abuse and the product of an overstimulated imagination? Is her illness a fabrication, an excuse to act without apology, an eccentric role she finds useful to play in the art world?

These questions may occupy us for some time and may never be answered. Yet for whatever reason and by whatever name, Kusama feels estranged from reality. To defend the cencial of her self by an alien world she must assert her existence by making art. Her capacity to give her fantastic vision lucid form proves the power of discipline over degeneration, creative will over depression and the confirmation of her physical reality over her mental projections. For Kusama, art and madness are never an identical activity. They are distinct and truthful ways to know the self.

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For published and unpublished material referred to in the endnotes with alphanumeric code (e.g., E-4, H,8, etc.), see the bibliography. Citations beginning with the code CICA/YK refer to the Yayoi Kusama archives at CICA.

3. I am grateful to Gillian Walkei, therapist at the Ackerman Institute of Family Therapy, New York, for enlightening me on many aspects of the feminist critique in cultural criticism and psychotherapy.
7. I.19.
10. I.19. Kusama discussed her family with me on several occasions. The sense of the family dynamics which I am describing here is gathered from CICA's interviews with the artist as well as with her close friends and associates.
14. Kusama may have titled this work later.
15. I.19.
17. I.19.
19. F.2.
20. Shizō Takiguchi, "Kusama Yayoi koton ni tsuita" (On Yayoi Kusama's Solo Exhibition) in A.1. Translated by Tomii, adapted by author.
23. G.2.
25. E.3.
27. Georgia O'Keeffe, letter to Kusama, 4 Dec. 1955 (CICA/YK/880.2).
32. Kusama, incomplete typescript (CICA/YK/6160.40).
33. CICA/YK/6160.40.
34. Kusama, draft based on an interview (CICA/YK/6000.08).
37. Judd, I.5.
40. Piene, I.36.
41. Andy Warhol and Pat Hackett, POPism: The Warhol Sixties (New York: Harcourt, Brace, Jovanovich, 1980): 22. I am grateful to Carol Stringary, Associate Paintings Conservator, the Museum of Modern Art, New York, for bringing this quote to my attention.
42. A friend of Kusama's who prefers to remain anonymous recalls how she "brought mattresses up from the street to the studio" and used the "cotton... stuffing from the mattresses" for her sculptures.
43. Other egg-carton works are visible in contemporary photographs of Kusama's studio. The whereabouts of these are unknown.
45. Barretta, Eva Hesse: 106.
46. Barrette, Eva Hesse. 106.
47. This work is now in the collection of the Des Moines Art Center, Iowa.
49. All quotes in this paragraph are from L.S. Oldenburg, say's of soft sculpture: "It's body referential. You can't help that when you make something soft and stuff it. It's like a doll. It resembles the body."
50. All quotes in this paragraph are from Judd, F.60.
51. All quotes in this paragraph are from Lucy R. Lippard, F.65.
52. Kusama, "Struggle and Wanderer of My Soul": 3.
55. Allan Kaprow, "'Happenings' in the New York Scene," Armewa 60, no. 3 (May 1961): 60. Kaprow writes: "In keeping with this [impermanence], the physical materials used to create the environments of Happenings are of the most perishable kind: newspapers, junk, rage, old wooden crates knocked together, cardboard cartons cut up, real trees, food, borrowed machines, etc..."
56. Peter Schjeldahl, F.60.
59. Kusama's Narcissus Garden was featured, with an illustration, in the Newsweek coverage of the Venice Biennale (G.15).
60. I.5.
62. H.277.
64. Al van Starres, G.31.
65. James Golata, I.43.
69. Carolee Schneemann, L.38.
70. Kusama, statement, CICA/YK/6320.01.
71. CICA/YK/6320.01.
74. H.277.
76. Udo Kultermann, "Yayoi Kusama and the Concept of Obsession in Contemporary Art" in A.127.
77. Yoshiki Tono, interview by author. Tokyo, 22 Dec. 1988. 78. This year, 1910, is generally accepted as the beginning of the avant-garde tradition in Japanese modern culture. It marks the first publication of Shinsekabi, a Tokyo-based journal devoted to contemporary European art. For a further reasoning of the choice of this date, see Shoji Takashina's "Introduction" in A.173: 23-28.
79. E.3.
80. On Kawara was a member of three artists' groups in the 1950s: the Demokratō bishu kyōkai (Democratic Art Association), the Ōdōsatsukai (Yellow Race), and the Seikòkai kōdankai (Artists' Discussion Group). He was also an affiliated member of the Neo Dada Organizers. Shinozaka and Arakawa were founding members of the Neo Dada Organizers.
81. I am grateful to Michiyasu Itesuji of Fuji Television Gallery for pointing this out to me.
82. Robert Taylor, H.38.
83. Jack Kroll, F.12.
84. Kusama wrote in the 1960s: "If there is any Zen in my work, I am unconscious of it" (CICA/YK/6000.08).