

GAGOSIAN GALLERY

KUSAMA DOT COM

IS SHE MAD OR MERELY
CUNNING? WHILE
THE ART WORLD DEBATES,
YAYOI KUSAMA
CLIMBS BACK ON TOP.
BY ALEXI WORTH

W

e hope you will understand." With typically fervent Japanese politeness, Yayoi Kusama's staff warned me that the resurgent queen of the Japanese art world, now approaching 80, no longer permits herself to be photographed. But

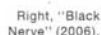
when she learned that the photographer in question was Nobuyoshi Araki, the celebrated master of nude bondage pictures, it turned out that Kusama was only too happy to oblige. And so, on a quiet Thursday afternoon, after an hour or so of failed efforts to interview Kusama, I waited with the artist and her staff around a conference table for Araki's arrival. Wearing a bright red wig, matching lipstick and her signature polka-dot motif — a red kimono-like dress adorned with circles of black and white felt — Kusama looked like a small grave clown, in the lull before a birthday party begins.

When the elevator doors finally opened, a potbellied man with a fringe of gray hair bounded into the room, followed by a crew of gear-laden assistants. Araki, the most famous Japanese photographer, was an ebullient self-caricature. Grunting, laughing, shouting orders and dirty jokes, he seemed a mischievous antidote to the notion of Japanese reserve. The assistants scrambled to set up a tripod and a pair of giant lights, and to seat Kusama in front of one of her radiant new paintings, so that Araki's performance could begin: squatting, swiveling, lunging back and forth between Kusama and his equipment, he moved through the small, crowded space with an enchanting unpredictability. After 10 minutes, he was sweating profusely. The rest of us watched him, more or less transfixed. But Kusama sat motionless, silent, never smiling, showing no response to Araki's virtuosic patter. For most of an hour, she stared unblinkingly into the

PHOTOGRAPH BY NOBUYOSHI ARAKI



I had hoped, in thinking about Kusama, to sidestep the question of her mental condition, which I suspected had been mythologized and perhaps blown out of proportion in recent years by critics, by journalists and, above all, by Kusama herself. Instead, later that evening at my hotel, I found myself scanning *Psychiatry Online*, joining the legions of amateurs who have speculated about her strangeness. The starting point for all such investigations — given the silence of her doctors — is Kusama herself. In 1975, at the lowest point in her career, she published an autobiographical



Left, "Dot's Obsession," at the Biennale of Sydney in 2000; right, with pumpkin objects in 2002; below right, "City" (1989), a silk-screen



Right, "Infinity Mirror Room — Phalli's Field" (1965); below, "The Moment of Regeneration," at Frieze Art Fair in 2004.



Probably more than any other living artist, Kusama's case highlights the tensions inherent in the division between mainstream and outsider art. Is great art the conscious effort of brilliant minds, or is it an outpouring of freakish individuality? Kusama's is clearly both. Claiming to be utterly uninfluenced by any other artist or school, she pictures her art-making as a purely therapeutic necessity: "art medicine." And yet her artwork has been understood, by her friend Donald Judd and others, as a uniquely sophisticated response to the predicaments of 20th-century modernism. At times, Kusama can seem like a grandmaster who claims not to play

In New York, where Kusama lived for more than a decade, acquaintances remember her as a quiet, small, attractive woman, intensely



Left, "God's Heart" (2000) and "Shoes" (1999); below, in the Hal Reiff photograph "Accumulation No. 2" (1966), on a couch of her own design.



driven and odd, but certainly not someone about whom you would use a word like "crazy." "That's insulting," protested Kate Millett, who with her former husband, the sculptor Fumio Yoshimura, spent time with Kusama in the mid-'60s. Nobody ill, she said, "could have operated at her level of efficiency." Like other artists from that time — Judd, James Rosenquist, Ed Clark — Millett never heard Kusama speak about hallucinations or delusions. Her current supporters, however, have come to see her "bedeviled" mental state as central to her work's powerful authenticity. "What she painted," says the New York art dealer Peter Blum, "is what she saw. These were visions." Alexandra Munroe, the scholar of Japanese art whose 1989 Kusama retrospective first rescued the artist from neglect, puts it differently: "Kusama is not simply notating her madness as it comes to her; she is inventing an art to channel and

express it." What's clear is that, ill or not, Kusama has always been marked by a peculiar, blinkered relentlessness. Incurious about other people, she has a prodigious drive for work, and an apparently insatiable need for attention, recognition and fame. She is, her Tokyo dealer told me with an affable, slightly bewildered laugh, "*yokubo no katamari*," "a lump of desire."

As a teenager, Kusama took a sketchbook to the Kyoto zoo. Its pages are covered with small, beautifully observed drawings of monkeys — furry bodies, hands and wrinkly faces colored in pink. Any precocious art student would be proud to make a page of such studies, but Kusama made dozens and dozens. Leafing through them, it was easy to imagine her frustration, growing up in a small, conservative city in the mountains during World War II, when the possibilities for an aspiring artist, let alone a girl, seemed remote. Kusama's wealthy, unhappily married parents

opposed her ambitions. Nevertheless, while in her early 20s, she began to exhibit, and to attract the attention of prominent critics. Her paintings from these years — ragged mystical emblems inspired by European Surrealists like Miró and Ernst — also attracted the attention of psychiatrists. One of them, Dr. Shiho Nishimaru, thought he saw "traits of schizophrenia" in her face. He asked to interview Kusama, and eventually presented a paper titled "Genius Artist Woman With Schizophrenic Tendency." Was she already ill? Japanese psychiatry was, by most accounts, in a fairly primitive state back then, but it seems at least likely that his assessment sparked a psychological self-consciousness that has never left her.

