In 1978, five years after her move back to Japan, Yayoi Kusama wrote an autobiographical novel entitled *Manhattan Suicide Addict* about her life as an artist in downtown New York during the 1960s. She produced the manuscript as she produced so much of her art, in a single spell of obsessive creation, completing the first and only draft within a mere three weeks.¹ The book, published by a small literary press and illustrated with images of Kusama’s sixties’ art (including her Infinity Net paintings, Driving Image installations, and nude happenings), was a moderate critical success that eventually acquired cult status among Japan’s literary vanguard. *Manhattan Suicide Addict*’s publication marked the beginning of Kusama’s professional writing career. She has since issued twelve books, including novels, poetry, and short-story collections.²

Kusama produced these volumes writing through the nights in her cubicle at a Tokyo hospital for the mentally ill, her voluntary residence since 1977. She has found in writing an alternative therapeutic practice to painting and sculpture; it is an outlet for the expression of “metaphysical things, the negative feelings inside of me, human pain, life and death.”³

Kusama’s art and fiction are different forms of the same repetitive production of traumatic, phantasmic, and transcendental experiences that obsess her. Her prose is an incessant narration of a depersonalized self fighting against the void of self-obliteration. Set in New York or Japan in the present time, her novels recount the adventures of a cast of multiethnic characters living at the fringes of society. Half-lunatic and destitute, many of them artists, their lives revolve around drug addiction and psychiatric illness; incest, rape, and prostitution; orphanhood, loss of a beloved, and suicide. For Kusama madness, supernatural forces, and suicide are not miserable but strangely free and gorgeous fates, signs of dignity in a debauched world. Her best-known works, *The Hustlers*, *Grotto of Christopher Street* and *The Burning of St. Mark’s Church* combine the sordid and the hallucinatory in a fluid, imagistic prose. The renowned novelist Ryū Murakami has remarked that Kusama’s novels are reminiscent of Jean Genet’s fictions of depraved city underworlds, in the sense that “both make filth shine.”⁴ Drag queens, junkies, exiles from far-flung places—the subversive and unmoored detritus of the modern industrialized

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Kusama during performance en Brooklyn Bridge, 17 May 1968

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state—carouse, hustle, castrate their lovers, and die pure deaths with haunting, carnivalesque redundancy. But unlike Genet, Kusama’s rhapsodic melodramas embrace the surreal and remain in an ambiguous world, where “spirits wander between reality and image.”

Kusama’s novels, like her painting and collages, sculpture, environments, and happenings, owe their intensity to the structure of obsessive repetition. “Her words multiply,” critic Atsushi Tanigawa has commented, “in an anxious stream of unconscious narrative.” But it is not only the repetition of a basic structural vocabulary that links Kusama’s visual art to her writing. The obsessive thematic preoccupations that figure repeatedly in all of her works are sex as a site of power abuse, hallucinatory experience as a reproduction of what Freud terms “the uncanny,” and suicidal ideation as a mode of escaping from, or rebelling against, authoritarian denials of individuality. Kusama has claimed in numerous interviews and statements over the last fifty years that such obsessions are the conditions of her disease, which stems from childhood. To counter the forces of negation that aim to obliterate the self or separate it from others, she has to exert enormous willpower to simultaneously resist and overwhelm the oppression. If Kusama’s vast artistic production is the evidence of a ferocious battle between concrete reality and the overwhelming emptiness of nonbeing, a struggle to master the images that revolt or terrify her by repeatedly recreating them under her aesthetic control, then her fiction (which until recently has not been available in English translation) offers further evidence of Kusama’s extraordinary powers to transform the disturbing illusions of the mind into enduring art. Ultimately, her production legitimizes a realm where symbolic order has exploded, leaving us, like the narrator in Manhattan Suicide Addict, in a state of suspension: “I can not give up my existence. Also I can not escape from death. This languid weight of life!”

