

Transcending Boundaries: Yayoi Kusama's Artistic Expression Through Accumulation, Soft Sculptures, and Polka Dots

Yeon-jin Kim^{1*}

Abstract

Kusama Yayoi, a prominent Japanese contemporary artist, has made significant contributions to the art world through her exploration of diverse mediums and her deeply personal artistic expression. The purpose of this study is to examine Kusama's unique artistic world with focus on her installations that are rooted in her personal experiences and influenced by her struggles with obsessive-compulsive disorders. While it is impossible to provide a comprehensive overview of Kusama's extensive 63-year career, this study seeks to analyze the thought-provoking questions raised by the artist and their implications for contemporary art. By delving into Kusama's installations, this study expects to enrich the understanding of art history and gain insights into the trajectory of contemporary art.

Keyword : Kusama Yayoi, Sculpture, Artistic Thought, Installation Works

1. Introduction

When examining the realm of modern art, it is crucial to acknowledge its departure from established artistic traditions and its pursuit of uncharted territories [1]. Nonetheless, it is important to recognize that modern art emerged as a response to preceding artistic epochs. Among the diverse manifestations within modern art, installation art has gained prominence by introducing novel elements that actively engage a broader audience and challenging conventional notions of art traditionally confined to privileged elites. Through the undertaking of experimental perceptual activities by diverse artists, installation art has forged a distinctive artistic movement that breaks away from historical customs and traditions.

One salient characteristic that distinguishes installation art from conventional installations associated with religious or ceremonial contexts lies in its liberty of presentation. It creates new spatial configurations and effectively conveys meaning as an entity that transcends conventional definitions and properties. By fashioning innovative sculptural spaces and compellingly conveying significance, installation art has evolved into a form known as Total Art, prioritizing the overall aesthetic impact of the sculptural space over the individual components of the artwork. As a product of modern art, installation art continues to push the boundaries of its domain and exert a profound influence [2].

1 Kookmin University Museum, Seoul, Korea [Curator]
e-mail: kimkkori@naver.com (Corresponding author)

Received(October 13, 2022), Review Result(1st: November 9, 2022), Accepted(December 2, 2022), Published(December 31, 2022)



© 2022 The Authors. Published by NCISS.
This is an open access article licensed under the Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial 4.0 International License.
To view a copy of this license, visit <http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc/4.0/>.

Among the modern artists, Kusama Yayoi is a renowned Japanese artist who is famous for her contributions to the pop art, minimalism and feminist art movements. Much research and critical overview on her artwork and career was done [3][4] first, to explore Yayoi Kusama's persona as an overlooked aspect of her art and analyzes her use of Japanese stereotypes for self-promotion and commercial success in the Western art world of the 1960s [5]. Second much focus was paid attention to her pathology to examine her abstraction and artistic practice [6]. Kusama has openly shared her personal struggles with obsessive-compulsive disorder and hallucinations and she has described her process of making art as a form of therapy. Based on the previous research, this purpose of this study is to examine Kusama's unique artistic world with focus on her installations which are rooted in her personal experiences and influenced by her struggles with obsessive-compulsive disorders. While it is impossible to provide a comprehensive overview of Kusama's extensive 63-year career, this study seeks to analyze the thought-provoking questions raised by the artist and their implications for contemporary art.

2. The background and artistic journey of Kusama Yayoi

Kusama Yayoi, born in 1929 in Nagano Prefecture, Japan, emerged as a prominent figure in the art world with a distinct artistic trajectory. Initially trained in *Nahonga*, a traditional Japanese art form, at Kyoto University of Arts in 1948, Kusama's artistic development deviated from the traditional apprenticeship model that emphasized strict obedience to the teacher. Instead, she pursued a diverse range of Western painting techniques including gouache, watercolor and oil painting while showcasing a unique talent that garnered recognition through numerous art competitions. However, Kusama's artistic journey was shaped by the challenges and adversities of her personal life. Growing up in a tumultuous family environment characterized by a prodigal father, an abusive mother and poverty exacerbated by the backdrop of war, she encountered various mental illnesses such as obsessive-compulsive disorder, paranoia and delirium from a young age. These afflictions profoundly influenced her artistic expression. In her inaugural solo exhibition in 1952, Kusama presented an extensive collection of Western paintings to incorporate multimedia materials in watercolor and oil painting. Within a remarkably short span of six months, she unleashed a burst of creative energy, revealing over 280 new works. These artistic endeavors can be interpreted as manifestations of her personal quest for healing and as outlets for expressing her chaotic worldview through art [3].

