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AS YAYOI KUSAMA CELEBRATES THE OPENING OF HER RETROSPECTIVE AT THE WHITNEY MUSEUM—AS WELL AS A COLLABORATION WITH LOUIS VUITTON—HER LIFELONG DREAM OF SUPERSTARDOM IS FINALLY A REALITY. ARTHUR LUBOW DISCOVERS WHY THE WHOLE WORLD IS MAD FOR JAPAN'S MOST ICONOCLASTIC ARTIST. PORTRAIT BY NOBUYOSHI ARAKI

I ENTERED THE STUDIO OF YAYOI KUSAMA LIKE ALICE WANDERING into Wonderland. The generic concrete three-story building is located across the avenue from a private Tokyo mental hospital, in which this 83-year-old woman—who is widely thought to be Japan's greatest living artist—has resided voluntarily for 35 years. For a few minutes I waited as the finishing touches of her maquillage were applied. And then the diminutive and self-aggrandizing Kusama appeared, made up outrageously in a vermillion wig and matching lipstick and dress, her expression frozen in an intense gaze that blended imperiousness with traces of confusion. Assistants watched anxiously. Solicitous of her frailty, they also feared her unpredictable “Off with their heads!”-like flashes of anger. They were well aware that she has fired her longtime secretary three times and, for good measure, once impulsively dismissed her primary art dealer. She is the Red Queen come to life.

On first glance, almost everything about Kusama is paradoxical. Her latest canvases in bold, colorful patterns, which she completes at a ferocious pace, retail in the mid-six figures at New York's Gagosian Gallery and London's Victoria Miro; one of her rare early paintings sold at auction in November 2008 for \$5.79 million, a record at the time for a living woman artist. Yet she resides in a one-bedroom institutional apartment with little more than a bed, desk, refrigerator, bookshelf, and closet. In conversation, her mind jumps erratically along synaptic connections that follow the timeworn network of her phobias. Every morning, she carefully reads the newspaper and, when she gets to the book listings, underlines the titles of interesting new publications—especially on scientific subjects—which her staff orders, and she reads. Perhaps her core contradiction is that her mental illness, which she has described as obsessive-compulsive disorder, isolates her in a private prison yet also provides a way for her to find a place in the world. “By her obsession, she opens herself to others,” said Akira Tatehata, the president of the Kyoto City University of Arts and a curator and art critic who has been a key supporter of Kusama's art. “If she was just arrogant and proud of her power, it would deny her communication. But because of her obsession, we want to understand her.”

Many artists long for recognition, but Kusama craves fame like a pop star does. When we spoke, she interrupted me periodically to tell me how famous she was or to ask if I thought she was more famous than some other artist (Andy Warhol, Joseph Cornell, Donald Judd) whose path she has crossed. In fact, she's famous but not as famous as she should be. During her most fertile period, while she was living in New York in the sixties, she led the way with astonishing creativity—and in two directions simultaneously—as art moved from the established territory of Abstract Expressionism toward Minimalism

and Pop. As demonstrated by a retrospective of her work that opens in July at the Whitney Museum in New York (following stops at Centre Pompidou in Paris and Tate Modern in London), Kusama— notwithstanding her explanation that her work expresses her psychological obsessions—has always been an artist of her time and, usually, a step or two ahead of it.

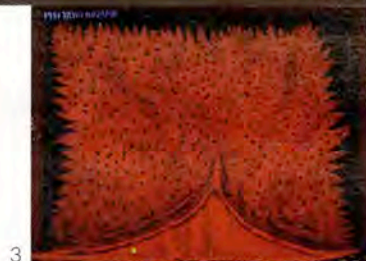
When asked about her creative trajectory, Kusama wasn't so helpful. For example, to my inquiry of why she had progressed from the black and white "Love Forever" drawings of 2004 to the brilliant unmixed blue, orange, and red pigments of "My Eternal Soul," the series she has been working on since 2009, she replied: "I wanted to switch from monochrome work to color because I am talented." Only gradually did I realize that she was answering my question truthfully—her narcissism is as innocent and all-encompassing as a child's.