**Kusama and Trends in Contemporary Japanese Literature**

When Kusama’s first literary work was published in Tokyo in the late 1970s, she was known only to a small circle within the Japanese art establishment. She had left Japan in 1957, achieved fame abroad, and quietly returned in 1973 after a fifteen-year absence to receive medical treatment and psychiatric care. Beyond a faithful following of postwar avant-garde artists and critics who recognized her stature, Kusama’s reputation in Japan was modest. Her New York activities had received little coverage in the Japanese art press and virtually no works from that period had ever been shown in Japan. It was not until 1982, when she held her first solo exhibition at a major Tokyo gallery, that Kusama gained a new audience and reestablished her position as one of Japan’s preeminent artists of the international avant-garde. It is significant, in the context of her literary career, that the majority of her early readers thus came to know her first and foremost as a writer. Her early fans—and she had hundreds—were mostly young urban Japanese who identified with Kusama’s characters freely trans-
gressing social, sexual, and psychological boundaries.

But Kusama’s early novels attracted critical attention as well. In 1983 The Hustlers Grotto of Christopher Street won the prestigious literary award for new writers given by the monthly magazine Yasei jidai. The jury consisted of the notable novelists Masahiro Mita, Michitsuna Takahashi, Teru Miyamoto, Ryū Murakami, and Kenji Nakagami. This group, a generation or two younger than the postwar school of Japanese literature represented by such giants as Kōbō Abe, Yukio Mishima, and Kenzaburō Ōe, had emerged as the proponents of a new genre of contemporary Japanese fiction. As intellectual nihilists who came of age in the 1960s they eschewed Abe’s existentialism, Mishima’s romanticism, and Ōe’s political ideology for a more fantastic, even psychedelic style of writing. Their tales of bizarre violence, erotic obsession, and occult happenings—a kind of postmodern magic realism—were inspired in part by their attraction to an eccentric strain in early modern Japanese literature prominent in the writings of Izumi Kyōka (1873–1939).

Viewed as peripheral during his lifetime because he stood apart from the dominant naturalistic prose of the period, Kyōka had invoked folklore, superstitition, and legend to create a fictive purgatory of the supernatural and grotesque. What appealed to avant-garde writers of the 1970s and 1980s was his graphic imagery, gothic decadence, and dark, premodern sensibility. Although his plots and characterizations were often unstructured or poorly developed, his haunting atmosphere of multiple realities—what the great early-modern writer Ryūnosuke Akutagawa summed up as “Kyōka’s world”—profoundly influenced the emergence of the new literary genres. Nakagami and Murakami, like Kyōka, created an ambiguous domain beyond thought and knowledge as resistance to the prevailing symbolic order imposed by modernity and Westernization. It is not surprising that Kusama, who ranks Kyōka topmost among her favorite Japanese writers, emerged in Tokyo’s literary world at the height of the “Kyōka boom” and later established close association with three of her jurors—Miyamoto, Murakami, and Nakagami—who today are internationally recognized for ushering in the new Japanese fiction. It is instructive, therefore, to discuss Kusama’s literary works in the context of this development.

The Hustlers Grotto of Christopher Street, a story of sexual violence, hallucination, and suicide, is representative of Kusama’s own idiosyncratic production of a fictive purgatory. Like Kyōka, Kusama writes about a macabre, supernatural world haunted with strange forms of love and betrayal in a language that is equally visual, formalist, and stylized. Kyōka’s most famous story, “The Holy Man of Mount Kōya” (Kōya hijiri, 1900), recounts the tale of an itin-
rant ascetic (the narrator) who transgresses into a spirit world where the trees rain black leeches and the ground seethes with giant snakes. There he comes upon a woman of ethereal beauty who is married to an idiot; she taunts the monk to forgo his vows. He weakens until he discovers that she is in fact a serpent-demon with powers to transform her lovers into bats and hoary beasts of burden.10

Kyōka's stories, frequently centered on the lives of prostitutes, aestheticize the violent aspect of the erotic and endow the female body with dark powers typical of Japanese premodern folklore. For Kyōka, who once remarked that "monsters are the concretization of my emotion,"11 words themselves are bake-mono—beings of transformation—and writing is a ritualistic act in which one can "pass through reality to reach a still greater power."12 Kyōka, Mishima once wrote, revived the ancient linked-verse style of renga poetry, with its "leaps of association and the imagistic splendor of the Japanese language that modern Japanese literature had forgotten."13 Unquestionably, the risks Kusama's fiction takes with its imagery and ambiguous relations between this world and the world of apparitions can best be appreciated by positioning her work in the lineage of Kyōka's tales of the supernatural and grotesque.

