

YAYOI KUSAMA, 1958-1968

LOVE  
FOREVER  
KUSAMA

LOVE  
FOREVER  
KUSAMA

**yayoi Kusama,**  
**1958-1968**

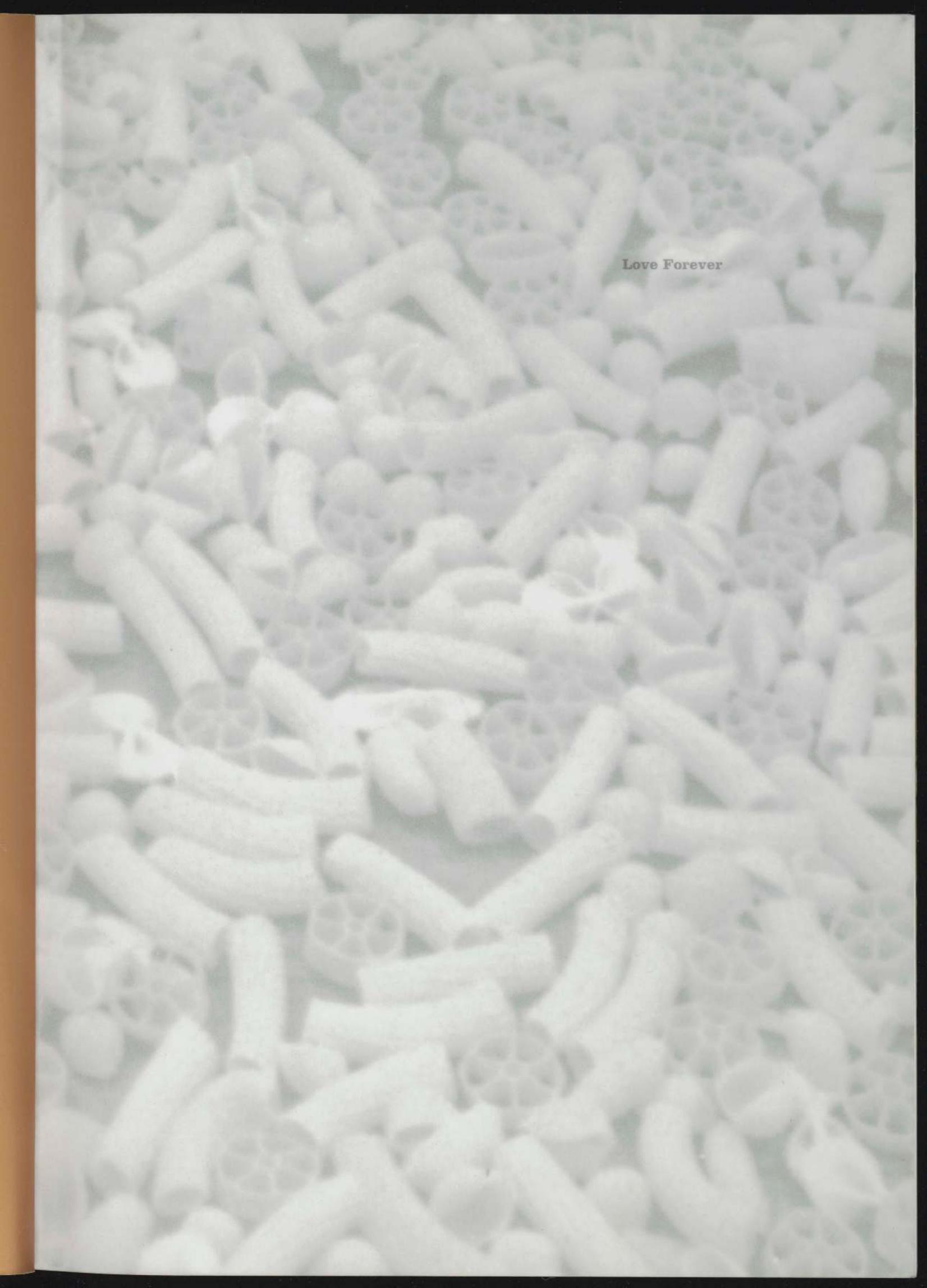
ive

# Love Forever: Yayoi Kusama, 1958–1968

**Love Forever: Yayoi Kusama,**

**1958–1968** takes a comprehensive look at the defining decade of an artist whose recent rediscovery and renewed activity have been one of the great surprises in contemporary art. Accompanying a major retrospective held at the Los Angeles County Museum of Art, The Museum of Modern Art, New York, the Walker Art Center, and the Museum of Contemporary Art, Tokyo, it documents every work in the show (many not seen for decades) and provides a complete exhibition history for the artwork Kusama created during those innovative years. But this comprehensive volume includes much more: Lynn Zelevansky undertakes a detailed discussion of the artistic, cultural, and psychological import of Kusama's New York period. Laura Hoptman explores the artist's important but little-known association with the European avant-garde of the sixties. Akira Tatehata investigates Kusama's artistic roots in Japan, first as a student of Nihonga-style painting and then as a self-created surrealist. And Alexandra Munroe provides an illuminating inquiry into the style and sources of the highly acclaimed fiction the artist has produced in recent years.

Once considered part of the pop, minimalist, and performance art movements, Kusama can now, by means of the groundbreaking material in this book, be seen as a truly original force with a wide-ranging influence on contemporary art. Containing 121 color and 86 black-and-white illustrations, **Love Forever: Yayoi Kusama, 1958–1968** is both a fascinating monograph on an important figure and a revealing examination of the complex cultural crosscurrents underlying a crucial artistic decade.



Love Forever

# Love Forever: Yayoi Kusama, 1958-1968

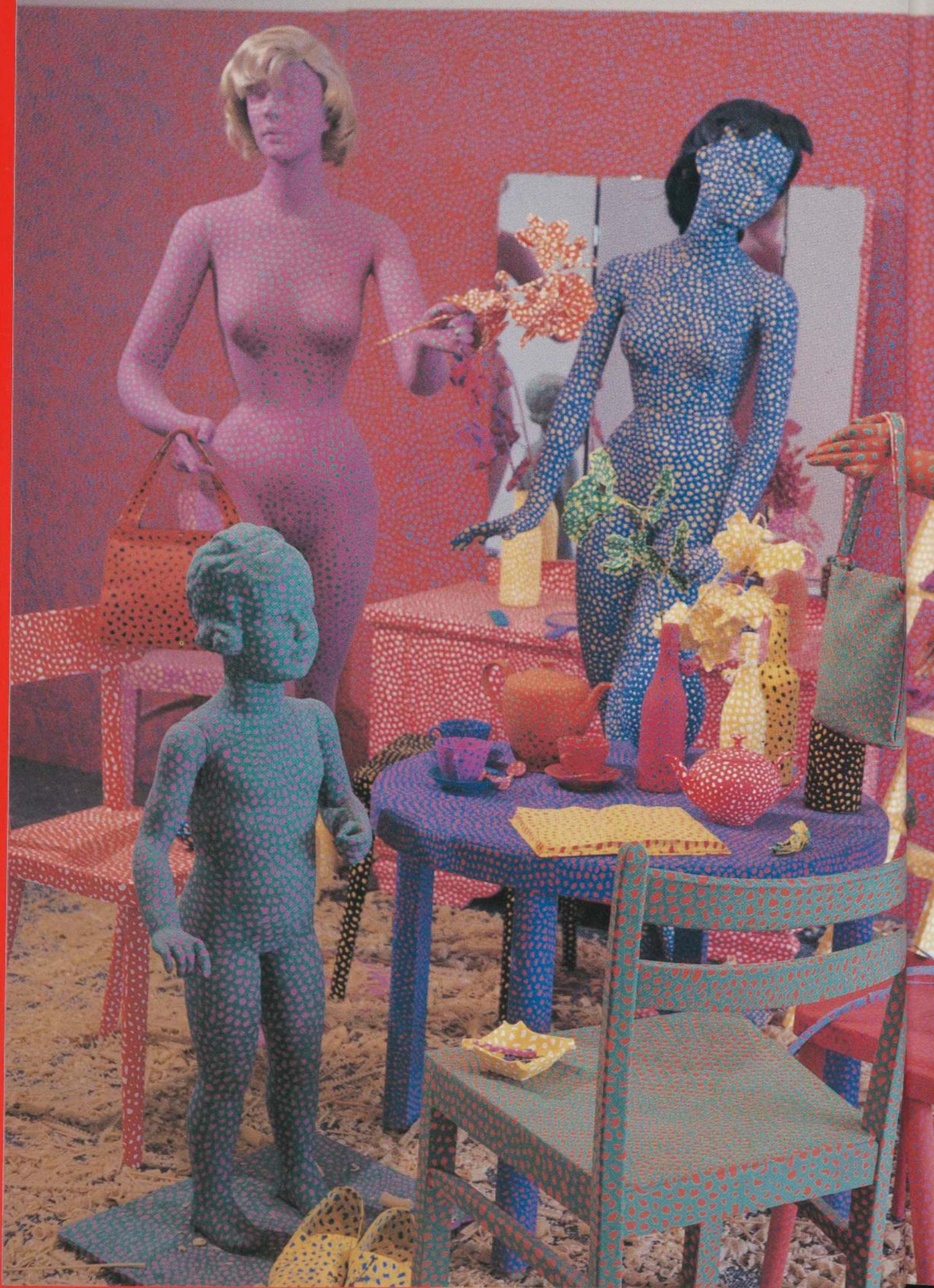
## Love Forever: Yayoi Kusama

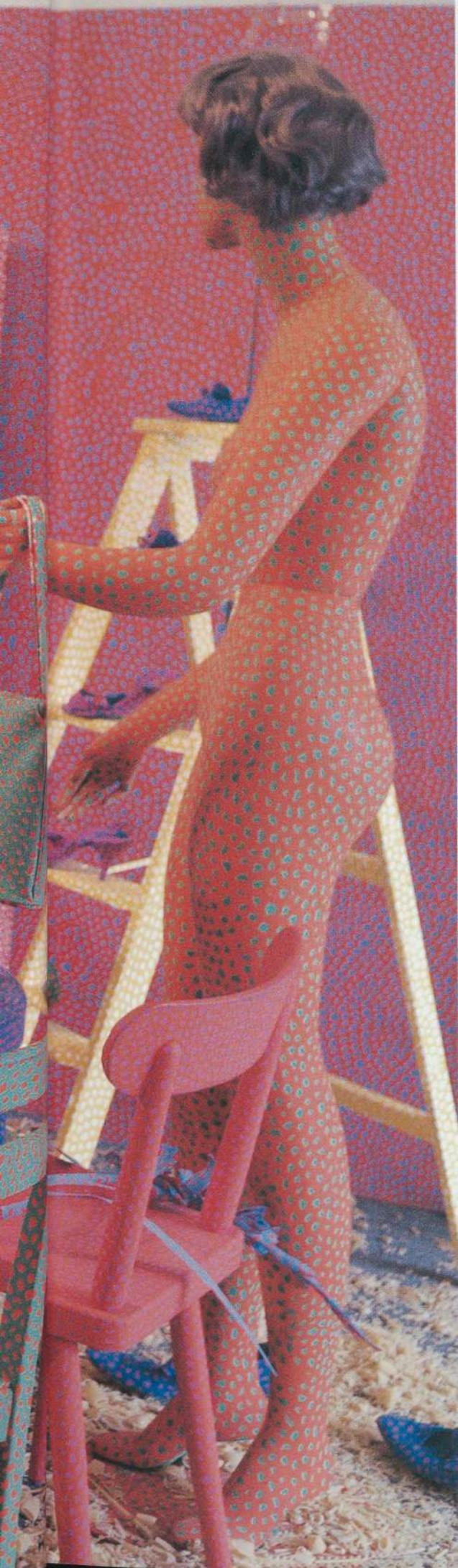
1958-1968 takes a comprehensive look at the defining decade of an artist whose recent rediscovery and renewed activity have been one of the great surprises in contemporary art. Accompanying a major retrospective held at the Los Angeles County Museum of Art, The Museum of Modern Art, New York, the Walker Art Center, and the Museum of Contemporary Art, Tokyo, it documents every work in the show (many not seen for decades) and provides a complete exhibition history for the artwork.

Kusama created during these innovative years. But this comprehensive volume includes much more. Lynn Zelensky undertakes a detailed discussion of the artistic, cultural, and psychological import of Kusama's New York period. Laura Hoptman explores the artist's important but little-known association with the European avant-garde in the sixties. Akira Tatehata investigates Kusama's artistic circle in Japan, first as a student of Nishizuguchi's painting school, then as a self-created alternative. And Alexandra Munroe provides an illuminating inquiry into the style she has called the highly acclaimed *Infinity Nets*. Her research has produced three recent books.

Once considered part of the post-minimalist and performance art movements, Kusama can now be named as the groundbreaking master of her own art, seen as a truly original force whose wide-ranging influence has permeated art. Celebrating her work and its work and while celebrating Yayoi Kusama, *Yayoi Kusama: Love Forever* is both a fascinating introduction to her work and a revealing introduction to the complex cultural world she has been forging a critical artistic legacy.

**Love Forever**





Sudhya  
Art M  
1181

Lynn Zelevansky  
Laura Hoptman  
Akira Tatehata  
Alexandra Munroe

# Love Forever: YAYOI Kusama, 1958–1968

Los Angeles County Museum of Art  
The Japan Foundation  
The Museum of Modern Art, New York

Archive  
MoMA  
1811

This volume was published in conjunction with the exhibition of the same name. The exhibition was organized by the Los Angeles County Museum of Art and the Japan Foundation in collaboration with The Museum of Modern Art, New York. It was supported by a generous grant from the Nippon Foundation. Transportation assistance was provided by Japan Airlines.

This exhibition catalogue was supported in part by a grant from The Andy Warhol Foundation for the Visual Arts.

#### Exhibition itinerary

Los Angeles County Museum of Art  
8 March–8 June 1998

The Museum of Modern Art, New York  
9 July–22 September 1998

The Walker Art Center  
13 December 1998–7 March 1999

The Museum of Contemporary Art, Tokyo  
29 April–4 July 1999

#### Published by

Los Angeles County Museum of Art  
5905 Wilshire Boulevard  
Los Angeles, California 90036

#### Distributed by

D.A.P./Distributed Art Publishers  
155 Sixth Avenue, 2nd floor  
New York, New York 10013  
Phone: (212) 627-1999; Fax: (212) 627-9484

Copyright © 1998 by Museum Associates, Los Angeles County Museum of Art. All rights reserved. No part of the contents of this book may be reproduced in any form or medium for any reason without permission in writing from the publisher.

Library of Congress Catalogue Card Number:  
97-075136  
ISBN: 0-87587-181-X

#### Note to the reader

In Japan names are conventionally expressed family name first. However, to avoid possible confusion for Western readers, in this publication Japanese names are printed family name last.

In dates of artworks a solidus is used (1958/c. 1963) to indicate two distinct periods of work.

#### Photography credits

Most photographs in this volume are reproduced courtesy of the creators or lenders of the artworks depicted. For certain documentary photographs we have been unable to trace copyright holders; we would appreciate notification of same for acknowledgment in future editions. Additional photo credits: © Louise Bourgeois, courtesy of Robert Miller Gallery, fig. 12; Peter Brenner, pp. 73, 77, 80; Frank D. Deinhard, fig. 17; courtesy of the Estate of Eve Hesse, fig. 13; © Eikō Hosoe, cat. 83; Donald Judd Archive, Marfa, TX, p. 10; courtesy of Yves Klein Archive, Paradise Valley, AZ, fig. 28; © Fred W. McDarragh, pp. 70, 183; © The New York Daily News L.P., reprinted with permission, fig. 11

Edited by Thomas Frick

Designed by Sandy Bell

Text composed in New Caledonia and Clarendon typefaces

Photography supervised by Peter Brenner

Production coordinated by Rachel Ware Zooi

Printed by Toppan Printing Company,  
Tokyo, Japan

#### FRONT COVER

Kusama with "Love Forever" buttons, which she distributed at the opening of *Kusama's Peep Show*, a mirror-lined environmental installation at Castellane Gallery, New York, 1966; photograph by Hal Reiff

#### BACK COVER

*Love Forever Collage*, 1966, cat. 39, Beatrice Perry Family Collection

#### FRONTISPICE

*Driving Image Show*, installation view,  
Galleria d'Arte del Naviglio, Milan, 1966

# Contents

- 7 **Preface**
- 8 **Foreword**
- 10 **Driving Image: Yayoi Kusama in New York**  
Lynn Zelevansky
- 42 **Down to Zero: Yayoi Kusama and the  
European New Tendency**  
Laura Hoptman
- 60 **Kusama as Autonomous Surrealist**  
Akira Tatehata
- 70 **Between Heaven and Earth:  
The Literary Art of Yayoi Kusama**  
Alexandra Munroe
- 87 **Catalogue**
- 170 **Selected Exhibition History**  
Kristine C. Kuramitsu with  
the collaboration of Julie Joyce
- 192 **Acknowledgments**
- 195 **Lenders to the Exhibition**



## Preface

The Japan Foundation is extremely pleased to present *Love Forever: Yayoi Kusama, 1958–1968*, an exhibition featuring the work of a quintessential contemporary Japanese artist, which will be shown at the Los Angeles County Museum of Art, The Museum of Modern Art, New York, and the Walker Art Center, Minneapolis.

Among the Japanese exhibitions that we have organized for international art festivals, the solo exhibition of Ms. Kusama's work at the 1993 Venice Biennale had especially broad repercussions and received wide acclaim. Its great success is still fresh in the memory of many people in the art world. In the forty-year history of the Venice Biennale's Japanese pavilion, this was virtually the first solo exhibition, and this was the moment when Kusama's intense expressiveness and unleashed passion were recognized for their true value.

This exhibition focuses specifically on the variety of works that Ms. Kusama produced from 1958 to 1968, when she was based in New York, and attempts to reexamine and reestablish the significance of her work within the context of art history. In recent years Ms. Kusama has continued her creative activity with ever more energy, but the works she produced while she was establishing her personal artistic idiom continue to stand out, providing a consistent thematic background for her artwork right up to the present moment.

We are also pleased that, under other auspices, the exhibition will be held at the Museum of Contemporary Art, Tokyo, after its U.S. presentation, giving Japanese audiences their first comprehensive view of Ms. Kusama's early work.

I would like to express my deep gratitude to the collectors who have generously allowed their valuable works to be displayed in this exhibition. I would also like to express my heartfelt thanks to Lynn Zelevansky, associate curator at the Los Angeles County Museum of Art, and Laura Hoptman, assistant curator at The Museum of Modern Art, New York, for their planning and vigorous promotion of this very strong show. In addition, I would like to express my appreciation to Japan Air Lines for their cooperation in transporting the artworks, and to all those who have worked hard to bring this project to fruition.

**Asao Shinichiro**

*President, The Japan Foundation*

## Foreword

Against all odds and more than any postwar Japanese artist, Yayoi Kusama has influenced the form and direction of artistic production in the United States. Between 1958, when she arrived in New York, and the late 1960s, when performance began to dominate her art, she created a body of work that made a widely known and highly significant contribution to the contemporary scene. Combining aspects of surrealism and abstract expressionism with elements from minimalism and pop art, her work proved remarkably prescient of post-minimalism in the United States, a nascent trend that would not fully emerge until the late 1960s. It also set precedents for artwork produced by some of today's most influential younger artists. Yet up until very recently Kusama remained little known in the West, her vital contribution to contemporary art largely overlooked. *Love Forever: Yayoi Kusama, 1958–1968* seeks to redress this situation.

During this crucial decade Kusama showed extensively in the United States and Europe. In New York she exhibited with major painters and sculptors of the time, among them Claes Oldenburg, Robert Morris, and Andy Warhol. Abroad—together with such figures as Yves Klein and Piero Manzoni—she was regularly included in exhibitions of the Nul and Zero groups. Following her return to Japan in the early 1970s Kusama was forgotten in this country, and her return to prominence can, in no small measure, be attributed to the attention of a younger generation of artists, whose concerns have much in common with Kusama's manner of connecting the personal and formal, the organic and the mechanical, the physical and the intellectual.

In contrast to the few recent, narrowly focused presentations of Kusama's work, *Love Forever: Yayoi Kusama, 1958–1968* addresses the full scope of her influential activities during those years and offers an in-depth introduction to her oeuvre for the museum-going public. As well as the almost eighty paintings, collages, and sculptures from Kusama's New York period, the exhibition includes reconstructions of three of the artist's precedent-setting environmental installations: *Aggregation: One Thousand Boats Show* (1964), *Infinity Mirror Room* (1965), and *Narcissus Garden* (1966). Originally done for the Venice Biennale, *Narcissus Garden* marks a pivotal moment in the artist's transition from installation to performance.

This exhibition is the result of many individuals' tireless efforts. First, we would like to thank our coorganizers, the Japan Foundation, whose collaboration has made this project possible. We are extremely grateful to the Foundation's president, Asao Shinichiro, and to his able staff in the arts department, including Sohei Yoshino, managing director, Hayato Ogo, director, exhibition division, and Masanobu Ito, exhibition division, all of whom worked diligently to make the idea a reality. Our sincere appreciation is also due to the Nippon Foundation, who very generously supported the exhibition's United States tour; we would particularly like to thank Ayako Sono, chairman, and Takashi Ito, manager, planning and coordination, department of international affairs. Our thanks go as well to the Andy Warhol Foundation for their support of this

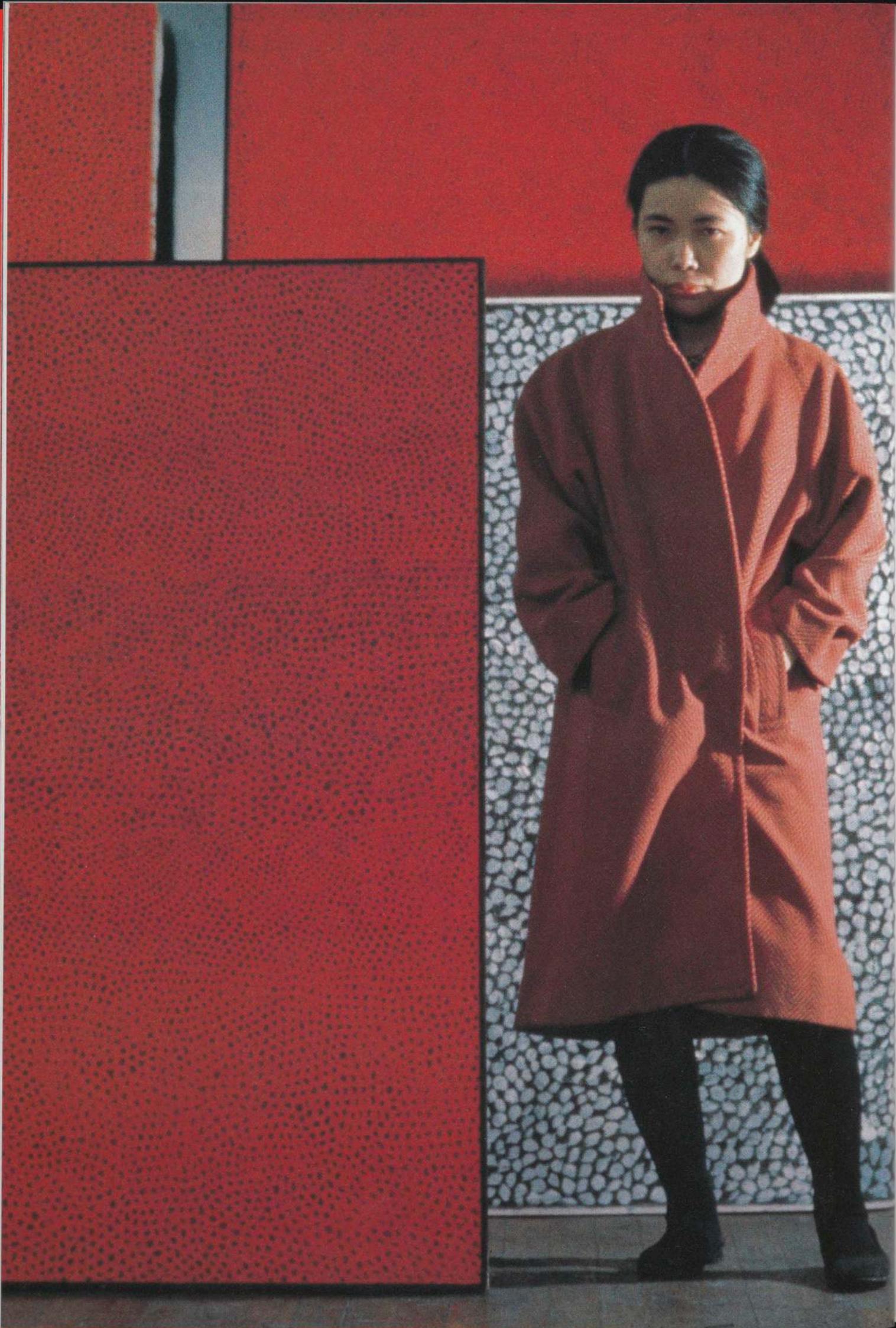
accompanying publication. Very special appreciation goes to Lynn Zelevansky, associate curator in LACMA's modern and contemporary art department, and her colleague Laura Hoptman, assistant curator in the department of drawings at The Museum of Modern Art, New York, for conceiving and organizing this timely venture as well as for the important essays they have contributed to the catalogue. Kathy Halbreich, director of the Walker Art Center, arranged for the exhibition's appearance there, and we are grateful for this partnership. We also appreciate the partnership of the Museum of Contemporary Art, Tokyo, and offer our thanks to its director, Yasuo Kamon, who supported the exhibition's appearance in Japan. In the end, of course, the exhibition owes its existence to the extraordinary vision of the artist herself. On behalf of the Los Angeles County Museum of Art, The Museum of Modern Art, and all of our colleagues in this endeavor, we would like to express our deep gratitude for her assistance in bringing this important exhibition to fruition.

**Graham W. J. Beal**

*Director, Los Angeles County Museum of Art*

**Glenn D. Lowry**

*Director, The Museum of Modern Art, New York*



**F**rom the time that she arrived in New York in 1958 until performance began to dominate her oeuvre a decade later, Yayoi Kusama produced a body of work that was undeniable in its power and remarkably prescient in its anticipation of subsequent artistic developments in the United States. She showed in museums and galleries, in this country and in Europe, along with many of the most influential painters and sculptors of the moment. Often praised in art journals and personally well connected in the art world, Kusama was a fixture on the New York scene.

However, she never received the long-term critical or financial support that might have allowed her to become a lasting art-world figure there. After her return to her native Tokyo in the mid-seventies she was largely forgotten in this country.<sup>1</sup> *Love Forever: Yayoi Kusama, 1958–1968* situates her New York years in the context of her earlier and later development in order to help retrieve a piece of art history that, until recently, was all but lost.

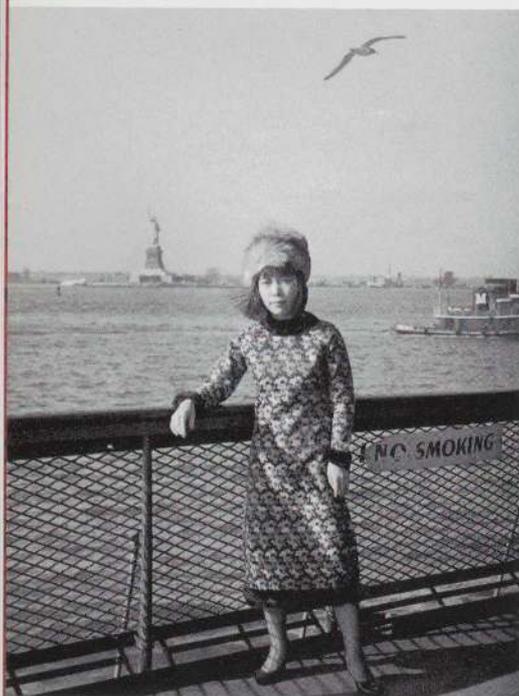
Kusama challenges many deeply ingrained assumptions about creativity and art practice. Elusive but crucial contradictions and paradoxes lie at the heart of her project, and this has colored much of what has been written about her. From the sixties to the present, certain dichotomous questions have dogged her: as an artist with a history of mental illness, is she conscious or unconscious of the meaning of what she produces? Is she, in fact, mentally ill, or is she a shrewd media manipulator? Has her overarching concern been gaining publicity or confronting pressing aesthetic questions?

Has she been exploitative of artistic trends or genuinely responsive to the cultural moment? Is her work, especially in its most performatory manifestations, exhibitionistic, or does it constitute a scathing critique of male sexual, social, and artistic domination? Was Kusama doubly disadvantaged in New York as a woman and an Asian, or did she use sexual provocation and a contemporary fascination with the East to her own advantage?

As this essay will demonstrate, for Kusama these are largely false dichotomies. The richness of her creative intelligence lies in its ability to embrace and subsume dualities. Since her work strives to be nothing less than all-encompassing, no contradiction exists for her between aesthetic engagement

## Driving Image: Yayoi Kusama in New York

Kusama in her New York loft in front of  
Infinity Net paintings, c. 1961



**Figure 1**  
Kusama on the Staten Island ferry,  
c. 1958

and publicity, or psychic disorder and emotional control, and there is no consistently discernible boundary between her self and her art. This essay charts Kusama's development during her extremely productive New York years. In it I attempt to counter the binary oppositions that have characterized much Kusama criticism, both positive and negative, in order to reach a deeper understanding of the nature of her achievement.

Although Kusama's visual vocabulary was, to an extent, established during her childhood and formative years in Japan, it was the active and competitive art environment of New York that catalyzed her great ambition and brought her work to maturity. When she arrived there in June 1958 (fig. 1) at the age of 29 she carried with her approximately two thousand relatively small works on paper that she had produced in Japan. Some of these watercolors and drawings utilized the polka-dot and net motifs that would remain central to her production.<sup>2</sup> Occasionally these visual elements were segregated and deployed in all-over patterns that eschewed any conventional notion of composition, forecasting the radical nature of her New York canvases. Most often, however, she used them in elegant, multihued, abstract watercolors and ink drawings that are reminiscent of aspects of postwar French tachisme or abstract expressionism in the United States.

Remarkably, within only eighteen months of her arrival in New York Kusama had radically transformed her art. In October 1959 she was given a solo exhibition at the important artist-run cooperative, Brata Gallery.<sup>3</sup> There she showed five white-on-white paintings nearly the size of the gallery walls. These works were so visually subtle that, on entering the space, "the initial impression was one of no-show," critic Lucy Lippard later reported, "but on close scrutiny, a fine mesh of circular patterns was revealed."<sup>4</sup> Lippard was describing the first of Kusama's Infinity Nets, the often exquisitely beautiful, almost monochrome (in fact, usually subtly two-toned) paintings of repetitive patterns for which she became known during her first years in the United States (cat. 1–4). The exhibition was a critical success. In *Arts* magazine Sidney Tillim compared one fourteen-foot painting to Jackson Pollock's *Shimmering Substance* (1946) and declared, "This stunning and quietly overwhelming exhibition is likely to prove and remain the sensation of a season barely a month old."<sup>5</sup> Dore Ashton called the exhibition "a striking tour de force, but disturbing none the less in its tightly held austerity,"<sup>6</sup> while Donald Judd, then better known as a critic than a sculptor, compared her paintings to "a large, fragile, but vigorously carved grill or to a massive, solid lace. The expression," he said, "transcends the question of whether [the art] is Oriental or American. Although it is something of both, certainly of such Americans as Rothko, Still, and Newman, it is not at all a synthesis and is thoroughly independent."<sup>7</sup>

The stunning transformation that Kusama's work underwent during her first year and a half in New York was the result of a keen sensitivity to the demands of the cultural moment. Not only did she immediately respond, with

large canvases, to the imperative to go beyond easel painting, a defining tenet of the New York school; she also prefigured the currency of repetitive form and of the monochrome which, in New York, was still largely incipient.<sup>8</sup> Her canvases constituted an ideal bridge between the painterly concerns of abstract expressionism and the reduced aesthetic of minimalism, whose star was not yet ascendent. Kusama had brilliantly reconfigured her personal vocabulary to match new circumstances, a move characteristic of her development from that point on.