Kusama's artistic background grounded in her life experiences symbolically reflects her preoccupations

with the body, the significance of mental life and messages of liberation and dissolution [7]. Although she could not completely overcome her mental illnesses, her artistic expression can be viewed as a form of art therapy where she channeled her inner struggles into creative outlets [4]. In 1957, Kusama relocated to the United States and established herself in the vibrant art scene of New York and it served as the epicenter of post-war artistic movements. Her artistic endeavors during this period coincided with influential art movements such as minimalism, pop art, fluxus, feminism and environmental art which were thriving within the United States. While some critics associated Kusama's works with the mainstream pop art movement of the time due to shared visual elements like the use of everyday objects, repetition and aggregation, fundamental differences set her work apart. Unlike pop art, Kusama's creations lacked the anti-artistic orientation and incorporation of mass media images that constituted the core principles of the movement.

In addition, there were attempts to categorize Kusama within the Zero Group that was recognized for their monochromatic paintings after her inclusion as an artist in the German exhibition 'Monochrome Malerei' in 1960. Although visual similarities exist, it remains challenging to conceptually align her work within the same framework. Kusama's reputation as an internationally acclaimed artist extends beyond traditional boundaries to encompass diverse artistic genres such as painting, sculpture, happenings, environmental installations and fashion. Throughout the 1960s and beyond, her artistic elements progressed steadily and unrestrainedly to invite comparisons to various art styles of the era. Despite such associations, Kusama steadfastly constructed her own distinctive artistic world [8] characterized as a personal myth rather than a transient artistic trend.

3. Characteristics of Kusama Yayoi's Works

Kusama Yayoi's early artistic endeavors were primarily centered around monochromatic abstract paintings, notably exemplified in her participation in exhibitions such as Monochrome Malerei and Japanese Abstraction during her tenure in 1960s New York. These works known as *Infinity Net* featured a profusion of monochromatic dots that densely covered the canvas. Some viewpoints even drew parallels between her art and the Zero Group due to her commitment to monochromatic abstract painting. Kusama's *Infinity Net* challenged the prevailing dominance of monochromatic abstracts and abstract expressionism through No. F (1959) as shown in [Fig. 1] [9]. However, in 1961, with her work titled *Accumulation*, she embarked on a transformative artistic journey that transcended genre boundaries and transitioned it from two-dimensional paintings to installation artworks. This study aims to explore

the distinctive artistic language of Kusama including the themes of accumulation, softness, sculpture and polka dots through an analysis of her notable installations.



[Fig. 1] No. F, 1959 © 2020

3.1. Accumulation

As shown in [Fig. 2], the concept of accumulation became evident in Kusama's inaugural accumulation work created in the autumn of 1961 which depicted armchairs adorned with cotton-filled phalluses—ordinary objects painted in white and covered with knurled cloth bags. Building upon this initial series, she further expanded her artistic exploration through the Compulsive Furniture series to incorporate knurled cloth bags onto various everyday objects such as coats, ladders, strollers and boats. These individual works were subsequently unified and presented as a cohesive collection in the exhibition titled *Floor Show: Kusama*.



[Fig. 2] Accumulation No.1, 1962 © 2020

The notion of repetition in Kusama's works extends beyond the minimalist approach or sequential imagery characteristic of pop art. Instead, it engenders a field teeming with idiosyncratic compositions to symbolize phallus-shaped crops. This idea is exemplified in the installation artwork titled *Infinity Mirror Room Phalli's Field* as shown in [Fig. 3] wherein a room is filled with cotton-filled knurled cloth bags and enveloped in a profusion of countless red dots.