KUSAMA HAS BEEN TELLING versions of her life story for so long that no one, not even she, can vouch for particular facts. She grew up in Matsumoto, a provincial city in the foothills of the Japanese Alps, in the grim years before and during World War II. Her mother's prosperous family owned a large plant nursery there. When her father married, he took his in-laws' last name because they had no male heirs. It was an unhappy union: Kusama's father was an irrepressible womanizer, and his wife was thwarted and angry. The youngest of four children, Yayoi sought refuge in books and painting, but like other Japanese adolescents at the time, she was drafted into the war effort and worked long hours in a parachute factory. "I would get rid of the dust on the fabric and was cleaning the floor," she recalled. "The factory was humid and dusty. That is why I got tuberculosis." Perhaps so, although at other times she has said that her father contracted tuberculosis and she caught it from him, and, in still another variation, her pulmonary problems weren't caused by tuberculosis at all.

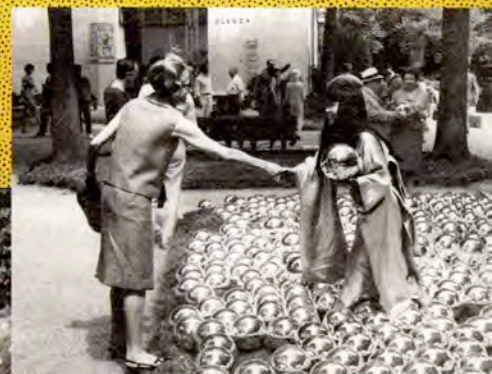
That is a minor discrepancy when compared with one of the central mysteries of Kusama's life: the genesis of her mental illness. She blames it on an irate mother who beat and ridiculed her youngest child in fury meant for her husband, whom Kusama described to me as a "very gentle" man. Her mother would enlist her to spy on him. "My father had so many girlfriends," she told me. "Once, my mother and I went to the house of prostitutes to find my father, but he was not there." In her 2002 autobiography, *Infinity Net*, which was published in English last year, Kusama relates that her first hallucinations occurred during the war. Human-faced violets began speaking to her, her voice became a dog's bark, and floral patterns enveloped the room. Reproducing these visions as drawings or paintings soothed her. Although she now says that her trademark patterns of dots are a representation of her visions, she used to tell a different story. "Her mother was jealous, and her energy went to Kusama-san in domestic violence," said Hidenori Ota, whose Ota Fine Arts gallery in Tokyo represents Kusama. "She would pinch her hard, and that would leave dots on her skin. Kusama-san told me twice that was the origin of the dots."

It all becomes even murkier if you interpret the violence-soaked literature Kusama published after returning to Japan in 1975. Although it would be simplistic to read the fiction as pure autobiography, it is remarkable how vividly and how often her 14 short novels feature heroines who are victims of sexual abuse. In *The Hustlers Grotto of Christopher Street*, for instance, a young female Asian procurer of male prostitutes for gay clients is "full of hatred for men" because her father raped her in the bath when she was a little girl; the second protagonist, a young hustler, is penetrated forcibly by his client and suffers from disorienting visions. The main character of another tale, *Woodstock Phallus Cutter*, is a 10-year-old who is raped in the woods by her womanizing father.

Further confusing the issue of the cause and onset date of Kusama's mental illness is her reported habit of revising art. "She added dots and nets to childhood paintings," Ota said. "She repainted them after, but she doesn't care. She says, 'It's my work. I'm not an art historian or scholar.'" Along with the desire to fit her art into the accepted narrative of her life story, Kusama is also eager to provide what buyers request. In the eighties, collectors would ask her if she had any net paintings from the late fifties or early sixties. She didn't, but she nonetheless wanted to



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1. A young Yayoi Kusama (second from right) in Japan with her family. 2. The artist staging one of her happenings, 1968. 3. Kusama's 1951 painting *Heart*. 4. *Infinity-Nets (TBBBTY)*, 2008. 5. "Hi, Konnichiwa (Hello!)" installation from Kusama's 2004 solo exhibition at Mori Art Museum in Tokyo. 6. Her *Narcissus Garden* installation at the 1966 Venice Biennale. 7. Kusama's 1967 happening *Horse Play*. 8. The artist with one of her "Accumulation" works, 1966. 9. Bachelor, a happening staged in 1969.



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oblige. After experimenting with ways of adding texture to the acrylic medium she now uses, she produced paintings that resembled her early oil works and signed and dated them '60 or '61. Once her dealer discovered the subterfuge, he stopped the practice and notified the big auction houses. Kusama had probably done 30 to 40 such counterfeits; only 10 were tracked down. "We bought them back, the ones we found," Ota said. "It was a difficult time to explain, so finally we called them 'misdated' paintings."