Kusama was determined to leave Japan, despite the visa and currency restrictions that made foreign travel difficult. With characteristic boldness, she sent paintings to two American artists, Georgia O'Keeffe and Kenneth Callahan, whose work she had seen in magazines. O'Keeffe responded with cautious encouragement. Callahan helped her arrange her first solo show abroad, in Seattle in December 1957. "A large number of people came to my exhibition," she reported to O'Keeffe, but "my medium, Oriental mystic symbolism, is not so readily received, I am afraid."

Six months later, she was in New York. She spoke virtually no English and knew no one. "I am truly amazed," she wrote soon after her arrival, "at the large number of galleries listed in the phone book." Within a few months, Kusama was sending proud reports to Japanese magazines about the parade of visitors to her 12th Street studio: "I became acquainted with such leaders of New York-isms as de Kooning, Franz Kline and Philip Guston." Little more than a year after her arrival, she was ready to make her mark: "I am planning," she bragged to another Japanese magazine, "to create a revolutionary work that will stun ... the New York art world."

So she did: when it opened at the Brata Gallery in October 1959, Kusama's first New York exhibition was a shrewd, perfect debut. There were only five paintings, each a giant mesh composed of innumerable small loops of white paint. Kusama called them Infinity Nets. They had the "all-over" composition and scale of post-Pollock abstraction, but none of Pollock's

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turbulence. Instead they seemed calm, delicate, almost boring. Kusama had created a whispered, eerie modulation of the prevailing style, a kind of anti-expressionist Abstract Expressionism. It's not surprising that forward-looking artists like Frank Stella and Donald Judd were among the first to appreciate them. The nets were immediately recognizable as part of a generational shift, a movement toward what would eventually become Minimalism. Both Judd and Stella bought paintings after seeing the Brata show, but their enthusiasm was in some ways misleading. Unlike the Minimalists' paintings, Kusama's were never grid-based; in fact, it was her freehand facture, with its suggestion of slight swellings and rotations, that gave the nets their "dizzy, empty, hypnotic feeling," as Kusama herself aptly described it. They were rooted, she acknowledged, in cellular structures, in views of the ocean surface as her plane crossed the Pacific—and, above all, in her own psychology, in her compelling need for repetitive tasks, what she called "the spell of repetition and aggregation."

Over the next seven years, Kusama would remain loyal to this simplest possible art-making method. In a series of ever more flamboyant exhibitions in New York and Europe, she took the notion of infinity literally: the nets overran the borders of her canvases, spreading over furniture and other objects. Paintings changed to collages and installations; the loops became repeating dots, airmail stickers, macaroni, egg cartons and stuffed sacks that resembled ranks of phalluses. Kusama attributed the latter, part of her "Sex-Obsession" series, to her fear of male genitalia. But the sculptures themselves, literally upholstered with erections, are also, unmistakably, mockeries of male desire. Laughable, threatening and bizarre, they projected, as Roberta Smith, an art critic for *The Times*, later put it, "an exuberant if bitter feminist irony."

In retrospect, the last material that Kusama turned to—mirrors—marked a high point, and a turning point in her work. For the first time, repetition was accomplished without her own obsessive labor. The most memorable of her mirrored environments (which preceded Lucas Samaras's by a year or so) was Kusama's 1966 "Peep Show," a closed, six-sided mirrored chamber into which viewers could peer through one of two windows. Inside the chamber, colored lights on the ceiling multiplied endlessly across the walls and floor. The effect was simple and yet powerfully evocative, plunging viewers into an airless brightness as vast and as alienating as outer space.

Financially, though, Kusama's situation remained precarious. Sales were few. Her parents sent money, but Kusama remembers life in New York as extremely difficult: "Day after day I forgot my coldness and hunger by painting." What stands out most in the recollections of people who knew her was her relentless

determination, manifested in superhuman productivity (one of the later Infinity Nets was 33 feet long) and in a willingness to ask strangers for introductions or recommendations, or simply that they buy her work. "She was the opposite of what you expect from an Asian woman," remembers one friend. "She was tiny but macho. She used everybody. She had to." For some New York artists, Kusama's persistent demands were tiresome. The generally gregarious Al Held told people he would cross the street to avoid Kusama. Others went out of their way to support her. Of these benefactors, perhaps the most generous was Joseph Cornell, whom Kusama now remembers as "the love of my life."