In contemplating the complex relation of Kusama to her time I am accepting as a given that every artwork—no matter how brilliantly individual—is mediated by the social conditions under which it is made. The cultural situation at any given moment is a deep, elaborated phenomenon in flux.<sup>9</sup> We contribute to the moment but cannot see the totality of it. Nonetheless, the currency of a particular body of work seems determined in large part by the ability of an artist to choose, from the morass of possibilities, ideas and trends whose time is about to come. T. W. Adorno notes that “[t]he language of works of art is constituted, like any language, by a collective undercurrent. This goes especially for those works which public opinion labels unique, individualistic or eccentric products of creativity.” Contrary to what many think, “[t]he overarching validity of art works cannot be usurped by the artist trying to choose just the right subject matter or just the right effect.”<sup>10</sup> There must be a genuine connection with the cultural moment for an artist to identify germinal trends and give them the form that will allow them to dominate. Only in this fashion can artists address a broad audience. In a highly original manner Kusama was intuiting, assimilating, and giving shape to important, potentially generative cultural tendencies as they were emerging.

As Adorno suggests, making these kinds of connections is largely an unconscious process over which most artists have little control. However, some appear to be more innately talented at it than others, and those who can interpret, to a degree, a moment that may or may not perfectly match their sensibility can have a modicum of success. Later I will argue that the sixties were not the period when Kusama's oeuvre was optimally in synch with dominant cultural currents—that period appears to be the present. Nonetheless, her rare ability to understand, respond to, and reinterpret her milieu gave her a significant voice even then.

When Kusama first came to New York she was greatly impressed with the numbers of talented artists in the city. She recalls going to the top of the Empire State Building, looking down at all the activity below, and realizing that, in order to be known in New York, she had to do something truly spectacular. The white paintings, she felt, would be “like a bomb.”<sup>11</sup> Though this was an expression of Kusama's hunger for publicity, her art always has served multiple purposes, and her paintings, as we have seen, also addressed certain pressing aesthetic questions of pertinence to her adopted environment. They were, in



**Figure 2**  
Kusama with Barnett Newman, early  
1960s

fact, manifestations of both serious artistic goals and the desire for attention. Similarly, the Infinity Nets, while prefiguring aspects of minimalism and postminimalism, were also a response to long-standing emotional imperatives that stemmed from the hallucinations that she suffered as a child.

The complex interrelationship between Kusama's well-known history of mental illness and her art requires careful consideration. It is crucial, in engaging this issue, neither to mythologize Kusama as a mad,

visionary artist nor to pathologize her achievement. Although her work has been shaped in part by her illness, it does not follow that others with similar problems would produce similar work. In fact, Kusama challenges the stereotype of the crazy artist, a romanticized figure whose aesthetic contribution may be simultaneously elevated through immersion in the crucible of pain and denigrated through association with the art of children and other so-called primitives.<sup>12</sup> The insane are generally assumed to create wholly instinctively, isolated from intellectual currents or calculations. Kusama, in contrast, has always been a "conscious producer,"<sup>13</sup> who, like most artists, may use intuition as a tool but is also well aware of the intellectual relevance of what she does. Far from being an "outsider," during her years in New York she was the consummate art-world insider (fig. 2). Her friendships with central figures such as Joseph Cornell and Donald Judd are well documented.<sup>14</sup> The art historian and critic Udo Kultermann, who introduced Kusama to Europe in the important 1960 exhibition *Monochrome Malerei*, reports that when he first came to the United States from Germany in the sixties it was through Kusama that he met Mark Rothko, Barnett Newman, and other art-world luminaries.<sup>15</sup>

Nonetheless, it is important to acknowledge that mental illness has deeply affected Kusama's work. Her illness began in childhood with visions that included recurrent, terrifying images of repetitive and proliferating dots, nets, and flowers that threatened to overtake everything, herself included.<sup>16</sup> These hallucinations, which persisted until she was ten,<sup>17</sup> remain sources of inspiration for the artist even today. The Infinity Net paintings that developed from them seem to have offered Kusama a sense of control, as if by recreating the patterns she had some power over their appearance and activity. Her childhood search for a means of representing the infinite reiterations of nets, polka dots, and flowers in her visions led her to tear clothing and papers into thousands of tiny pieces, shatter windows, mirrors, and dishes with stones and hammers, and render the minuscule networks found in leaves and butterfly wings. She cut "thou-



**Figure 3**  
Kusama with works (no longer extant)  
made of collaged cut-out heads, c. 1965

sands of faces from magazines and collected them in a box,"<sup>18</sup> an activity that she relates to a group of collages that she made in New York many years later (fig. 3). Indeed, obsessive accumulation, arguably the most consistent element in Kusama's production, seems to be a by-product of her hallucinations.

Kusama's illness has also helped to shape her creative process. She explains that, while others might be able to tolerate the monotonous labor long enough to complete only a square foot of one of her large canvases, her mental condition gives her the stamina and focus to cover huge surfaces with intricate, repetitive patterning.<sup>19</sup> These same powers of concentration permit Kusama to produce work at a prodigious rate. She estimates that during the early fifties she made five thousand small works on paper.<sup>20</sup> Since returning to Japan in the mid-seventies, not only has she created a large body of visual art, she has also published thirteen books of fiction and poetry. Kusama acknowledges that this level of production has psychic advantages, calling her work "art-medicine,"<sup>21</sup> both because it allows her to gain control over her extreme anxieties and also because the activity involved is, in itself, healing. Thus, in contrast to the practice of some of New York's most influential artists of the sixties, physical labor is at the very center of Kusama's art.<sup>22</sup>

In its mature manifestations Kusama's work has not evolved in a strictly linear fashion. She has never completely given up one medium for another, though at different times one form may dominate.<sup>23</sup> Her first three years in New York were occupied primarily with painting in oils. After working exclusively in white, she made Infinity Nets in a variety of colors, usually with contrasting backgrounds (cat. 6–7, for example). The dimensions of the works vary greatly, but in the early oils there is generally a good deal of impasto, and often the size of the mesh changes in different areas of a single canvas. There are also watercolors from this period that render the motif as a fine web of delicate lines.

The years 1961 and 1962 inaugurated a period of experimentation on Kusama's part. After 1961 she seems to have moved from one art form to another in a quest to express the consuming notion of infinity. The first of her collages, made of photographs of small sections of her net paintings arranged in checkerboard patterns, dates from 1962.<sup>24</sup> The same year, she created compositions from airmail and price stickers, file-folder labels, and gummed reinforcements (cat. 30–34) and made a large collage of dollar bills. Alexandra Munroe has noted the similarity between these works and Andy Warhol's silkscreen prints of money and stamps from the same time, stating that Kusama, in employing the actual object, adhered to modernist tradition.<sup>25</sup> However, Kusama already had proved daring enough to defy long-established aesthetic conventions, so it is doubtful that her choice of medium was simply the result of formal concerns. This is an instance where her need for repetitive physical labor comes into play. In her collages the obsessive accumulation of actual things, reinforced by the activity of pasting each element down, draws attention to the fevered mode of their creation; they become intense and pointedly personal in a manner alien to the cool detachment of a silkscreen print.

Although Kusama did not conform to what have since become defining characteristics of pop art, in the early sixties the trend was interpreted more broadly than it is today, and her collages of airmail stickers and dollar bills, emblems of contemporary consumer culture, were often seen in that context.<sup>26</sup> This relationship was reinforced by Kusama's sculptures, which she began making at the same time as the collages, using mundane household furniture and kitchen implements as their supports. It was probably in late 1961 that the artist began her first sculpture, *Accumulation No. 1* (cat. 42), in which she covered the frame of an old armchair with stuffed phallic protrusions sewn from canvas.<sup>27</sup> Her early objects incorporated the repetition essential to all her work and were painted monochrome white, silver, or bronze.

Shortly after completing them Kusama showed two of her earliest sculptures at Green Gallery in New York. When he was first organizing the gallery, director Richard Bellamy asked Kusama to join his stable. Although she chose not to do so, she did participate in two group shows there.<sup>28</sup> In September 1962 Bellamy presented *Accumulation No. 1* and *Accumulation No. 2* (cat. 43) in an exhibition dominated by pop artists. Included were works by Claes Oldenburg (who had developed his own very different soft sculpture at approxi-

mately the same time), George Segal, James Rosenquist, and Andy Warhol.<sup>29</sup> (Bellamy also showed Robert Morris, who would be associated with minimalism.) Kusama's sculptures, like the collages, were emphatically handmade and extremely labor-intensive, lacking the slick, unified surface that characterizes the signature pop work of artists such as Rosenquist, Warhol, and even Oldenburg.<sup>30</sup> Kusama was not commenting on mass culture; she was engaging the world of objects as she perceived it, distorted in a manner simultaneously disturbing and parodic.

If Kusama's paintings formed an elegant bridge between abstract expressionist and minimalist concerns, and her collages could be seen as handmade riffs on pop art or minimalist repetition, *Accumulation No. 1* and *No. 2* and the sculpture that followed make the urgent psychological issues underlying the artist's work more visible. Gone is the ethereal beauty of the paintings and the refinement of the collages; the phallic forms are absurd, and repetition only exaggerates their alienation from the quotidian domestic artifacts that act as their supports, making the sculpture cruder, funnier, and more aggressively emotional than anything Kusama had done before. These objects dare to be laughable, ugly, and threatening.

Kusama's sculpture had a strong and lasting impact in New York. In Lucy Lippard's 1966 essay "Eccentric Abstraction"—also the title of an exhibition that she organized that year at Fischbach Gallery, New York—she places the artist among a group whose work presaged what would later become known as postminimalism. Lippard says that the artists in the show "have evolved a . . . style that has a good deal in common with [minimalism] as well as, surprisingly, with aspects of Surrealism."<sup>31</sup> She notes that "around 1960, Yayoi Kusama developed similar ideas in her phallus-studded furniture which, though unquestionably fecund, remained surrealist in spirit."<sup>32</sup>

Lippard was perceptive in making this connection. Although Kusama rejects the notion of surrealist influence on her work, she clearly reshaped aspects of that practice to her own purposes. In 1954 she experimented with decalomania, a technique pioneered by surrealist André Masson and, in an early work from the fifties, she mixed traditional Japanese painting techniques with surrealist imagery.<sup>33</sup> Certain works on paper from the early fifties incorporate a spiderlike vaginal form associated with Joan Miró that was also adopted by the abstract expressionist painter Arshile Gorky. In addition, whether or not they were direct influences, precedents for some of her sculptures can be found in the sexually charged art of Hans Bellmer and Meret Oppenheim.

Kusama is especially close to surrealism in the way that she engages the notion of the fetish. When surrealist writer and theoretician Georges Bataille challenged "any art lover to adore a canvas as a fetishist adores a shoe,"<sup>34</sup> he used the Freudian concept of fetishism to destabilize and undermine what the surrealists saw as pervasive bourgeois values and modes of thinking in regard to high art. Freud maintained that fetishism resulted from the childhood trauma that occurs when a young boy discovers that his mother has no penis and

assumes that she has been castrated. A number of contemporary writers have objected to the way Freud casts fetishism, a by-product of the Oedipus complex and thus central to psychoanalysis, as a wholly male phenomenon,<sup>35</sup> and it remains open to debate whether women can be fetishists in the classic Freudian sense. At stake is the very notion of creativity, which has been closely linked by some psychoanalysts to the mechanism of fetishism.<sup>36</sup>

In Freudian theory the fetish for men becomes a substitute for the mother's missing phallus. It functions as a vehicle of "disavowal," allowing the fetishist subconsciously to maintain the illusion that the mother has a penis even though, on a conscious level, he knows that she does not.<sup>37</sup> Although unlikely to be traumatized by the notion of castration, there is no question that women also behave fetishistically, coping with fears by imbuing objects with magical powers and engaging with them through repetitive behavior. In this regard Kusama's art exhibits traits that are undeniably fetishistic. In psychological fetishism the ritualized use of the fetish object serves to ward off anxiety, just as the repetitive, labor-intensive work involved in making her art has assuaged the anxieties induced by Kusama's childhood hallucinations.

The artist says that she originally created her sculptures (and later her nude performances) because she was afraid of sex in general and of male genitalia specifically.<sup>38</sup> If this account seems inconsistent with Kusama's sexualized self-portrayal in certain photographs and occasional participation in the nude performances, it is wholly consistent with her attempts to master her anxieties by engaging, and even replicating, their causes. The fetishistic reiteration of phallic forms in her sculpture simultaneously reifies and combats her fears of sexuality, just as the repetitive recreation of net patterns in her paintings both embodies and counters the terror of her hallucinations. However, in the case of the sculpture, the phallic protrusions represent the actual penis; Kusama appropriates but does not conceal the cause of her fear, whereas Freud's male fetishist endows with meaning an object that symbolizes and so hides the source of his anxiety.

But Kusama's art is not simply concerned with the reenactment of her visions or the expression of her fears; she makes the mechanism of fetishism visible in a wholly conscious way at the same time as she exhibits fetishistic practices. Take, for example, a staple of her sculptural vocabulary, the high-heeled shoe crammed with one or more of her stuffed phallic forms (cat. 53). She says that from the beginning these pieces represented an intentional "doubling of the fetish" and, as such, served to make her message more intense.<sup>39</sup> High-heeled shoes are, of course, a cliché of male fetishism and fantasy, and Kusama uses them to exploit their significance in the larger social arena. More than any other found element, the shoes play a recurrent role in her work from the sixties: as discrete sculptures, in clusters, and in larger, more complex works. For example, in *Compulsion Furniture* (1966) a phallus-stuffed, bronze high heel lies amid bowls, cups, and other kitchen utensils. These have been covered with



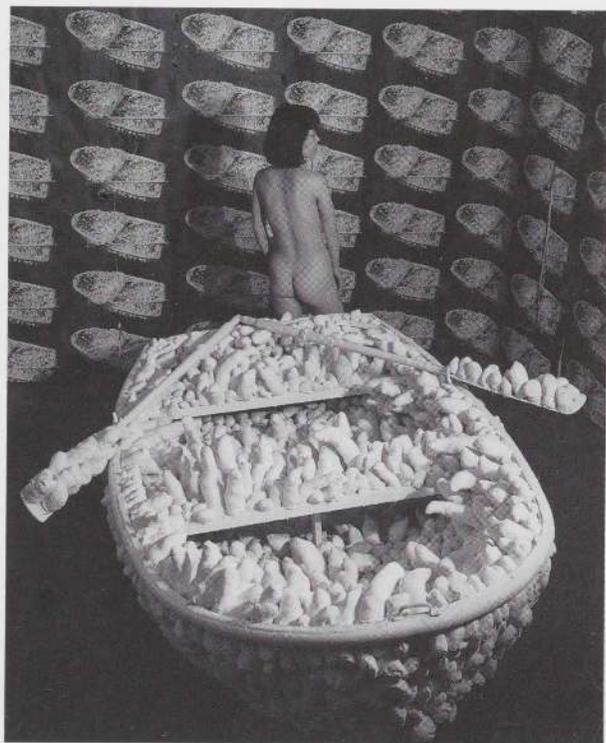
**Figure 4**  
Kusama with macaroni mannequin (no longer extant) from her Food Obsession series, c. 1966

brightly colored and exuberantly patterned fabric and are themselves filled with stuffed phalluses.<sup>40</sup>

*Compulsion Furniture* manifests a significant shift that had taken place in Kusama's work. By 1965 she had introduced a profusion of color into her sculpture through the use of dotted and striped fabrics. Generally she continued to employ ordinary household objects and furniture as supports and left these strongly hued sculptures unpainted. At around the same time, she began working with store mannequins (fig. 4; cat. 71), objects that fascinated the surrealists and that are also a classic part of the repertoire of fetishism. Kusama painted these figures with brightly colored Infinity Nets or covered them with stuffed phalluses, polka dots, or macaroni, and placed them in mock domestic environments inundated with color and pattern down to their pasta-laden floors. Her dystopic vision, linking sexuality and rampant gluttony, is expressed most explicitly in her mannequin environments of the mid-sixties, which are more literal and less abstract than much of her art.<sup>41</sup>

Although it seems obvious today, no critic of the period mentioned the underlying subject of these works, no doubt because there was, as yet, little place in intellectual discourse for concerns specific to women.<sup>42</sup> In fact, these fundamentally ephemeral installations both explore and satirize the construction of feminine identities. Filled with such paraphernalia as vanities, clothing, and hairbrushes, installations like *Yayoi Kusama: Driving Image Show* (see frontispiece) recall nothing so much as off-kilter dollhouses for life-size Barbies, stand-in humans subsumed by the patterns that threatened to overtake Kusama as a child. These environments are like blown-up, skewed versions of the domestic tableaux frequently created by little girls. Customarily made with doll furniture, doll clothes, and makeshift arrangements of toys that stand in for desired objects, these children's constructions are training grounds for adult life, where girls work through their relationships to the female role models prevalent in the culture at large. Mannequins, like Barbie dolls, are glamorous creatures, often displayed in chic clothing, in possession of ensemble furniture and flawless bodies.

In her Food Obsession sculptures Kusama turned this ideal on its head. Dried macaroni took over the mannequin's perfect form and fashionable accoutrements. The proliferation of pasta seems to represent both excess and clawing need in the process of overtaking what was once a cool, unassailable exterior. Kusama says that her sculpture on this theme was an expression of the terror she felt when she imagined, passing by on a conveyor belt, the vast amount of food that a person consumes in a lifetime.<sup>43</sup> Today her food-encrusted mannequins appear to comment on the illnesses of anorexia and bulimia—hardly discussed at the time<sup>44</sup>—where the exaggerated, obsessive attempts to conform to a feminine ideal become physically destructive. More recently these eating disorders have been seen as rites of passage run amok and, like sexual fetishism, they act as “transitional mechanism[s] for coping with underlying unconscious conflicts.”<sup>45</sup>



**Figure 5**  
Kusama in *Aggregation: One Thousand Boats Show* installation, Gertrude Stein Gallery, New York, 1963; photograph by Rudolph Burckhardt

Kusama also explored the construction of the feminine in her photo-based work. During her years in New York she commissioned many photographs depicting her artwork and frequently including herself as well. Although a series of different photographers “took” these pictures, the images were, in essence, authored by her. Rudy Burckhardt, who photographed Kusama nude in the installation *Aggregation: One Thousand Boats Show* (1963–64), reports that she told him exactly how to compose that picture (fig. 5).<sup>46</sup> These photographs thus belong to the convention that weds self-portraiture and performance for the camera. This form had been pioneered by photographers in the 1800s, explored by Marcel Duchamp and Man Ray earlier in this century, and was taken up in the late sixties and seventies by artists involved in the discourse on the body, among them Vito Acconci, Eleanor Antin, and Dennis Oppenheim.<sup>47</sup>

There is little that is overtly sexual in the Burckhardt photograph. Kusama is turned away from the viewer and strikes an almost classical pose. In contrast, a well-known image taken by fashion photographer Hal Reiff in the mid-to-late sixties presents Kusama in a pose associated with old-fashioned pinups, one that entices with the promise of available sex (fig. 6). Naked, the artist lies on her stomach atop *Accumulation No. 2*, which has a couch as its frame. Her knees are bent, her lower legs raised, her feet, in high heels, crossed. She looks back at the viewer, her face resting in her hand. Her hair is cut in bangs, as usual, but it is longer than it had been previously, flowing down her back and across her shoulders. The hairstyle and black eyeliner recall the seductress Cleopatra as recently played, Hollywood-style, by Elizabeth Taylor. The artist is covered in polka dots, long part of her visual vocabulary. Seen in the context of the upbeat, brightly patterned, pop-derived designs that accompanied the English cultural invasion of the United States in the middle and late sixties, Kusama’s dots take on a “mod” fashionability.

Kusama was known to be hungry for publicity, and that is probably how this photograph was most often understood at the time it was made.<sup>48</sup> However, like most of her works, it accommodates contradictory meanings. Intentionally sexually provocative and openly exhibitionistic, the image also can be seen as evidence of Kusama’s desire to conflate the representational and the actual, the art and the artist. If at first sight the blatantly exploitative qualities of the picture seem to refute this interpretation, the numerous instances in which Kusama has made herself inseparable from her work support it.

This is especially evident in the collages that she created from many of the photographs that she commissioned. One group provides greater insight into her artistic goals than any other aspect of her oeuvre. Kusama wanted her work to invade and conquer the world like an epidemic. Her collages present

**Figure 6**  
Collage (c. 1966, no longer extant) with photograph by Hal Reiff of Kusama reclining on *Accumulation No. 2*





**Figure 7**  
Collage (no longer extant), 1964, with  
photograph by Peter Moore

**Figure 8**  
Kusama with macaroni mannequin (no  
longer extant) from her Food Obsession  
series, February 1964; photograph by  
Peter Moore, © the Estate of Peter Moore



fantasy environments akin to the *Driving Image* shows, except that their flattened spaces are so densely layered and packed with art that they would be impossible to realize in the physical world.<sup>49</sup> In them her artwork seems to overwhelm the air itself.<sup>50</sup> The artist serves as a pictorial element in many of these collages. In one she floats above a macaroni-strewn floor, holding against her body a dress encrusted with dried pasta (fig. 7). She is framed by a large phallic dressing-table sculpture, which in turn is framed by a net painting. In another she wears net stockings, emblems of sexuality that also mirror the pattern of the painting.

Similarly, Kusama's desire to completely integrate herself and her work is expressed in an unmanipulated photograph that shows her standing before the same vanity-sculpture beside a mannequin that is covered from head to toe in macaroni. Kusama wears a densely patterned crocheted blouse that, in the black-and-white photograph, closely resembles the pattern on the pasta-laden mannequin and, again, net stockings. Mirror images, sister creatures, artist and mannequin gaze outward, hairbrushes in their hands (fig. 8). In the Reiff photograph she goes one step further, omitting the mannequins and sporting the polka dots herself. Her art—even her painting—was always fundamentally performatory, with the process overshadowing the product and the artist subsuming the art. The photo-works where Kusama appears wearing net stockings, a crocheted blouse, or polka dots make these concerns explicit.

It is interesting to note that Kusama seldom appeared naked in her live performances. Her nudity was usually reserved for the inanimate eye of the camera in posed photographs.<sup>51</sup> Control, to the extent that she was able to exercise it, was important to her. In the Reiff photograph Kusama exerts additional control because, as a pin-up, she is available to vision but not to touch; she promises, but does not deliver.<sup>52</sup> The artist substitutes performance for presence in a stereotypical representation of femininity that is a piece of theater, a

masquerade, and "masquerade," as feminist film theorist Mary Anne Doane has pointed out, "in flaunting femininity, holds it at a distance."<sup>53</sup>

There is a degree of cruelty, as well as humor, in the way that Kusama exploits gender-based stereotypes in the Reiff image. Depicting herself not only as a pinup but also as a seductress in the mode of Hollywood's Cleopatra, Kusama becomes, like that mythical figure, a *femme fatale*.<sup>54</sup> This dominating and dangerous female type has been around since Eve who, lacking in moral sensitivity and will power, precipitated the Fall of Man.<sup>55</sup> She is Freud's narcissistic woman, usually very beautiful, who cares only for herself and causes great dissatisfaction in her lover.<sup>56</sup> In the genre of film noir the *femme fatale* always gets her comeuppance, a victim of her own lust for power and enjoyment. In the meantime she ruins the lives of the men whose paths she crosses.<sup>57</sup> Doane notes that the power of masquerade, for women, "lies in its potential to manufacture a distance from the image, to generate a problematic within which the image is manipulable, producible, and readable by [them]."<sup>58</sup> Clearly Kusama grasped the social dynamics behind two examples of masquerade, the pinup and the *femme fatale*, and was able to use these modes of depiction to her own ends. In the photograph in question she acquires power in one of the few forms in which it was available to her. Such power may be facilitated by a male imperative for its own ends, but it is power nonetheless.

Kusama manipulated cultural as well as sexual stereotypes. In New York and Europe she typically donned a kimono for important openings.<sup>59</sup> Assimilating the cultural biases that had been imposed upon her, she presented herself as she expected to be seen.<sup>60</sup> Race complicates and also intensifies issues of female representation.<sup>61</sup> For Westerners the kimono probably evoked the image of a demure and passive Asian woman, a far more acceptable and less threatening figure than the Japanese *femme fatale* seen in the Reiff photograph. The kimono also infused Kusama's presence with an extra whiff of the exotic, further enhancing the special appeal that Asian women have for many Western men.<sup>62</sup> At the same time, by emphasizing her own Japaneseness she could share the cachet enjoyed by Zen Buddhism and other forms of Eastern thought in intellectual circles in the United States during the fifties and sixties.<sup>63</sup>

In engaging issues of gender, race, and culture in these ways Kusama was wielding a double-edged sword, and the strategy worked against her in the long run. Invoking stereotypes that imparted sexual allure and mystery may have given her some increased leverage within the male power structure. But a woman artist had to fight to be taken seriously no matter who she was, and Kusama's masquerades provided fodder for those inclined to dismiss her efforts. There is no question that prevailing attitudes toward ethnicity and gender would have colored the reception of her work no matter how she chose to present herself, but her sexualized self-image also contributed to the way she was perceived and represented by others. Even positive reviews of her work termed her "a young Japanese" in 1961,<sup>64</sup> "little Kusama" in 1964,<sup>65</sup> and "a diminutive

Japanese girl with long black hair, pretty enough to decorate any environment" in 1965,<sup>66</sup> progressively undermining any authority she might have accrued.

While sexuality and related concerns have always been at the center of Kusama's endeavor, the artist Carolee Schneemann, who knew Kusama well during the sixties, confirms that she "really wasn't a sensualist"<sup>67</sup> and that, as we have seen, Kusama's works express as much concern with negotiating power as with sexual desire. If, in the prefeminist sixties, Kusama lacked a theoretical construction within which to frame the social issues she engaged, a recent statement shows that she has since acquired a means of verbalizing those concerns: "Except for childbearing, something men consider an act of nature, men monopolize all rights to a full life, granting women nothing but an unproductive place in society. Men believe women exist for sex only and are useful only as a sex tool. The way men look at women, collecting them like pets, forces the women to wear makeup and skimpy clothes."<sup>68</sup>

Since Kusama's inclination was always to adapt to what life offered, it is not surprising that her work of the sixties reflected the conditions under which it was made, without intellectualizing her plight as a woman.<sup>69</sup> If her understanding of gender relations was largely intuitive, it was also incisive. Her response to the problem was no doubt catalyzed by the New York art world, which during the sixties was an excruciatingly difficult place for women artists. While gender bias in the arts has by no means been eradicated, conditions then were considerably worse than they are today. Schneemann recalls that, as a woman, "You had to shut up and affiliate yourself with really interesting men. . . . You could be an artist, but you were [really] a kind of cunt-mascot. You had to be good-looking." Schneemann had great respect and affection for Kusama's tenacity: "She had tremendous will and never, ever accepted the hierarchical values which she entered as a stranger. She never thought Oldenburg was more important than she was, just because he was getting collectors and galleries. . . . And she never let anyone treat her as if she wasn't absolutely the most critical artist they could. . . . encounter."<sup>70</sup> Few women were able to sustain careers in this environment. While male artists were encouraged to give full expression to their masculinity, women had to suppress their femaleness in their work to be taken seriously, and often in their lives as well.<sup>71</sup>

This was the environment that Kusama confronted in the United States. Given her sensitivity to her surroundings and the way in which her art and life intertwined, her social milieu naturally affected her sculptural work in the early sixties as it had her painting a few years earlier. It is telling, for example, that the phallic forms that made their appearance in her work three or four years after her arrival in New York are the only formal element central to her visual repertory that have no precedent in her earlier production.<sup>72</sup> It is likely that they were, at least in part, a response to the milieu in which she found herself and the pressures that it generated.

Kusama's reaction to the male-dominated New York art world is evident in the barbed humor of any number of her sculptures. In *Traveling Life*



**Figure 9**  
Kusama holding spoon with phallic form attached, part of an Accumulation sculpture, c. 1966



**Figure 10**  
Kusama in *Infinity Mirror Room*, Castellane Gallery, New York, 1965

(cat. 46) high-heeled shoes sit on the rungs of a tall ladder. Surrounded by phalluses, they are poised for an upward climb. The shoes in this instance seem to represent Kusama and the sculpture as a whole to express the way she understood her situation: surrounded, threatened, and almost overtaken by men as she attempted to fight her way to the top in the New York art world.<sup>73</sup> If in her photographs Kusama sometimes used her feminine allure as protection, here the spike heels become a defensive weapon. In *Ironing Board* (cat. 45) a steam iron sits, face down, threatening to scorch and flatten the sea of erect phalluses covering the surface. In numerous kitchen utensil sculptures a phallus is clamped in a set of tongs (cat. 52) or, severed from its base, offered to the viewer on a spatula or spoon (fig. 9).

Kusama's sculptural practice and her preoccupation with the idea of infinity found a natural outgrowth in installation work. Her first such environment, *Aggregation: One Thousand Boats Show* (cat. 54), opened at the Gertrude Stein Gallery in New York in December 1963. The artist produced a poster showing her large white rowboat sculpture on a dark background and papered the walls with 999 copies of it (see fig. 5). A dim, narrow hallway led to a larger room in which the boat was spotlit, so viewers were inundated with its image before they encountered the object. Thus Kusama created a situation wherein the boat-sculpture, known and anticipated before it was seen, like a canonical masterpiece, became the original of all the reproductions that surrounded it. The work was also unabashedly theatrical, a quality not especially prized in New York in the sixties, when even performance, defined in relation to minimalist sculpture or conceptual and body art, frequently rejected the entertaining and emotive in favor of a stripped-down, systemic approach to abstract, intellectual content.<sup>74</sup>

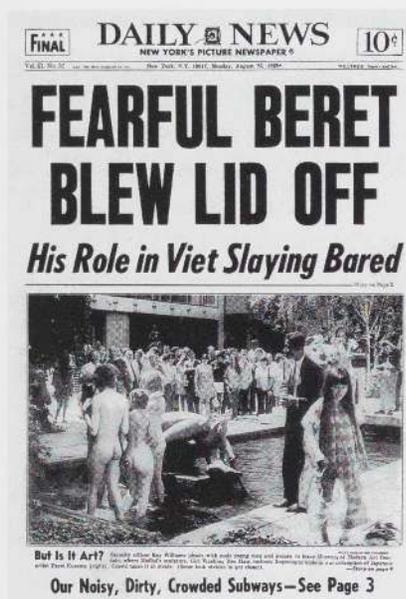
In her two mirrored installations of the period, *Infinity Mirror Room—Phalli's Field* (cat. 80) and *Kusama's Peep Show* (also known as *Endless Love Show* [1966; see pp. 168–69]), Kusama created fully realized, discrete environments. In so doing, she blurred distinctions between disciplines, since these were undeniably architectural works, shown in a fine-art context, which she used for essentially theatrical purposes (fig. 10). The viewer, endlessly multiplied by mirrors, became part of a dramatic event. These chambers also functioned as stage sets for the many photographs of herself that Kusama had taken within them.

In *Empire of Signs*, his book on the semiotics of Japanese culture, Roland Barthes writes, "In the West, the mirror is an essentially narcissistic object: man conceives a mirror only in order to look at himself in it."<sup>75</sup> In Late Renaissance and Early Baroque paintings of Venus or Bathsheba, where the toilette becomes a conventional theme of femininity, it is women who carry mirrors, symbolizing vanity.<sup>76</sup> An obvious interpretation is that Kusama's mirrored rooms are explorations of voyeurism, and that the photographs taken within them are exercises in narcissism and vanity. But this ignores Kusama's ability to embed multiple meanings in her work. In these environments she took the col-

lage principle—essential to her art since 1962 and manifest in the wallpaper of the *One Thousand Boats Show*—to what was for her its logical conclusion. Within these spaces images replicate themselves in a manner that gives the fullest expression to her abiding notion of infinite repetition. For Kusama accumulation and obliteration coexist; enough polka dots can annihilate the world. As Barthes also tells us, “[I]n the Orient, apparently, the mirror is empty; it is a symbol of the very emptiness of symbols. . . [T]he mirror intercepts only other mirrors, and this infinite reflection is emptiness itself. . .”<sup>77</sup> In Kusama’s mirrored rooms Eastern emptiness and Western proliferation are one.