Sales are important to Kusama not because she needs the money but as proof that the public appreciates her. She used to call Ota five or six times a day, but now, he told me, she rings him merely two or three times. "How are sales?" she asks him. "What do you do, Ota-san? Please stop working on other artists. You should concentrate on my work." He has developed a strategy of dividing her payments into many checks. "Small amounts are okay—a hundred dollars, ten dollars," he explained. "When I wire money, it is a sign that society needs her."

Kusama's new collaboration, with Louis Vuitton—to make handbags, dresses, bathing suits, sunglasses, and shoes with her signature designs—evidently delights her. It is another public affirmation of her worth. "The reason I collaborate with Louis Vuitton is that Louis Vuitton is number one in the world, and I am honored to work with them," she told me enthusiastically. Although it's hard to imagine, say, Jackson Pollock endorsing the reproduction of his work as luxury linens, Kusama didn't hesitate to let her patterns become linings for purses. Of course, times have changed, but interestingly, Kusama hasn't. "Her whole relation to product and merchandise has been consistent throughout her career," said Frances Morris, head of collections for international art at Tate, who organized the traveling retrospective. "From very early on, she was marketing herself. When you think of the Vuitton collaboration, it is not so different from what she was doing in New York in the second half of the sixties. She published press releases. She set up a fashion house. She designed clothes." Although Morris compares her to Warhol, who was doing similar things in the sixties, Kusama may owe her attitude more to the traditional Japanese view that there is no distinction between high art and popular art.

JAPAN, WHICH KUSAMA DENIGRATES in her autobiography as "a corrupt and bogus fourth-rate country," was obviously too small to contain her ambition. In her bourgeois environs, she had to struggle against expectations that she would become a pampered housewife. Despite her mother's protests, Kusama studied painting, first in Matsumoto and then in Kyoto. Her talent was recognized immediately. So was her extraordinary fecundity. Three years after graduating from art school in Kyoto, she exhibited 200 works in a 1952 solo exhibition in Matsumoto. Seven months later, she showed 280 new works in a second show.

With the help of a relative who had lived in Seattle, Kusama left Japan in late 1957, first to attend a gallery opening of her work in Seattle and then, six months later, to reside in New York. Despite providing material assistance, Kusama's parents temporarily disowned her. "I received money—enough to buy three houses at the time—and my mother said, 'Never come back to my place,'" she said. "My mother was at that point trying hard to make me a wealthy bride, so that is why she was so upset." For a young Japanese woman who spoke little English, relocating on her own to the States so soon after the war took enormous courage. "It was difficult in the years when I went to the United States," Kusama said. "Today it is full of people coming from Japan on planes, but then it was only picture brides for GIs."

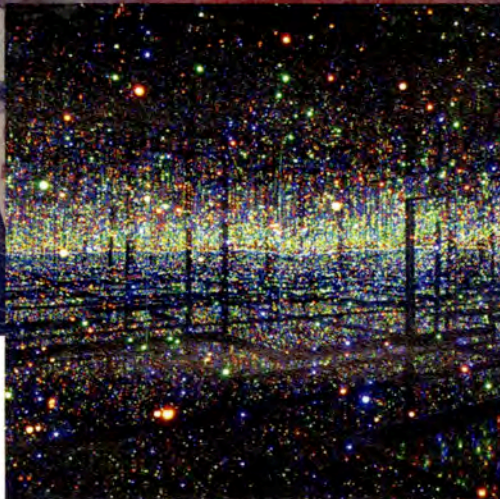
In New York, Kusama's networking skills proved to be remarkable. "Whenever I went to a party, I made a friend," she said. She got to know Donald Judd, Frank Stella, Claes Oldenburg, and many others. Judd, who was then primarily an art critic, wrote an enthusiastic and perceptive piece on Kusama's first show in New York, which took place in October 1959, little more than a year after her arrival. He was also the first to buy one of her enormous white proto-minimalist "infinity net" paintings, which Kusama began making in 1958. Preparing a canvas with a background of pale gray and then superimposing on it one small white arc after another, she ended up with a surface that pulsed with a lacelike proliferation. In her cold East 19th Street apartment, unable to afford much food other than rice, she would work 40 or 50 hours without taking a break. Painting the infinity nets produced in the artist a similar effect to the experience of the viewer, which



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Kusama once described as “a kind of dizzy, empty, hypnotic feeling.”