They met in 1964, when Kusama volunteered to model for the older artist. The reclusive, celibate Cornell made jittery drawings of Kusama in the nude and offered her gifts of cash and artwork. "I believe it was love at first sight for Cornell when he first saw me," Kusama remembered. Cornell began writing love notes full of dopey tenderness: "Yayoi, fly back to me!" "Have some tea and think of me." "K=kiss!" Eventually, their relationship grew intimate: Kusama "apparently gave [Cornell] his first true taste of sexual bliss," the Cornell biographer (and New York Times Magazine contributing writer) Deborah Solomon writes: "He was 60 years old, and finally, at last, he kissed a woman on the mouth, and explored a woman's body with his hands. ..." Cornell's mother, who lived with her son, made every effort to prevent these intimacies: on one occasion she poured cold water on the two artists as they necked.

"I disliked sex, and he was impotent; we suited each other very well." So Kusama recalled their odd romance, speaking to the writer Andrew Solomon. She herself, however, was not celibate, and indeed her activities after the "Sex-Obsession" series became increasingly sex-centered. In 1967, she largely abandoned galleries in favor of "naked happenings." With a small crew of young dancers, Kusama would arrive in some iconic spot (Wall Street, Liberty Island, the Brooklyn Bridge); the dancers would undress, and Kusama, usually clothed, would paint polka dots on their naked bodies until the police arrived. These brief, free-wheeling events eventually culminated in a short movie, "Kusama's Self Obliteration," which now looks like a good-natured 1960s parody. Her most recent catalog includes a dreamily narcissistic prose poem about those years:

Yes, I ran to Greenwich Village where many people with explosive mind longing for freedom hanged. ... I yelled at a crazy crowd surrounding me, "Everybody take off your clothes!" Then all at once the young people [took off their] T-shirts and jeans. ... And they ran up to the paints and asked Kusama, "Please paint me. ..."

The late '60s is often regarded as Kusama's low point, a period when her hunger for publicity and money (she started a biweekly newspaper, *Kusama Orgy*, and a fashion business that sold polka-dotted, strategically perforated clothing) became woefully disconnected from the real sources of her art. By the time leering articles about "Kookie Kusama, the Princess of Polka Dots" began appearing in men's magazines like *Bachelor* and *Sophisticated Swapper*, they seemed to be elegies for a career that had descended into commercialism. And yet there were always touches of comic poignancy: in her film, for instance, where Kusama is shown painting dots onto the surface of a pond, only to have them drift away; or in her wry, absurdist "Open Letter to My Hero, Richard M. Nixon:"

Our earth is like one little polka dot, one orb full of hatred and strife among the peaceful, silent spheres. ... Let's you and I change all that. ... Let's forget ourselves, dearest Richard, and become one with the Absolute, all together in the altogether. ...

In photographs, the happenings era is virtually the only time Kusama can be seen smiling, looking relaxed and engaged. It seems possible that this period, when her notoriety briefly outshone Warhol's, was the happiest of her life. Her narcissistic longings were at last fulfilled: Kusama herself, as opposed to her artworks, was the center of attention. But it couldn't last. Journalists tired of covering the happenings. Her family in Japan, hearing garbled rumors about nakedness and worse, withdrew their financial support. A dispirited Kusama retreated to Tokyo in 1970 and five years later entered a hospital for the mentally ill. For the next two decades, her work went virtually unexhibited in New York.

Lynn Zelevansky, who helped curate a 1998 traveling show that fueled Kusama's re-emergence, notes that Kusama's inclination was always "to adapt to what life offered." In her years of neglect, Kusama began writing grotesque, psychedelic novels like "Woodstock Phallus Cutter" (books that still have a cult following in Japan). Now, in a jet-fueled art world, Kusama lives the life of a pampered, semiretired C.E.O. Her staff coordinates exhibitions at her various galleries (Ota Fine Arts, Victoria Miro and Gagosian internationally) and executes new sculptures and dot paintings under her direction. Kusama arrives in the studio in the early afternoon. Her drawings are increasingly cheerful, no longer strictly obsessive, but crowded with a mix of childlike icons (tulips, faces, pumpkins). They are seldom particularly compelling, but when watching her make them, one feels the presence of a rare, autism-like intensity. Kusama seems to be incapable of hesitation. Her hand really does just move forward on its own.

In Matsumoto, her hometown, evidence of

Kusama's renewed celebrity is hard to miss. Beside the entrance to the town's art museum sits an outdoor sculpture of enormous polka-dotted tulips. Much of the second floor has been given over to a permanent Kusama retrospective. Its centerpiece is "Infinity Mirrored Room," a recent example of the kaleidoscopic installations that Kusama began making at the height of her New York career. On the day after the Araki photo shoot, I found myself walking through its reflective corridors with a few other visitors. Inevitably we smiled at ourselves, genial tourists in a narcissistic echo chamber. At the center is a tiny inset window. I leaned forward to peer into a smaller mirrored space, decorated with concentric colored lights that went black and then quickly, color by color, relit. It was another infinity, a gaudier one. But where was I? I was absent, or rather visible only as two dim eyes, a ghostly voyeur into its inaccessible gaiety. "Infinity Mirrored Room" is a memento mori, surely, but also a self-portrait. It crystallizes Kusama's narcissism, and her lifelong sense of disconnection. And it forces us, briefly but unforgettably, to recognize them as our own. ■