During the 1966 opening for *Kusama’s Peep Show*, the second of these mirrored environments and the last that she created in the West, the artist dispensed “Love Forever” buttons;<sup>78</sup> three months later she offered for sale—at 1,200 lire each (then around two dollars)—the 1,500 plastic mirror balls that constituted *Narcissus Garden* (cat. 81), her unofficial entry to the Venice Biennale.<sup>79</sup> These actions can be seen as her first public performance works. Live art was to occupy her increasingly, so that by 1968 it had become her main activity. This was a logical development, given the manner in which she previously had used photography to exploit the theatrical potential of her environmental sculpture. Despite documentary photographs and the expressionistic 1967 film *Kusama’s Self-Obliteration* (cat. 82), made with filmmaker Jud Yalkut (which combines footage from multiple happenings and does convey their orgiastic aspects), her time-based works are essentially lost to us.<sup>80</sup>

Kusama’s performances reflected a time when long-standing suppositions about the nature of social institutions were widely challenged and art was charged with dematerializing itself. Her first public events were mounted at the Black Gate Theater in New York in June 1967. By midsummer she had moved to the streets, staging Body Festivals in Tompkins Square and Washington Square. There she painted her signature polka dots on rolls of paper and on the vagabond flower children who populated the parks.<sup>81</sup> Neither before the late sixties nor since her return to Japan in the seventies has Kusama’s art been motivated by geopolitics. However, in the charged climate of those years nudity itself could be seen as a sociopolitical statement, and more pointedly ideological issues also found their way into her happenings. In 1968 she staged *Naked Demonstration/Anatomic Explosion* on Wall Street. In her press release for the action Kusama proclaimed, “STOCK IS A FRAUD! STOCK MEANS NOTHING TO THE WORKING MAN. STOCK IS A LOT OF CAPITALIST BULLSHIT,” and admonished people to “OBLITERATE WALL STREET MEN WITH POLKA\*DOTS.” More consistent with Kusama’s usual concerns, in August 1969 she directed *Grand Orgy to Awaken the Dead at MoMA* (*Otherwise Known as the Museum of Modern Art*). The happening occurred in the museum’s sculpture garden, where eight naked participants stepped into the pool and mimed the poses of the sculptures around them. The event made the front page of the *New York Daily News* (fig. 11).<sup>82</sup>



**Figure 11**

Front page of New York *Daily News* with photograph of Kusama's *Grand Orgy to Awaken the Dead* at MoMA, 25 August 1969

Kusama's performances were notorious. Even her most consistent supporters had, as one critic put it, the "lurking sense that there is absolutely nothing she would not do for publicity." He goes on, "There's a certain value in any artist who pushes to the extremes—he may uncover materials others may make coherent use of, whether or not he is coherent in himself. But Kusama leaves one wondering. She wouldn't be so spooky if she were entirely an artist—or entirely an exploiter. But like Andy Warhol, she is a blend of the two, combining the obsession of an artist with the ruthless cynicism of an exploiter. And there is a lurking sense that when she talks about self-destruction, she means every word of it."<sup>83</sup> As Kusama's involvement with performance increased, the coverage of her activities in the art journals lessened. More and more she found her print audience in tabloid newspapers and other kinds of magazines. There they dubbed her "The Polka-Dot Princess."<sup>84</sup> James Golata, Kusama's business manager at the time, remembers that she was annoyed at being ignored by the art press but felt that the tabloids were a good place for art, since they brought it to "the people."<sup>85</sup>

Artist Mike Kelley, who included a photograph of Kusama posing with a macaroni-laden mannequin in his 1993 book *The Uncanny*,<sup>86</sup> sees the art world's dismissal of Kusama's performances as reflecting a pervasive disregard for the more radical manifestations of sixties counterculture.<sup>87</sup> With hindsight it can be difficult to accept the romanticized excesses of that time, its utopian belief in the infallibility of the individual and the power of unmediated feelings. These and kindred assumptions are at the core of much of the cultural production of the period, Kusama's work included. Her happenings engage and explore a constellation of attitudes that became emblematic of the time: capitalism is bad; the work ethic is oppressive; individual expression is the answer; free love will cure the world's ills.

Although it is difficult today to grasp the exact nature of Kusama's performances, the documentation that exists makes it clear that they constitute the bluntest and most aggressive aspect of her work. If, in the sculpture, phallic protrusions overtake domestic objects like ravenous bacteria, the performances confronted viewers with actual bodies, vulnerable in their nakedness and covered with rashlike dots that suggest infection and extreme discomfort. The film *Self-Obliteration* includes scenes from Kusama's orgy-performances that seem not entirely celebratory. Like all of her work, the events were double-edged, mixing the satirical with the slightly sadistic. Group abandon left participants open to domination by the artist who, in one scene, slips a sock over someone's penis and then dabs it with paint. Kusama thus infantilizes masculinity, robbing it of its symbolic power to dominate, a goal achieved in many of her sculptures as well. In *Self-Obliteration* she and Yalkut capture a feeling of hollowness that—despite the ethic of peace and love—also resonated during a period when the measure of cool was to what extent you could live in the moment, explore sensation, and make no judgments or commitments. Whether or not

Kusama meant to reveal the dark side of the sexual revolution, she was unquestionably caught up in the hippie environment and was responding to it.

It is possible that the sensitivity and responsiveness to the cultural moment that served Kusama so well during her early years in New York worked against her a decade later, when the art world's injunction against physicality encouraged her to abandon the material manifestations of her art. Although conceptually repetitive, the performance work did not necessitate the long hours of repetitious labor that had been Kusama's "art medicine." In addition to being robbed of this therapeutic activity, she also inhabited a social milieu that was extremely unstable. For someone with Kusama's anxieties this must have been a highly stressful situation.<sup>88</sup> Never easy, life became even more emotionally and financially difficult for her during the late sixties.<sup>89</sup>

Despite the accusations of sensationalism and publicity seeking, there is no question that Kusama was as serious about her happenings as she had been about her other creative endeavors. Not only were they aesthetically consistent with the rest of her artistic project, emphasizing her usual themes of repetition and obsession as well as her engagement with the body; they were also politically important to her. Udo Kultermann is one of a number of people who remember that in the late sixties Kusama was adamantly against the Vietnam War.<sup>90</sup> Jon Hendricks, who in the seventies was a founding member of the Guerilla Art Action Group, a performance collaborative, says that Kusama was influential for them, citing particularly her MOMA performance piece.<sup>91</sup>

Although she has not always received credit for her innovations, when Kusama departed the United States in the seventies she left a legacy that affected her own generation and is still felt today.<sup>92</sup> Lippard surmises that of all the artists in New York during the sixties Kusama provided the most significant precedent for the obsessive, repetitive, body-oriented objects of Eva Hesse, one of the most influential postminimalists.<sup>93</sup> In the late seventies Louise Bourgeois made sculpture with protrusions closely resembling the phallus-studded furniture that Kusama created in the middle sixties. In a 1978 performance by Bourgeois, participants wore garments very reminiscent of Kusama's clothing-sculptures from the earlier period (fig. 12).<sup>94</sup> Thus, even during the time when her accomplishments were eclipsed in the West, Kusama's influence was indirectly felt through the work of two of our most powerful sculptors.

There are many reasons why Kusama was largely forgotten after her return to Japan. It was not only because she left New York before conditions for women artists had substantially improved, or because some in the art world looked askance at the performances that were her overriding concern immediately prior to her departure. It is important to recognize that only a tiny percentage of even our most successful artists are able to maintain careers in the face of the waxing and waning of aesthetic and market trends, and that a unique interweaving of professional, personal, and circumstantial factors determines the staying power of each artist of unusual talent and creative energy. Among



**Figure 12**

Louise Bourgeois, *A Banquet/A Fashion Show of Body Parts*, Hamilton Gallery, New York, 1978; photograph by Peter Moore, © the Estate of Peter Moore

practical considerations, the long-term commitment of an influential gallery might have made a difference, but Kusama never had that kind of support.

Earlier I argued that the currency of a particular body of artwork seems determined in large part by the degree to which, in it, an artist gives voice to what will ultimately become dominant cultural trends as they emerge. I would also argue that the sixties were not when Kusama's creative sensibility was optimally in synch with those trends. Between 1958 and 1968 she engaged certain key formal and conceptual concerns of her adopted artistic milieu. Before such categories were more narrowly defined, she could be seen as a minimalist because she employed the strategies of repetition and modularity or as a pop artist because she integrated elements from popular culture and everyday life.<sup>95</sup> At its core, however, her art was too organic in its references, too emotional, and in some cases too crude, to fully conform to the dominant aesthetics of the period. Although it may not have been obvious during the sixties, when her affinities with developing styles would have been more prominent than the differences, Kusama's art ultimately proved problematic in its idiosyncratic involvement with autobiography, the body, and the feminine voice. But it is those very qualities that make it especially resonant today.

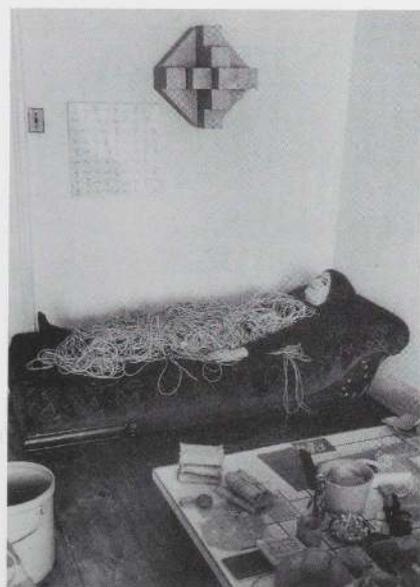
Over the last twenty-five years there has been a shift in the art world from an emphasis on the notions of objective and enduring truths, associated with modernism, to a postmodern discourse that, as cultural theorist Andreas Huyssen has described it, "operates in a field of tension between tradition and innovation, conservatism and renewal, mass culture and high art, in which the second terms are no longer automatically privileged over the first; a field of tension which can no longer be grasped in categories such as progress versus reaction, left versus right, present versus past, modernism versus realism,

abstraction versus representation, avant-garde versus kitsch.”<sup>96</sup> In the seventies, feminists’ close examination of representations of women in art and popular culture began a process of destabilizing notions of sexual identity. In the eighties, fueled by the AIDS epidemic, attention focused on explorations of the human body that emphasized its constantly shifting social construction and meaning.<sup>97</sup> These developments have combined with the broader multicultural debate to sensitize art audiences in the United States to issues of sexuality, gender, and ethnicity.<sup>98</sup>

The resulting intellectual climate has proved hospitable to Kusama, who was in many ways postmodern *avant la lettre*. Her embrace of seeming dichotomies and her prescient examination of culturally prescribed identities have made her increasingly important for younger artists. Fundamentally performatory, her installations and photographs anticipate work by Janine Antoni, Matthew Barney, Yasumasa Morimura, and many others. For Kusama the body is both the vehicle and the central metaphor for the expression of emotional and, in particular, erotic experience; fragmented, absurd, and vulnerable, it is simultaneously horrific and comical. This attitude prefigures sculpture and photographs by such artists as Robert Gober, Rona Pondick, Cindy Sherman, and Kiki Smith, all of whom focus on the body or its parts as a means of examining extreme psychological states.<sup>99</sup>

Pondick endorses the idea that Kusama’s disappearance from the annals of art history in the seventies occurred because her art was too idiosyncratic and emotional to have been fully assimilated in the more doctrinaire sixties. At that time, Pondick feels, formal issues so dominated the cultural discussion that the extra-art content of a work often went unmentioned. She points out that thirty years ago Hesse was recognized less for her exploration of sexuality than for her use of unconventional materials.<sup>100</sup> A humorous photograph from around 1968 shows Hesse lying rigidly face-up, eyes open, on an old-fashioned chaise longue, fully dressed as if ready for burial or psychoanalysis (fig. 13). She is covered with cord or rope of a type that could have been used in her sculpture. A comparison of this image with the photograph of Kusama nude on *Accumulation No. 2* illustrates the point. Hesse is cloaked with and subsumed by the material nature of her art, while nonformal matters such as sexuality and identity are the main event for Kusama. In Pondick’s view, Hesse’s work is more controlled, more concerned with art issues: “Kusama did everything that Hesse was afraid to do,” she asserts. Pondick feels that in Kusama’s work there is the sense that she is not out to please anyone; she shows you how to “just do, without worrying about how it’s perceived.”<sup>101</sup> Pondick’s point is important. Although Kusama craved recognition, she also had an overriding need to make her own statement. Forced to choose between art-world esteem and personal expression, as she was with her performance work, personal expression prevailed.

Like Pondick, artist Polly Apfelbaum is intrigued by the obsession evident in the work, although Apfelbaum focuses more on the manner in which



**Figure 13**  
Eva Hesse posed on sofa, c. 1968

Kusama uses the freedom inherent in abstraction; in particular she notes the nature of Kusama's mark and how its repetition can communicate shifting states of mind.<sup>102</sup> Mike Kelley, on the other hand, responds to Kusama's visceral materials, the psychedelia in her imagery, and the gaudiness of her work. He "like[s] the artists of that period who thought about their actions and...their position in the world as somehow equivalent to their art production...[so that] dress and behavior...become part of the work."<sup>103</sup> Jessica Diamond showed parts of her ongoing multidisciplinary project *Tributes to Kusama* in the Aperto section of the Venice Biennale in 1993<sup>104</sup> (the same year that Kusama represented Japan in that exhibition), adopting Kusama's bright palette of the mid-sixties for wall paintings that utilize text. Far from ignoring the performance pieces, in a 1992 work Diamond highlights the phrase "stock is a fraud" from Kusama's 1968 Wall Street happening.<sup>105</sup>

The complexity of Kusama's enterprise makes her oeuvre deep, rich, and unpredictable. She has been able to combine exhibitionism and apparent opportunism with deep commitment and profound meaning, sexual provocation with sexual ambivalence. During Kusama's New York years her work evidenced extraordinary material ambition even as it moved inexorably toward ephemerality. Throughout the period she remained remarkably consistent. That the whole of her New York production is essentially performatory is apparent from the primacy of process that always determined the formal attributes of her two- and three-dimensional work. Kusama's vision of infinity and her desire to subsume the world around her also remained constant. As early as 1961 she exhibited a nine-by-thirty-three-foot canvas in a one-person exhibition at the Stephen Radich Gallery (fig. 20, p. 48).<sup>106</sup> An early form of installation art, paintings like these represented efforts to create spaces totally defined by art, forecasting her later photocollages, installations, and mirrored rooms.

Kusama's world has been dominated by a marathon dance of production that obliterates any separation between art and life. She and her art are wedded so inextricably that it is impossible to tell where one begins and the other leaves off. In confronting the depth and breadth of her work one encounters an unusually raw form of invention. Daring—for better or worse—can be a by-product of true obsession, and Kusama has been daring, creating the art that she must against great odds. At another time we might have mythologized her in the manner of Vincent van Gogh and Jackson Pollock, romantic figures whose obsessive need to create was paralleled by an even stronger inclination to push emotional and physical boundaries to the edge of self-destruction. If Kusama is heroic, it is for an opposite and arguably more prosaic reason. Rather than suffering for her art, she has used it to fight psychic disintegration, and it stands as evidence of and reward for that battle. Today, in the United States, much of the art world is disenchanted with movements and trends and suspicious of grand proclamations and global theories. Kusama—offbeat, relentless, and female—may be the only kind of hero that we can accept.

## Notes

- 1 Kusama went back to Japan in 1973. After that, she lived intermittently there, in Europe, and in the United States until she returned to Japan in 1975. Kusama, interview by author, Itsusuji Gallery, Tokyo, 1 October 1995.
- 2 Date in Bhupendra Karia, "Biographical Notes," in *Yayoi Kusama: A Retrospective* exh. cat., (New York: Center for International Contemporary Arts, 1989), 74. Many of the watercolors were reworked in the 1960s. Some retain elements from the early fifties; other were completely repainted or drawn over.
- 3 This Tenth Street co-op, administered by the brothers Nicholas and John Krushenick, showed a number of influential artists early in their careers. See Selected Exhibition History.
- 4 Lucy Lippard, "The Silent Art," *Art in America* 55, no. 1 (January–February 1967): 60.
- 5 Sidney Tillim, "In the Galleries," *Arts* 34, no. 1 (October 1959): 56.
- 6 Dore Ashton, "Art: Tenth Street View," *New York Times* (23 October 1959); copy from Kusama archive.
- 7 Donald Judd, "Reviews and Previews: New Names This Month," *Artnews* 58, no. 6 (October 1959): 17. In his original draft of the review Judd ends by saying that Kusama's paintings "are advanced in all respects; the great frontality, the relative lack of tone, the dual economy and complexity of the structure, the importance of the single stroke, whose multiplicity is so essential here, and the color and detail as surface itself. The expression is cool and tough; its vast generality is achieved through a precision and an individuality of statement, not directly." Draft from Donald Judd archive, Marfa, Texas. Judd eventually owned two of Kusama's white paintings, at least one through purchase, as well as a large phallic sculpture from the 1970s, a smaller sculpture, and a painted dress from Kusama's New York period.
- 8 During the fifties, monochrome painting, though more influential in Europe than in the U.S., had precedents in New York art. Rauschenberg's all-white paintings of 1951 were primarily dada gestures, but his black paintings, begun the same year, were closer to Kusama's enterprise. Jasper Johns's first show at Castelli Gallery (January–February 1958) included *Green Target*, an all-white *Flag*, and the monochrome grey *Numbers* and *White Numbers*. Ad Reinhardt had been making monochrome canvases in blue and red since 1952; by 1954 he had reduced his palette to shades of black.
- 9 I have used "cultural situation" and "cultural moment," instead of the Marxist term "ideology," to define the deep, complex, and dynamic workings of culture. The concept of the cultural moment should not be confused with the romantic notion of an informing temporal spirit, or "zeitgeist."
- 10 T. W. Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory*, trans. C. Lenhart (London and Boston: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1984), 127.
- 11 Kusama, interview by author, Kusama's studio, Tokyo, 26 September 1995.
- 12 See, for example, Michel Thévoz, *Art Brut* (New York: Rizzoli, 1976), 11. The surrealists were also guilty of such stereotyping.
- 13 Mike Kelley coined this term, which is especially apt. Kelley, interview by author, Kelley's studio, Los Angeles, 27 March 1996.
- 14 See, for example, Karia, "Notes," 76 and 98.

- <sup>15</sup> Kultermann, interview by author, Kultermann's apartment, New York City, 17 April 1995.
- <sup>16</sup> Kusama often has discussed the relationship between her illness and her art. In 1975 she wrote "Struggles and Wandering of My Soul," which begins, "It was hallucination that drove me to paint." Unpublished typescript from Kusama archive. See also Alexandra Munroe, "Obsession, Fantasy and Outrage: The Art of Yayoi Kusama," in *Yayoi Kusama: A Retrospective*, 13–14.
- <sup>17</sup> Kusama, interview by author, Kusama's studio, Tokyo, 15 May 1996.
- <sup>18</sup> Kusama, interview by Gordon Brown for WABC radio, June 1964. Reprinted in Armando et al, eds., *De nieuwe stijl* (The new style), vol. 1 (Amsterdam: De Bezige Bij, [1965]). Research for this exhibition has located only one photocollage of cut-out heads, though multiple works of this kind are documented in photographs of Kusama's studio from the sixties and in a video done for Belgian television, *L'Ecole de New York* (Brussels: Radio Télévision Belge de la Communauté Française, 1965), where Kusama is seen amid cups and saucers, bed linen, and other household items that have been covered with these cut-outs.
- <sup>19</sup> Kusama, 26 September 1995 interview. On her larger canvases Kusama usually worked on one approximately twelve-inch-square area at a time. This method resulted in the linear divisions that subtly crisscross many of the paintings of her New York period.
- <sup>20</sup> Kusama, 15 May 1996 interview.
- <sup>21</sup> Kusama, 1 October 1995 interview. Kusama has strong feelings about psychiatric care for artists. She believes that Freudian analysis was damaging for her, because it robbed her of the energy that she used for art-making. Kusama, 26 September and 1 October 1995 interviews.
- <sup>22</sup> I am thinking here of pop artists like Andy Warhol, who favored commercial processes like silkscreen; minimalists like Donald Judd, who commissioned industrial and other fabricators to produce their work; and, at the end of the decade, conceptual artists like Lawrence Weiner, who believed that to present the artist's idea was sufficient, and there was no need to physically create the work.
- <sup>23</sup> For example, the Infinity Net oil paintings that Kusama first created in 1958 dominated her production for three years. After that, the net continued to function as an element in her visual alphabet and was adapted for different contexts. As the sixties wore on, it found its way into rapidly executed felt-pen drawings which, lacking both the complex visual texture and the intensity of the earlier paintings, became more a symbol of a process than a manifestation of the process itself; into more complex painted compositions; and onto mannequins used in installations. It eventually became a decorative motif on the clothing that Kusama designed toward the end of the decade.
- <sup>24</sup> Kusama, 15 May 1996 interview. She later said that she made four or five versions of this collage (Kusama, conversation with Laura Hoptman, The Museum of Modern Art, New York, 18 September 1996, recounted to the author).

- 25 Munroe, "Obsession," 20. The artist George Segal recounted that, upon seeing Warhol's repetitions of dollar bills, "We were amused. . . [b]ecause this Japanese girl Yayoi Kusama was already at the Green Gallery with her repetitions of penises" (Jean Stein, *Edie: An American Biography* [New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1982], 189).
- 26 Today we are more inclined to read Kusama's collages as elegant and witty puns on what was then a nascent minimalism. See, for example, Roberta Smith, "60's Minimalism, Looking Handmade," *New York Times*, 24 May 1996.
- 27 Donald Judd helped Kusama retrieve discarded furniture from the street for her first sculptures; he also assisted in stuffing the protrusions that cover *Accumulation No. 1* (Karia, "Notes," 79).
- 28 Richard Bellamy, interview by author, Oil and Steel Gallery, Long Island City, New York, 29 November 1995. Later Kusama changed her mind and asked her Washington, D.C., dealer, Beatrice Perry, and Judd to speak with Bellamy about representing her. No long-term arrangement came of this.
- 29 Lucy Lippard grouped Kusama with "others using popular objects in their work" in the early sixties, among them George Brecht, Dan Flavin, Robert Watts, and Robert Morris: "Yayoi Kusama anticipated Warhol's repeated rows of soup cans, money, green stamps, and photographs with her own repeated rows of mailing stickers used non-objectively" (Lippard, "New York Pop," in *Pop Art* [New York: Praeger, 1966], 75).
- 30 After 1962 handmade paintings and drawings were overshadowed by silkscreen as the primary medium for Warhol's art. Similarly, after 1963 or 1964 painterly aspects disappeared from Oldenburg's sculpture. There were, of course, exceptions—notably in the work of Jim Dine—to this trend in pop art.
- 31 Lippard, "Eccentric Abstraction," in *Art International* 10, no. 9 (20 November 1966): 28–40; reprinted in *Changing: Essays in Art Criticism* (New York: Dutton, 1971), 99. The exhibition did not include Kusama or the other precursors, which included Meret Oppenheim, Claes Oldenburg, Yves Tanguy, and Lee Bontecou.
- 32 Lippard, "Eccentric Abstraction," 101. Lippard was a scholar of surrealism (see, for example, "Ernst and Dubuffet: A Study in Like and Unlike" in *Art Journal* 21, no. 4 [summer 1962] and *Surrealists on Art* [Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice Hall, 1970]). However, there is evidence that, at this time in New York's contemporary art world, surrealism often was seen as degraded. For example, in Brian O'Doherty's review of Kusama's 1963–64 *One Thousand Boats Show* at Gertrude Stein Gallery he assures readers that Kusama's work is no mere "surrealist caper."
- 33 Kusama, interview by author, Kusama's studio, and condominium that serves the artist as a storage facility, Tokyo, 17 May 1996.
- 34 Georges Bataille, "L'esprit moderne et le jeu des transpositions," in *Documents* (Paris: Mercure de France, 1968), 200 ("... je défie n'importe quel amateur de peinture d'aimer une toile autant qu'un fétichiste aime une chaussure").
- 35 See, for example, Lorraine Ganman and Merja Makinen, *Female Fetishism* (New York: New York University Press, 1994), 2–3.

- <sup>36</sup> The subject is explored, for example, by Janine Chasseguet-Smirgel, who claims that fetishism constitutes an important aspect of "the creation of a new reality in which the father and his attributes are disqualified and in which the genital level of sexuality is disavowed" (Chasseguet-Smirgel, "Reflections on Fetishism," in *Creativity and Perversion* [London: Free Association Press, 1985], 80).
- <sup>37</sup> "In the world of psychical reality, the woman still has a penis. . . . But this penis is no longer the same as it once was. Something else has taken its place. . . . The horror of castration sets up a sort of permanent memorial to itself by creating this substitute" (Sigmund Freud, "Fetishism," in *Sexuality and the Psychology of Love* [New York: Macmillan, 1963], 216).
- <sup>38</sup> Kusama, 26 September 1995 interview.
- <sup>39</sup> Kusama, 15 May 1996 interview. Kusama also said that she wanted to put the shoes everywhere, to hang them from walls if possible, underscoring her desire for intensity.
- <sup>40</sup> *Compulsion Furniture* was constructed in two parts. In the sixties a German dealer divided the sculpture and sold it as two separate works. One half entered the collection of Peter Ludwig and now belongs to the Ludwig Museum in Cologne; it is in almost perfect condition. For many years the other half was lost. Recently it resurfaced, considerably damaged, and was restored. In the opinion of the curators of this exhibition it is not currently in exhibitable condition, especially when reunited with its nearly pristine former mate from the Ludwig Museum. For this reason *Compulsion Furniture* is not included in *Love Forever: Yayoi Kusama, 1958–1968*.
- <sup>41</sup> Chasseguet-Smirgel describes a world close to the ones Kusama constructed in her Driving Image installations: "Puppets, mannequins, waxworks automatons, dolls, painted scenery, plaster casts, dummies. . . . All form a part of the fetishist's magic and artful universe. Lying between life and death, animated and mechanic, hybrid creatures to which hubris gave birth, they all may be likened to fetishes. And as fetishes, they give us, for a while, the feeling that a world not ruled by our common laws does exist, a marvelous and uncanny world" (Chasseguet-Smirgel, 88).
- <sup>42</sup> Although Betty Friedan's *The Feminine Mystique* (New York: Norton, 1963) was published to wide notice, it marked a controversial beginning for a politicized discourse on women's issues, and the questions it raised did not yet have widespread credibility.
- <sup>43</sup> Kusama, 15 May 1996 interview.
- <sup>44</sup> Ibid. Kusama says she was unaware of these illnesses.
- <sup>45</sup> Ganman and Makinen, "Bulimia: The Fourth Fetishism?" in *Female Fetishism*, 122. Ganman and Makinen refer to Kim Chernin's idea of eating disorders as distorted rites of passage (Chernin, *The Hungry Self: Women, Eating, and Identity* [London: Virago, 1986], 166–67).
- <sup>46</sup> Rudy Burckhardt, conversation with author, Burckhardt's loft, New York City, 11 December 1995. Burckhardt thinks he may have made the first nude photographs of Kusama.
- <sup>47</sup> Early practitioners such as Julia Margaret Cameron (1815–79) and F. Holland Day (1864–1933), who photographed themselves and others in tableaux with religious and allegorical themes, worked without the self-consciousness that has characterized the production of artists from Duchamp and Man Ray to Cindy Sherman.

- <sup>48</sup> In a recent article Calvin Tomkins interprets the Reiff photograph in a manner—implicitly flattering to men—that was probably common at the time that the image was made. He mentions Alexandra Munroe's analysis of Kusama's sculpture, which sees in it an attempt to defy male dominance, and writes, "Fair enough. Let's just note, though, that in a frequently published photograph for which Kusama posed in 1966, nude save for high-heeled pumps, lying face down on a phallus-bristling couch, and looking candidly at the lens, her expression does not exactly project defiance" (Tomkins, "A Doyenne of Disturbance Returns to New York," *New Yorker* [7 October 1996]: 102).
- <sup>49</sup> In his 1964 review of Kusama's *Driving Image Show* at Castellane Gallery Donald Judd enumerates the many paintings, sculptures, and collages that filled the space, adding, "[T]he gallery is small, so it is jammed." Judd, "Yayoi Kusama," *Arts* 38, no. 10 (September 1964): 68.
- <sup>50</sup> Very few of these collages exist today in their original form. Some—for example, the ones for the *Yayoi Kusama: Driving Image Show* in New York—were used for exhibition announcements and may have been discarded by the printer.
- <sup>51</sup> One instance of her performing nude was *Bust Out*, held in 1969 in Central Park, New York (photograph in Karia, "Notes," 93). There is also an image of her almost naked, wrapped in transparent gauzelike fabric, near Trinity Church in Manhattan in 1968. She says that she intended to do a performance at the altar of the church but the priest asked her not to, so she refrained (Kusama, 17 May 1996 interview). She is also seen naked in her 1967 film *Kusama's Self-Obliteration* (discussed below), though it is unclear whether the situation in question was live or staged for the camera.
- <sup>52</sup> Today it is a commonplace that, historically, women have been the objects, not the subjects, of their representations. As Laura Mulvey argued over twenty years ago, pleasure in looking has been defined by the active male viewer, who projects his fantasy onto the passive female form, presented in a way that will match his expectations. Laura Mulvey, "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema," written in 1973 and first published in *Screen* 16, no. 3 (autumn 1975); reprinted in Constance Penley, ed., *Feminism and Film Theory* (New York: Routledge, 1988), 57–68. In the Reiff photograph Kusama has styled herself to conform to a classic notion of male expectations.
- <sup>53</sup> Mary Ann Doane, *Femmes Fatales* (New York and London: Routledge, 1991), 25. My discussion of Kusama's use of her own image in photo-based works is indebted to Abigail Solomon-Godeau, "The Legs of the Countess," in Emily Apter and William Pietz, eds., *Fetishism as Cultural Discourse* (Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 1993).
- <sup>54</sup> Doane says that "this type of masquerade, an excess of femininity, is aligned with the femme fatale and... is necessarily regarded by men as evil incarnate" (Doane, 26).
- <sup>55</sup> See Nel Noddings, *Women and Evil* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1989), 5–35.
- <sup>56</sup> See Sigmund Freud, "On Narcissism: An Introduction," in *A General Selection from the Works of Sigmund Freud*, ed. John Rickman (New York: Doubleday, 1957), 113. In contrast, Slavoj Žižek sees the femme fatale as a creation of male desire. See *The Metastases of Enjoyment* (London and New York: Verso, 1994), 89–112.
- <sup>57</sup> See Slavoj Žižek, "Looking Awry," *October* no. 50 (Fall 1989): 53–54.

- <sup>58</sup> Doane, *Femmes Fatales*, 32.
- <sup>59</sup> In a photograph of the large group of participating artists taken on the occasion of the opening of *Nul* at the Stedelijk Museum in Amsterdam (fig. 14), Kusama stands in the front row, her light silk kimono glowing against everyone else's dark attire. Kusama also appears in a kimono in a newspaper photograph on the occasion of her *Driving Image Show* at Galleria d'Arte del Naviglio (*Corriere d'informazione*, February 1–2, 1966). This picture was probably taken at her opening, because another photograph shows her wearing the same attire while standing among her works with gallery director Renato Cardazzo (Karia, "Notes," 86). The New York art dealer Stephen Radich remembers Kusama wearing a kimono at the opening of the 1961 Whitney Biennial, in which she participated (Stephen Radich, telephone conversation with author, February 1996).
- <sup>60</sup> Edward Said describes how those—like Kusama during her New York years—who are regarded as "other" may see and portray themselves as the dominant culture does. He discusses "the paradox of an Arab regarding himself as an 'Arab' of the sort put out by Hollywood" and the idea that "the modern Orient... participates in its own Orientalizing" (Said, *Orientalism* [New York: Pantheon, 1978], 325).
- <sup>61</sup> See, for example, Gina Marchetti, *Romance and the Yellow Peril: Race, Sex, and Discursive Strategies in Hollywood Fiction* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1993), 71–72.
- <sup>62</sup> In Hollywood films "[t]he Eurasian woman, when she is a simple, passive object of spectacle and speculation, is harmless. However, when she asserts her own desires, she becomes the agent of social havoc and moral ruin" (Marchetti, 71). "One of the most enduring aspects of the Western vision of Asia involves the East's supposedly intrinsic seductiveness." Asia is "feminized in the Western imagination" so that the whole continent becomes "an exotic, beckoning woman, who can both satisfy the male Westerner's forbidden desires and ensnare him in an unyielding web of deceit" (Marchetti, 67).
- <sup>63</sup> That Kusama's Japaneseness imparted additional intellectual credibility to her work is evident from early writings about it. In the original draft of his review of Kusama's 1959 Brata gallery exhibition Judd claims that the Japaneseness in her work is to be found in its resemblance to the "taut openwork and repeated patterns carved at the Horyuji around the seventh century or [to] a section of Korin's waves, constantly shifting direction within a single plane" (Judd archive, Marfa Texas). Sidney Tillim writes, "Conditioned by a tradition of not only black and white but of self-effacement, perhaps only a Japanese artist could create an art of withdrawal without the polemical emotions of Western Abstract Expressionism" (Tillim, *Arts* 34, no. 1 [October 1959]: 56). A writer for a Boston paper says, "Miss Kusama's idiom is decidedly Japanese in its reticence and confinement to black and white; and she has original things to say in abstract expressionist terms... I could not help but think that her style expresses obliquely and delicately the sense of the void so germane to Buddhist thought..." (Unsigned review in unidentified Boston paper; copy from Kusama archive). Dore Ashton calls Kusama a "prodigy of patience" and asks, "dare I say Oriental patience since Miss Kusama was born and trained in Japan?" Ashton admits that she is not "an adept of

the philosophies this genre of painting presumably reflects" (Ashton, "Art: Tenth Street Views," *New York Times* [23 October 1959]). In fact Kusama was never involved with Buddhism or conscious of employing any kind of Japanese traditions. She thought of her work as decidedly Western and today seems to regard such comments as a form of ethnic stereotyping (Kusama, 26 September 1995 interview). Nevertheless, the ways in which Kusama engages notions of infinity and endless repetition do suggest the formative influence of Japanese culture in the broader sense.