The Hustlers Grotto of Christopher Street recounts an episode in the life of Yanni, a young woman from Hong Kong who briefly studied philosophy at Columbia University and now manages male prostitutes in lower Manhattan. One of her boys is Henry, an African-American college dropout and heroin addict for whom she feels some sympathy "if only because he was a 'nigger' in a racist country" and with whom she occasionally has sex. "Though Yanni, with her hip-length black hair, dark almond eyes, and feline grace, was precisely the type he claimed to be wild about, the truth is that his heart was empty to the core. Nor were Yanni's feelings for Henry anything like love. Her own heart was so full of hatred for men..."14 As a little girl in Hong Kong, we learn, Yanni lost her virginity to her own father, who thereafter forced himself upon her regularly. In revenge against men, "to match up young canaries with pederasts" was now "all a glorious game to her."

The novel opens on a sweltering summer day in the West Village with Henry desperate for cash to score his next fix. Yanni sets him up with a wealthy john named Robert Greenberg, who sweeps him away in a white Porsche to a country house in New Jersey and rapes him repeatedly. Henry is overcome by drug withdrawal spasms ("his flesh panting with lunacy"), and hallucinations make his surroundings heave with terrifying images of infinity and destruction: "Everything in the room begins to move in a halting, vertiginous swirl with a chock, chock like the sound of a watch, and the ceiling seems about to collapse under the weight of the sky." Flowers are decapitated, "blood spurting out and soaking into the carpet." Henry's "physiology tugs relentlessly at his senses, demanding the destruction of everything visible. There, on a bitter-tasting hilltop the light-brown color of diacetyl morphone, poppies bloom as far as the eye can see. Henry makes a mad dash for those preternatural Turkish fields, strad-
dling the horse that gallops through his veins and riding riotously through the flowers."

Accosted again by "Bob's slug," Henry sees the Porsche driving "at blinding speed to the terminus" on "an illusory highway [that] twists and bucks, writhing over the surface of the earth." The Porsche flips, its "wheels pointed toward heaven and spinning uselessly" and in the emerging background "a black well in the dark valley, long thought to be dry, fills with Bob's white jism. The mouth of the well overflows, eroding the ruined landscape with the force of a flood, turning everything white...[until there is nothing but] white obliterating the scenery as far as the eye can see." In a final fit of loathing and craving, Henry cuts off Greenberg's penis:

Henry sees himself standing in the midst of this nightmarish scene and shivers. In his accursed hand he notices something that glitters a bright sports-car silver. The semen dogging him through the night continues to flow incessantly, entwining itself around the jackknife in his hand and dripping down on the carpet.

For one moment all the stars cease to shine. And as they lose their light, Bob's raw, warm little animal separates from his body. The unattached clump of meat rolls over the highway, bumps against a rock, and comes to a stop.

Fleeing from his crime, Henry escapes with Yanni to the top of the Empire State Building, "that gemstudded nightless castle" whose dizzying heights are engulfed in mists like a "silvery void." In the final scene their panic is heightened by an imagined terror that "the earth's axis has ceased to turn." Henry feels overcome by "a thin translucent curtain cutting him off from the external world...leaving him a prisoner behind the curtain of depersonalization." Suddenly he disappears into the white oblivion. Yanni rushes to the railing. "In the milk-colored mist a single black spot. Falling."

Kusama's appropriation of the American subculture of the 1960s as the setting for her fiction has been compared to the work of Ryū Murakami (b. 1952), author of the bestselling 1976 *Almost Transparent Blue* (Kagirinaku tömei ni chikai burū) and other novels that chronicle with surrealist precision a similarly carnivalesque world. In a shift from the introspective trend of postwar Japanese literature, Murakami narrates his fragmentary, cinematic accounts of multiracial orgies, drug-induced hallucinations, and violent but ultimately futile political subversion with deadpan detachment. Yet what he sees in his nullified, Americanized Japanese youth—and what he admires in Kusama—is an aspiration for authenticity. For both Murakami and Kusama drugs, mental illness, and the unconscious imaginary are nobler because they oppose and ultimately disrupt the strictures of symbolic order (mundane modern reality, social
formations, and statism). Murakami, who terms Kusama a “genius,” has remarked that her fiction is unique for a psychological intensity that makes her descriptions of “living on the edge between a normal and very strange world so extremely real.”