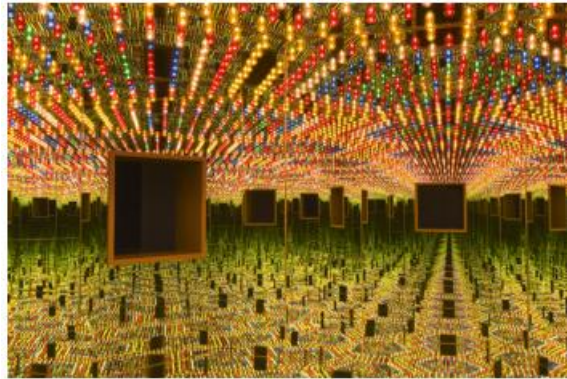


[Fig. 3] Infinity Mirror Room Phalli's Field, 1965 © 2020

This work serves as a confrontation with the traditional patriarchal influences that pervaded Kusama's formative years to employ parody and replication of phallic symbols to convey a sense of ridicule. Mirrors embedded within the artwork represent boundless proliferation and eternal existence, effectively blurring the boundaries between objects and their surrounding environment.

The sculptures and the ceaseless proliferation of red dot droplets that multiply infinitely within the reflective confines of the mirrors trace their origins back to the dot motif observed in Kusama's early work, *The Infinite Mesh*. It underwent a perceptual transformation through relentless repetition. The droplets act as disguises to obfuscate the delineation between objects and the mirrored background. This progression culminates in the creation of *Infinity Mirror Room Love Forever*, an installation featuring the infinite repetition of small lights within a dimly illuminated chamber as shown in [Fig. 4]. The artwork is meticulously crafted with a small aperture that allows viewers to peer inside. The interior space is entirely enveloped in mirrors with hundreds of flickering multicolored light bulbs inducing optical illusions and engendering a captivating visual spectacle. The light bulbs assume the appearance of polka dots to constitute a three-dimensional embodiment of Kusama's artistic language. The series of mirror works by Kusama symbolizes boundless expansion and infinite space and showcases the aggregation and

unending generation of objects within. It offers viewers an immersive experience and a visual voyage into a new realm to faithfully reproduce her innermost domain.



[Fig. 4] Infinity Mirror Room Love Forever, 1966 © 2020

3.2. Soft sculpture

The realm of an artist's inner world and personal experiences inevitably permeates their artwork to find expression through distinctive forms and techniques. These manifestations encapsulate diverse factors including momentary needs, novel encounters and external influences and ultimately coalesce into a work that authentically embodies the artist themselves [10]. Within Kusama's installations, recurring imagery of cloth bags brimming with cotton can be observed meticulously fashioned into the contours of male phalluses—a manifestation she refers to as soft sculpture. Sculpture, conventionally associated with the manipulation of three-dimensional forms through carving or molding, assumes a contrasting concept when examined within the framework of soft sculpture.

Kusama's exposure to sewing techniques during her involvement at a military plant in wartime Japan profoundly influenced her incorporation of soft elements fashioned through the art of needlework into her creative repertoire. The supple phallic shapes that populate her artwork convey her obsessive exploration of sexual desire that finds its roots in an upbringing steeped in a conservative and stifling family environment. Furthermore, they lay bare her critique of patriarchal systems and her deep-seated resentment towards her prodigal father as objects enveloped in phallic forms symbolize her apprehension regarding sexuality. Simultaneously constituting her endeavor to challenge the male-dominated art world of New York City asserts her position as a woman. In an interview, Kusama expounded upon her creation of soft sculptures in the likeness of phallic symbols to elucidate her intention to overcome her

fear and repulsion toward the notion that sex is impure. Through her art, Kusama channels her mental afflictions and inner conflicts into sublimation that candidly addresses them through the medium of art therapy. Her resolute determination to transcend the tribulations of her tumultuous existence constitutes an intrinsic facet of the self-healing process she ardently pursues through these artistic practices [11].