- <sup>64</sup> J.K. [Jack Kroll], "Yayoi Kusama," *Artnews* 60, no. 3 (May 1961): 15.
- <sup>65</sup> Lil Picard, "Kühler Wind des Nihilismus" (Cool wind of nihilism), *Die Welt* (5 March 1964).
- <sup>66</sup> Charlotte Willard, "In the Art Galleries: Kusama's Show," *New York Post* (14 November 1965): 46. That a woman wrote this only demonstrates that women journalists generally wrote the way their male counterparts did, no doubt a prerequisite for getting and keeping their jobs. The same year, an author who referred to Kusama as "a tiny Japanese girl" also said that she "conquers her evil demons, just as the aboriginal sculptor does, by transforming them into images" (Jan Cremer, "On the Cover," *Art Voices* [Fall 1965]: 5). The use of this sort of patronizing description only escalated when Kusama became involved with public performance.
- <sup>67</sup> Carolee Schneemann, interview by author, Citrus restaurant, Los Angeles, 14 March 1996.
- <sup>68</sup> Kusama, untitled statement, *Tema Celeste* (special issue, "The Question of Gender in Art") no. 39 (Winter 1993): 50.

- <sup>69</sup> Kusama says that she never thought about her situation as a woman artist in New York in the sixties (Kusama, 26 September 1995 interview).
- <sup>70</sup> Schneemann, 14 March 1996 interview.
- <sup>71</sup> Some women artists probably suppressed their femaleness in social situations as well as in their work. Others, as Carolee Schneemann suggests in the above comments, were accepted by male artists at least in part because of their physical attractiveness. Such traditional aspects of a woman's life as childbearing and -rearing were denied to all. In 1971 Lippard enumerated nine ways in which women artists were discriminated against, a number of which support Schneemann's recollections. They include "labeling women unfeminine and abnormally assertive if they persist in maintaining the value of their art or protest their treatment" and "refusing to consider a married woman or a mother an artist no matter how hard she works or what she produces" (Lippard, "Sexual Politics: Art Style," in *From the Center* [New York: Dutton, 1976], 31; originally published in *Art in America* 59, no. 5 [September 1971]: 19–20).
- <sup>72</sup> There is no question that polka dots were part of Kusama's visual repertoire from childhood. Because so many of her watercolors from the fifties were reworked in the sixties, it is difficult to know exactly when the net image appeared in her work. It seems likely, however, that she was using this motif in the early fifties in Japan. See, for example, plate 11 in *Yayoi Kusama: A Retrospective*.
- <sup>73</sup> Munroe also identifies the shoes with Kusama but gives the work a more benign interpretation ("Obsession," 24).

- <sup>74</sup> See, for example, RoseLee Goldberg, *Performance: Live Art, 1909 to the Present* (New York: Harry N. Abrams, 1979), especially 92-93, regarding the Judson Dance Group, and 98-111, "Seventies Performance."
- <sup>75</sup> Roland Barthes, *Empire of Signs*, trans. Richard Howard (New York: Hill and Wang, 1982), 78-79.
- <sup>76</sup> Anne Hollander, *Seeing Through Clothes* (New York: Penguin Books, 1988), 396-97. For a careful consideration of the mirror as a symbol in Western art see pages 391-418. There is hypocrisy inherent in this symbolism, since the mirror also rewards the gaze by providing a view of the other side of the naked model, thus intensifying the experience of looking. See Carol Armstrong, "Fracturing Femininity: Manet's *Before the Mirror*," *October*, no. 74 (Fall 1995): 79.
- <sup>77</sup> Barthes, *Empire*, 79.
- <sup>78</sup> This act was echoed seventeen years later when, representing Japan at the 1993 Venice Biennale, Kusama dispensed miniature yellow-and-black "pumpkins."
- <sup>79</sup> Karia, "Notes," 87. Kusama reports that the artist Lucio Fontana lent her the money to produce this work and that she repaid him by giving him one of her other works (Kusama, conversation with author, Kusama's studio, Tokyo, 10 May 1997).
- <sup>80</sup> Beginning with her first public performance Kusama formed a partnership with Yalkut. *Self-Obliteration* won prizes at several international festivals of experimental film (Karia, 89).
- <sup>81</sup> Karia, 89.
- <sup>82</sup> The information about these performances is from Karia, 88-94. In the press release for the happening at MOMA, Kusama issued the invitation to "take off your clothes in good company: RENOIR, MAILLOL, GIACOMETTI, PICASSO. I positively guarantee that these characters will all be present and that all will be nude." She also provided a "sociological note": "The nude has become socially acceptable among the more permanent residents of the garden of the museum. Phalli are also à la mode, particularly the harder varieties in granite, basalt, and bronze" (Karia, 93).
- <sup>83</sup> Neal Weaver, "The Polka-Dot Girl Strikes Again, or Kusama's Infamous Spectacular," *After Dark* 10, no. 1 (May 1968): 43-46.
- <sup>84</sup> "Kusama: The Polka-Dot Princess," *Bachelor* 10, no. 3 (June 1969): 10.
- <sup>85</sup> James Golata, telephone interview by author, 3 April 1996. Golata had never been a business manager before. He had been in charge of the mail and the classified section for publisher Al Goldstein at *Screw* magazine, which gave Kusama a lot of coverage at the time. Golata was very sympathetic to Kusama's work. He recalled that she had another manager before him (though he does not remember who), that the three of them talked, and that they decided together that Golata should take over.
- <sup>86</sup> Mike Kelley, *The Uncanny* (Arnhem, Netherlands: Gemeentemuseum Arnhem, 1993). Published to accompany an exhibition curated by Kelley at the Gemeentemuseum Arnhem, the book forms a kind of exhibition in itself. Kusama was not included in the actual show.
- <sup>87</sup> Kelley, 27 March 1996 interview. Psychedelic art is a form that Kelley feels has been repressed.

- <sup>88</sup> Kusama says that she was afraid for her physical well-being when she was in New York. She experienced four robberies there. She also reports that she was afraid to disrobe during her orgy-performances because she feared that the participants carried diseases (Kusama, 26 September 1995 interview).
- <sup>89</sup> Karia, 95-99.
- <sup>90</sup> Kultermann, 17 April 1995 interview.
- <sup>91</sup> Jon Hendricks, interview by author, Hendricks's apartment, New York City, 17 April 1995.
- <sup>92</sup> It is worth noting that Kusama papered the walls of the Gertrude Stein Gallery with her boat-sculpture poster in December 1963, two years before Warhol created his *Cow Wallpaper*. She also showed her *Infinity Mirror Room* at the short-lived Castellane Gallery in November 1965, nearly a year before Lucas Samaras exhibited his *Mirrored Room* (or *Room No. 2*) at Pace. See also George Segal quote in note 25.
- <sup>93</sup> Lucy Lippard, *Eva Hesse* (New York: New York University Press, 1976), 197. In separate reviews of a May 1996 exhibition of Kusama's New York-period work at Paula Cooper Gallery in New York two critics noted the similarity of the artist's *No. B. 3* (1962) to later works by Eva Hesse (Smith, "60's Minimalism"; also Howard Halle, "From Here to Infinity," *Time Out*, no. 34 [15-22 May 1996]), n.p.
- <sup>94</sup> *A Banquet/A Fashion Show of Body Parts* was held at the Hamilton Gallery in New York on 21 October 1978. Such Bourgeois sculptures as *Confrontation*, also of 1978, are reminiscent of Kusama works from the early to mid-sixties. See Deborah Wye, *Louise Bourgeois* (New York: Museum of Modern Art, 1982), 96-97.
- <sup>95</sup> In fact pop and minimalism shared characteristics. For example, Warhol used and was strongly identified with the strategies of modularity and repetition. The first of two exhibitions in which Kusama participated at Green Gallery in New York, held in September 1962, was composed largely of pop artists. The same was true of *The New Art*, held at the Davison Art Center, Wesleyan University, in March 1964. In 1965 she was one of seven artists, most of whom were pop-associated, interviewed for a Belgian television program, *L'Ecole de New York*. The others were Jim Dine, Lee Bontecou, Roy Lichtenstein, Andy Warhol, Marisol, and George Segal. Viewing the tape today, there is nothing jarring about Kusama's inclusion in this group.
- <sup>96</sup> Andreas Huyssen, "Mapping the Post-Modern," in *After the Great Divide: Modernity, Mass Culture, Post-Modernism* (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1986), 216-17.
- <sup>97</sup> There are numerous theoretical constructions of "the body," some of them contradictory. For recent art the most crucial may be the "instinctual, repressed body on which psychoanalysis is based." For a sense of the complexity of the discussion see Michel Feher, "Introduction," *Fragments for a History of the Body*, vol. 1 (New York: Zone, 1989), 11-17; the quotation is from page 11.
- <sup>98</sup> For a helpful description of this cultural development see Norman Kleeblatt, "Passing into Multi-Culturalism," in *Too Jewish* (New York and New Brunswick, NJ: The Jewish Museum and Rutgers University Press, 1996), 3-6.

- <sup>99</sup> In a review of Kusama's Paula Cooper Gallery exhibition Bill Arning claims that she influenced her contemporaries Warhol and Robert Ryman and, "by inexplicable osmosis, also seems to have touched current artists such as Richmond Burton, Julian Lethbridge, Fred Tomasselli, David Nyzio, and Polly Apfelbaum." He may be overstating the case, but his point, I believe, is how relevant she is for today (Bill Arning, "MIA Rescue," *Village Voice* [4 June 1996]: 79).
- <sup>100</sup> Rona Pondick, telephone interview by author, 20 March 1996. Support for this idea can be found in Lippard, "Eva Hesse: The Circle," *Art In America* 59, no. 3 (May-June 1971): 63-73; reprinted in Lippard, *From the Center: Feminist Essays on Women's Art* (New York: Dutton, 1976), 161.
- <sup>101</sup> Pondick, 20 March 1996 interview.
- <sup>102</sup> Polly Apfelbaum, telephone interview by author, 11 March 1996.
- <sup>103</sup> Kelley, 27 March 1996 interview.
- <sup>104</sup> The Aperto section of the Venice Biennale presents work by an international group of emerging artists.
- <sup>105</sup> See Ralph Rugoff, "Crazy Love (Dimensions Variable)," in Ulrich Looock, ed., *Am Rande der Malerei (At the Edge of Painting)* (Bern: Kunsthalle Bern, 1995), 89-93.
- <sup>106</sup> This was one of a number of huge paintings that Kusama made during her time in New York (see, for example, p. 172). We have not been successful in locating any of these works; we know them only from photographs and written descriptions.

**KUNST ZOEKT NIEUWE WEGEN**  
**Nul, Zero, T en Gutai**  
te kijk in Amsterdam

**DE POINTES VAN NUL**

**Nul-groep: persoonlijke gevoelens**  
vermijden blijkt fundamenteel

**'Nul' in Stedelijk**  
**Stilte voor de storm**

**Gallery**  
previews

**Johnny Lids**  
gilde eiert  
Boltini co

**Yayoi Kusama opvallende**  
verslapping bij opening  
van „Nul“-tentoonstelling

**NUL** Geraffineerd kijkspel  
bezijden de schilderkunst

**0-65** toegang a.l.

**MORGEN**  
SCHILDEREN  
MET  
**RIPOLIN**

**Zeroten aan het werk...**

**De kunst van Nu in een**  
walm van woorden

**k in Orez: practical**

**arie van der Boon**  
groot tekenaar

**Nul - Zero - Gutai - T - N**  
**ONZE TUD KRUGT**  
ZIJN VISUELE  
INFORMATIE

**en macaronigarderobe**  
elmeubilair

**KUNST**  
Een maal reisje  
van Tater Nos

**BEZIELENDE KUNST**  
Werkdrevolutie?

**aan een**  
meent

**Werkdrevolutie?**  
Het is een vraag die zich voordoet bij de kunstwereld van nu. De kunstenaar wordt steeds meer gezien als een soort ondernemer. Hij moet zijn werk promoten, exposities organiseren, en soms zelfs zijn eigen galerie oprichten. Dit kan tot conflicten leiden met de traditionele kunstwereld. Het is een tijd van verandering en uitdaging voor de kunstenaar.

**aan een**

**W**hen Yayoi Kusama left Japan for the United States in 1957, her goal was to establish herself as an artist on an international level. Yet it is exclusively as part of the New York art scene that her work of the 1960s has come to be considered. Generally emphasized is her relationship to pop and minimalism, the main tendencies of American art during that decade. In point of fact, from 1960 to 1970 it was easier to see her work in Milan or Amsterdam than it was in New York. Kusama was represented in more than twenty major exhibitions in some of Europe's most prestigious galleries and museums, along with the most important artists of the European avant-garde, among them Lucio Fontana, Piero Manzoni, Yves Klein, and the German Zero and Dutch Nul groups (fig. 14). Although Kusama was seldom mentioned in conjunction with artists associated with pop or minimal aesthetics, her presence in the European avant-garde was so significant that she appears in the vast majority of articles, catalogues, and artists' publications chronicling the burgeoning European-based international art movement dubbed the "New Tendency."

## Down to Zero: Yayoi Kusama and the European "New Tendency"

Throughout the fifties the European scene—in France, Italy, and the Low Countries in particular—was dominated by various strains of expressionist abstraction loosely gathered under the rubric of *art informel*. Despite its roots in surrealist practices like automatism, this emotionally charged gestural painting style was most often linked with American abstract expressionism. Beginning immediately after World War II, images of American popular culture had spread through a devastated Europe in the form of Hollywood films, magazines, comic books, and pop music, all part of the postwar flood of American popular culture that accompanied economic aid. Along with this mix of jazz, science fiction, cowboy movies, Marlboros, and blue jeans came ample opportunity to view the high cultural products of the New York school both in reproduction and in person. As early as 1948 the Venice Biennale displayed works by Jackson Pollock, Willem de Kooning, Mark Rothko, Clyfford Still, and Franz Kline. In 1958 a massive Pollock retrospective cut a cultural swath through virtually every large European city, drawing crowds and a critical polemic against the increasing Americanization of European culture. Out of the furor rose the cry for the creation of a "nouvelle école européenne"<sup>1</sup> that would erase national cultural languages and unite all European avant-gardes under one supranational banner. Proposed as an antidote to both

Floor strewn with reviews of Kusama's exhibitions, most from European publications c. 1968; photograph by Peter Moore, © the Estate of Peter Moore



**Figure 14**

Artists at Nul group exhibition, Stedelijk Museum, Amsterdam, 1965 (left to right): Jiro Yoshihara, Hans Haacke, Henk Peeters, Rotraut Klein-Uecker, Jan Schoonhoven, Lucio Fontana, Pol Bury, Gianni Colombo, Mrs. Fontana, E. L. L. de Wilde, Nono Reinhold, Yayoi Kusama, George Rickey, Jesus Raphael Soto, Otto Piene, Nanda Vigo, Alfred Schmela, Heinz Mack, unidentified woman, Günther Uecker

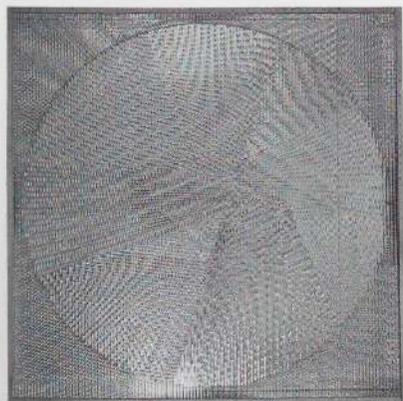
abstract expressionism and its European coeval, *art informel*, this New Tendency was, equally importantly, a bid to define a “*caractère propre européen*” in the tidal wave of Americana sweeping the continent.

Inspired by the theoretical writings of prewar hard-edge abstractionists like Piet Mondrian and postwar maverick experimenters like Lucio Fontana, diverse groups such as Zero in Germany, Nul in Amsterdam, Groupe de Recherche d'Art Visuel (GRAV) in Paris, and Azimuth, Gruppo N, and Gruppo T in Italy shared an intense involvement with the problem of developing a means of representation that acknowledged the relation of an object to the space around it without resorting to illusionism. Using a wide variety of strategies with a precision that recalled scientific investigation and anticipating the rhetoric of American minimalism, artists in these groups explored the material and visual properties of surface, color, and light in an attempt to create an art that was antimetaphoric, uniform, and empty of any reference except to itself. These strictures caused some artists to concentrate on the purely visual properties of monochrome surfaces; others, in an effort to reveal two-dimensional structure, organized geometric forms within the rigorous confines of a grid.<sup>2</sup> Because they freed the painted surface or the things represented of referential relationships, monomorphism (serial repetition of a single motif) and monochromism were ideal formal strategies to reinforce the concrete nature of an artwork as an artwork and nothing else.

*Monochrome Malerei* (Monochrome painting), an exhibition held in March 1960 at the Städtisches Museum Schloss Morsbroich in Leverkusen, West Germany, and organized by its young curator Udo Kultermann, can be considered the first major international show of the New Tendency, and it was through this exhibition that Yayoi Kusama's work was introduced to a European public. Kultermann, who first saw a reproduction of her work in a magazine review in 1960, chose to include *Composition*, a white Infinity Net from 1959, hanging it with an array of monochromes by Lucio Fontana, Yves Klein, Piero Manzoni, and members of the Zero group. Kultermann recalls having thought of Kusama's work in a strictly American context, but the result of the show was to cement an alliance between Kusama and the European artists of the New Tendency, particularly those associated with Zero and Nul.<sup>3</sup> Although she did not meet them in person until some five years later, Kusama became familiar with the work of Heinz Mack, Otto Piene, and Günther Uecker of Zero, and Nul's Henk Peeters, as a result of her participation in *Monochrome Malerei*.<sup>4</sup> Initiating a lively correspondence with Peeters<sup>5</sup> (who, in addition to being an

artist, actively organized international group exhibitions in Holland), Kusama kept in close touch with Zero and Nul activities, and her work was included in most international New Tendency exhibitions under their auspices until the breakup of Zero in 1966.

Unlike the more tightly woven manifesto groups of the time, there were no "members" of Zero, only "partners" or "adherents," who never collaborated with one another on group artworks or issued group statements but joined together solely for exhibitions.<sup>6</sup> Kusama's involvement with both Zero and Nul began in 1960 with her participation in several exhibitions that followed in the wake of the success of *Monochrome Malerei*. In keeping with the New Tendency, Zero as a concept was loosely defined but firmly grounded in the study of the visual effect of elements presented in as close to their original state of material substance as possible. Although the Zero artists worked with widely varying materials—ranging from Mack's pieces of reflective metal serially arranged on a surface (fig. 15) to Piene's dancing beams of light to Uecker's nails deployed in varied patterns—all were concerned with separating color and "the fascinating attraction of light"<sup>7</sup> from their traditional descriptive and metaphorical tasks and presenting them purely in and of themselves. The aims of Nul closely resembled those of the synonymous Zero, focused as they were on a "zero zone of pure possibility" in which "old theories and expectations of art are stripped away leaving only the 'new' to be explored."<sup>8</sup> Works by the four core Nul artists—Henk Peeters, Armando, Jan Schoonhoven, and Jan Henderikse—were monochromatic and object-oriented. Using the repetitive field structure of the grid to create reliefs (fig. 16), Nul artists concentrated on presenting objects



**Figure 15**  
Heinz Mack  
*Silver Dynamo*, 1964  
Motor-driven wheel covered with sheet aluminum in a glass-covered, aluminum-lined box  
60 x 60 x 7 in. (152.4 x 152.4 x 17.8 cm)  
The Museum of Modern Art, New York; Elizabeth Bliss Parkinson Fund; © 1997 Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York; photograph © 1997 The Museum of Modern Art, New York

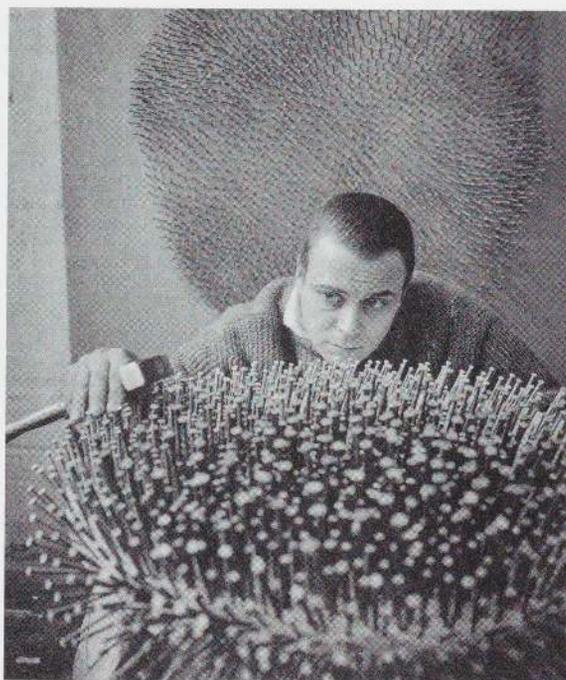


**Figure 16**  
Jan Schoonhoven  
Untitled, 1965  
Papier-mâché on chipboard  
57 1/8 x 33 1/2 in. (147 x 85 cm)  
Ho-Am Art Museum, Seoul; collection of Samsung Foundation of Culture  
© 1997 Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York/Beeldrecht, Amsterdam

in space instead of exploring the effects of color, but they were equally opposed to the metaphoric and the illusionistic. As Henk Peeters stated simply in a 1964 letter to Kusama, "To me, a painting is a painting and not more."<sup>9</sup>

The connections between Kusama's early work, particularly her monochromatic Infinity Nets and monomorphic Accumulation Furniture, and that of the Zero artists are not difficult to see. Gunther Uecker's protruding-nail reliefs and Kusama's Infinity Net paintings of the late fifties and early sixties might use diametrically opposed visual devices, but both produce a kinetic visual buzz through their accumulative, organic patterning. Kusama's looping holes

**Figure 17**  
Günther Uecker in his studio, 1963



**Figure 18**  
Günther Uecker  
*Grosser Wind*, 1966  
Nails, wood  
39 3/8 x 39 3/8 in. (100 x 100 cm)  
Städtisches Museum, Mönchengladbach

and Uecker's nails are arrayed in similar spirals that converge and overlap in an obsessive yet nonsystematic manner. More direct, however, is the connection between Kusama's Accumulation Furniture, begun in 1961, and the stools, tables, televisions, and sewing machines that Uecker used as supports for his bristling carpets of nails (fig. 17).<sup>10</sup> Like the stuffed phallic forms in works like *Accumulation No. 1* (cat. 42), Uecker's nails gave these domestic objects a threatening though clearly sexual frisson.<sup>11</sup> In their varying patterns and situations they evoke bizarre and dangerous female pubic zones—the opposite, of course, to Kusama's phalluses (fig. 18).

Vibration and dynamism as perceptual effects of light and color were key terms in the theoretical vocabulary of both Zero and Nul. The founding artists in these groups were zealous in their experiments with reflective materials and the effects of elemental phenomena like fire, water, air, and light. They created mirrored reliefs, motorized metal objects, and mobiles, and envisioned unexecutable fire gardens, walls of light, and air architecture. Wrote Mack: "A color can have several meanings. However, its virtual objectification, i.e. its intrinsic energy, is achieved when it strikes its own vibration; that is its life, its breath."<sup>12</sup> Since the early fifties Kusama's paintings and works on paper had exhibited a fascination with color vibration. In an oft-repeated motif, particularly evident in her large body of work on paper, a colored orb veined with a net pattern is suspended in the depths of an otherwise unarticulated velvety black background. Perhaps dissatisfied with the subtle effect of such chiaroscuro, in the early sixties Kusama achieved a much more kinetic effect by painting over the orbs and nets of the early fifties with fluorescent paints in complementary colors. While the early drawings merely glowed, the revised ones vibrate with hallucinatory abandon, whirling crazily out of the depths of their deep black backgrounds like psychedelic meteors (cat. 14–16, for example).

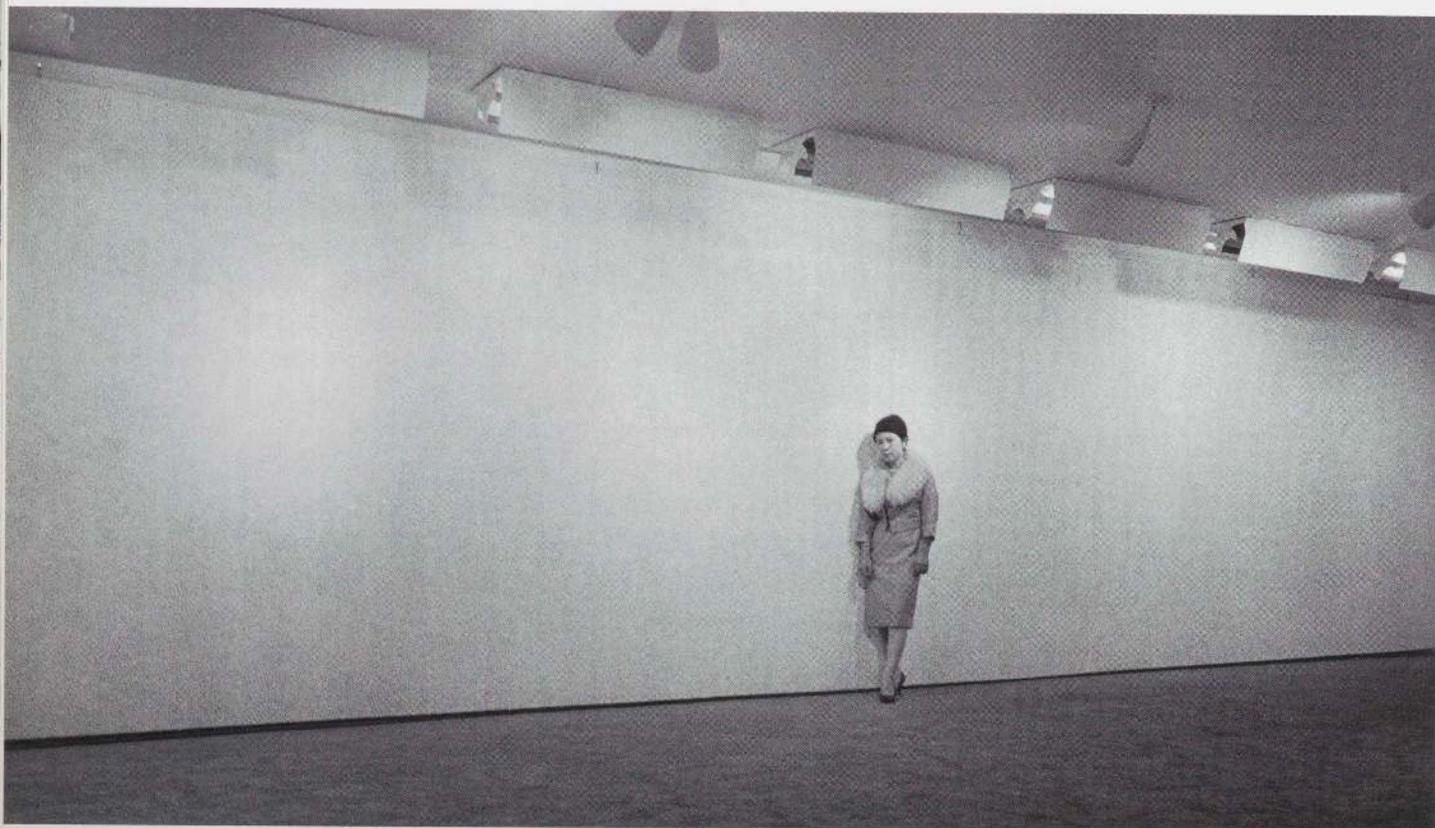
Kusama continued to use such potent visual combinations when she began working in three dimensions, most strikingly in her first installation outside her own studio. This was *Driving Image* (see frontispiece), which premiered in New York at the Castellane Gallery in the spring of 1964 and was

repeated in different forms, initially at the Galleria d'Arte del Naviglio in Milan in January 1966 and in April at Gallerie Thelen in Essen, West Germany. *Driving Image* was an environment walled with Infinity Net paintings, spread with a carpet of dried macaroni, filled with a myriad of objects—furniture, clothing, household items, and mannequins—all of these covered in their entirety with stuffed phalluses, dried noodles in many shapes, or net patterns or polka dots painted in fluorescent, complementary colors. The riot of repetitive pattern this created caused a visual turmoil that elided figure and ground, making individual objects difficult to discern. In the *Driving Image* environment, as one critic noted, "the separate, distinguishable things tended to dissolve in their all-over texture."<sup>13</sup>

*Kusama's Peep Show* (subtitled *Endless Love Show*), a mirrored hexagonal room with colored lights that flashed in time to rock and roll, premiered in New York in March 1966 (see pp. 168–69), nearly a year before Lucas Samaras showed his better-known mirrored environment at Pace Gallery.<sup>14</sup> That such ideas were also clearly in the air in Europe among New Tendency artists is demonstrated by the formal similarity of *Peep Show* to *Lightbox*, a mirrored room produced by Heinz Mack in 1964–65 and shown at the Schmela Gallery in Germany, and to Otto Piene's illuminated environments. However, a crucial distinction between these Zero works and that of Kusama lies in the kind of interactivity encouraged between the viewer and the artwork. Using light and mirrors Mack and Piene create effects that are atmospheric; Piene's *Milky Way* (fig. 19), for instance, is a retractable system of twinkling fairy lights at the City Opera house in Bonn, Germany. *Peep Show*, on the other hand, rather than encompassing its audience, turns inward. As the title announces, the subject (and as it turns out, the object) of *Peep Show* is the viewer, who cannot physically enter the space of the work; instead holes just large enough for faces are provided. When someone peeps in she is confronted with her own face reflected dozens of times, in a kind of kinetic self-portrait. This illusion is visible in a photograph of *Peep Show* taken by Peter Moore (pp. 168–69), in which

**Figure 19**  
Otto Piene's *Milky Way*, 1965, an installation of movable lights at the City Opera House, Bonn





**Figure 20**  
Kusama in front of her 33-foot white net painting (no longer extant) at solo exhibition, Stephen Radich Gallery, New York, 1961

Kusama herself peers through an opening, her visage multiplied and remultiplied in the mirrors among the flashing lights.