It is significant that the contemporary novelist most closely associated with the Kyōka revival and the new supernaturalism, Kenji Nakagami (1946–1992), was also among Kusama’s greatest supporters. What impressed Nakagami, beyond her imagistic writing style, was Kusama’s commitment to exploring the taboo territories of violence, discrimination, incest, and bisexuality. His own celebrated and much-debated work is itself steeped in those very themes. Consciously invoking Japan’s traditional, loosely structured monogatari narrative form, Nakagami peoples a part-primitive, part-modern landscape with passionate criminal antiheroes motivated by impulses that maintain a deep connection with archaic animism.

Among his best-known tales are the 1976 “Snake Lust” (Jain), a medieval ghost story recast in a contemporary buraku (outcaste ghetto), in which a boy and his girlfriend murder the boy’s parents; and the 1984 “The Moon and the Immortal” (Tsuki to fushi), based on Kyōka’s “The Holy Man of Mount Kōya,” the story of an ascetic who willfully pursues “somewhere on that mountain bathed by the dead-still sun...an entryway to and the abode of the supernatural.” But where Kyōka’s monk escapes the demonic forces of the lustful snake-woman, Nakagami’s merges with the creature in a violent, erotic struggle and is transfigured into a monstrous being, part human and part animal, half female and half male, doomed to endless wandering and suffering. In Nakagami’s and Kusama’s fiction, sexual obsession is both brutal and transcendental. The difference is that Nakagami incorporates an ecstatic communion with natural phenomenon (the protagonist would, “given water, become soaked with it. Given fire, flame up with it”), whereas Kusama’s submission to the sublime is elicited by the opposite emotion—a loathing of and revolt against the sexual act.

Nakagami and Kusama share an outsider status in Japanese society that informs their respective work and forged their friendship from 1983 until Nakagami’s early death by cancer in 1992. His legacy as a child of the buraku branded him, despite modern laws against discrimination, as a descent of the Edo-period subclass of “untouchables” — so called because of their association with “impure” occupations such as handling human and animal corpses. Traditionally illiterate, the burakumin were neither written about nor able to write for themselves, and until Nakagami their ethnic narrative scarcely had been represented in the Japanese literary canon. Kusama, who was born to the upper class in rural Nagano Prefecture, has also struggled to claim her subjective self from Japan’s rigid social hierarchies. As a woman avant-garde artist and a psychiatric patient most of her adult life, she (like Nakagami) writes from the point of view of the oppressed “other.” In each case this otherness is symbolized by imaginary forces that transgress and disrupt phenomenal realism.
Kusama’s version of a Kyōka-like snake tale, *Between Heaven and Earth*, is told from the side of the enchantress, O-Chu, an idiot woman who lives in the mountain groves; the snake-demon, a local policeman who pursues her, is a masculine, not feminine, sexual force of destruction. The story is narrated by her illegitimate daughter, Chi, who is repeatedly subjected to watching the policeman rape her mother on the forest floor. In silent panic Chi sees the leaves at his feet change from “a net of dry, dead veins” into “a scalelike, intertwining pattern of spots. And between the spots arises an ominous pair of small unblinking eyes.” Soon the entire ground and the trunks of the surrounding trees are writhing skyward, an accumulation of reptilian slugs—“columns of phalluses.” Again and again Kusama describes the lives of misfit females whose spectacular obsessions with phallicentric animism are the conduit for transcendence into another world. Hallucinatory experience is not disabling but rather emancipatory; it opens consciousness up to realms beyond banal and cruel existence.