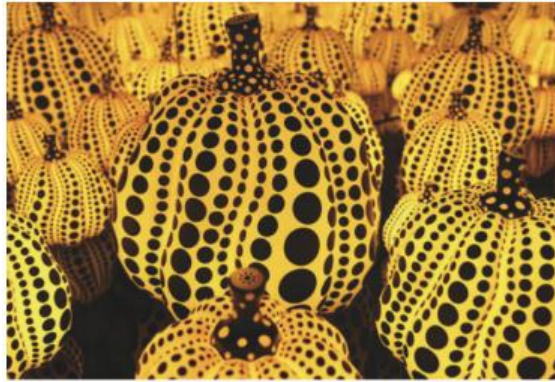
3.3 Polka Dots

Kusama's earliest manifestation of polka dots can be traced back to a portrait of her mother adorned in a kimono titled *Untitled*. As shown in [Fig. 5], it was created at her age of 10. Within this artwork, her mother's countenance and the surrounding backdrop are engulfed in an abundance of polka dots. This pivotal juncture serves as the genesis for the subsequent prominence of droplet patterns and polka dots within Kusama's oeuvre and it becomes wellsprings of inspiration for a multitude of her pieces.



[Fig. 5] *Untitled*, 1939 © 2020

Kusama ascribes her personal interpretation of polka dots to their inherent simplicity, vibrant hues and jubilant essence. She elucidates that the dot motif symbolizes the dynamic energy of the sun, universally epitomizing vitality and when assuming the guise of the moon, it embodies a tranquil, spherical, soft and unyielding quality. The dot pattern, in Kusama's discernment, assumes the guise of a conduit to infinity.



[Fig. 6] All the Eternal Love I Have for the Pumpkins, 2016 © 2020

As previously alluded to, the polka dot pattern obfuscates the demarcations between objects and the background to assume an integral role as a formative language that engenders boundless space. Kusama recurrently employs this pattern and manifests her compulsive fantasies and externalizing her inner realm. This creative process exhibits potential ties to the genesis of her mental afflictions. Beyond the realm of painting, Kusama ingeniously incorporates polka dots into her sculptural installations such as the renowned Pumpkin series. As shown in [Fig. 6], the surfaces of these displayed pumpkins are bedecked with Kusama's signature polka dots to engender a visual effect that evokes both circular and linear elements. Ranging from diminutive clusters to gargantuan pumpkins, these sculptures have solidified their place as some of Kusama's most celebrated and well-received artworks.

While some observers may perceive the obsessive repetition of the polka dot pattern as a pathway to self-liberation through unyielding self-negation culminating in self-annihilation, it is the belief that the artist's symptoms of phantasmagoria, illusion and hallucination find sublimation through the vehicle of her artwork. The circular dot as an isolated entity fluctuates in silent cadence to serve as a bridge linking silence and resonance. Moreover, these dots perpetually amass and disperse to undergo fluctuations in size, orientation, order and disorder while incessantly reproducing akin to cellular division. In Kusama's discernment, dots encapsulate her visionary realm and possess an inherent vitality to beckon individuals into the domain of visual experiences she has traversed.

Historically, Kusama's use of the polka dot links to several art movements. Pop Art characterized by the use of motifs drawn from popular culture resonates with Kusama's use of this simple and universally recognized pattern. Her works also echo aspects of Minimalism, in the repetition of a singular motif to create her installations. In some ways, her work anticipates the Pattern and Decoration movement of the 1970s when it sought to validate more traditionally 'decorative' elements in art. Her

Infinity Rooms could be considered precursors to contemporary trends in immersive and experiential art installations. In cultural context, the use of repetitive and simplistic polka dots can be seen as a way to democratize art while moving away from elitist high art towards something accessible and relatable to the masses. Her immersive installations often invite audiences to become part of the artwork to blur boundaries and promoting inclusivity.