Self as inscribed in art is of course precisely what the New Tendency expected the act of serial repetition to banish, but the photomontage of Kusama and her *Peep Show* is not just a sly jibe at mechanistic repetition and absolute objectivity. More interestingly it illustrates the fundamental difference between Kusama's work and that of the majority of New Tendency artists. In the words of one critic, the New Tendency was "first and foremost a new concept of reality, in which the individual role of the artist is kept to a minimum."<sup>15</sup> In striking contrast, Kusama's primary artwork during the sixties was herself. Signified by the net and its structural opposite, the polka dot, she is the subject most strongly evident in her paintings, sculptures, environments, and performances, and there is not one work in her oeuvre that does not carry a mark of the artist's physical presence. So active was Kusama's presence in her work that, as Hans Haacke observed, in hindsight it was clear that from her earliest Infinity Net paintings through the happenings of the late sixties Kusama was "headed...into the peculiar world of performance art."<sup>16</sup>

Kusama's description of how she produced her Infinity Nets offers a chilling picture of an artist as physically connected to the mark-making on her canvas as any action painter. "I feel as if I were driving on the highways or car-

ried on a conveyor belt without ending to my death," she reported, describing those sessions when she would paint as much as forty to fifty hours at an uninterrupted stretch. "This is like continuing to drink thousands of cups of coffee or eating thousands of feet of macaroni. This is to continue to desire and to escape all sorts of feelings and visions until the end of my days whether I want to or not. . . ."<sup>17</sup> Each Infinity Net of this period, from the smallest works on paper to the thirty-three-foot white-on-white mural the artist made for her 1961 exhibition at the Stephen Radich Gallery in New York (fig. 20), is a map of sustained campaigns of minute repetitive movements of the brush as well as a record of the artist's time and labor. Given Kusama's description of her obsessive state of mind during their making, one might expect the surface of an Infinity Net to have what she called a consistent pattern "repeated exactly in monotone like the gear of a machine,"<sup>18</sup> but examination reveals that there is no systematic application of strokes, no repeated chains of holes. Looking like liquid crochet or cells in mitosis, irregular loops grow from various nodal "centers" on the canvas, meeting and in many cases overlapping each other in their eager colonization of the picture plane. It is these spiraling patterns that give the paintings depth and cause their surfaces to vibrate before the eyes. *Facture* plays an important role in the warp and woof of these works, as is clear from the easily discernible individual brushstrokes that are insistently evident even in the rich mix of candy colors and bright whites that swirl through the Infinity Nets, especially the early ones. Such marks emphasize the truly astonishing amount of labor involved in the creation of such paintings, which were usually quite large, as well as dispel any possible link to more mechanical methods of production.<sup>19</sup>

On the most superficial level Kusama's obsessive patternings, particularly as seen in reproduction, might seem to mimic the serial repetition of Schoonhoven's work on paper and Peeters' collages, but in point of fact Kusama's technique actually undermines the kind of monomorphic serial repetition found in New Tendency works. In even her most gridlike pieces—collages made with self-adhesive stickers, mailing labels, and in a few cases, black-and-white photographs of details of Infinity Nets or Accumulations—the serial structure is deliberately ruined by a rupture or slippage of one or more elements. In what seems an almost aggressive move against the inexorability of the grid, stickers or photos are purposely misaligned, spoiling the optical pleasure of a more strictly repeated pattern. Like a tear in a fabric, the slipped stickers in The Museum of Modern Art's *Accumulation of Stamps No. 63* (cat. 30) abruptly remind the viewer of the process of the work's making. The crudely cropped edges and uneven fit of the segments of *Accumulation of Nets No. 7* (cat. 36), a collage of black-and-white photo details of Infinity Net paintings, serve a similar function. Although arranged in a grid formation that calls to mind any number of New Tendency compositions of the late fifties and early sixties, the edges of the collaged pieces are so awkwardly cut and pieced together that small photo strips have been pasted in to cover the gaps between individual squares. This deliberate irregularity within what one expects to be a

regular matrix not only frustrates the possibility of optical vibration caused by the juxtaposition of varying net patterns but undercuts the purpose of the grid altogether; the focus of our attention in such a work is not the repetitive nature of its constituent parts, but rather each one's individuality.

To see a show by Kusama, wrote Donald Judd in a review of the New York *Driving Image* exhibition, is to see "a result of Kusama's work, not a work itself."<sup>20</sup> Kusama's insistence on crude irregularity in artwork done by hand shifted the emphasis away from the art object onto the act of its making and ultimately onto its maker. This was not without its political ramifications, particularly in the art world of the mid-sixties. Kusama's rejection of mechanized seriality contained a pointed critique of commercial culture, which was epitomized, in her words, by "highly civilized America and particularly. . . New York."<sup>21</sup> As ambitious as Kusama was to participate in the burgeoning New York art scene, from early on she was keenly aware of the difficulties she faced as a foreigner and a woman "in a time when American artists developed national pride. . . that did not allow them to acknowledge or to recognize what people were doing in other cultures."<sup>22</sup> For Kusama pop art, the "national style of America" then dominant,<sup>23</sup> was both the prophet and the result of nationalism, mechanization, and commodity culture "as if paralleling the policy of the country."<sup>24</sup> Kusama's work was included in important exhibitions at places like New York's Green Gallery—the epicenter of the pop explosion—and was considered to be within that sphere by critics like Lucy Lippard, who included her in a definitive 1966 anthology of pop art in New York. In her letters to Henk Peeters, however, Kusama clearly and repeatedly classifies herself with the Europeans, whose work she saw as opposed to pop. "By this American Pop art [Americans] become exclusive of others and tend. . . to subdue monochrome artists and the shows by young European artists," she wrote, referring to her own struggle for recognition in New York as well as that of artists like Peeters.<sup>25</sup>

Kusama's harsh critique of pop as a particularly American phenomenon cannot be entirely explained by her frustration at her ultimate exclusion, if not from the pop milieu, then from its red-hot market. A vaguely Marxist analysis of pop's commodification of art, Kusama's opinion echoed the chorus of angry European voices raised against American art—and pop in particular—that reached a peak after the 1964 Venice Biennale, where the grand prize was awarded to Robert Rauschenberg, an event that signaled to many in the European art world the definitive transfer of cultural power from Paris to New York. In pop's loving portraits of Campbell's soup cans and Chevrolets it seemed both to celebrate and to send up the desirability of an art product that could take the form of the object/commodity or the artist/celebrity. The ambivalence of pop to the commodities it depicted was often accepted by United States viewers. In postwar Europe, however, there was an almost universal concern about, if not antipathy to, the commodification of contemporary art.

Kusama's contribution to the 1966 Venice Biennale was her most straightforward critique thus far of the mechanization and commodification of

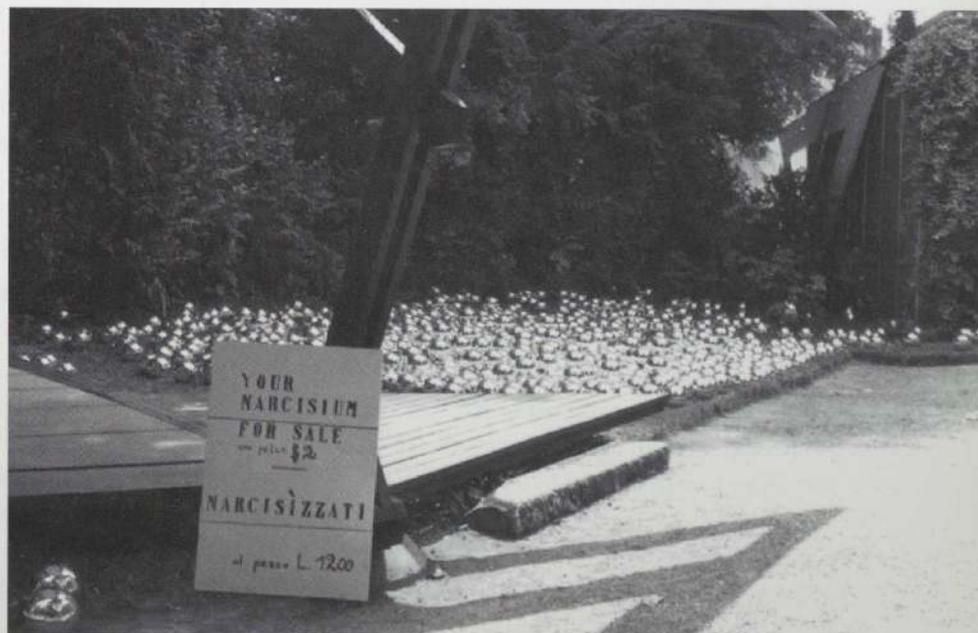


**Figure 21**  
Kusama at 1966 Venice Biennale, tossing  
one of the 1,500 mirror balls of *Narcissus  
Garden*

the art market. At first glance her *Narcissus Garden* (fig. 21), installed at the heart of the Biennale, was a dazzlingly Zeroesque orchestration of the artificial and natural effects of light and color on reflective surfaces. Consisting of approximately 1,500 silver plastic spheres placed in rows on a

lawn twenty meters square in front of the Italian Pavilion, *Narcissus Garden* reflected the blue sky and green lawn as well as every movement at this busiest intersection of the Biennale. On a purely visual level, this shimmering sea of color and twinkling light seemed to fit squarely within the tradition of kinetic public sculptures mobilized by wind, water, or reflected light. But, in an exhibition otherwise roundly pronounced “weak and insipid,”<sup>26</sup> Kusama’s “way out exhibition of mirrored balls”<sup>27</sup> caused not only a visual sensation, but a scandal. In what was no doubt a nasty surprise for Renato Cardazzo, proprietor of the Galleria d’Arte del Naviglio and Kusama’s sponsor, no sooner had *Narcissus Garden* been put in place than the artist began hawking the individual balls to passersby (fig. 22). Horrified, the Biennale organizers had the police ask the artist to desist, which she did, but not before giving a large number of interviews to a wide range of international publications. The news stories all expressed shock at the artist’s crass reminder—in the hallowed precincts of the Biennale—of the economic underpinnings of the go-go contemporary art market. At the same time they gleefully bought into Kusama’s publicity stunt by running pictures of the artist cavorting in the sunlight among her reflective

**Figure 22**  
*Narcissus Garden*, installation view



wares, fetchingly clad in a red leotard. The media ruckus caused by this performance was clearly part of Kusama's plan. Explaining that the wholesaling of her sculpture was a logical result of the development of contemporary art, she told an interviewer, "In the past one used brushes, colors, chisels. Today, the work of art is produced exclusively by the artist's sensibility. One is no longer obstructed by the difficulties of the occupation. Today, the artist only has to have an idea for an object."<sup>28</sup> Artists, she continued, should integrate themselves into economic life by making their work inexpensive and accessible enough to be bought like items in a supermarket.

By selling the elements of a kinetic experience, Kusama transformed *Narcissus Garden* from a New Tendency garden folly into an act of social critique against cultural nationalism, excessive commodification, and the strangulation of individual creativity. While the immediate message of *Narcissus Garden* might have been peculiarly European in flavor, in its unfolding as an event it stepped smartly out of line with the New Tendency. As daring as the formal experimentation was among those artists, as much as they explored the limits of materiality, finally they were trying to expand the precincts of high art but not to exceed its bounds. The larger issue of the integration of fine art into daily life—an issue that was leading toward an outright critique of art's status as object—was not part of the New Tendency polemic. The vast majority of these artists worked within the confines of traditional two- and three-dimensional mediums. Although many New Tendency reliefs and objects incorporated unconventional, "non-art" materials, like Uecker's nails and household objects and Mack's mirrors, there was never any doubt of their status as art objects and their remove from daily life.

By transforming an installation of objects into a performance redolent with ironic critique, Kusama went beyond the most radical of the New Tendency investigations of dynamism, dematerialization, and the boundary between art and life. Two other artists whose works were also often included in New Tendency exhibitions but who broke through its formalistic constraints were Yves Klein and Piero Manzoni.<sup>29</sup> Mavericks, they produced work ranging from two-dimensional experiments in monochromatic painting to flamboyant performances carefully documented for public distribution through photography, film, radio, and press releases. Because of its clearly performatory elements as well as its subjectivity, Kusama's sixties practice has more in common with the work of Manzoni and Klein than with any other European—or for that matter American—artist of the time.<sup>30</sup>

Manzoni's oeuvre reflected his concerted efforts to reveal and to ridicule the commodity status of art in a newly internationalized art market. His *Merda d'artista* (Artist's shit, 1961), *Fiato d'artista* (Artist's breath, 1959–60), and various "artist's fingerprints" (1960–61) made fun of the cult of the art object and the artist celebrity at the same time. What lifted Manzoni's life project (tragically shortened by his early death) from the merely transgressive to

**Figure 23**

Piero Manzoni premiering *Merda d'artista* in the bathroom at Angli shirt factory, 1961; © Piero Manzoni/Licensed by VAGA, New York, NY

**Figure 24**

Manzoni with *Merda d'artista* in his Milan studio, 1961; © Piero Manzoni/Licensed by VAGA, New York, NY

the frankly scandalous was his tireless promotion of himself and his products through the mass media. Generating press releases and hiring photographers to document his every highly choreographed movement, during his lifetime he appeared in newspapers and magazines, on radio and in newsreels<sup>31</sup> much more often than in art publications. In a number of cases press exposure was the element that completed the artwork. The first *Consumazione dell'arte dinamica del pubblico, divorare l'arte* (Consumption of dynamic art by the public devouring art, 1960), an event in which the "audience" consumed hard-boiled eggs signed with the artist's thumbprint, was never publicly performed but was staged for still and newsreel cameras using invited guests as stand-ins for the public.<sup>32</sup> Another work completed by its photographic documentation was Manzoni's infamous *Merda d'artista* (figs. 23–24). This project, consisting of ninety small numbered tins labeled "Merda d'artista: prodotto d'italia," was accompanied by an extensive sequence of photos showing the artist with his "masterpiece." In one Manzoni is in a lavatory holding a labeled can; in another he stares at a group of cans in deep, aesthetic contemplation. Although the tins of *Merda* are now most often shown on bases and under protective vitrines as straight sculpture, the photos clearly reveal the artist's intention to parody exactly this kind of object worship. A parody also of the aura surrounding the act of artistic creation, *Merda* and its accompanying photos emphasize the inextricable link between artist, artistic process, artwork, and daily life.

Despite or because of the fact that they were purely media creations, *Consumazione* and *Merda d'artista* are two of Manzoni's best-known works. As a result of his expert manipulation of the popular press and the general public he was often accused of being more interested in self-promotion than in making art. What this criticism did not take into account was that for Manzoni there was little difference between the two. He was among the first postwar artists to live his life as his art, with his breath, his signature, and his excrement as ironic souvenirs of a larger, more ambitious work—the artist himself. Without denigrating the importance of the artist as a producer of material things, Manzoni's projects explored, with none of the ambivalence of the pop artist toward the commodity, the reification of the artistic personality.

Kusama's attention-grabbing action at the Venice Biennale attracted similar accusations of excessive self-promotion, complaints that would follow



**Figure 25**  
Multiple portrait of Kusama, 1966;  
photograph by Eikō Hosoe

her throughout her career. “[S]he has a collection of magazine articles about herself from all over the world,” wrote Neal Weaver in a 1968 feature on the artist, “and a visitor to her studio is not likely to escape until he sees them all...”<sup>33</sup> As with Manzoni, this kind of criticism fails to take into account the level of parody that clearly animates Kusama’s most flamboyant performatory actions. *Narcissus Garden* confronted two of the most exercised issues of the sixties avant-garde—the call to merge art and life and the increasing commercialization of the art market. As its title reveals, it was as much about the promotion of the artist through the media as it was about the dematerialization of a sculptural object through the selling off of its elements.

Kusama, like Manzoni, considered herself a living work of art and promoted herself as such. From early on in her career she too hired professional photographers to systematically document all aspects of her varied activities. Carefully choreographed by the artist, most of the photographs of Kusama and her work are difficult to classify as mere publicity shots; they are closer to performance documentation and/or self-portraits (fig. 25). Perhaps as a result of the success of Hans Namuth’s well-known photos of Jackson Pollock in his studio,<sup>34</sup> first published in *Artnews* in 1951 and reproduced widely in the years following (most notably in *Life* magazine), it was not uncommon for media-savvy artists in the early sixties to hire photographers to document them in the process of making their work. Pollock was arguably the first artist to achieve a level of international popular stardom, and this can in large measure be attributed to the distribution of Namuth’s photos. Kusama’s series of straight photos and photocollages can nominally be seen in this tradition. Yet it is more illuminating, perhaps, to compare them with Manzoni’s series of photographs documenting himself and his work. Scholars have often commented on the fact (many with some annoyance) that it is virtually impossible to find a photograph of Kusama’s work that does not include the artist. Heretofore this has been explained by her “lust for publicity,”<sup>35</sup> but on reexamination it becomes clear that her interactions on film with her paintings, sculptures, and environments constitute works in themselves, however ephemeral in nature. As with *Narcissus Garden*, the crucial, performatory element in all her work is not apparent until the photographs of the artist in action have been publicly distributed through magazines, newspapers, or other media channels.

In a large number of recently unearthed early photos she used several ingenious methods to fuse her own image with her paintings and sculptures, giving both images equal weight. A double-exposure entitled “Kusama and Her Painting” overlays images of Kusama and an Infinity Net so that the artist is engulfed and almost obliterated by a fuzzy, transparent dotted veil (fig. 26). In a



**Figure 26**  
Kusama and Infinity Net painting, double exposure, early 1960s

photograph of the artist in her studio, probably from the mid-1960s, Kusama sits in a Plexiglas box, completely surrounded by Infinity Net canvases (fig. 27). In a series of color photos Kusama continues the game of merging with her paintings by posing in front of them in clothing color-coordinated to their surfaces. Though they are set up like straight documentation photos, the artist's insistent presence in front of her paintings leaves no doubt that she is an integral element.

So closely did Kusama identify herself with her work and the signature form of the Infinity Net that by the late sixties she had succeeded in transforming that motif and its topological variants, the polka dot and the phallus, into the artistic equivalent of the commercial logo. It is in this extraordinary accomplishment, more than any trace of process or manipulation of photography, that she most successfully completes the merger between artwork and artist. If Kusama's parody of the artistic aura can be compared with the work of Piero Manzoni, her manipulation of the Infinity Net motif is related to the work of his French contemporary, Yves Klein. Klein, like Kusama, transformed an object/concept—in his case a carefully selected color, International Klein Blue (IKB)—into a franchise of the artist himself. Never merely an expression of artistic passions—like Jackson Pollock's paint skeins, for example—IKB was for Klein coeval with the artist's being. "A painter must paint a single masterpiece, constantly—himself," he wrote in 1957. "He thus becomes a sort of atomic pile, a sort of generator of constant radiation who impregnates the atmosphere with his whole pictorial presence."<sup>36</sup> Klein considered artist and artwork inextricably entwined, as did Manzoni, his sometime rival, but rather than use elements of his own body as material, he employed his chosen shade of deep and pungent blue. Klein's "monochrome adventure" quickly grew until IKB encompassed



**Figure 27**  
Kusama in Plexiglas enclosure surrounded by paintings, c. 1964

mural-sized paintings, sculpture, installations, and in theory whole countries. In projects like *Colonisation par le blu* (1958) and his proposed monochrome painting the size of France entitled *Blue Revolution* (1959) Klein envisioned IKB—as pigment, light, and concept—poised to take over first an art gallery and then all of France. Works like the *Victoire de Samothrace* (Victory of Samothrace) (fig. 28), *Venus bleue* (Blue Venus), and *Esclave mourant* (Dying slave) (all 1962) were aspects of Klein's dream of covering all of Western culture with blue pigment. Klein's IKB monochromes caused him to



**Figure 28**  
Yves Klein  
*Victoire de Samothrace*, 1962  
Plaster, blue pigment  
H: 19 3/8 in. (49.2 cm)  
Private collection; © 1997 Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York

come “face to face with my own psyche” as well as allowing him “to experience nothingness.” Enveloped by IKB, Klein reported, “I was no longer myself. I, without the ‘I,’ became one with life itself.”<sup>37</sup>

Dubbed the “Polka-Dot Girl,”<sup>38</sup> “Dotty,”<sup>39</sup> and “the Polka-Dot Princess”<sup>40</sup> by the press, Kusama was as closely identified with her motifs as Klein was with IKB. “When this image is given freedom,” she said hopefully, “it overflows the limits of time and space.”<sup>41</sup> Like Klein, who traced his color obsession to his childhood, Kusama reported that her obsession with veils of nets and dots stemmed from hallucinations experienced as a young girl. Both artists envisioned the disappearance of the physical body of the artist and the material body of the artwork. “Become one with eternity,” Kusama preached in 1966. “Obliterate your personality. Become part of your environment. Forget yourself.”<sup>42</sup> This complete dematerialization, the culmination of the merger of artist and artwork, would represent the universal ascendance and recognition of the Idea.

Like Klein’s and Manzoni’s during their lifetimes, Kusama’s work was poorly received in New York as the sixties wore on and had all but disappeared from the scene by the beginning of the seventies. To a large extent it was this difficulty with the art public in the United States that encouraged her to continue exhibiting in Europe with Zero, Nul, and other New Tendency artists well into the late sixties. If her work was commonly linked to this “new tendency” emanating from Europe, it is most particularly the experiments of Manzoni and Klein—flying the flag of the New Tendency but sharing few affinities with it—with which it most clearly belongs. That Kusama herself sensed this is evident from a letter she wrote despondently to Henk Peeters in 1972: “Pierre Manzoni [sic], Yves Klein and I had a very hard time in this country.”<sup>43</sup> Their critique of the art object as commodity, their movement toward its dematerialization, and their assertion of the artist as the crucial element in the artwork steered the debate away from the object in space to the role of the artist in society. Ultimately it was their work that cleared the way for the artist-centered and body-oriented performances and environments that began in the seventies and continue to proliferate today.

Despite Kusama’s calls to “obliterate your personality. Become part of your environment. Forget yourself,” the artist—like her image haunting the photographs of her work—refuses to disappear. Art—first as a projected element of the self, then as interchangeable with the self, and finally, in performance, as coincident with the self—was the means by which Kusama was determined not only not to disappear into the world but to act in it. To the benefit of us all she succeeded in that goal.

## Notes

- 1 The call for a "nouvelle école européenne" was made by Georges J. Kasper in his Lausanne-based magazine *Art Actuel International*. The phrase was also the title of a 1960 anthology of critical writings by and about artists, edited by Kasper and Monique Kasper Franco for the Fondation internationale pour l'art nouveau in Lausanne.
- 2 The grid, as a ready-made organizational system, allowed for the creation of a "noncompositional" field in which figure and ground were elided. This visual effect served as another defining quality of the New Tendency, as reported by Enrico Castellani in his introduction to the exhibition catalogue *Monochrome Malerei* (Leverkusen: Städtisches Museum, 1960).
- 3 Kusama was one of two American artists in the exhibition; the other was Mark Rothko (Udo Kultermann, interview by Lynn Zelevansky, New York City, 17 April 1995).
- 4 Although she began corresponding with Peeters after *Monochrome Malerei*, Kusama only met him personally in 1965 on her journey to Europe for the opening of *Nul* at the Stedelijk Museum in Amsterdam. It was through Peeters that she was introduced to Leo Verboen and Albert Vogel, who presented her first European solo show in May 1965 at the Internationale Galerij Orez in the Hague. Its name the word *zero* spelled backwards, Orez represented the artists of both the *Nul* and *Zero* groups. The gallery became Kusama's primary agent in Northern Europe, a relationship that exists, at least nominally, today.
- 5 This correspondence lasted well into the early 1980s.
- 6 Otto Piene, "The Development of Group Zero," *Times Literary Supplement* (3 September 1964). Yves Klein, Piero Manzoni, and Lucio Fontana also appeared in *Zero* publications as adherents.
- 7 Otto Piene, "Zero," in *Group Zero* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Institute of Contemporary Art, 1964). This was a small, unpaginated catalogue for an eponymous exhibition organized by *Zero*.
- 8 Samuel Adams Green, "Foreword," in *Group Zero*. Green was director and curator at the Philadelphia ICA.
- 9 Peeters, letter to Kusama, October 1963 (courtesy Peeters archive). As close as this and other statements seem to the rhetoric of Frank Stella and Donald Judd, *Zero* and *Nul* work resembles the work of American kinetic artists more than it does the minimalists. However, *Zero* and *Nul* did not share the interest in optically oriented effects held by New Tendency groups like the Paris-centered GRAV, led by Victor Vasarely. Interestingly, Kusama listed herself as a member of GRAV in a biography prepared by the artist for publicity purposes around 1963 (courtesy Beatrice Perry archives).
- 10 This was noted by Hans Haacke (Haacke, telephone interview by Alexandra Munroe and Reiko Tomii, 8 December 1988).
- 11 This connection was noted by a critic as early as 1966. "Kusama's products are not an isolated phenomenon. They may be compared to Gunther Uecker's nail-infested pieces of furniture..." (Ed Sommer, "Letter from Germany: Yayoi Kusama at the Galerie M. E. Thelen, Essen," *Art International* 10, no. 8 [October 1966]: 46).
- 12 Heinz Mack, "The New Dynamic Structure" (first published in *Zero I*, Düsseldorf, 1958). Reprinted in Otto Piene and Heinz Mack, eds. *Zero* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1973), 14.
- 13 Sommer, "Letter from Germany," 46.

- <sup>14</sup> Samaras's room measured eight by ten feet and contained a series of mirrored cubes.
- <sup>15</sup> Unsigned article in *De Nieuwe Stijl*, an artist-produced magazine from 1965; quoted in Janneke Wessling, *Schoonhoven* (Den Haag: SDU Openbaar Kunstbezit, 1990), 39.
- <sup>16</sup> Haacke, 8 December 1988 interview.
- <sup>17</sup> Jud Yalkut, "The Polka-Dot Way of Life (Conversation with Yayoi Kusama)," *New York Free Press* 1, no. 8 (15 February 1968):8–9.
- <sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*, 8.
- <sup>19</sup> When the artist began a short-lived scheme to manufacture and market polka-dotted and net-infested clothes, that each item was unique was the principal selling point.
- <sup>20</sup> Donald Judd, "In the Galleries," *Arts* 35, no. 10 (September 1964): 68.
- <sup>21</sup> Al van Starrex, "Some Far-Out Fashions: With and without Clothes," *Mr.* 13, no. 8 (July 1969): 41.
- <sup>22</sup> Haacke, 8 December 1988 interview.
- <sup>23</sup> Kusama, letter to Henk Peeters, 9 September 1963 (courtesy Peeters archive).
- <sup>24</sup> *Ibid.*
- <sup>25</sup> *Ibid.*
- <sup>26</sup> Norman Narotzky, "The Venice Biennial: Pease Porridge in the Pot Nine Days Old," *Arts* 40, no. 9 (September–October, 1966): 42.
- <sup>27</sup> *Ibid.*
- <sup>28</sup> Kusama, interview by Gordon Brown, WABC radio, June 1964; reprinted in *De nieuwe stijl: Werk van de internationale avantgarde*, exh. cat. (Amsterdam: De Bezige Bij Gallery, 1965). Brown was a friend of Kusama's; he also interviewed her for one of Henk Peeters' Nul exhibition catalogues.
- <sup>29</sup> It is important to note that both artists died young—Klein in June 1962 and Manzoni in February 1963. Thus their work was included posthumously in the majority of New Tendency exhibitions of the early to mid 1960s.
- <sup>30</sup> Mention must be made here of the connection between Kusama's work and that of Andy Warhol, whose silkscreened serial repetitions of dollar bills from 1962 closely resemble a lost collage by Kusama that incorporated real American money, and whose successful efforts of self-promotion created the category of "art star." Kusama has said that she was very aware of and interested in Warhol's activities. However, there are important differences between Warhol's project and Kusama's, and for that matter between Warhol's and those of Manzoni and Klein. Although all might have shared the strategy of ironic self-promotion, Kusama and the two Europeans had a much more active and direct critical attitude toward issues of cultural nationalism and commodification, standing in high contrast to Warhol's tongue-in-cheek "if you can't beat 'em, join 'em" stance.
- <sup>31</sup> Manzoni was filmed speaking about his work or performing a number of times by the Italian film newsmagazine *Cinegiornale Sedi*, most probably as a result of his friendship with two of the cameramen.
- <sup>32</sup> This strategy is reminiscent of Yves Klein's famous *Leap into the Void*, staged for the camera and existing only as a photomontage.

- 33 Neal Weaver, "The Polka-Dot Girl Strikes Again, or Kusama's Infamous Spectacular," *After Dark* 10, no. 1 (May 1968): 46. However harsh, Weaver's article is exceptional in that he recognizes Kusama's "tremendous showmanship," comparing her manipulation of the mass media with that of Andy Warhol.
- 34 Namuth also produced a film of Pollock at work that accompanied the artist's posthumous retrospective as it traveled in Europe.
- 35 Unsigned article, *Village Voice* (28 November 1968).
- 36 Klein, quoted by Sidra Stich in *Yves Klein* (London: Hayward Gallery, 1995), 104.
- 37 *Ibid.*
- 38 Neal Weaver, "The Polka-Dot Girl," 43.
- 39 Alfred Carl, "Call Her Dotty," *New York Sunday News* (13 August 1967): 10.
- 40 Unsigned article, "Kusama: The Polka-Dot Princess Who Practices What She Preaches!" *Bachelor* 10, no. 3 (June 1969): 10.
- 41 Kusama, interview by Gordon Brown, WABC Radio, June 1964.
- 42 Jud Yalkut, "The Polka-Dot Way of Life," 8.
- 43 Kusama, letter to Henk Peeters, 17 August 1972 (courtesy Peeters archive).



## Akira Tatehata

Translated by Bert Winther-Tamaki

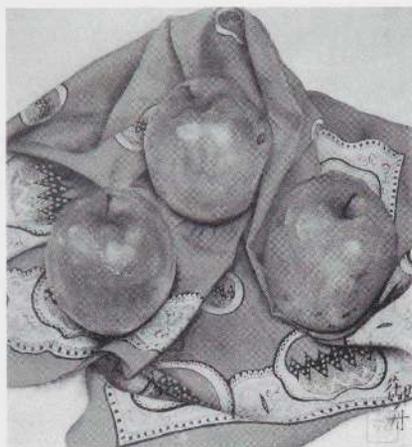
# Kusama as Autonomous Surrealist

**Y**ayoi Kusama began her career as a painter with almost no academic art education. The one exception was a period of a year and a half, starting in 1948, when she left her home town of Matsumoto to study at the Kyoto Municipal School of Arts and Crafts. She had graduated from Matsumoto First Girls' High School two years previously. Since then Kusama and her mother had quarreled fiercely and steadily, because the daughter had resolved to become an artist and her mother was dead set against the idea. It was only when the young Kusama agreed to the condition that she take lessons in traditional Japanese etiquette from a relative in Kyoto that her mother approved her move to that city.

From Kusama's perspective, student life in Kyoto was a means of getting away from her hot-tempered mother and focusing on artwork. Not surprisingly, the etiquette lessons were not foremost in her thoughts, and her attendance fell off as she devoted all her energies to art studies. She enrolled in the Nihonga department simply because her art teacher in high school had been a Nihonga painter and not out of any personal interest in the genre. Nihonga, or "Japanese painting," is not a direct evolution of traditional styles. Rather, it emerged as an idealistic and nationalistic reaction to the Japanese practice of *yōga*, or "Western painting," introduced into Japan in the late nineteenth century. Nihonga practice is perpetuated even today through centralized exhibitions organized like academic salons, a system that has continuously been a primary focus of the Kyoto art world. But Kusama was an outsider from the start, and she had absolutely no contact with the ideology and system of the salon.

Nevertheless, she managed to learn Nihonga technique, and this played a role of some significance in her self-formation as a painter. Linear rendering from nature is the foundation of Nihonga training, and this was the only period when Kusama, who since childhood had drawn images based on her own fantasies, would concentrate on naturalistic sketches of the exterior world. Numerous studies remain from her sketchbooks of this time in both pencil and brush-and-ink, with passages of light color; they often depict plants or monkeys. None of these studies transcend the school exercises that they were. However, they do record the cultivation of pow-

Newspaper photograph of Kusama with early works on paper, c. 1952



**Figure 29**  
Hayami Gyoshū  
*Apples*, 1920  
Pigment and gold leaf on silk  
10  $\frac{3}{8}$  x 9  $\frac{3}{8}$  in. (26.4 x 23.9 cm)  
Toyota Municipal Museum of Art

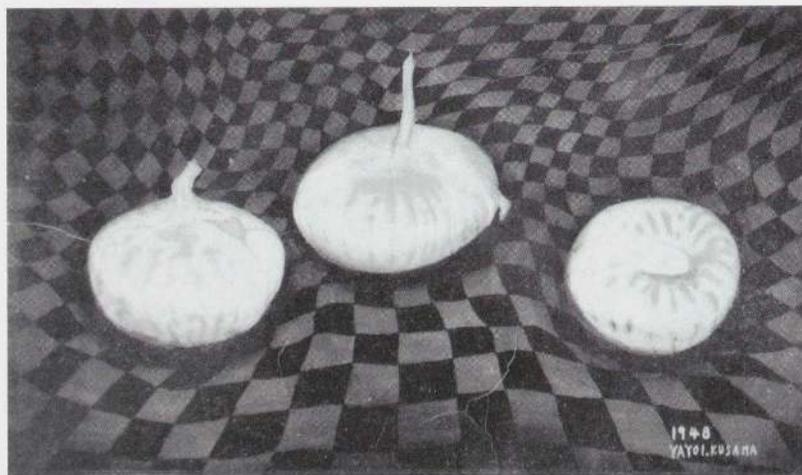
ers of observation and draftsmanship that were the basis for the next phase of Kusama's art, an autonomous surrealism driven by inner necessity.