Kusama’s literary style can also be understood through her lifelong association with surrealism. Surrealism’s essential preoccupation with the processes of the unconscious mind, its practice of automatism, and its dedication to what Paul Klee called the “instinct [which] drives us downward, deep down to the primal source” have consistently provided a critical framework for the appreciation of Kusama’s visual art, from her early biomorphic watercolors to her later psychosexual sculptures. The critic most responsible for introducing Kusama’s art in this context was the surrealist poet Shūzō Takiguchi (1903–79). Takiguchi, whom the militarists arrested in 1941 for his affiliation with André Breton and the French surrealists, emerged in the postwar era as the most influential critic of the Japanese avant-garde. A humanist, modernist, and prolific writer, Takiguchi articulated modern art and literature as the moral cultivation and improvised expression of an artist’s psychic nature, the supremacy of spirit and imagination over ideology and statism of any kind. For Takiguchi art was not an illustration, representation, or imitation of reality but rather a practice both formative and transformative.

Surrealism in prewar Japan implied a veiled critique of the totalitarian state; fantasy (genso) was encoded with social and political subversion. Postwar avant-garde artists in Japan, responding to prevailing academicism and the thir-
ties’ legacy of fascist art and ideology, privileged children’s art, naive art, art of the mentally ill, and other “amateurs who painted and sculpted as if outside of time.” Kusama’s outrage against authoritarianism was informed by this radical stance, which imparted urgency to works like her Driving Image series and her antiwar happenings of the 1960s. In her fiction as well Kusama sets fantasy (in the form of hallucinations from drugs or madness) in opposition to outside systems of phallocentric and abusive authority.

Takiguchi’s support of Kusama in the early 1950s helped to establish her identity as an avant-garde artist conceptually linked through surrealism to her other artistic self—that of a mentally-ill patient producing exceptional “psychoanalytic art.” For her second one-person show at the Matsumoto Civic Hall in 1952 he 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 of 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.” Twenty-five years later, when she published her first novel, Manhattan Suicide Addict, she asked Takiguchi to contribute the afterword. Entitled “My Nymph through Eternity” (Yūsei yo eien ni), his reminiscence of their long friendship concludes with a “literary and even poetic evocation” wherein he passes on his literary mantle: “Lingered in the crevices of illusion, the interstices of a vast void, this nymph emerges casting looks upon the world infinitely sharper than I myself…”

Fictional Themes and Kusama’s Narrative Production

Since Kusama first emerged as a self-described “independent” in Tokyo’s contemporary art establishment in the early 1950s, she has claimed in numerous statements and interviews that her work is related to her mental problems. In her 1975 manifesto “Struggles and Wandering of My Soul” she describes a life of recurring hallucinations that drove her to paint and generated what she identified as her unique practice of “obsessional art.” She was compelled to give form to her visions, as if the act of creation would give her mastery over the terrors that repeatedly threatened to dissolve her being. Her path of obsessional art, she suggests, has saved her from total despair and probable suicide; it has also certified her originality in the midst of the dominant contemporary art modes, which she disdains. “My motivation [for art],” she wrote, “was far from artistic, but primitive and instinctive.”

In a sense, her 1975 manifesto provided a story line for the autobiographical fiction she embarked on two years later, when she was permanently installed at a psychiatric hospital renowned for art therapy. Recurring themes of sex, death, and madness defy throughout her fiction any normative orders of rationality or realism. By Kusama’s accounts, for her the practice of writing is similar to that of making art, in that she becomes consumed by a single work, completes it in a compulsive rush, and rarely returns to rework it once it is
"out." From a psychoanalytic perspective, Kusama’s practice entails a loss of distinction between subject and object; as the unconscious imaginary assumes powers to distort objective reality, the symbolic order breaks down. Her creations survive, it could be argued, as documents of this transgressive experience.

