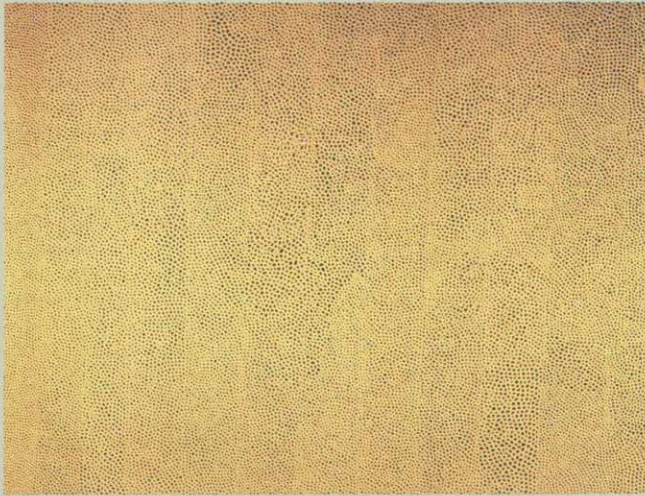


Kusama Yayoi—Art of Proliferation

By Iseki Masaaki



"Yellow Net" 1960; 240 x 294.6cm; oil on canvas; Frank Stella collection

Not a small number of contemporary Japanese artists are better known overseas than at home. Kusama Yayoi is one of them.

Born in 1929, Kusama went through her early years painfully, suffering from hallucinations, tensions toward the outer world, and compulsions for as long as she can remember. In those days, she was troubled by the gap between the feudalistic atmosphere of her family and her own self, finding her enthusiasm only in painting. By the time she had her first show in her hometown of Nagano at the age of 23, she had accumulated as many as 250 pieces of work. Within two years, by the time she decided to move to America, she had established herself as a young female painter, well recognized by Japanese critics.

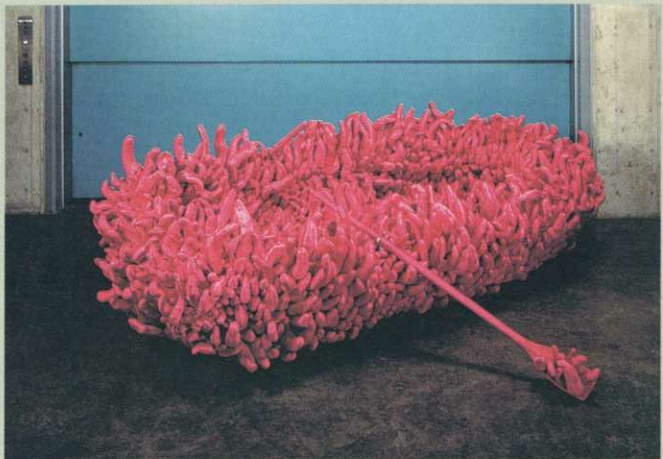
It was around that time that Kawabata Yasunari, a Nobel Prize winning writer, purchased her work. Most of her works in that period were watercolors, abstract expressions which revealed her obsession with microscopic details, such as polka dots and nets, later to become her

trademark. America, which was then on the eve of pop art and also incubating minimal arts, found a precursor of these trends in her proliferating tiny polka dots and nets, and "soft sculptures" of accumulated phallic projections which