Starting in 1961, she made soft sculptures well in advance of Oldenburg. In these works, which she called “accumulations,” fabric stuffed in phallic shapes multiplied on furniture, spilled out of suitcases, or popped up out of shoes. She also produced clothing covered with dried macaroni and painted silver or gold; resembling fancy brocade, it commented in a witty Pop manner on both factory-made food and trend-mad fashion. Her decal pictures and wallpaper antedate Warhol’s comparable exercises in repetition. She constructed a room-size installation in December 1963, before the term “installation art” even existed; and one of her early mirrored pavilions, *Kusama’s Peep Show*, in which blinking white, green, red, and blue lightbulbs on the ceiling were reflected on the walls and floor, appeared in March 1966, months before Lucas Samaras introduced a similar one.

She and Judd lived on different floors of the same building. He helped her scavenge for raw materials and stuff fabric for her sculptures. “He was very influenced by her,” said the painter Malcolm Morley, who knew them both at the time. Kusama told me that she and Judd were so close that they would eat three meals a day together but that their relationship remained platonic because she regarded sex and sexual organs with horrified aversion. Within her chaste realm, her most ardent suitor was the middle-aged artist Joseph Cornell, who lived with his elderly mother in Queens. Cornell would call her every day and send her love letters. They sketched each other in the nude. Kusama showed me one of his portraits of her: In it, she resembles a Neolithic fertility goddess. That relationship, too, was unconsummated. “He hated sex,” she said. “That’s why we got along for such a long time.” Once, when they were kissing, his mother emptied a bucket of water on them. “But then she felt sorry and asked me to come again,” Kusama added.

Kusama routinely had herself photographed with her art. Often she appeared nude, in provocative poses. Other times she wore a kimono, the traditional garb she had shunned while living in Japan. Critics have interpreted her activity as a feminist critique, but with Kusama, there has always been that insatiable hunger for attention and fame. At the Venice

Biennale in 1966, she stood in a kimono outside the Italian pavilion, amid an installation (which she called *Narcissus Garden*) of 1,500 mirrored plastic balls, selling them for 1,200 lira (about \$2) apiece. It was a brilliant stroke of guerrilla art, and a successful one: The police ushered her off for having the audacity “to sell art like hot dogs or ice cream cones,” they said. Back in New York, she staged happenings in which she encouraged people to remove their clothing so she could paint their naked bodies. She presented some of these events as comments on the ossified and money-driven art world, others as protests against the Vietnam War. In 1968, she designed a “homosexual wedding dress,” which two men could wear at the same time, decades before gay marriage emerged as a real possibility. Many of her closest associates were gay men. “They never thought about having sex with me; that’s why I liked them,” she explained.

By the late sixties, she was despairing of her ability to earn a living as an artist and devoting more of her time to happenings and “orgies,” for which she charged admission. She lent her name to a sexually explicit magazine called *Kusama Orgy* and was listed in the credits as house geisha. She designed dresses with holes cut to expose breasts and buttocks. As word got back to Japan, her parents became more and more distressed. They stopped sending her money, which aggravated her financial woes. Early in 1973, emotionally drained and physically ill, she retreated to Japan. After brief stays at the Seiwa hospital in the Shinjuku neighborhood of Tokyo, she admitted herself in March 1977 and has remained there ever since. “The hospital bathes her, it feeds her, it gives her medications,” said Alexandra Munroe, senior curator of Asian art at the Guggenheim Museum in New York. “It’s her wife.”

IN JAPAN, SHE WAS REGARDED as “the queen of scandal,” the critic Tatehata said, and not as a major artist. Yet she continued to create art, enlisting fellow hospital patients to assist her. The refurbishment of her reputation began with small exhibitions in Tokyo of the exquisite collages she made with magazine clippings that Cornell had



1. Kusama in her New York studio in 1960. 2. The Anatomic Explosion happening held at the New York Stock Exchange, 1968. 3. The artist posing in her monkey-fur coat, 1964. 4. The 2011 installation Infinity Mirrored Room—Filled With the Brilliance of Life. 5. With Donald Judd, 1978. 6. Louis Vuitton leather bags featuring Kusama's designs, photographed by Nobuyoshi Araki for W. 7. Kusama wearing sunglasses from her collaboration with Louis Vuitton.