Yet Kusama is not simply noting her madness; she is inventing an art to represent and reproduce it. Ultimately, her obsession is not focused on single images but rather on the repetitive production of a fantasy narrative that stars herself as object and subject, author and protagonist, artist and artwork. While the themes of her narrative are fixed, the degree and position of her subjectivity are constantly shifting—from psychotic crises to self-conscious sociopolitical critique to Warholesque self-promotion. That the artist has produced a vast photographic archive of herself posing beside and performing in and with her work suggests subtly shifting boundaries similar to those in Roland Barthes’ description of the Japanese Bunraku puppet theater, wherein the manipulators, clothed in black, are part of the performance. Bunraku, Barthes writes, “separates action from gesture: it shows the gesture, lets the action be seen, exhibits simultaneously the art and the labor, reserving for each its own writing.”30 This is connected, he continues, to the "alienation effect" that Bertolt Brecht had sought:

That distance, regarded among us as impossible, useless, or absurd, and eagerly abandoned, though Brecht very specifically located it at the center of his revolutionary dramaturgy...that distance is made explicable by Bunraku, which allows us to see how it can function: by the discontinuity of the codes, by this caesura imposed on the various features of representation, so that the copy elaborated on the stage is not destroyed but somehow broken, striated, withdrawn from that metonymic contagion of voice and gesture, body and soul, which entraps our [Western] actors.31

Kusama thus writes fiction as a manipulator blatantly free of disguise. Her stories reveal a fixation on sexual abuse, a fascination with the idea of self-obliteratiοn (jiko shomenpū), and an identification with rōjin-shō. Literally "separate-person symptom," this illness connotes being parted like a prisoner (shujin) from social and temporal reality; it is a "curtain of separation" wherein the boundary dissolves between the real and the nonreal (hi-genshitsu).32 In the English translations Kusama has authorized, rōjin-shō is rendered as "depersonalization," which further suggests being deprived of individual character, rendered impersonal, a nonbeing. Henry’s reaction to being raped in The Hustlers Crotto of Christopher Street is precisely this sensation, whose terror then provokes him to self-obliteratiοn through suicide. In Kusama’s world sexual abuse is predicated on the abuser depersonalizing the object of abuse. The forced secrecy of such traumatic experience, the need to escape achieved by numbing one’s con-
sciousness to what is taking place, the hopeless battle against figures of authority who deny the reality of the experience, the humiliation that later turns to dissociated outrage—these are the factors that throughout Kusama’s novels determine her characters’ fates.

The 1988 Woodstock Phallic Cutter offers one of the most graphic illustrations of Kusama’s narrative repetitions. Once again, it is told from a child’s point of view: Emily is a ten-year-old girl who likes to paint. Her father, an artist and teacher at New York’s Art Students League, who has exhibited at the Whitney and The Museum of Modern Art, is also a womanizer and a child molester. The book begins with his rape of Emily in the woods. Her hysterical mother passes time by breaking stacks of dishes, and her older brother regularly commits incest with Emily as well. In the midst of having sex with her father, Emily has an attack of rjinn-shō and cuts off his penis with a pair of scissors. With this, she becomes obsessed with acquiring penises and aspires to obtain a collection of 450 of them by castrating the doctor who amasshed it. While fleeing incarceration for her crime, Emily commits suicide.

Thus her first response is to negate reality through the numbing separation of rjinn-shō. Next she stages her silent outrage by appropriating the object of abuse. Finally, she transforms the aggressive act of being depersonalized into a transcendental state of nonbeing; through self-obliteration she becomes, in Buddhist terms, one with infinite voidness. Critic Akira Asada has commented that castration for Kusama entails a double strategy: she not only attacks masculinity directly, but by recreating and multiplying penises into humorous or inert forms she succeeds in robbing them of their threat, a technique frequently employed in her sculptural work as well. The fantastic improbability of Kusama’s fiction, like her sculptures and environments, is at the same time laughable and disturbing. Yet the power of her language gives the sordidness of her subject matter the dreamlike quality of another realm of being.

The anxiety and panic that rule Kusama’s characters and fill her narratives with such frenzy are not, however, the product of imagination only. The true subject of Kusama’s fiction is trauma. In the Freudian interpretation trauma results from violent events in the subject’s personal history that are repressed and thus impossible to reconstruct or verify. The need to reproduce the traumatic experience, the manifestation of the repressed, is what Freud calls the “compulsion to repeat,” which frequently manifests itself in the realm of the spectral or phantasmic—either as a recurring dream or as the “uncanny.” An uncanny effect is produced when the distinction between imagi-
nation and reality is effaced, when something that should be regarded as imaginary appears before us in reality. This psychical reality, Freud posits, is that memory/event that has become alien through the process of repression coming to light as ghostly material being.\textsuperscript{35}