In an interview regarding her Kyoto period Kusama mentioned her interest in two Nihonga painters of the preceding generation, Murayama Kagaku (1888–1939) and Hayami Gyoshū (1894–1935).<sup>1</sup> As she is not in the habit of discussing the work of other painters, this was an unusual acknowledgment. Kagaku and Gyoshū are highly regarded for the innovations they brought to the Nihonga tradition through deep study of classical Japanese and Chinese painting. Kusama was no doubt attracted to their work because of its modernist tendency toward extremely individualistic expression. In Kagaku's case this was manifest in a mysterious spiritual character based on his interpretation of Buddhist philosophy. In Gyoshū's work the sense of modernity was effected by his move from thoroughgoing naturalism to anxious illusionism (fig. 29).

Kusama's 1948 *Onions* (fig. 30), a work in mineral pigments on paper (the traditional Nihonga materials) from her Kyoto period, is the earliest example of her commitment to painting. It is also her only extant representational painted work. She says that she created this Nihonga work in a spirit of competition with the close rendering of Gyoshū.<sup>2</sup> Nihonga painting typically employs such flat rendering, distinct from the volumetric modeling and illusionistic depth of oil paint due to the nature of mineral pigment, which lacks the viscosity of oils. The objects Kusama fixed her eye on were not grounded in the stable structure of a still life. Because these onions hover over a ground delineated in a grid pattern and permeated by strange fluctuations they take on the appearance of a hallucinatory vision severed from reality. This grid unmistakably foreshadows Kusama's later net paintings.

Another work done in mineral pigments on paper, *Lingering Dream* (1948) (fig. 31), also comes from Kusama's student days in Kyoto. It was based on the memory of a seed-harvesting field, part of the nursery owned by her family in Matsumoto. This image of crimson earth, a green butterfly, and biomorphic foliage arguably represents Kusama's closest approach to surrealist

**Figure 30**  
Yayoi Kusama  
*Onions*, 1948  
Pigment on paper  
15  $\frac{1}{2}$  x 23  $\frac{1}{4}$  in. (39.5 x 59 cm)  
Collection of the artist





**Figure 31**  
Yayoi Kusama  
*Lingering Dream*, 1948  
Pigment on paper  
59 x 78 3/4 in. (150 x 200 cm)  
Collection of the artist

**Figure 32**  
Hayami Gyoshū  
*Pomegranates in Nabeshima Ware*, 1921  
Pigment on silk  
14 1/2 x 19 1/2 in. (36.8 x 49.5 cm)  
Private collection

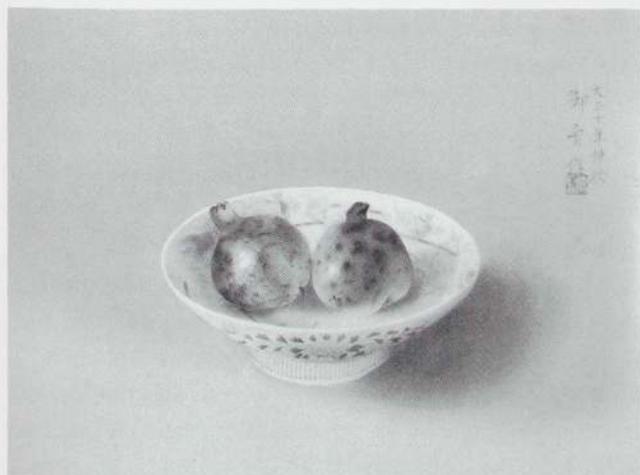
**Figure 33**  
Hayami Gyoshū  
*Fresh Fruits (Apples and Figs)*, 1921  
Pigment and gold leaf on silk  
9 3/4 x 8 3/4 in. (24.9 x 22.3 cm)  
Private collection

illusionism. However, she says she knew nothing about this movement at the time. If indeed these images took form through a combination of skilled draftsmanship and the hallucinations of mental illness, then we must say that Kusama was an autonomous surrealist.

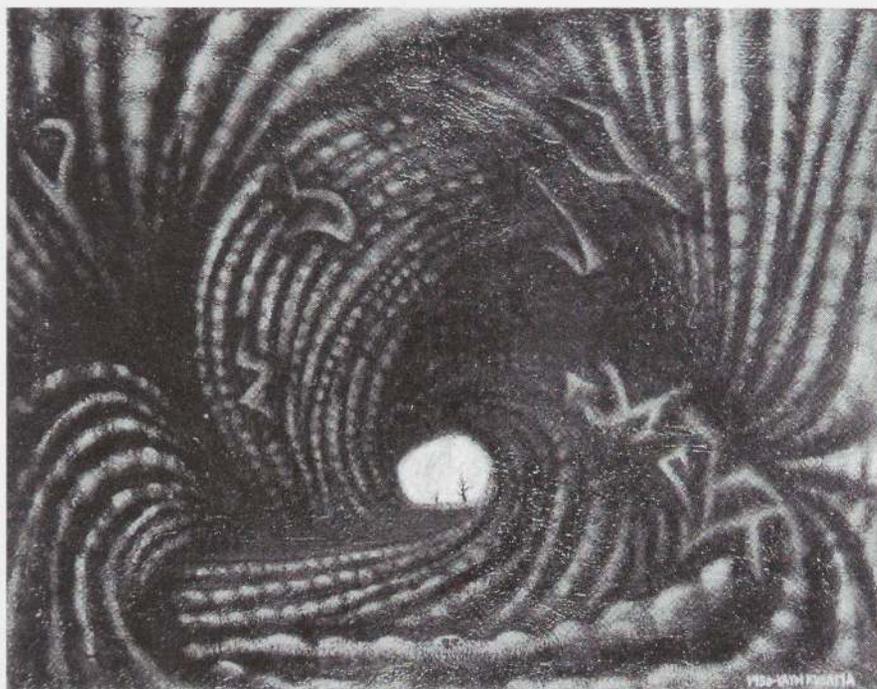
Similarly, considering Gyoshū's own style and the historical and social context in which he worked, it is likely that he too had no direct knowledge of surrealism. In any case, the works to which Kusama was drawn preceded Gyoshū's travel

to Europe. His minute naturalistic rendering represented a fusion of Sung Dynasty court painting technique and a style of naturalistic representation imported from the West (figs. 32 and 33). Kusama viewed Gyoshū as an "artist who painted apparitions."<sup>3</sup> In a manner unprecedented in Nihonga painting, Gyoshū revealed an obsession with the object itself in its every detail. In Kusama's eyes he had arrived at a personal form of surrealism through the extremity of his naturalism.

In retrospect Kusama says her schooling was a waste of time.<sup>4</sup> Nevertheless, even if it was merely an exercise, this detour forced her, to her benefit, to grapple with naturalistic drawing and put her in contact with the distinctive hallucinatory vision of these two exemplars of modernist Nihonga. For a young woman whose only means of securing peace of mind was to seek refuge in the practice of drawing and painting, this classroom experience stimulated the awakening of another self that could objectively apprehend the visions produced by her illness.



**Figure 34**  
Yayoi Kusama  
*Accumulation of Corpses (Prisoner  
Surrounded by a Curtain of  
Depersonalization)*, 1950  
Oil on canvas  
28 3/8 x 35 7/8 in. (72 x 91 cm)  
Collection of the artist

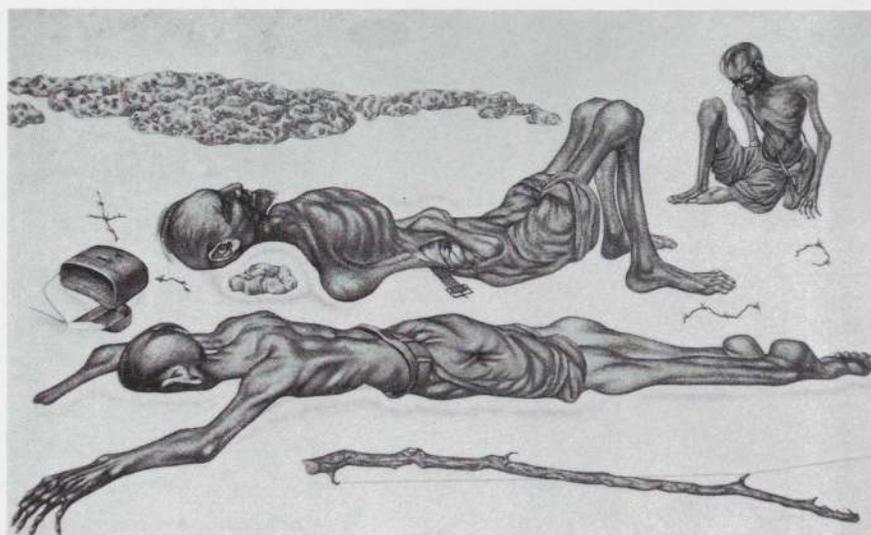


It was when she returned to Matsumoto, after living in Kyoto for a year and a half, that Kusama worked with oil paint in earnest for the first time. Unfortunately, however, her family situation had not improved, and the discord with her mother again produced a climate of hostility. This was the psychologically stressful context in which she painted *Accumulation of Corpses (Prisoner Surrounded by a Curtain of Depersonalization)* (1950) (fig. 34). During this period she had frequent symptoms of *rijin-shō*, or “depersonalization syndrome,” an illness in which her perception of the outer world—including landscapes, people, and sounds—suddenly faded, submerged behind a swirling curtainlike haze. Later, after seeing a psychiatrist, Kusama would recognize in the description of *rijin-shō* her own form of illness. This painting was subtitled retrospectively, but the artist says that she faithfully recorded the great sense of terror she experienced at the time. In the center of the painting two small trees appear in a distant, light-filled space surrounded, like a window, by the undulant pleats of what could be reddish curtains. The folds seem also to refer to the furrows in the nursery fields around her parents’ house. The biomorphic shapes scattered through these swirling forms can be read as fragmentary figures.

To be sure, this painting expresses a sense of fear, but at the same time it is impressive for the firm structure of its composition. It achieves a vivid volumetric modeling of a sort that would be impossible using the mineral pigments of the Nihonga style. The whole composition is controlled by an organic rhythm that seems to proliferate infinitely, vibrating the picture plane and depicting great depth. Without question, this rhythm emerged from the fluctuating grid in the background of *Onions*.

Kusama’s childhood drawings might be regarded as the crystallization of a despairing scream, but *Accumulation of Corpses* goes beyond this. Perhaps the underlying motivation is the same, but the artist has absorbed the *métier* of painting and demonstrates a strong creative will. The 1950 canvas contains a formality of spatial organization beyond that which one would expect to find in the depiction of an imaginary landscape by a naive or outsider artist. It is not the

**Figure 35**  
 Nobuya Abe  
*Starvation*, 1949  
 Oil on canvas  
 31 1/2 x 51 1/8 in. (80 x 130 cm)  
 Kanagawa Prefectural Museum of  
 Modern Art



indulgence of eccentricity that one senses here, but the eye of an expressive artist confronting the painted image from a detached perspective.

*Accumulation of Corpses* might be understood as implying the artist watching the spectacle of her own confinement. While she is absorbed with the weaving of the proliferating imagery, she also positions herself as a coolheaded observer insofar as the painterly labor itself is repetitious and disciplined. Later she would make objective reference to labor of this kind with the term "accumulation."

The recognition of one's confinement in a cage of absurdity and the dispassionate observation of that confinement from a sober distance was not unique to Kusama but was shared by a number of notable artists in Japan shortly after the end of World War II. Nobuya Abe's *Starvation* of 1949 (fig. 35), for example, depicts an extreme situation that can be understood as an overlay of the artist's memory of his wretched experience of war in the South Seas and the intervening postwar years of desolation and spiritual collapse. However, Abe's transition, in the years following this work, to surrealistic nude figure painting, such as in his *Person* (1951), suggests that the artist's intention may not have been simply an indictment of the misery of war or the expression of a sense of futility. For Abe this human image, ringing with trauma, was also a target of hard objective scrutiny.

On Kawara's earliest drawings and oil paintings similarly feature images of objectified humans. In what one might expect to be gruesome interior scenes of dissected and severed corpses in Kawara's oil painting *Butcher's Wife* (fig. 36) and drawing *Smallpox* (both 1952), anthropomorphic forms are treated as if they were the inert parts of a machine. This imagery is also a reflection of the suffocating postwar years of poverty, social collapse, and individual discouragement; but in these absurdist and forsaken scenes, which allow no specific narra-



**Figure 36**  
On Kawara  
*Butcher's Wife*, 1952  
Oil on canvas  
39 3/4 x 33 3/4 in. (100 x 86 cm)  
Private collection, Tokyo

tive interpretation, there is an antic quality, leading us to conclude that the artist stands in a position of observation even more icily detached than that of Abe.

The art critic Toshiaki Minemura discussed the early 1950s work of Kusama, Abe, Kawara, and others as follows:

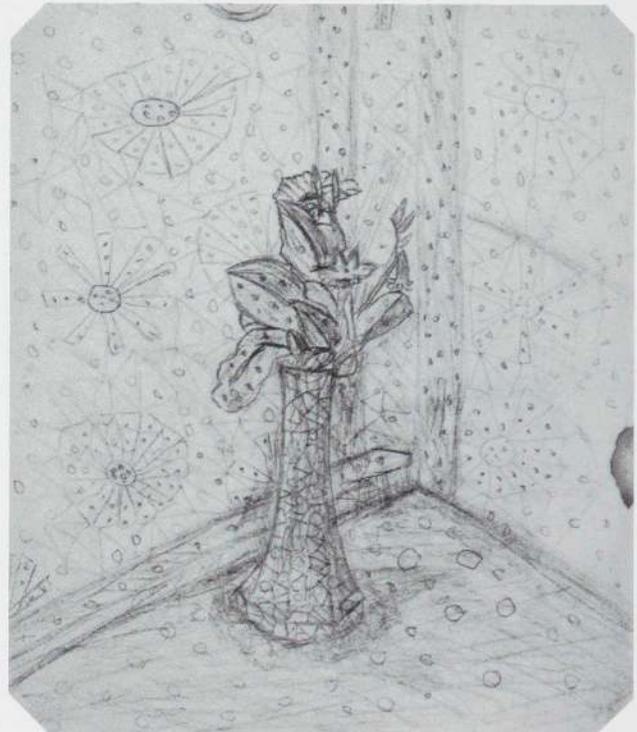
Having experienced a deep sense of desolation and faithlessness occasioned by the war, they could not suppress a need to completely reject all expressive form linked to ideological bombast or embellishment. [This was a generation that], more than anything else, demanded a direct confrontation with the real existence of things and material (and moreover, the state of the work of art as thing, the human being as thing). An unexpected basso continuo can be sensed reverberating throughout their diverse work. . . .<sup>5</sup>

This is an apt characterization of artists who, under postwar conditions, trained their stringent gaze on the object. Moreover, the basso continuo transcends generations when one recalls that Kusama had the sense of rivaling Gyoshū, as though he were her contemporary, in the way he had focused his fixed, objective gaze three decades earlier. Though similar developments were occurring in Europe and the United States, the early postwar period was a time when information about contemporary art movements elsewhere, such as *informel* and abstract expressionism, was very limited in Japan. Nor did the artists with this object-oriented disposition organize themselves into a movement. Minemura's observation could be applied not only to artists who might be regarded as having approached a more or less surrealist position, but also to those practitioners, soon to form the Gutai group, who were deliberately antisurrealist in their outlook. By applying paint with their feet or by hurling pigment-covered balls at the picture surface, these artists approached the recognition of painting as, above all, material substance. Thus, the late 1940s and early 1950s can be recognized as the starting point for postwar Japanese art, presaging Gutai activities as well as such antifigurative motifs as Kusama's nets.

Kusama's personal experience of the war and its aftermath was not as severe as it might have been. To be sure, she was mobilized along with the rest of her high-school classmates to work in a factory sewing parachutes, but living in the countryside, which did not come under bombardment, she did not have to fear for the destruction of her home in air raids, nor did she lose family members, as many of her generation did. A member of a wealthy rural household, she probably did not have to worry about lack of food during the shortages following the war. Moreover, Kyoto, where she was studying, was exceptional among large cities for having escaped bombardment.



**Figure 37**  
Yayoi Kusama  
Untitled, c. 1939  
Pencil on paper  
9 3/4 x 8 7/8 in. (24.8 x 22.5 cm)  
Collection of the artist



**Figure 38**  
Yayoi Kusama  
Untitled, c. 1939  
Pencil on paper  
9 3/4 x 8 7/8 in. (24.8 x 22.5 cm)  
Collection of the artist

The art of Kawara, Abe, and others, such as Masao Tsuruoka, can be fruitfully regarded in terms of its broader social context, its imagery conveying the absurd human sacrifice of the war years. But the feeling of absurdity in Kusama's work was generated largely by the inner conditions of her mental illness. There was no obvious external reason for her to represent people as sacrifices. She was neither a social realist nor did she wish to confront and convey the conditions of her time, as did contemporaries such as Kawara; Kusama was entirely absorbed in her own illusionary vision. As Alexandra Munroe has pointed out, "[W]hereas Abe's and Kawara's imagery is symbolic and fantastic, Kusama's is the least self-conscious and thus the most genuinely nightmarish."<sup>6</sup> This is not to suggest that her work is limited in scope, but rather that it sustains a universal vision that can only be attained by severe internal solitude.

From 1951 until she left for the United States in 1957 Kusama concentrated entirely on works on paper, whether in pastel, gouache, or ink. It is noteworthy that she experimented in these drawings and watercolors with motifs clearly prototypical of those she would develop in the net/dot paintings of her early years in New York. Though they are mostly small works, these images—incorporating scattered dots and intricate, fluctuating nets—are the products of obsessive repetition that seems to proliferate beyond all bounds. These motifs were already apparent to some degree in *Onions* and *Accumulation of Corpses*, but they can be followed back even further, to two pencil drawings remaining from Kusama's elementary-school years. One of these depicts, according to the artist, a young mother, her eyes closed and her head slightly averted (fig. 37). Small dots are inscribed all over her face, clothes, and the background, as if it were snowing. In the other drawing (fig. 38) a vase of flowers in the corner of a room is similarly covered with dots; radiating weblike patterns are casually scrawled all over the walls. Both drawings go beyond the unbridled freedom of juvenilia to evoke disquieting, hallucinatory experience. It would require over



**Figure 39**  
Tetsumi Kudō  
*Proliferating Chain Reaction in X-Style  
Basic Substance*, 1960  
Wire, iron, vinyl tubes, brushes  
28 3/4 x 32 1/4 x 25 3/4 in.  
(73 x 82 x 65 cm)  
Museum of Contemporary Art, Tokyo;  
©1997 Artists Rights Society (ARS),  
New York

ten years, but Kusama would eventually sublimate her inner-driven and incurable obsession to accomplish large, objectified mesmeric net/dot systems.

One of the first art critics to recognize Kusama's talent was Shūzō Takiguchi, a surrealist poet who had corresponded with André Breton and who had championed surrealism in Japan for many years. According to retrospective comments in interviews with the author, Kusama was delighted to be recognized by the most influential critic of the Japanese art world in that period, but she took no active interest in the surrealist movement itself. Aside from a few experiments with the technique of decalomania, there is no fundamental transformation apparent in her subsequent work attributable to surrealism. Kusama's drawings from this period, though reminiscent of the work of Klee, Miró, Wols, or early Pollock, cannot be definitively linked to direct influence. Though reproductions of Klee and Miró were available, Kusama claims to have had no interest in them. Thus we had best posit simply that the methods and explorations of this autonomous surrealist happened to be in agreement with international tendencies in the avant-garde.

Through the vibrancy of her visual hallucinations a sort of animistic feeling is evoked in the world of her drawings. This animism also seems to underlie the menacing, blatantly sexual, fetishistic, and feminist objects she created in the 1960s. It may be no more than a dangerous temptation to speculate about the possible link between such animism and the context and history of an agrarian society. The lineage of object-making by artists Shūsaku Arakawa, Tomio Miki, and Tetsumi Kudō (fig. 39) clearly suggests a key to understanding the character of Japanese fetishism, though it might well be argued that Kusama does not belong to this lineage.

In any case, having decided in the mid-1950s to go to New York, at the highest pitch of the feud with her mother, Kusama burned thousands of her drawings on the riverbank behind her house. *Pacific Ocean* (1959) (cat. 13) was one of the earliest of the net/dot works to be done in New York. The artist says its fluctuating all-over pattern represents the waves she saw from the window of the propeller plane in which she crossed the ocean. Having completed a self-transformation, Kusama in this painting effected a symbolic leave-taking from her period as an autonomous surrealist.

**Notes**

- 1 Yayoi Kusama, interview by author, Kusama's studio, Tokyo, 19 December 1996.
- 2 Ibid.
- 3 Ibid.
- 4 Yayoi Kusama, interview by author, Kusama's studio, Tokyo, 18 March 1997.
- 5 Toshiaki Minemura, "Introduction," in *1953 raito appu: atarashii sengō bijutsuzō ga miete kita* (1953 light up: a new image of postwar art comes into view), exh. cat. (Tokyo: Meguro-ku Bijutsukan, 1996), 14.
- 6 Alexandra Munroe, "Obsession, Fantasy and Outrage: The Art of Yayoi Kusama," in *Yayoi Kusama: A Retrospective*, exh. cat. (New York: Center for International Contemporary Arts, 1989), 15.



## Between Heaven and Earth: The Literary Art of Yayoi Kusama

Kusama during performance on Brooklyn  
Bridge, 17 May 1968

**I**n 1978, five years after her move back to Japan, Yayoi Kusama wrote an autobiographical novel entitled *Manhattan Suicide Addict* about her life as an artist in downtown New York during the 1960s. She produced the manuscript as she produced so much of her art, in a single spell of obsessive creation, completing the first and only draft within a mere three weeks.<sup>1</sup> The book, published by a small literary press and illustrated with images of Kusama's sixties' art (including her Infinity Net paintings, Driving Image installations, and nude happenings), was a moderate critical success that eventually acquired cult status among Japan's literary vanguard. *Manhattan Suicide Addict's* publication marked the beginning of Kusama's professional writing career: She has since issued twelve books, including novels, poetry, and short-story collections.<sup>2</sup>

Kusama produced these volumes writing through the nights in her cubicle at a Tokyo hospital for the mentally ill, her voluntary residence since 1977.

She has found in writing an alternative therapeutic practice to painting and sculpture; it is an outlet for the expression of "metaphysical things, the negative feelings inside of me, human pain, life and death."<sup>3</sup>

Kusama's art and fiction are different forms of the same repetitive production of traumatic, phantasmic, and transcendental experiences that obsess her. Her prose is an incessant narration of a depersonalized self fighting against the void of self-obliteration. Set in New York or Japan in the present time, her novels recount the adventures of a cast of multiethnic characters living at the fringes of society. Half-lunatic and destitute, many of them artists, their lives revolve around drug addiction and psychiatric illness; incest, rape, and prostitution; orphanhood, loss of a beloved, and suicide. For Kusama madness, supernatural forces, and suicide are not miserable but strangely free and gorgeous fates, signs of dignity in a debauched world. Her best-known works, *The Hustlers*, *Grotto of Christopher Street* and *The Burning of St. Mark's Church* combine the sordid and the hallucinatory in a fluid, imagistic prose. The renowned novelist Ryū Murakami has remarked that Kusama's novels are reminiscent of Jean Genet's fictions of depraved city underworlds, in the sense that "both make filth shine."<sup>4</sup> Drag queens, junkies, exiles from far-flung places—the subversive and unmoored detritus of the modern industrialized

state—carouse, hustle, castrate their lovers, and die pure deaths with haunting, carnivalesque redundancy. But unlike Genet, Kusama's rhapsodic melodramas embrace the surreal and remain in an ambiguous world, where "spirits wander between reality and image."<sup>5</sup>

Kusama's novels, like her painting and collages, sculpture, environments, and happenings, owe their intensity to the structure of obsessive repetition. "Her words multiply," critic Atsushi Tanigawa has commented, "in an anxious stream of unconscious narrative."<sup>6</sup> But it is not only the repetition of a basic structural vocabulary that links Kusama's visual art to her writing. The obsessive thematic preoccupations that figure repeatedly in all of her works are sex as a site of power abuse, hallucinatory experience as a reproduction of what Freud terms "the uncanny," and suicidal ideation as a mode of escaping from, or rebelling against, authoritarian denials of individuality. Kusama has claimed in numerous interviews and statements over the last fifty years that such obsessions are the conditions of her disease, which stems from childhood. To counter the forces of negation that aim to obliterate the self or separate it from others, she has to exert enormous willpower to simultaneously resist and overwhelm the oppression. If Kusama's vast artistic production is the evidence of a ferocious battle between concrete reality and the overwhelming emptiness of nonbeing, a struggle to master the images that revolt or terrify her by repeatedly recreating them under her aesthetic control, then her fiction (which until recently has not been available in English translation) offers further evidence of Kusama's extraordinary powers to transform the disturbing illusions of the mind into enduring art. Ultimately, her production legitimizes a realm where symbolic order has exploded, leaving us, like the narrator in *Manhattan Suicide Addict*, in a state of suspension: "I can not give up my existence. Also I can not escape from death. This languid weight of life!"<sup>7</sup>

#### Kusama and Trends in Contemporary Japanese Literature

When Kusama's first literary work was published in Tokyo in the late 1970s, she was known only to a small circle within the Japanese art establishment. She had left Japan in 1957, achieved fame abroad, and quietly returned in 1973 after a fifteen-year absence to receive medical treatment and psychiatric care. Beyond a faithful following of postwar avant-garde artists and critics who recognized her stature, Kusama's reputation in Japan was modest. Her New York activities had received little coverage in the Japanese art press and virtually no works from that period had ever been shown in Japan. It was not until 1982, when she held her first solo exhibition at a major Tokyo gallery, that Kusama gained a new audience and reestablished her position as one of Japan's preeminent artists of the international avant-garde.<sup>8</sup> It is significant, in the context of her literary career, that the majority of her early readers thus came to know her first and foremost as a writer. Her early fans—and she had hundreds—were mostly young urban Japanese who identified with Kusama's characters freely trans-



Dust jacket, Yayoi Kusama, *The Burning of St. Mark's Church*, 1985

gressing social, sexual, and psychological boundaries.

But Kusama's early novels attracted critical attention as well. In 1983 *The Hustlers Grotto of Christopher Street* won the prestigious literary award for new writers given by the monthly magazine *Yasei jidai*. The jury consisted of the notable novelists Masahiro Mita, Michitsuna Takahashi, Teru Miyamoto, Ryū

Murakami, and Kenji Nakagami. This group, a generation or two younger than the postwar school of Japanese literature represented by such giants as Kōbō Abe, Yukio Mishima, and Kenzaburō Ōe, had emerged as the proponents of a new genre of contemporary Japanese fiction. As intellectual nihilists who came of age in the 1960s they eschewed Abe's existentialism, Mishima's romanticism, and Ōe's political ideology for a more fantastic, even psychedelic style of writing. Their tales of bizarre violence, erotic obsession, and occult happenings—a kind of postmodern magic realism—were inspired in part by their attraction to an eccentric strain in early modern Japanese literature prominent in the writings of Izumi Kyōka (1873–1939).

Viewed as peripheral during his lifetime because he stood apart from the dominant naturalistic prose of the period, Kyōka had invoked folklore, superstition, and legend to create a fictive purgatory of the supernatural and grotesque.<sup>9</sup> What appealed to avant-garde writers of the 1970s and 1980s was his graphic imagery, gothic decadence, and dark, premodern sensibility. Although his plots and characterizations were often unstructured or poorly developed, his haunting atmosphere of multiple realities—what the great early-modern writer Ryūnosuke Akutagawa summed up as “Kyōka's world”—profoundly influenced the emergence of the new literary genres. Nakagami and Murakami, like Kyōka, created an ambiguous domain beyond thought and knowledge as resistance to the prevailing symbolic order imposed by modernity and Westernization. It is not surprising that Kusama, who ranks Kyōka topmost among her favorite Japanese writers, emerged in Tokyo's literary world at the height of the “Kyōka boom” and later established close association with three of her jurors—Miyamoto, Murakami, and Nakagami—who today are internationally recognized for ushering in the new Japanese fiction. It is instructive, therefore, to discuss Kusama's literary works in the context of this development.

*The Hustlers Grotto of Christopher Street*, a story of sexual violence, hallucination, and suicide, is representative of Kusama's own idiosyncratic production of a fictive purgatory. Like Kyōka, Kusama writes about a macabre, supernatural world haunted with strange forms of love and betrayal in a language that is equally visual, formalist, and stylized. Kyōka's most famous story, “The Holy Man of Mount Kōya” (Kōya hijiri, 1900), recounts the tale of an itin-

erant ascetic (the narrator) who transgresses into a spirit world where the trees rain black leeches and the ground seethes with giant snakes. There he comes upon a woman of ethereal beauty who is married to an idiot; she taunts the monk to forgo his vows. He weakens until he discovers that she is in fact a serpent-demon with powers to transform her lovers into bats and hoary beasts of burden.<sup>10</sup>

Kyōka's stories, frequently centered on the lives of prostitutes, aestheticize the violent aspect of the erotic and endow the female body with dark powers typical of Japanese premodern folklore. For Kyōka, who once remarked that "monsters are the concretization of my emotion,"<sup>11</sup> words themselves are *bakemono*—beings of transformation—and writing is a ritualistic act in which one can "pass through reality to reach a still greater power."<sup>12</sup> Kyōka, Mishima once wrote, revived the ancient linked-verse style of *renga* poetry, with its "leaps of association and the imagistic splendor of the Japanese language that modern Japanese literature had forgotten."<sup>13</sup> Unquestionably, the risks Kusama's fiction takes with its imagery and ambiguous relations between this world and the world of apparitions can best be appreciated by positioning her work in the lineage of Kyōka's tales of the supernatural and grotesque.

*The Hustlers Grotto of Christopher Street* recounts an episode in the life of Yanni, a young woman from Hong Kong who briefly studied philosophy at Columbia University and now manages male prostitutes in lower Manhattan. One of her boys is Henry, an African-American college dropout and heroin addict for whom she feels some sympathy "if only because he was a 'nigger' in a racist country" and with whom she occasionally has sex. "Though Yanni, with her hip-length black hair, dark almond eyes, and feline grace, was precisely the type he claimed to be wild about, the truth is that his heart was empty to the core. Nor were Yanni's feelings for Henry anything like love. Her own heart was so full of hatred for men..."<sup>14</sup> As a little girl in Hong Kong, we learn, Yanni lost her virginity to her own father, who thereafter forced himself upon her regularly. In revenge against men, "to match up young canaries with pederasts" was now "all a glorious game to her."

The novel opens on a sweltering summer day in the West Village with Henry desperate for cash to score his next fix. Yanni sets him up with a wealthy john named Robert Greenberg, who sweeps him away in a white Porsche to a country house in New Jersey and rapes him repeatedly. Henry is overcome by drug withdrawal spasms ("his flesh panting with lunacy"), and hallucinations make his surroundings heave with terrifying images of infinity and destruction: "Everything in the room begins to move in a halting, vertiginous swirl with a *chock, chock* like the sound of a watch, and the ceiling seems about to collapse under the weight of the sky." Flowers are decapitated, "blood spurting out and soaking into the carpet." Henry's "physiology tugs relentlessly at his senses, demanding the destruction of everything visible. There, on a bitter-tasting hilltop the light-brown color of diacetyl morphine, poppies bloom as far as the eye can see. Henry makes a mad dash for those preternatural Turkish fields, strad-

dling the horse that gallops through his veins and riding riotously through the flowers.”

Accosted again by “Bob’s slug,” Henry sees the Porsche driving “at blinding speed to the terminus” on “an illusory highway [that] twists and bucks, writhing over the surface of the earth.” The Porsche flips, its “wheels pointed toward heaven and spinning uselessly” and in the emerging background “a black well in the dark valley, long thought to be dry, fills with Bob’s white jism. The mouth of the well overflows, eroding the ruined landscape with the force of a flood, turning everything white. . . [until there is nothing but] white obliterating the scenery as far as the eye can see.” In a final fit of loathing and craving, Henry cuts off Greenberg’s penis:

Henry sees himself standing in the midst of this nightmarish scene and shivers. In his accursed hand he notices something that glitters a bright sports-car silver. The semen dogging him through the night continues to flow incessantly, entwining itself around the jackknife in his hand and dripping down on the carpet.