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HER FIRST HALLUCINATIONS OCCURRED DURING THE WAR. HUMAN-FACED VIOLETS BEGAN SPEAKING TO HER, HER VOICE BECAME A DOG'S BARK, AND FLORAL PATTERNS ENVELOPED THE ROOM.



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given her. But her rediscovery on a larger stage dates from the pioneering 1989 exhibition in New York that was organized by Munroe at the short-lived Center for International Contemporary Arts. To prepare for the show, Munroe visited Kusama in Tokyo and went through an apartment she kept that was piled, floor to ceiling, with shoeboxes and suitcases decorated with polka dots and old-fashioned air-travel decals. In these containers were diner receipts, letters from dealers and artists, and every last shred of press coverage—all of it carefully preserved by Kusama as the record of her New York art career. When Munroe brought back Kusama's archive of the sixties to the United States, she was stopped at customs in Seattle and accused of importing pornography. "I had to say, 'No, this is art history!'" Munroe recalled.

Kusama represented Japan at the Venice Biennale in 1993 in an acclaimed exhibition curated by Tatehata. The renegade who hawked mirror balls a quarter of a century earlier had morphed into a doyenne of the international art scene. Her reformed celebrity was cemented by an exhibition of her New York work, held in 1998 at the Museum of Modern Art and at the Los Angeles County Museum of Art. But even though she remained an active artist—indeed, a hyperactive artist—she was celebrated mainly for work she had done in the sixties. That disappointed her. At the Venice Biennale, about half the space was devoted to her New York production. "She asked me to show more of her contemporary work, but I denied it," Tatehata said.

Maybe it is too early to assess Kusama's more recent pieces. As always, her antennae are attuned to the zeitgeist. Around the time when artists like Damien Hirst and Takashi Murakami were setting up studios that resembled factories, and creating art that seemed like merchandise, Kusama established a studio of assistants to churn out dot paintings and net paintings. In Japan, where the Hello Kitty culture of cuteness (*kawaii*) is pervasive, her sculptures became less sinister and more jokey. Some of the recent installations look not like images of self-obliteration but rather a playground at McDonald's. And the fiberglass-reinforced plastic sculptures that she began making in the early nineties—giant flowers and pumpkins—are downright *kawaii*. However, the mirrored pavilions of the past decade are as mesmerizingly beautiful as any in her career.

Tatehata argues that a few of the paintings in the colorful "My Eternal Soul" series now under way constitute "some of her best work." "The early sixties was her most glorious period," he said. "In the 1990s and the early 21st century, her studio looked like a factory. Now she paints and draws in her own hand. That is the reason she is having a second peak period—she does everything by herself."

Unless she is too tired or ill, Kusama is driven each weekday around noon the short distance from the hospital to her studio. Upstairs are the offices, but the workspace is in the basement. On the afternoon I visited, she was clearly itching to get downstairs. When the time came, I followed. She was conveyed in a wheelchair. "I have pain in my knee, from painting all day long," she explained. In the chilly, gloomy room below, lit by overhead fluorescents and any natural light that could penetrate the glazed-brick wall, a small stack of unfinished canvases was propped in a corner. Another group of completed ones leaned against the opposite wall. In the center of the room was a low folding table and on it, a canvas that an assistant had prepared with a ground of metallic silver. The picture lay flat, awaiting the artist's touch. Seated in a battered desk chair that rolled on casters, Kusama could be spun around the table to reach any part of the painting. She was bundled up in a black and white overshirt on top of a floral-print dress, with a red blanket over that. She never hesitated as she daubed a scalloped border in red, advising the assistant: "Once I reach this point, can you bring me blue pigment?" She resumed in the new color without pausing.

"I never have a plan of what I am going to draw," she said. She added two big red eyes in the center of the canvas. Although it looked like an exercise in surrealist automatism, her next words suggested otherwise.

"I will finish this painting tomorrow," she said. "I think I have to quit now. The blue is beautiful. I will paint red and then black in the center." She pointed to an unfinished painting in which green wavy lines undulated on a gold background. "I think I will work on that one tomorrow." She seemed almost happy. ♦