Invariably the subject in the imaginary scene is the protagonist, and her fantasy represents the fulfillment of an unconscious wish. By this reading, Kusama’s recurring hallucinations would be the repetitive replaying of a traumatic childhood experience in the form of the Freudian uncanny. As early as 1964 she stated of her phallic-encrusted furniture, “My Aggregation Sculpture is a logical development of everything I have done since I was a child. It arises from a deep, driving compulsion to realize in visible form the repetitive image inside of me.”\textsuperscript{36} It appears that as Kusama grew more familiar through psychiatric treatment with the formal symptoms of her illness and more analytically aware of its childhood sources, her art became to a greater and greater extent the literal working-out of her disorders. Like Genet, who once remarked, “To create is always to speak about childhood,”\textsuperscript{37} Kusama has created a fiction drawing on the deepest sources of the self.\textsuperscript{38}

Literary critic and psychoanalyst Julia Kristeva has postulated that for many avant-garde artists of the twentieth century art has been a confrontation with psychosis, with the breakdown of the symbolic function:

\textit{It's necessary to see how all great works of art... are, to be brief, masterful sublimations of those crises of subjectivity which are known, in another connection, as psychotic crises. That has nothing to do with the freedom of expression of some vague kind of subjectivity which would have been there beforehand. It is, very simply, through the work and the play of signs, a crisis of subjectivity which is the basis for all creation, one which takes as its very precondition the possibility of survival.}\textsuperscript{39}

Kusama’s art and literature certainly arise from her privileged if disturbed access to unconscious and possibly supernatural realms of being. But the creation of her art requires not only surrender to madness but also triumph over it; trauma must be substantially transformed before it can communicate to others as beauty and meaning. Kusama’s genius lies in her ability to work both from the inside out and from the outside in. When her symptoms dominate, she retreats from the world; when she controls her symptoms and uses them for her visual vocabulary, she emerges as a great artist. As critics have finally come to appreciate, hers is an art “not of displaced energy, but of energy itself.”\textsuperscript{40} The unearthly brilliance of her art, both visual and verbal, is produced by this “double exposure,” as if she reflected both sides of an impassable threshold.
Notes

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1 Yayoi Kusama, *Manhattan jisatsu mishi jōshikain* (Tokyo: Kōsakusha, 1978). Kazue Kobata, the editor who acquired Kusama’s first novel, confirms that the manuscript was produced within three weeks of the publisher’s formal expression of interest in Kusama’s proposed chronicle. Kobata, interview by author, Tokyo, 21 May 1996.

2 In addition to *Manhattan Suicide Addict* (see note 1) her publications are: *Karīsu-ōta danbokuta* (The hustlers’ grotto of Christopher Street) [Tokyo: Kadokawa Shoten, 1983; reissued by Jiritsu Shobō in 1989 with the stories “Rūjin kāten no shūten” (Prisoner behind a curtain of depersonalization) and “Shinsō akashia” (Death smell acacia)); *Sentō Marukutsu kyōkai enjō* (The burning of St. Mark’s church) [Tokyo: Parco Shuppan, 1985]; *Ten to chi no aida/Between Heaven and Earth* [Tokyo: Jiritsu Shobō, 1988], also includes “Onna no sono” (Women’s meadow); *Wudōna tokkoku inrei giri* (Woodstock phallic cutters) [Tokyo: Peytoru Kobō, 1988]; *Shūshū: Kazanaru urei* (Collected poems: Such sorrows) [Tokyo: Jiritsu Shobō, 1989]; *Shinjū Sakurazakazaka* (Double suicide at Sakurazaka) [Tokyo: Jiritsu Shobō, 1989]; *Itani no shanderia/Aching Chandelier* [Tokyo: Peytoru Kobō, 1989]; *Kepu kodō no tenuki-tachi* (Cape Cod angels) [Tokyo: Jiritsu Shobō, 1991]; *Senri no paku no jīgitaru* (The foxgloves of Central Park) [Tokyo: Jiritsu Shobō, 1992]; *Numa ni moyotte* (Wandering in the marshes) [Tokyo: Jiritsu Shobō, 1992], also includes “Korote sōgen” (Field of abandoned children); *Nyūgōši autori/ The New York Story* [Tokyo: Jiritsu Shobō, 1993], also includes “New York AIDS” and “Downtown”; *Art no seishin kyōhin/The Madhouse of Ants* [Tokyo: Jiritsu Shobō, 1994], also includes “Bisexual.”