For one moment all the stars cease to shine. And as they lose their light, Bob’s raw, warm little animal separates from his body. The unattached clump of meat rolls over the highway, bumps against a rock, and comes to a stop.

Fleeing from his crime, Henry escapes with Yanni to the top of the Empire State Building, “that gemstudded nightless castle” whose dizzying heights are engulfed in mists like a “silvery void.” In the final scene their panic is heightened by an imagined terror that “the earth’s axis has ceased to turn.” Henry feels overcome by “a thin translucent curtain cutting him off from the external world. . . leaving him a prisoner behind the curtain of depersonalization.” Suddenly he disappears into the white oblivion. Yanni rushes to the railing. “In the milk-colored mist a single black spot. Falling.”

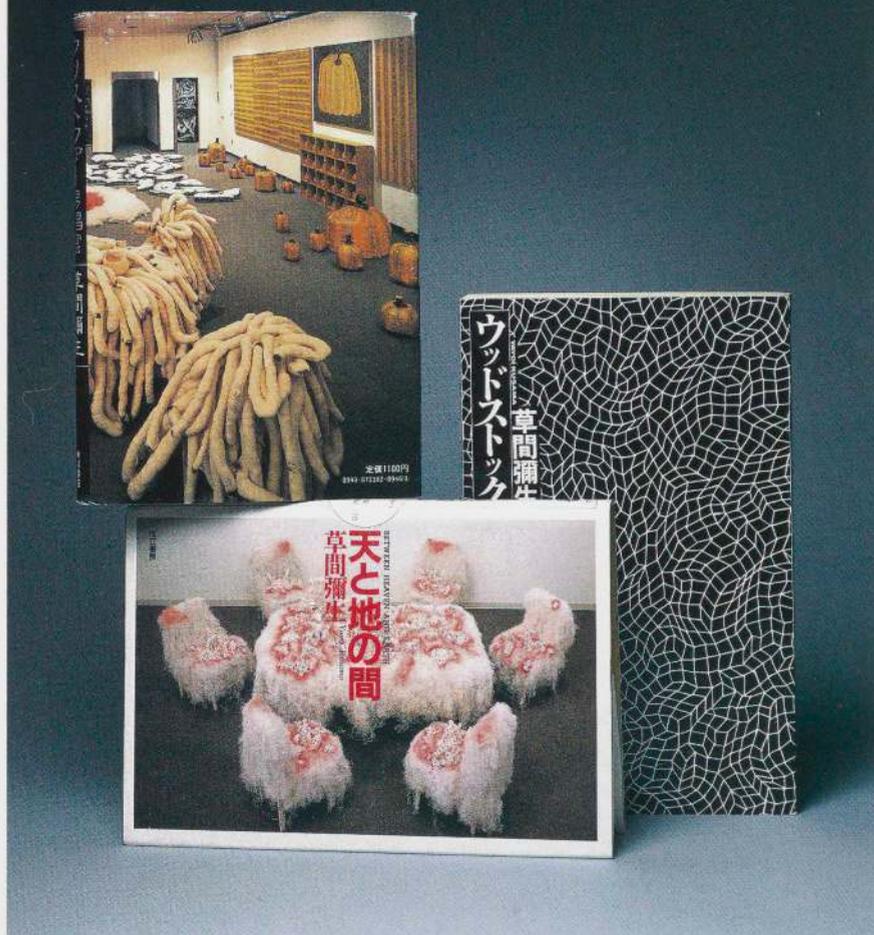
Kusama’s appropriation of the American subculture of the 1960s as the setting for her fiction has been compared to the work of Ryū Murakami (b. 1952), author of the bestselling 1976 *Almost Transparent Blue* (*Kagirinaku tōmei ni chikai burū*) and other novels that chronicle with surrealist precision a similarly carnivalesque world.<sup>15</sup> In a shift from the introspective trend of post-war Japanese literature, Murakami narrates his fragmentary, cinematic accounts of multiracial orgies, drug-induced hallucinations, and violent but ultimately futile political subversion with deadpan detachment. Yet what he sees in his nullified, Americanized Japanese youth—and what he admires in Kusama—is an aspiration for authenticity. For both Murakami and Kusama drugs, mental illness, and the unconscious imaginary are nobler because they oppose and ultimately disrupt the strictures of symbolic order (mundane modern reality, social

formations, and statism). Murakami, who terms Kusama a "genius," has remarked that her fiction is unique for a psychological intensity that makes her descriptions of "living on the edge between a normal and very strange world so extremely *real*."<sup>16</sup>

It is significant that the contemporary novelist most closely associated with the *Kyōka* revival and the new supernaturalism, Kenji Nakagami (1946–1992), was also among Kusama's greatest supporters. What impressed Nakagami, beyond her imagistic writing style, was Kusama's commitment to exploring the taboo territories of violence, discrimination, incest, and bisexuality. His own celebrated and much-debated work is itself steeped in those very themes.<sup>17</sup> Consciously invoking Japan's traditional, loosely structured *monogatari* narrative form, Nakagami populates a part-primitive, part-modern landscape with passionate criminal antiheroes motivated by impulses that maintain a deep connection with archaic animism.

Among his best-known tales are the 1976 "Snake Lust" (*Jain*), a medieval ghost story recast in a contemporary *buraku* (outcaste ghetto), in which a boy and his girlfriend murder the boy's parents; and the 1984 "The Moon and the Immortal" (*Tsuki to fushi*), based on *Kyōka*'s "The Holy Man of Mount Kōya," the story of an ascetic who willfully pursues "somewhere on that mountain bathed by the dead-still sun... an entryway to and the abode of the supernatural."<sup>18</sup> But where *Kyōka*'s monk escapes the demonic forces of the lustful snake-woman, Nakagami's merges with the creature in a violent, erotic struggle and is transfigured into a monstrous being, part human and part animal, half female and half male, doomed to endless wandering and suffering. In Nakagami's and Kusama's fiction, sexual obsession is both brutal and transcendental. The difference is that Nakagami incorporates an ecstatic communion with natural phenomenon (the protagonist would, "given water, become soaked with it. Given fire, flame up with it"<sup>19</sup>), whereas Kusama's submission to the sublime is elicited by the opposite emotion—a loathing of and revolt against the sexual act.

Nakagami and Kusama share an outsider status in Japanese society that informs their respective work and forged their friendship from 1983 until Nakagami's early death by cancer in 1992.<sup>20</sup> His legacy as a child of the *buraku* branded him, despite modern laws against discrimination, as a descendent of the Edo-period subclass of "untouchables"—so called because of their association with "impure" occupations such as handling human and animal corpses. Traditionally illiterate, the *burakumin* were neither written about nor able to write for themselves, and until Nakagami their ethnic narrative scarcely had been represented in the Japanese literary canon. Kusama, who was born to the upper class in rural Nagano Prefecture, has also struggled to claim her subjective self from Japan's rigid social hierarchies. As a woman avant-garde artist and a psychiatric patient most of her adult life, she (like Nakagami) writes from the point of view of the oppressed "other." In each case this otherness is symbolized by imaginary forces that transgress and disrupt phenomenal realism.



Cover/jacket art (clockwise from top): Yayoi Kusama, *The Hustler's Grotto of Christopher Street*, 1983; *Woodstock Phallus Cutter*, 1988; *Between Heaven and Earth*, 1988

Kusama's version of a Kyōka-like snake tale, *Between Heaven and Earth*, is told from the side of the enchantress, O-Chu, an idiot woman who lives in the mountain groves; the snake-demon, a local policeman who pursues her, is a masculine, not feminine, sexual force of destruction. The story is narrated by her illegitimate daughter, Chi, who is repeatedly subjected to watching the policeman rape her mother on the forest floor. In silent panic Chi sees the leaves at his feet change from "a net of dry, dead veins" into "a scalelike, intertwining pattern of spots. And between the spots arises an ominous pair of small unblinking eyes."<sup>21</sup> Soon the entire ground and the trunks of the sur-

rounding trees are writhing skyward, an accumulation of reptilian slugs—"columns of phalluses." Again and again Kusama describes the lives of misfit females whose spectacular obsessions with phallogocentric animism are the conduit for transcendence into another world. Hallucinatory experience is not disabling but rather emancipatory; it opens consciousness up to realms beyond banal and cruel existence.

Kusama's literary style can also be understood through her lifelong association with surrealism. Surrealism's essential preoccupation with the processes of the unconscious mind, its practice of automatism, and its dedication to what Paul Klee called the "instinct [which] drives us downward, deep down to the primal source"<sup>22</sup> have consistently provided a critical framework for the appreciation of Kusama's visual art, from her early biomorphic watercolors to her later psychosexual sculptures. The critic most responsible for introducing Kusama's art in this context was the surrealist poet Shūzō Takiguchi (1903–79). Takiguchi, whom the militarists arrested in 1941 for his affiliation with André Breton and the French surrealists, emerged in the postwar era as the most influential critic of the Japanese avant-garde. A humanist, modernist, and prolific writer, Takiguchi articulated modern art and literature as the moral cultivation and improvised expression of an artist's psychic nature, the supremacy of spirit and imagination over ideology and statism of any kind.<sup>23</sup> For Takiguchi art was not an illustration, representation, or imitation of reality but rather a practice both formative and transformative.

Surrealism in prewar Japan implied a veiled critique of the totalitarian state; fantasy (*gensō*) was encoded with social and political subversion. Postwar avant-garde artists in Japan, responding to prevailing academicism and the thir-

ties' legacy of fascist art and ideology, privileged children's art, naive art, art of the mentally ill, and other "amateurs who painted and sculpted as if outside of time."<sup>24</sup> Kusama's outrage against authoritarianism was informed by this radical stance, which imparted urgency to works like her Driving Image series and her antiwar happenings of the 1960s. In her fiction as well Kusama sets fantasy (in the form of hallucinations from drugs or madness) in opposition to outside systems of phallogentric and abusive authority.

Takiguchi's support of Kusama in the early 1950s helped to establish her identity as an avant-garde artist conceptually linked through surrealism to her other artistic self—that of a mentally-ill patient producing exceptional "psychoanalytic art."<sup>25</sup> For her second one-person show at the Matsumoto Civic Hall in 1952 he wrote: "Her drawings flow unceasingly as if a dam had broken. An artist, whatever his expression is, has to reveal signs of his own instinctive urges in drawing. Visionary forms of imagery should not be a fabrication but the symbolic appearance of such deep emotion. Here, an artist's breath becomes the natural flow which may be called her handwriting."<sup>26</sup> Twenty-five years later, when she published her first novel, *Manhattan Suicide Addict*, she asked Takiguchi to contribute the afterword. Entitled "My Nymph through Eternity" (Yōsei yo eien ni), his reminiscence of their long friendship concludes with a "literary and even poetic evocation" wherein he passes on his literary mantle: "Lingering in the crevices of illusion, the interstices of a vast void, this nymph emerges casting looks upon the world infinitely sharper than I myself..."<sup>27</sup>

#### **Fictional Themes and Kusama's Narrative Production**

Since Kusama first emerged as a self-described "independent" in Tokyo's contemporary art establishment in the early 1950s, she has claimed in numerous statements and interviews that her work is related to her mental problems. In her 1975 manifesto "Struggles and Wandering of My Soul" she describes a life of recurring hallucinations that drove her to paint and generated what she identified as her unique practice of "obsessional art."<sup>28</sup> She was compelled to give form to her visions, as if the act of creation would give her mastery over the terrors that repeatedly threatened to dissolve her being. Her path of obsessional art, she suggests, has saved her from total despair and probable suicide; it has also certified her originality in the midst of the dominant contemporary art modes, which she disdains. "My motivation [for art]," she wrote, "was far from artistic, but primitive and instinctive."<sup>29</sup>

In a sense, her 1975 manifesto provided a story line for the autobiographical fiction she embarked on two years later, when she was permanently installed at a psychiatric hospital renowned for art therapy. Recurring themes of sex, death, and madness defy throughout her fiction any normative orders of rationality or realism. By Kusama's accounts, for her the practice of writing is similar to that of making art, in that she becomes consumed by a single work, completes it in a compulsive rush, and rarely returns to rework it once it is

“out.” From a psychoanalytic perspective, Kusama’s practice entails a loss of distinction between subject and object; as the unconscious imaginary assumes powers to distort objective reality, the symbolic order breaks down. Her creations survive, it could be argued, as documents of this transgressive experience.

Yet Kusama is not simply notating her madness; she is inventing an art to represent and reproduce it. Ultimately, her obsession is not focused on single images but rather on the repetitive production of a fantastic narrative that stars herself as object *and* subject, author *and* protagonist, artist *and* artwork. While the themes of her narrative are fixed, the degree and position of her subjectivity are constantly shifting—from psychotic crises to self-conscious sociopolitical critique to Warholesque self-promotion. That the artist has produced a vast photographic archive of herself posing beside and performing in and with her work suggests subtly shifting boundaries similar to those in Roland Barthes’ description of the Japanese Bunraku puppet theater, wherein the manipulators, clothed in black, are part of the performance. Bunraku, Barthes writes, “separates action from gesture: it shows the gesture, lets the action be seen, exhibits simultaneously the art and the labor, reserving for each its own writing.”<sup>30</sup> This is connected, he continues, to the “alienation effect” that Bertolt Brecht had sought:

That distance, regarded among us as impossible, useless, or absurd, and eagerly abandoned, though Brecht very specifically located it at the center of his revolutionary dramaturgy. . . that distance is made explicable by Bunraku, which allows us to see how it can function: by the discontinuity of the codes, by this caesura imposed on the various features of representation, so that the copy elaborated on the stage is not destroyed but somehow broken, striated, withdrawn from that metonymic contagion of voice and gesture, body and soul, which entraps our [Western] actors.<sup>31</sup>

Kusama thus writes fiction as a manipulator blatantly free of disguise. Her stories reveal a fixation on sexual abuse, a fascination with the idea of self-obliteration (*jiko shōmetsu*), and an identification with *rijin-shō*. Literally “separate-person symptom,” this illness connotes being parted like a prisoner (*shujin*) from social and temporal reality; it is a “curtain of separation” wherein the boundary dissolves between the real and the nonreal (*hi-genjitsu*).<sup>32</sup> In the English translations Kusama has authorized, *rijin-shō* is rendered as “depersonalization,” which further suggests being deprived of individual character, rendered impersonal, a nonbeing. Henry’s reaction to being raped in *The Hustlers Grotto of Christopher Street* is precisely this sensation, whose terror then provokes him to self-obliteration through suicide. In Kusama’s world sexual abuse is predicated on the abuser depersonalizing the object of abuse. The forced secrecy of such traumatic experience, the need to escape achieved by numbing one’s con-

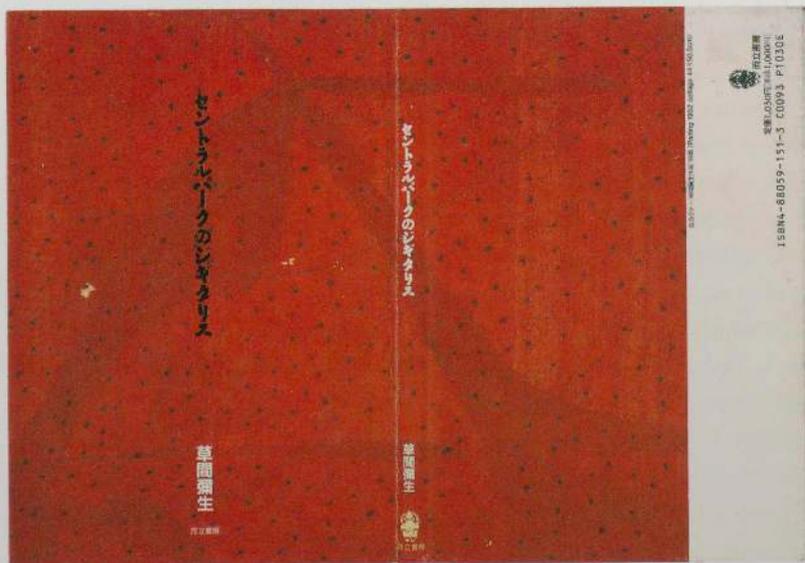
sciousness to what is taking place, the hopeless battle against figures of authority who deny the reality of the experience, the humiliation that later turns to disassociated outrage—these are the factors that throughout Kusama's novels determine her characters' fates.

The 1988 *Woodstock Phallus Cutter* offers one of the most graphic illustrations of Kusama's narrative repetitions. Once again, it is told from a child's point of view: Emily is a ten-year-old girl who likes to paint. Her father, an artist and teacher at New York's Art Students League, who has exhibited at the Whitney and The Museum of Modern Art, is also a womanizer and a child molester. The book begins with his rape of Emily in the woods. Her hysterical mother passes time by breaking stacks of dishes, and her older brother regularly commits incest with Emily as well. In the midst of having sex with her father, Emily has an attack of *rijin-shō* and cuts off his penis with a pair of scissors. With this, she becomes obsessed with acquiring penises and aspires to obtain a collection of 456 of them by castrating the doctor who amassed it. While fleeing incarceration for her crime, Emily commits suicide.

Thus her first response is to negate reality through the numbing separation of *rijin-shō*. Next she stages her silent outrage by appropriating the object of abuse. Finally, she transforms the aggressive act of being depersonalized into a transcendental state of nonbeing; through self-obliteration she becomes, in Buddhist terms, one with infinite voidness. Critic Akira Asada has commented that castration for Kusama entails a double strategy: she not only attacks masculinity directly, but by recreating and multiplying penises into humorous or inert forms she succeeds in robbing them of their threat, a technique frequently employed in her sculptural work as well.<sup>33</sup> The fantastic improbability of Kusama's fiction, like her sculptures and environments, is at the same time laughable and disturbing. Yet the power of her language gives the sordidness of her subject matter the dreamlike quality of another realm of being.

The anxiety and panic that rule Kusama's characters and fill her narratives with such frenzy are not, however, the product of imagination only. The true subject of Kusama's fiction is trauma. In the Freudian interpretation trauma results from violent events in the subject's personal history that are repressed and thus impossible to reconstruct or verify. The need to reproduce the traumatic experience, the manifestation of the repressed, is what Freud calls the "compulsion to repeat,"<sup>34</sup> which frequently manifests itself in the realm of the spectral or phantasmic—either as a recurring dream or as the "uncanny." An uncanny effect is produced when the distinction between imagi-

Dust jacket, Yayoi Kusama, *The Foxgloves of Central Park*, 1992



nation and reality is effaced, when something that should be regarded as imaginary appears before us in reality. This psychical reality, Freud posits, is that memory/event that has become alien through the process of repression coming to light as ghostly material being.<sup>35</sup>

Invariably the subject in the imaginary scene is the protagonist, and her fantasy represents the fulfillment of an unconscious wish. By this reading, Kusama's recurring hallucinations would be the repetitive replaying of a traumatic childhood experience in the form of the Freudian uncanny. As early as 1964 she stated of her phallus-encrusted furniture, "My Aggregation Sculpture is a logical development of everything I have done since I was a child. It arises from a deep, driving compulsion to realize in visible form the repetitive image inside of me."<sup>36</sup> It appears that as Kusama grew more familiar through psychiatric treatment with the formal symptoms of her illness and more analytically aware of its childhood sources, her art became to a greater and greater extent the literal working-out of her disorders. Like Genet, who once remarked, "To create is always to speak about childhood,"<sup>37</sup> Kusama has created a fiction drawing on the deepest sources of the self.<sup>38</sup>

Literary critic and psychoanalyst Julia Kristeva has postulated that for many avant-garde artists of the twentieth century art has been a confrontation with psychosis, with the breakdown of the symbolic function:

It's necessary to see how all great works of art . . . are, to be brief, masterful sublimations of those crises of subjectivity which are known, in another connection, as psychotic crises. That has nothing to do with the freedom of expression of some vague kind of subjectivity which would have been there beforehand. It is, very simply, through the work and the play of signs, a crisis of subjectivity which is the basis for all creation, one which takes as its very precondition the possibility of survival.<sup>39</sup>

Kusama's art and literature certainly arise from her privileged if disturbed access to unconscious and possibly supernatural realms of being. But the creation of her art requires not only surrender to madness but also triumph over it; trauma must be substantially transformed before it can communicate to others as beauty and meaning. Kusama's genius lies in her ability to work both from the inside out and from the outside in. When her symptoms dominate, she retreats from the world; when she controls her symptoms and uses them for her visual vocabulary, she emerges as a great artist. As critics have finally come to appreciate, hers is an art "not of displaced energy, but of energy itself."<sup>40</sup> The unearthly brilliance of her art, both visual and verbal, is produced by this "double exposure," as if she reflected both sides of an impassable threshold.

**Notes**

[I am grateful to Ralph McCarthy for sharing with me his translations of Kusama's novels and to Dr. Reiko Tomii for her critical assistance. Among my readers I am especially grateful to Jillian Walker of the Ackerman Institute of Family Therapy, Professor Harry Harootian of New York University, and Professor Chizuko Ueno of Tokyo University. At LACMA Lynn Zelevansky and Thomas Frick gave expert criticism of an earlier version of this paper. In Japan Akira Asada, Kōjin Karatani, Kazue Kobata, Ryū Murakami, and Mr. Miyanagi of Jiritsu Shobō provided valuable insights into Kusama's position in the Japanese literary world. Finally I am grateful to Yayoi Kusama and her assistant, Isao Takakura, for their ever-generous support of my research. Unless otherwise noted, translations from the Japanese are mine.]

- 1 Yayoi Kusama, *Manhattan jisatsu misui jōshūhan* (Tokyo: Kōsakusha, 1978). Kazue Kobata, the editor who acquired Kusama's first novel, confirms that the manuscript was produced within three weeks of the publisher's formal expression of interest in Kusama's proposed chronicle. Kobata, interview by author, Tokyo, 21 May 1996.
- 2 In addition to *Manhattan Suicide Addict* (see note 1) her publications are: *Kurisut-ofā danshōkutsu* (The hustlers grotto of Christopher Street) [Tokyo: Kadokawa Shoten, 1983; reissued by Jiritsu Shobō in 1989 with the stories "Rijin kâten no shūten" (Prisoner behind a curtain of depersonalization) and "Shishū akashia" (Death smell acacia)]; *Sento Marukusu kyōkai enjō* (The burning of St. Mark's church) [Tokyo: Parco Shuppan, 1985]; *Ten to chi no aida/Between Heaven and Earth* [Tokyo: Jiritsu Shobō, 1988], also includes "Onna no sono" (Women's meadow); *Wuddosutokku inkei giri* (Woodstock phallus cutter) [Tokyo: Peyotoru Kōbō, 1988]; *Shishū: Kakunaru urei* (Collected poems: Such sorrows) [Tokyo: Jiritsu Shobō, 1989]; *Shinjū Sakurazaka* (Double suicide at Sakurazaka) [Tokyo: Jiritsu Shobō, 1989];

*Itami no shanderia/Aching Chandelier* [Tokyo: Peyotoru Kōbō, 1989]; *Kēpu koddo no tenshi-tachi* (Cape Cod angels) [Tokyo: Jiritsu Shobō, 1991]; *Sentoraru paku no jigitarisu* (The foxgloves of Central Park) [Tokyo: Jiritsu Shobō, 1992]; *Numa ni mayoite* (Wandering in the marshes) [Tokyo: Jiritsu Shobō, 1992], also includes "Kosute sōgen" (Field of abandoned children); *Nyūyōku sutōri/The New York Story* [Tokyo: Jiritsu Shobō, 1993], also includes "New York AIDS" and "Downtown"; *Ari no seishin byōin/The Madhouse of Ants* [Tokyo: Jiritsu Shobō, 1994], also includes "Bisexual."

- 3 Kusama, interview by author, Tokyo, 19 May 1996.
- 4 Murakami, interview by author, Tokyo, 21 May 1996.
- 5 Kusama, statement in *Yayoi Kusama: Recent Works*, exh. cat. (New York: Robert Miller Gallery, 1996), unpaginated.
- 6 Tanigawa, interview by author, Tokyo, 22 May 1996.
- 7 Kusama, *Manhattan Suicide Addict*, trans. quoted in *Yayoi Kusama: Recent Works*.
- 8 Kusama's solo exhibition at Tokyo's prestigious Fuji Television Gallery featured nine large paintings from 1959–61, three objects covered with stuffed protrusions from the 1960s and 1970s, and nine paintings and nine objects completed during the previous three years. The show, organized by gallery president Susumu Yamamoto, was reviewed in major art journals, television features, and the popular press. Prior to this large semiretrospective Kusama had had ten small solo exhibitions in Japan since 1975.

- 9 For discussions and translation of Kyōka's work see Charles Shirō Inouye, ed. and trans., *Japanese Gothic Tales: Izumi Kyōka* (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 1996); Charles Shirō Inouye, "Water Imagery in the Works of Izumi Kyōka," *Monumentica Nipponica* 46, no. 1 (1992): 43–68; Donald Keene, "Izumi Kyōka," in *Dawn to the West: Japanese Literature in the Modern Era* (New York: Holt, Rinehart, and Winston, 1984), 202–19; and Juliet Carpenter, "Izumi Kyōka: Meiji-Era Gothic," *Japan Quarterly* 31, no. 2 (April–June 1984): 154–58. Dissertations on Kyōka include: Jean Funatsu, "Through the Colored Looking Glass of Izumi Kyōka: Reflections of the Kusazōshi" (Harvard University, 1972); Mark Jewel, "Aspects of Narrative Structure in the Work of Izumi Kyōka" (Stanford University, 1984); Charles Shirō Inouye, "Izumi Kyōka and the Visual Tradition" (Harvard University, 1988); Cody Poulton, "A Dissertation on the Fireflies, A Discourse on the Stars: The Major Plays of Izumi Kyōka" (University of Toronto, 1990); and Nina Cornyetz, "Izumi Kyōka's Speculum: Reflections on the Medusa, Thanatos, and Eros" (Columbia University, 1991). For Kyōka's collected works in Japanese see *Kyōka Zenshū* (Tokyo: Iwanami Shoten, 1973–76).
- 10 For a translation of "Kōya hijiri" see Inouye, *Japanese Gothic Tales*, 21–72.
- 11 Kyōka quoted in *ibid.*, 171.
- 12 *Ibid.*, 174.
- 13 Mishima quoted in *ibid.*, 7.
- 14 Kusama, trans. Ralph McCarthy, *The Hustlers Grotto of Christopher Street in Hustlers Grotto* (Berkeley: Wandering Mind Books, in press). Subsequent quotations are from this translation.
- 15 The novels of Murakami that have appeared in English are: *Almost Transparent Blue*, trans. Nancy Andrew (Tokyo and New York: Kodansha International, 1976); *Sixty-Nine*, trans. Ralph McCarthy (Tokyo and New York: Kodansha International, 1993); and *Coin Locker Babies*, trans. Stephen Snyder (Tokyo and New York: Kodansha International, 1995).
- 16 Murakami, 21 May 1996 interview.
- 17 For a discussion of Nakagami's work see Nina Cornyetz, "Nakagami Kenji's Mystic Writing Pad, or Tracing Origins, Tales of the Snake, and the Land as Matrix," *Positions: East Asia Cultures Critique* 13, no. 1 (Spring 1995): 224–54. Nakagami's vernacular language has proved difficult to translate, hence little has appeared in English despite his great stature in the Japanese literary world. For a translation of "Fushi" (The immortal) see Van C. Gessel and Tomone Matsumoto, eds., *The Shōwa Anthology: Modern Japanese Short Stories, 1929–1984* (Tokyo and New York: Kodansha International, 1985). For Nakagami's collected works in Japanese see *Nakagami Kenji zentanpen shōsetsu* (Tokyo: Kawade Shobō Shinsha, 1976) and *Kumanoshū* (Tokyo: Kodansha, 1992). Nina Cornyetz, who has researched both Kyōka's and Nakagami's work, says that "Nakagami himself confessed to a deep passion for Kyōka's work" ("Mystic Writing Pad," 231, n. 20).
- 18 Cornyetz, "Mystic Writing Pad," 231.
- 19 *Ibid.*, 243.
- 20 Murakami, Akira Asada, and the artist herself have confirmed to me in conversation that Kusama and Nakagami were friends with great mutual admiration.
- 21 *Between Heaven and Earth*, trans. Ralph McCarthy, unpublished typescript.

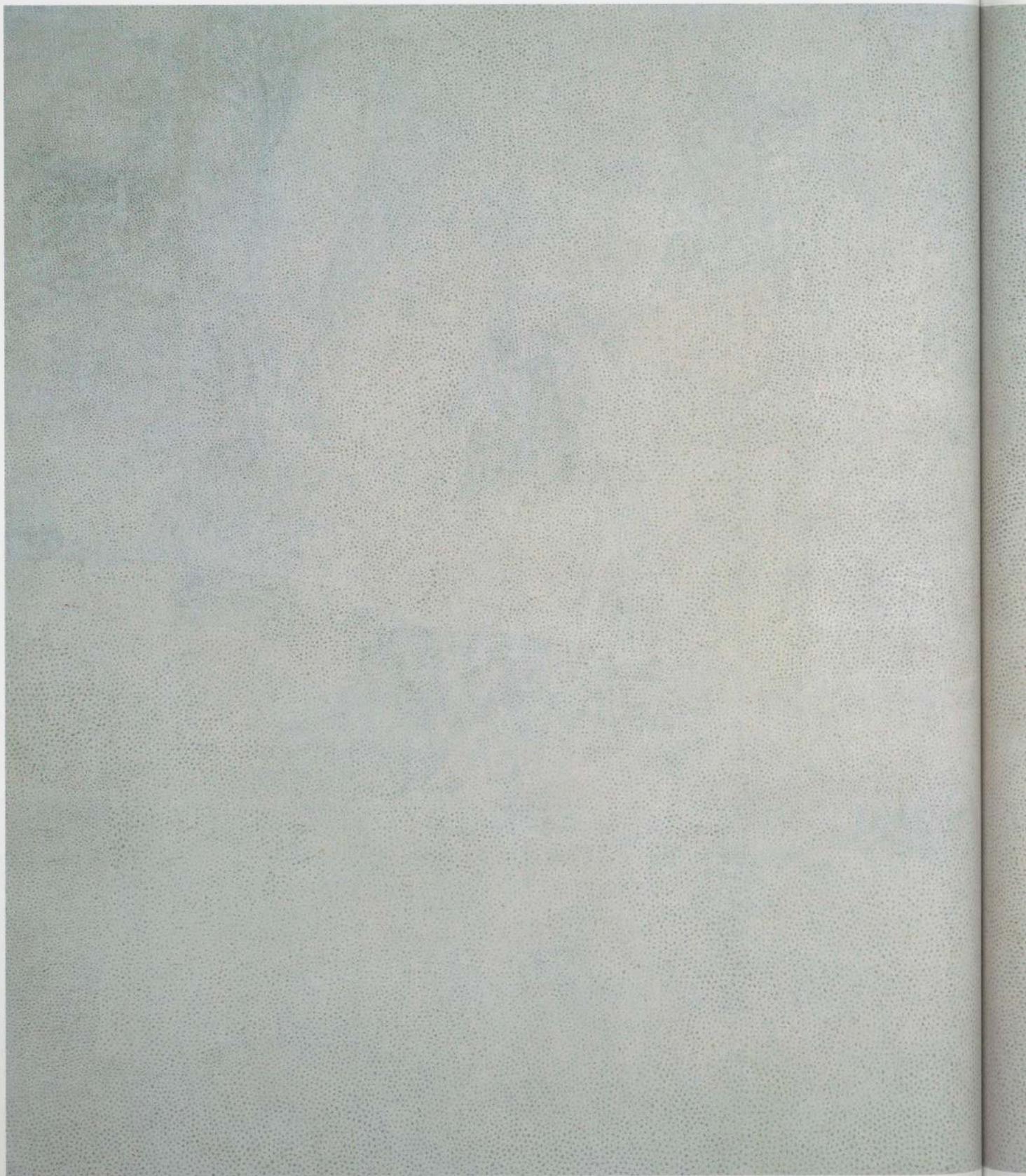
- 22 Klee quoted in Stephen Prokopoff, "The Prinzhorn Collection and Modern Art," in *The Prinzhorn Collection: Selected Work from the Prinzhorn Collection of the Art of the Mentally Ill* (Champaign: Krannert Art Museum, University of Illinois; and Heidelberg: Prinzhorn Collection, University of Heidelberg, 1984), 17.
- 23 For a discussion of Takiguchi and Kusama see Alexandra Munroe, "Obsession, Fantasy and Outrage: The Art of Yayoi Kusama," in *Yayoi Kusama: A Retrospective*, exh. cat. (New York: Center for International Contemporary Arts, 1989), 14–17. For other discussions of Takiguchi and the Japanese avant-garde see Munroe, *Japanese Art after 1945: Scream Against the Sky* (New York: Harry N. Abrams, 1994).
- 24 Michel Ragon (1966) quoted in Henry-Claude Coussean, "Origins and Deviations: A Short History of Art Brut," in "Art Brut: Madness and Marginalia," ed. Allen S. Weiss, special issue, *Art & Text* 27 (December 1987–February 1988): 6.
- 25 Kusama became aware of herself as an artist producing "psychoanalytic art" in the early 1950s, when her work was noticed by Dr. Shihō Nishimaru, an eminent professor of psychiatry at Shinshū University in Nagano Prefecture. It appears that he saw one or both of Kusama's solo shows at Matsumoto Civic Hall in 1952 and subsequently introduced her work at a meeting of the Japanese Psychiatry Association. Another widely respected psychiatrist, Ryūzaburō Shikiba, also took great interest in Kusama's work. See Munroe, "Obsession," 16, and Bhupendra Karia, "Biographical Notes," in *Yayoi Kusama: A Retrospective*, 70–71.
- 26 Takiguchi, "Kusama Yayoi koten ni tsuite" (On Yayoi Kusama's solo exhibition), cited in Munroe, "Obsession," 16.
- 27 Takiguchi, "Yōsei yo eien ni," in Kusama, *Manhattan jisatsu misui jōshūhan* (Tokyo: Kōsakusha, 1978).
- 28 "Waga tamashii no henreki to takakai" (Struggles and wandering of my soul), *Ceijutsu seikatsu* (Art and life) (November 1975).
- 29 *Ibid.*, 1.
- 30 Roland Barthes, trans. Richard Howard, *Empire of Signs* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1980), 54.
- 31 *Ibid.*, 54–55.
- 32 "I was under a spell," Kusama remarked around 1966 concerning working on her Infinity Nets paintings. "I thought of the nets that I painted over my canvases as curtains which separated me from people and reality. . . . When I looked at the walls, ceiling, floor, and furniture I found that they too were covered with nets" (Kusama, incomplete typescript, c. 1966; Kusama archive). See also Munroe, "Obsession," 17–20.
- 33 Akira Asada, interview by author, Tokyo, 23 May 1996.
- 34 Sigmund Freud, *Beyond the Pleasure Principle* (1920), ed. and trans. James Strachey (New York and London: W. W. Norton, 1961). Freud defines trauma as an influx of excitations that is excessive in relation to the tolerance of the psychical apparatus, causing neurosis. I have also drawn upon the invaluable study by J. Laplanche and J.-B. Pontalis, trans. Donald Nicholson-Smith, *The Language of Psycho-analysis* (New York and London: W. W. Norton, 1973).
- 35 Sigmund Freud, "The 'Uncanny'" (1919) in *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*, trans. James Strachey and Anna Freud (London: Hogarth Press, 1955), vol. 17, 217–56.

