

GAGOSIAN GALLERY

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Yayoi Kusama
*Infinity Mirror Room—
Phalli's Field (Floor Show)*
(detail)
1965
Mixed media
250×455×455 cm

*Museum Boijmans van Beuningen, Rotterdam,
The Netherlands*

For nearly half a century now, Yayoi Kusama's personal history has preceded her: the artist arrived in New York from Japan in the late 1950s, and soon became the city's avant-garde girl, receiving praise from and exhibitions with the likes of Donald Judd, Frank Stella and Yves Klein. Though she preferred the somewhat antiquated 'avant-garde' label to Abstract Expressionism, Minimalism or Fluxus, hers was nonetheless the perfect art practice for the wild 1960s. It mixed a vivid Pop sensibility with a knack for media pranksterism, best manifested in her elaborately staged performances and happenings, some of which she referred to as 'nude-ins'.

But when the party that was the 1960s wound down, Kusama retreated to Japan and checked herself into a Tokyo mental hospital, far beneath the art world's radar. Though she continued her astonishingly prolific production from those safer confines, her star lay dormant there, only to be rediscovered some two decades later, most notably as Japan's representative at the 1993 Venice Biennale (in marked contrast to 1966,

when she crashed the Biennale guerrilla-style, and was shown the door). A major retrospective at New York's Museum of Modern Art followed five years later, and since then Kusama has been everywhere.

Not least here at the Museum Boijmans van Beuningen, where a show called 'Mirrored Years' tries to find the links between the art that briefly made her famous decades ago, and the works she still makes today. On display are paintings, sculptures, collages and drawings, plus video and photographic documents of her installations and performances. The same themes still resonate in her latest work, namely obsessive repetition, dots (and their silver spherical 3D counterparts), and infinity intimated via the use of mirrors. This compulsiveness is said to be Kusama's means of dealing with the hallucinations that began tormenting her as child, leading her to paint and draw as a way of exerting control over her dark visions, by marshalling them into the service of art. And her deathless retelling of this anecdote is itself a form of obsession.

A claustrophobic, mirror-lined hallway leads, as if via an oesophagus, into the belly of a massive room, whose four walls have been filled with

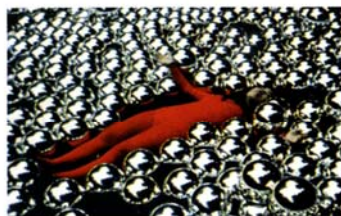
Yayoi Kusama

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several dozen paintings Kusama has produced over the past few years, set amidst dozens of amorphous textile beanbags. The new paintings still feature endlessly interlacing lines that form simple shapes, at once seemingly arbitrary and painstakingly orchestrated, suggesting a concerted effort to reign in Kusama's now-infamous delusional compulsions. Several overcrowded rooms follow, displaying older works such as the thousand-plus silver balls of *Narcissus Garden* (1966) and the growth-covered terrain of *Infinity Mirror Room - Phalli's Field (Floor Show)* (1965). Alternately referred to as phalluses, protuberances or protrusions, the forms that cover many of Kusama's works could just as well be seen as tumours - mitochondria growing uncontrollably, as the artist obsessively produces to keep the demons at bay. And in *Fireflies on the Water* (2000), a room with hundreds of coloured lights twinkling and reflecting over a pool of dark water, the viewer walks the plank to stand in an abyss that could be a few inches down, or maybe a few hundred meters; it's almost scary, and worlds away from the frolicking nudes that once shocked some corners of the New York art world some 40 years ago.

Kusama's iconic image - red wig and polka-dotted dress - is liberally sprinkled throughout many of these works, and viewers are also invited to insinuate themselves into the artist's *oeuvre* via video cameras provided by the museum (with the resulting footage promised to be used in some later iteration of the show). Indeed, Kusama's persona remains the main attraction here. Never a stranger to publicity, the artist (who will turn 80 next year) now has an appropriately polka-dotted MySpace page, replete with übercool friends such as Björk, Peaches and Cat Power (plus still-standing stars from her own generation such as Yoko Ono and Marianne Faithful). And though her visual style is now ubiquitous - evinced everywhere from Marc Jacobs' couture to the uniforms of the futuristic dancers who pranced through the Bird's Nest during the recent opening ceremonies of the Beijing Olympics - perhaps her most *au courant* characteristic is her survival narrative. While Kusama was once derided for spilling her guts to the world, that style is now the stuff of blockbuster memoirs that fuel a confessional-obsessed pop culture, and the artist has been delicately riding this fine line between catharsis and solipsism since before television had even become a mainstream medium.

Douglas Heingartner



Yayoi Kusama
Narcissus Garden
1966
Mixed media
Installation view