3 Kusama, interview by author, Tokyo, 19 May 1996.

4 Murakami, interview by author, Tokyo, 21 May 1996.


6 Tanigawa, interview by author, Tokyo, 22 May 1996.

7 Kusama, *Manhattan Suicide Addict*, trans. quoted in *Yayoi Kusama: Recent Works*.

8 Kusama’s solo exhibition at Tokyo’s prestigious Fuji Television Gallery featured nine large paintings from 1959–61, three objects covered with stuffed protrusions from the 1960s and 1970s, and nine paintings and nine objects completed during the previous three years. The show, organized by gallery president Susumu Yamamoto, was reviewed in major art journals, television features, and the popular press. Prior to this large retrospective Kusama had had ten small solo exhibitions in Japan since 1975.


Kyōka quoted in ibid., 171.

Ibid., 174.

Mishima quoted in ibid., 7.


Murakami, 21 May 1996 interview.


Cornyetz, "Mystic Writing Pad," 231.

Ibid., 243.

Murakami, Akira Asada, and the artist herself have confirmed to me in conversation that Kusama and Nakagami were friends with great mutual admiration.


25 Kusama became aware of herself as an artist producing "psychoanalytic art" in the early 1960s, when her work was noticed by Dr. Shihō Nishimaru, an eminent professor of psychiatry at Shinshū University in Nagano Prefecture. It appears that he saw one or both of Kusama's solo shows at Matsumoto Civic Hall in 1952 and subsequently introduced her work at an exhibition of the Japanese Psychiatry Association. Another widely respected psychiatrist, Byōsai Shūkō, also took great interest in Kusama's work. See Munroe, "Obsession," 16, and Bhupendra Karia, "Biographical Notes," in Yayoi Kusama: A Retrospective, 70–71.

26 Takiguchi, "Kusama Yayoi koten ni tsuite" (On Yayoi Kusama's solo exhibition), cited in Munroe, "Obsession," 16.

27 "Waga tamashii no henreski to takakai" (Struggles and wandering of my soul), Gekimatsu sokukatsu (Ar. and life) (November 1975).

28 Ibid., 1.


30 Ibid., 54–55.

31 "I was under a spell," Kusama remarked around 1966 concerning working on her Infinity Nets paintings. "I thought of the nets that I painted over my canvases as curtains which separated me from people and reality. When I looked at the walls, ceiling, floor, and furniture I found that they too were covered with nets" (Kusama, incomplete typescript, c. 1966; Kusama archive). See also Munroe, "Obsession," 17–20.

32 Akira Asada, interview by author, Tokyo, 23 May 1996.


In numerous interviews and other statements Kusama has attributed her imagery and artistic compulsions to her unhappy childhood growing up in a conservative, fragmented, and authoritarian family under a fascist wartime regime, all of which conspired against creativity and individuality. It appears that Kusama’s father largely abandoned the family and carried on conspicuous affairs, inciting her mother to jealous rages. Kusama’s mother looms in her memory as a domineering presence. She seems to have been a demanding disciplinarian, a prudish moralist, and an unrelenting critic of what she deemed Kusama’s unacceptable behavior. She opposed Kusama’s artistic leanings and according to the artist they fought constantly. Kusama has confirmed that during these years rape and incest were common occurrences in the countryside where she grew up (Kusama, interview by the author, Tokyo, 6 April 1997). During the 1930s totalitarian ideology infiltrated more and more of civilian life, sometimes resulting in violent suppression of liberal tendencies and individualism. The right-wing police state routinely crushed oppositional activity and exercised widespread censorship. Japan’s Fifteen Year War, ending so disastrously in 1945, entailed a rhetoric of nationalism and a mechanism of terror that to young Kusama were utterly oppressive. She has remarked of the war, “It killed my mind” (Munroe, “Obsession,” 12–14).


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