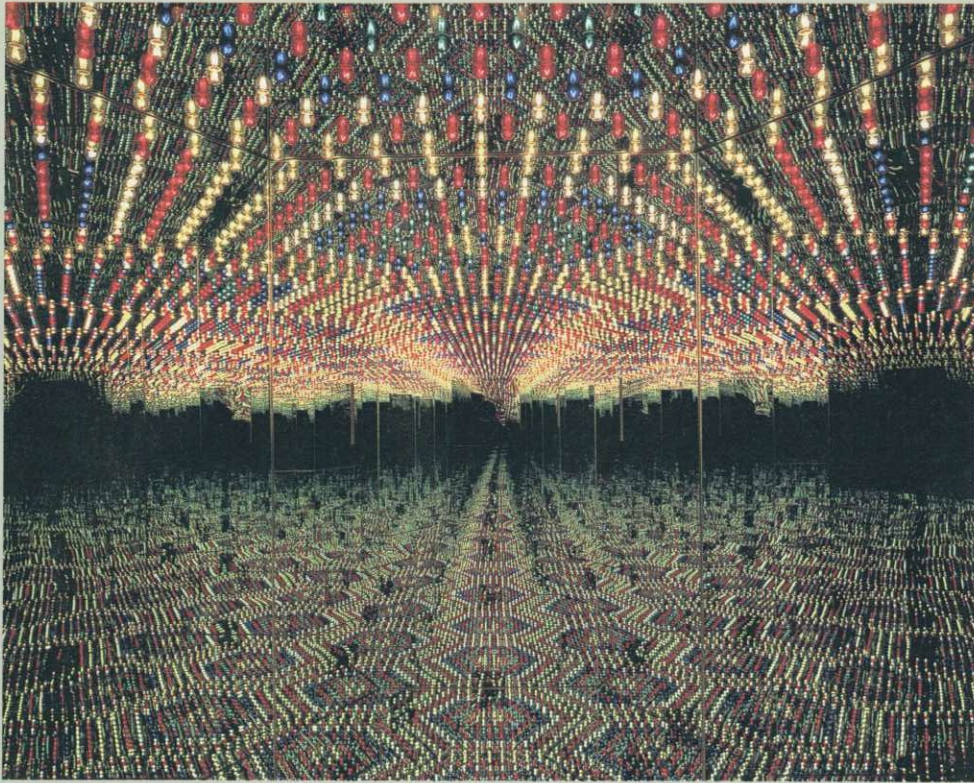
conveyed condensed avant-garde ideas.

Through these, she gave form to the recollection of her own childhood, described by her as "decomposition and accumulation, proliferation and disintegration, a particle level extinction and a sound from an invisible universe. ..." Her work in New York in the late 1950s through the 1960s gradually drew attention from the American art media and she was invited to contribute to the 1962 Group Zero exhibition in Amsterdam. In a short time following her arrival in New York, Kusama had become a success.

"I had a desire" said Kusama "to predict and measure, from my own position, the infinity toward the boundless universe through accumulation of particles, represented by loops of a net, which are at the same time negatives of each polka dot." It seems, then, her works represent her ability to turn madness into creativity, and the unlimited sustainability with no center, no beginning, and no ending is the source of her energy, which at the same time contributed to the evolution of her dream experiences since childhood.



"Violet Obsession" 1994; 100 x 382 x 185cm; mixed media



"Infinity Mirrored Room—Love Forever" 1994; 210 x 240 x 205cm (hexagonal mirrored room); mixed media

In New York, she matured into an "environmental" sculptor. Her 1963 exhibition, "One Thousand Boats Show," was an environment composed of a real boat covered with numerable phalli against a wallpaper of 999 reproduced pieces of the same boat covering three walls. Also, a series of work, including "Sights of Proliferation," "A Room of Compulsion," and "A Carpet of Food," reflected her obsession with sex and food, which could also have been a reflection of her observation on contemporary American life.

Her first "Mirror Room" series from the same period took its position as an extension of environmental art. For example, "An Infinite Mirror Room—A Field of Phalli" invites the viewer to enter a mirror-wall room to find him/herself captured in a labyrinth of infinity. The viewer becomes lost in a small pass of wonderland, watching

him/herself proliferating in the "field of phalli," bulb shaped projections randomly shooting out in mass from the floor along the pass. Here we find a good inclination toward humorous performances. The "Mirror Room" series can be classified as a curious combination of pop art and op art, but perhaps for Kusama it was a paradoxical "proliferating vision." The series resumed again in the 1990s with a more metaphysical experience for the viewers who, in "Infinity Mirrored Room—Love Forever" (1994) for example, were invited to look into the inside of a mirror through a peeping window.

She continued to amaze New Yorkers with her environmental art, the "art of action," and later by several bold attempts to cause "happenings." These activities were sporadically reported in Japan as scandals. However, her major concern always laid in protest, to grow

out of her obsessions and to publicize her own self-statement. Although the 1960s opened up possibilities for all sorts of artistic expressions, the '70s revealed the limits within avant-garde art. Kusama left New York for Japan.

Still, her artistic world has continued to represent a stimulative field of creative activities through attempts to diminish proliferation and accumulation in the unlimited universe. She had a retrospective in New York in 1989 and was chosen as the sole representative of Japanese artists to the 1993 Venezia Biennale, where she won great acclaim, reassuring her existence to the world. The immeasurable energy of Kusama Yayoi still remains remarkable to this day. ■

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