4. Conclusion

In this study, an exploration of selected installations created by Kusama Yayoi was undertaken with a prominent contemporary artist known for her extensive engagement across a spectrum of artistic mediums ranging from traditional painting to dynamic performance art. It investigates the work of renowned Japanese artist Yayoi Kusama with a particular focus on her distinctive use of polka dots, installation art and the themes of infinity and accumulation. These elements are not just artistic choices, but are deeply rooted in Kusama's personal experiences and struggles with mental health, specifically obsessive-compulsive disorder and hallucinations.

Kusama has adeptly assimilated various artistic trends and skillfully adapted to the prevailing ethos of each era and forging her own distinctive aesthetic approach. Her capacity for perpetual transformation and evolution has enabled her to carve out a singular and independent position that transcends the confines of conventional genres and forms. Throughout her illustrious career, Kusama has exemplified unwavering dedication to her artistic praxis and persistently honed her craft despite periods spent in mental health institutions and within the confines of her studio. By consistently presenting visually captivating and thought-provoking works, Kusama has garnered widespread public acclaim and continues to captivate audiences worldwide. A testament to her enduring creative vitality, Kusama unveiled a new painting exhibition in Shanghai in September 2020 and reaffirmed her status as an active and influential contemporary artist. In navigating the ever-shifting currents of modern art, Kusama adeptly embraces both comprehension and enigma to craft a trajectory that remains uniquely her own and defying definitive categorization imposed by external observers.

Kusama's critique of patriarchal systems through her art highlights how art can be a powerful medium for expressing sociopolitical viewpoints. Thus, further research could look into how art can instigate change and challenge societal norms.

References

- [1] E.H. Gombrich, *The Story of Art*, Yegyeong, 2017.
- [2] D. J. Kim, "Implementation of Light Art Work Utilizing the Afterimage of Light", *Journal of Next-generation Convergence Information Services Technology*, vol. 5, no.1, June 2016, pp. 27-34, doi:10.29056/jncist.2016.06.04.
- [3] Y. Kusama, *Infinity Net: The Autobiography of Yayoi Kusama*, Tate Publishing, 2013.
- [4] E. Przybylo, "Ace and aro lesbian art and theory with Agnes Martin and Yayoi Kusama", *Journal of Lesbian Studies*, vol. 26, no. 1, August 2021, pp. 89-112, doi: 10.1080/10894160.2021.1958732.
- [5] S. J. Lee, "The art and politics of artists' personas: The case of Yayoi Kusam", *Publication Details*, vol 1. no. 1, April 2015, pp. 25-39.
- [6] I. Nakajima, "Yayoi Kusama between Abstraction and Pathology," *Psychoanalysis and the Image: Transdisciplinary Perspectives*, G. Pollock, Eds., USA: Wiley-Blackwell, 2006, pp. 127-247.
- [7] H. S. Kim, *The World of Yayoi Kusama's Works = (The) World of Yayoi Kusama's Works*, Gwangju, 2002.
- [8] J. I. Kim, *Kusama Yayoi Study: Installation at = (An) Inquiry into Kusama Yayoi's Art World: Centered on the Work of Installation*, Hongik University, 2003.
- [9] Y. Hasegawa and P. Miki, "The Spell to Re-integrate the Self: The Significance of the Work of Yayoi Kusama in the New Era", *Afterall*, vol. 13, no. 53, Spring/Summer 2006, doi: 10.1086/aft.13.20711605
- [10] E. K. Lim, "A Study on Complex Psychology Projected in Sculpture Works", *World Art Dictionary*, Chung-Ang University Monthly Art, 1999.
- [11] S. J. Kim, "The World of Kusama Yayoi's Works in View of the Obsessive-Compulsive Disorders", *Korean Journal of Art Therapy*, vol. 23, no. 2, 2016, pp. 633-654, doi: 10.35594/kata.2016.23.2.013.