- <sup>36</sup> Kusama, interview by Gordon Brown for WABC radio, June 1964. Reprinted in Armando, et al., eds., *De nieuwe stijl*, vol. 1 (Amsterdam: De Bezige Bij, 1965).
- <sup>37</sup> Edmund White, *Genet* (London: Picador with Chatto and Windus, 1993), 17.
- <sup>38</sup> In numerous interviews and other statements Kusama has attributed her imagery and artistic compulsions to her unhappy childhood growing up in a conservative, fragmented, and authoritarian family under a fascist wartime regime, all of which conspired against creativity and individuality. It appears that Kusama's father largely abandoned the family and carried on conspicuous affairs, inciting her mother to jealous rages. Kusama's mother looms in her memory as a domineering presence. She seems to have been a demanding disciplinarian, a prudish moralist, and an unrelenting critic of what she deemed Kusama's unacceptable behavior. She opposed Kusama's artistic leanings and according to the artist they fought constantly. Kusama has confirmed that during these years rape and incest were common occurrences in the countryside where she grew up (Kusama, interview by the author, Tokyo, 6 April 1997). During the 1930s totalitarian ideology infiltrated more and more of civilian life, sometimes resulting in violent suppression of liberal tendencies and individualism. The right-wing police state routinely crushed oppositional activity and exercised widespread censorship. Japan's Fifteen Year War, ending so disastrously in 1945, entailed a rhetoric of nationalism and a mechanism of terror that to young Kusama were utterly oppressive. She has remarked of the war, "It killed my mind" (Munroe, "Obsession," 12-14).
- <sup>39</sup> Julia Kristeva, *Etrangers à nous-mêmes*, cited and trans. by John Lechte, *Julia Kristeva* (London and New York: Routledge, 1990), 53.
- <sup>40</sup> Andrew Solomon, "Dot Dot Dot: The Lifework of Yayoi Kusama," *Artforum* (February 1997): 109.

Kusama lying on *My Flower Bed*, New  
York, c. 1965-66

Catalogue





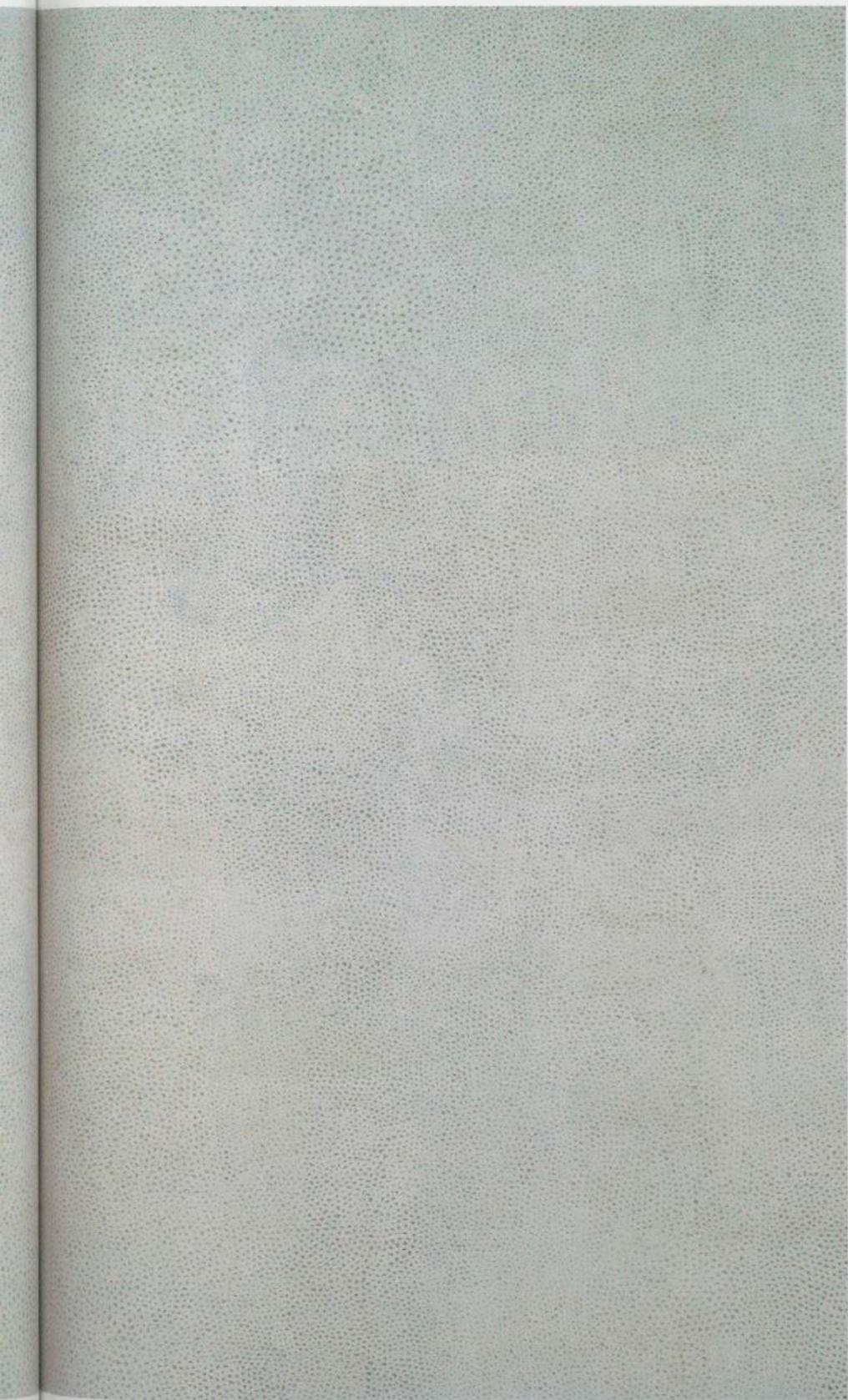
**[1]**

*No. White A.Z.*, 1958-59

Oil on canvas

91½ x 142½ in. (232.4 x 362 cm)

Shizuoka Prefectural Museum of Art





**[2]**

No. D., 1959

Oil on canvas

35½ x 28½ in. (90.2 x 72.4 cm)

Collection of the Donald Judd estate





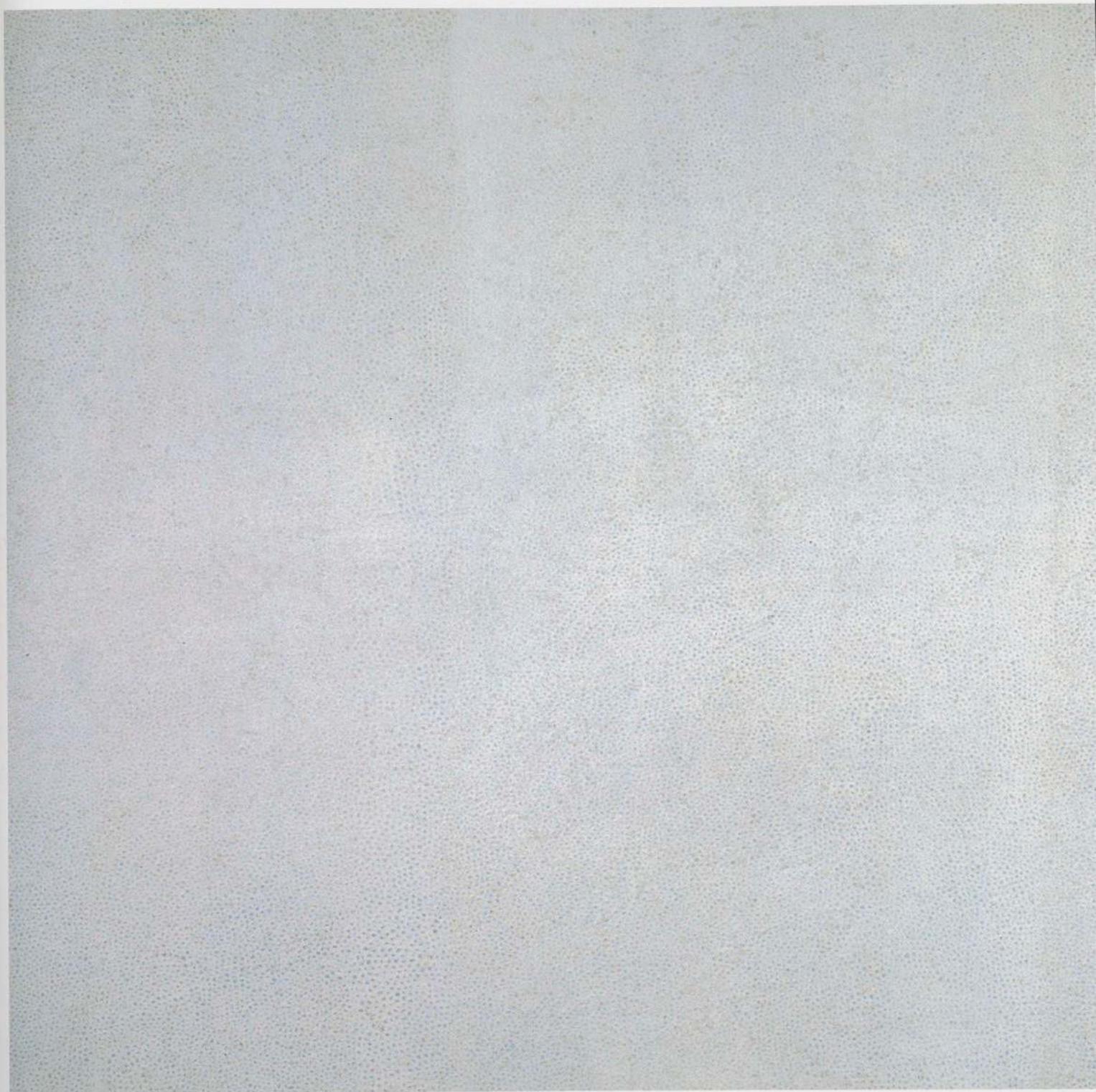
**[2]**

*No. D.*, 1959

Oil on canvas

35½ x 28½ in. (90.2 x 72.4 cm)

Collection of the Donald Judd estate



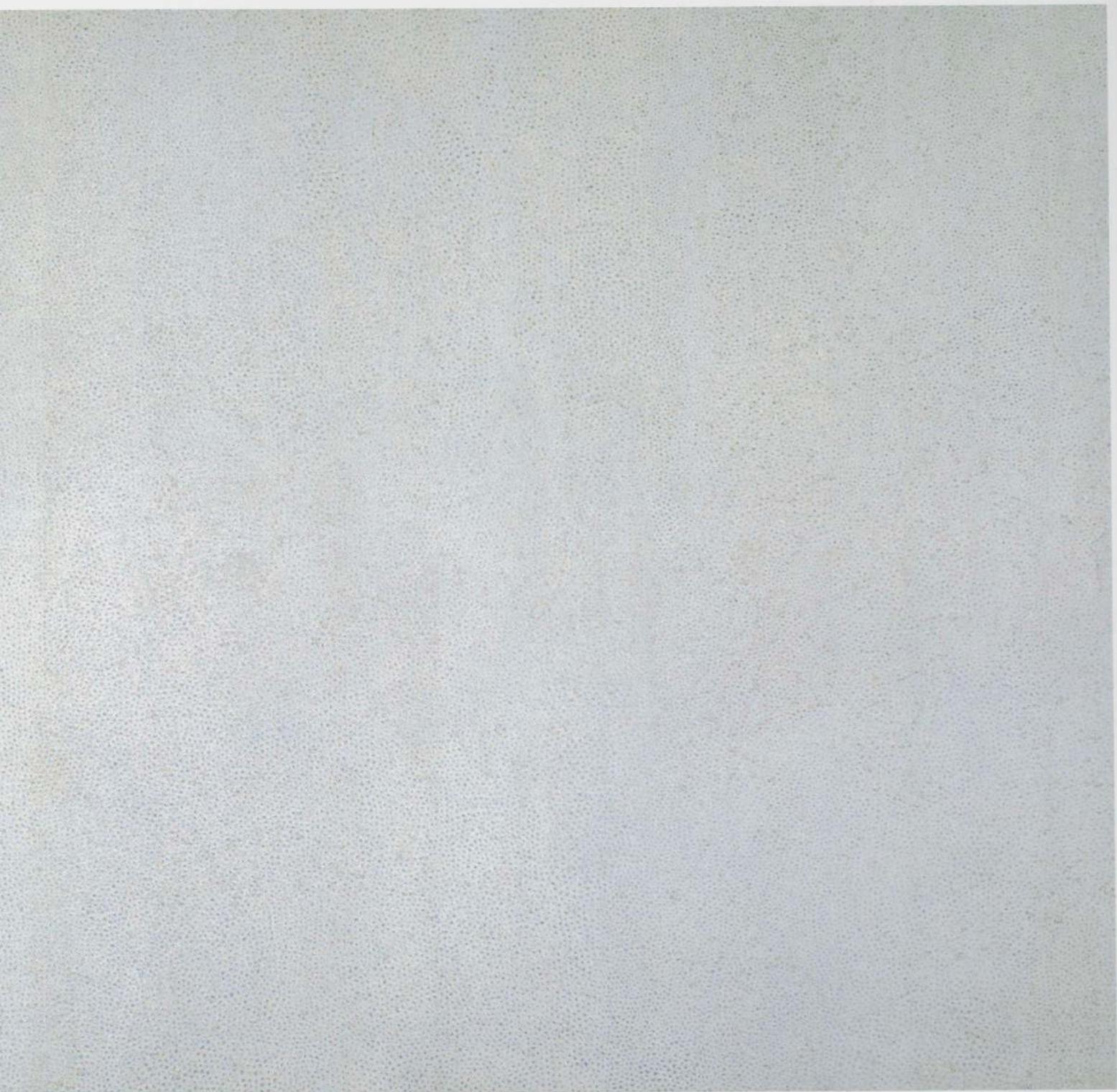
**[3]**

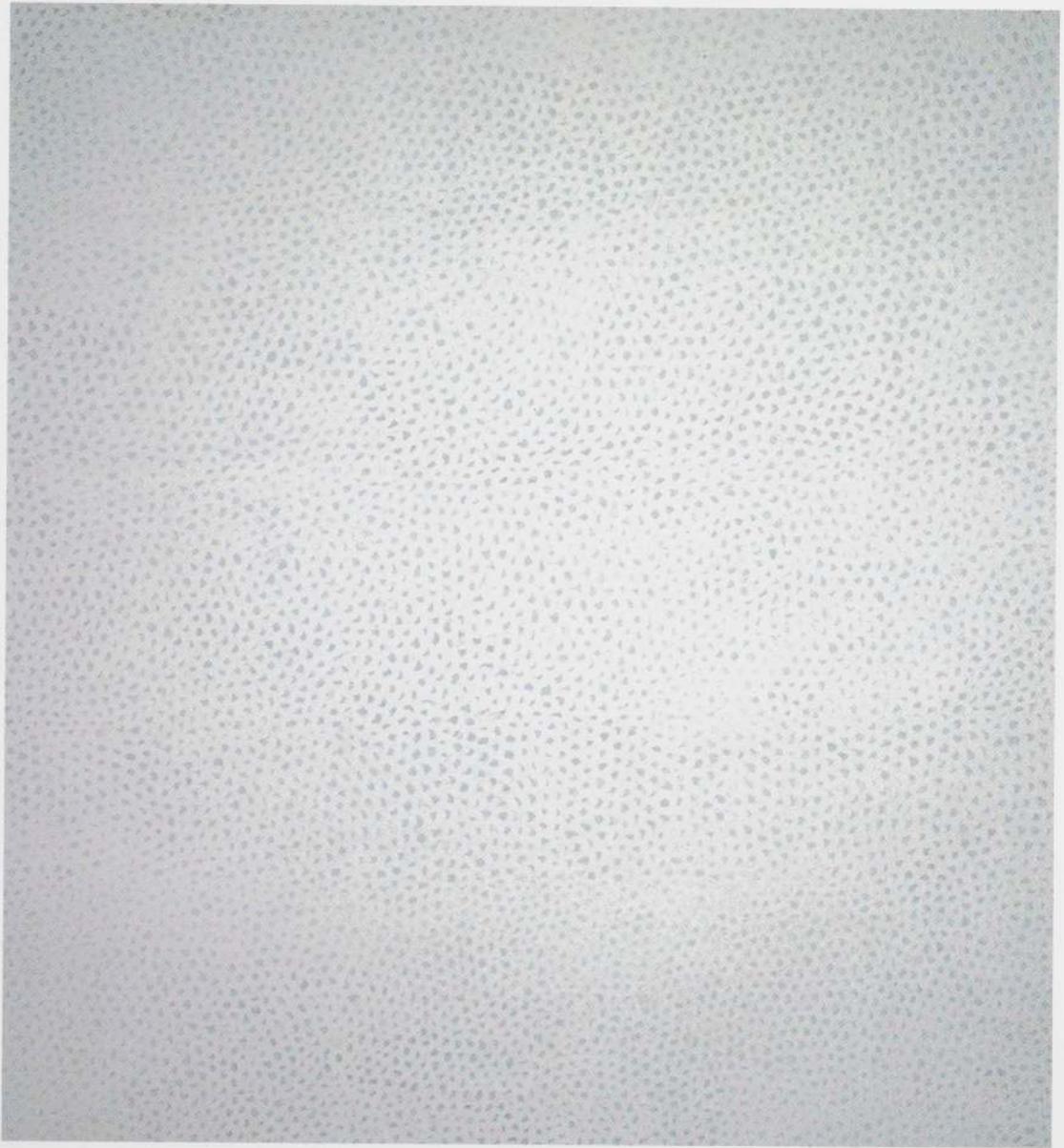
*No. A.B.*, 1959

Oil on canvas

82½ x 163 in. (210 x 414 cm)

Toyota Municipal Museum of Art





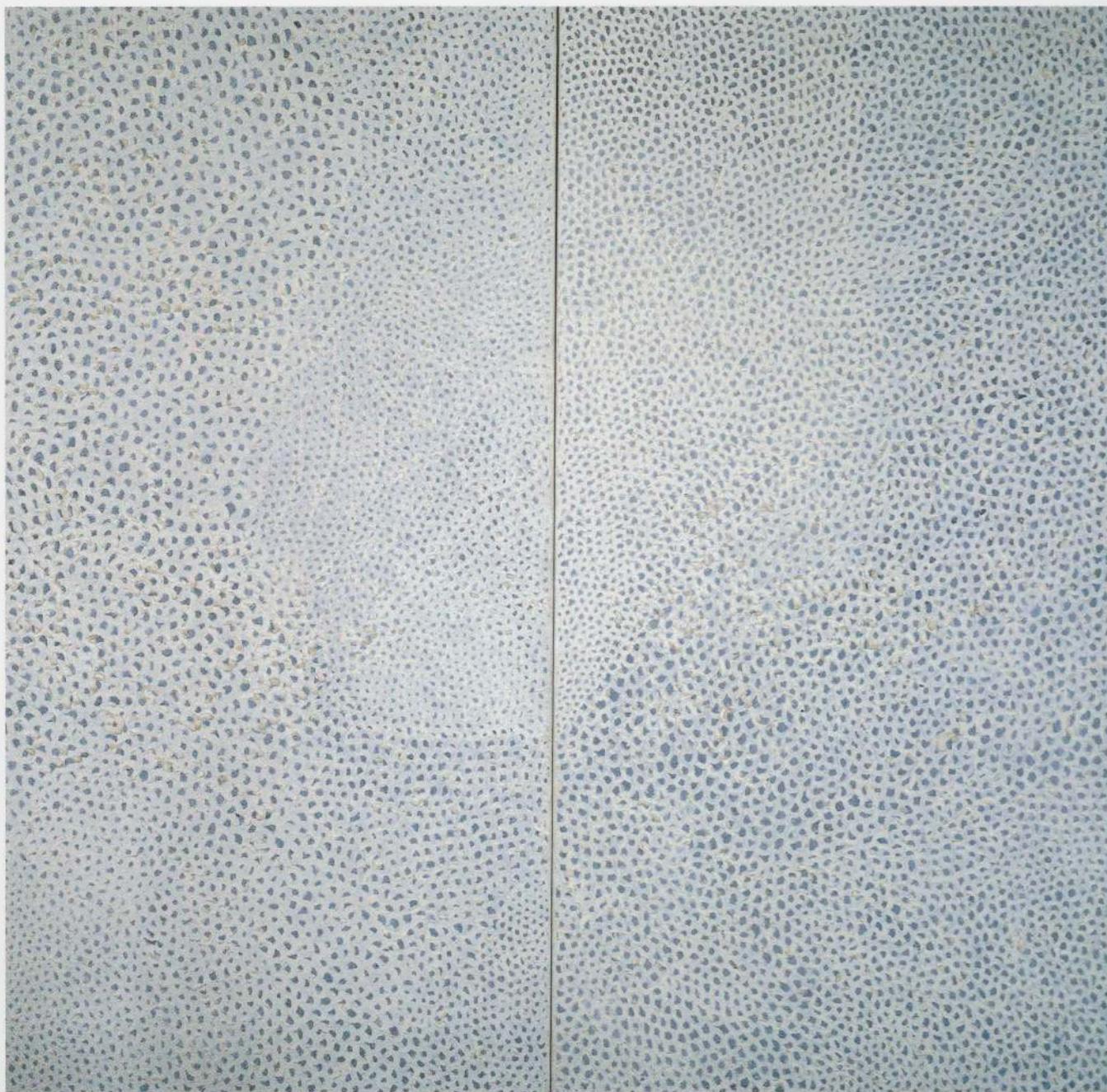
**[4]**

*Interminable Net*, 1959

Oil on canvas

52½ x 49½ in. (133.4 x 125.7 cm)

Collection of Michael and Gabrielle Boyd



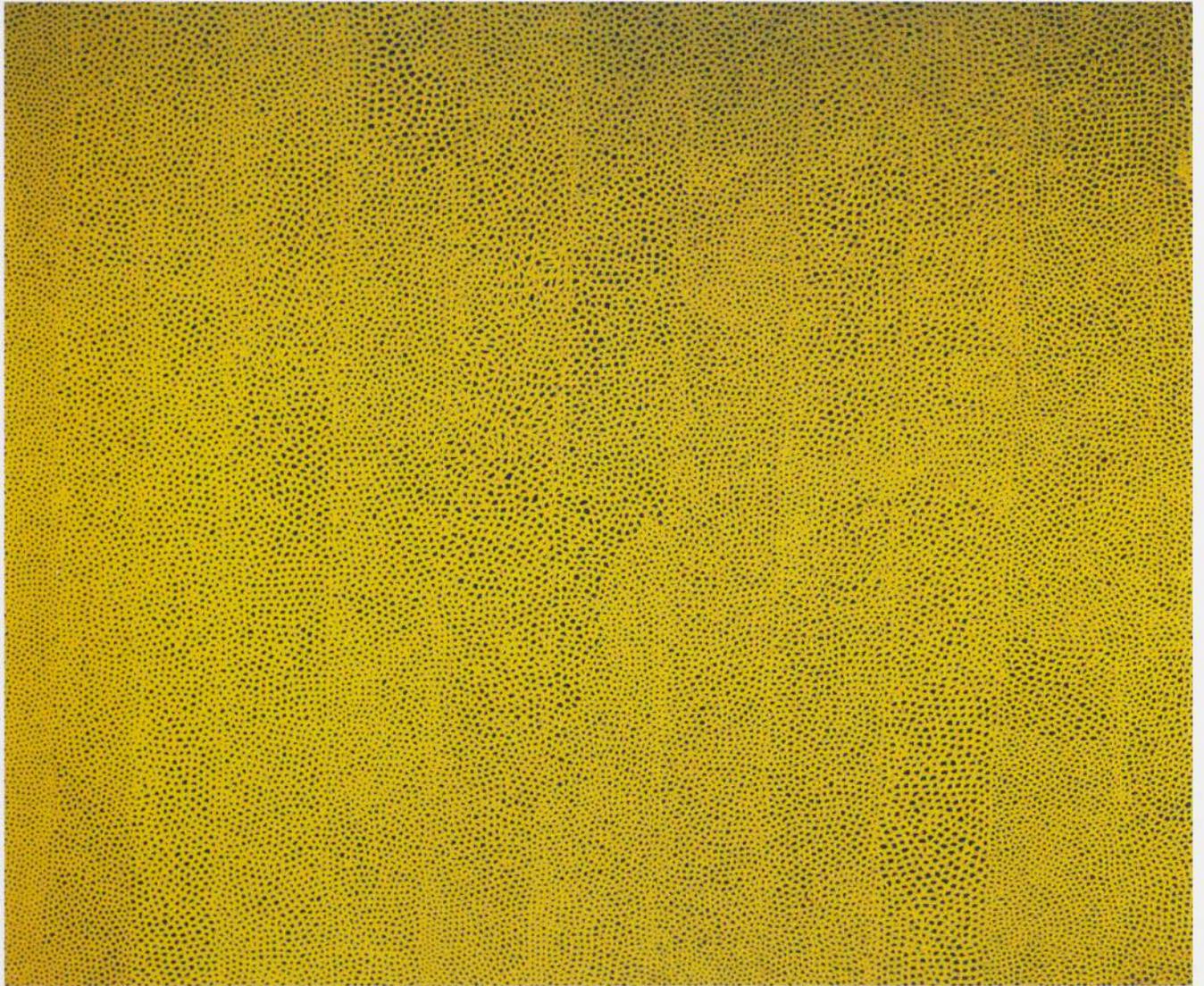
**[5]**

*Pacific Ocean*, 1960

Oil on canvas

72 x 72 in. (183 x 183 cm)

Museum of Contemporary Art, Tokyo



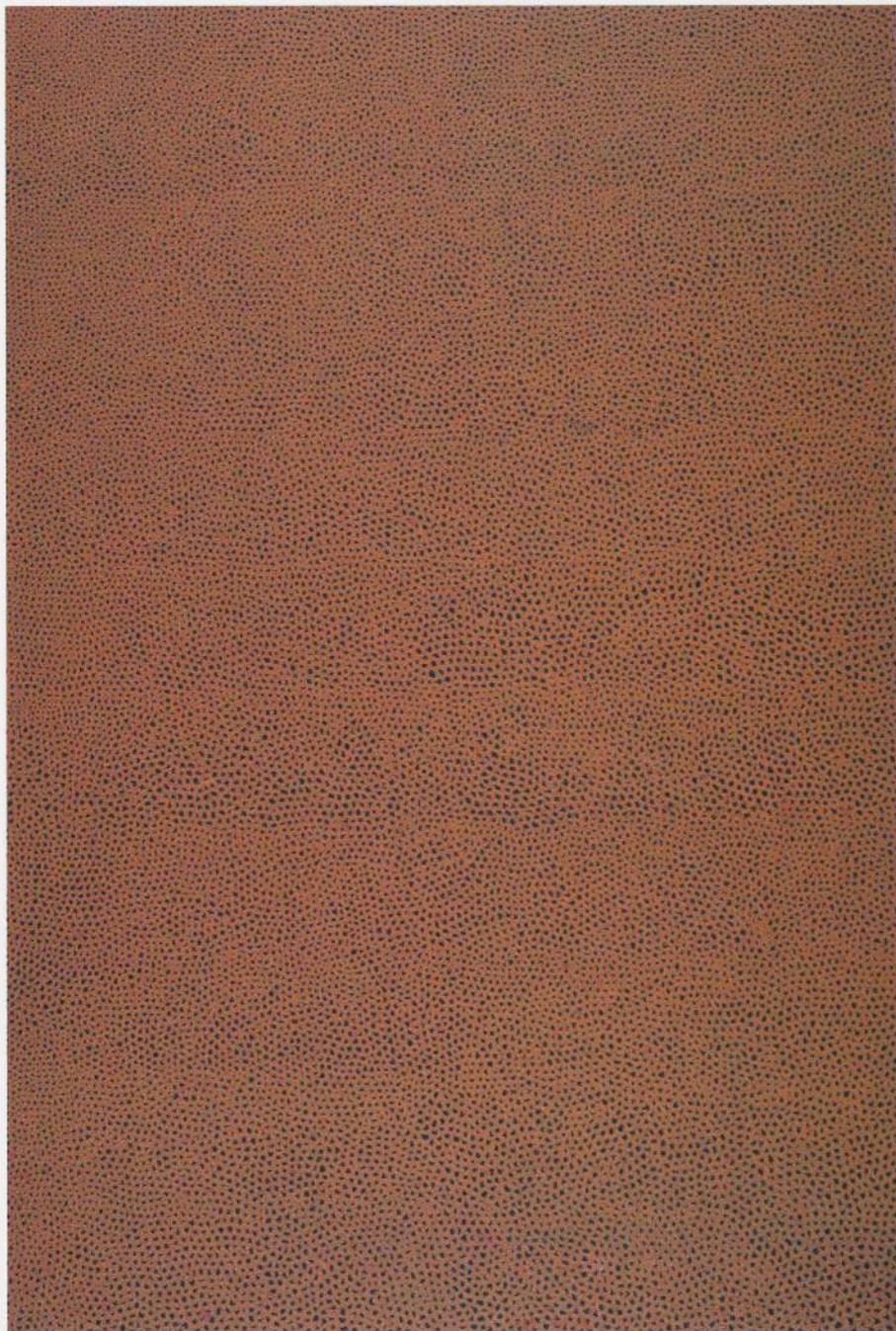
[6]

*Yellow Net*, 1960

Oil on canvas

94½ x 116 in. (240 x 294.6 cm)

Collection of Frank Stella



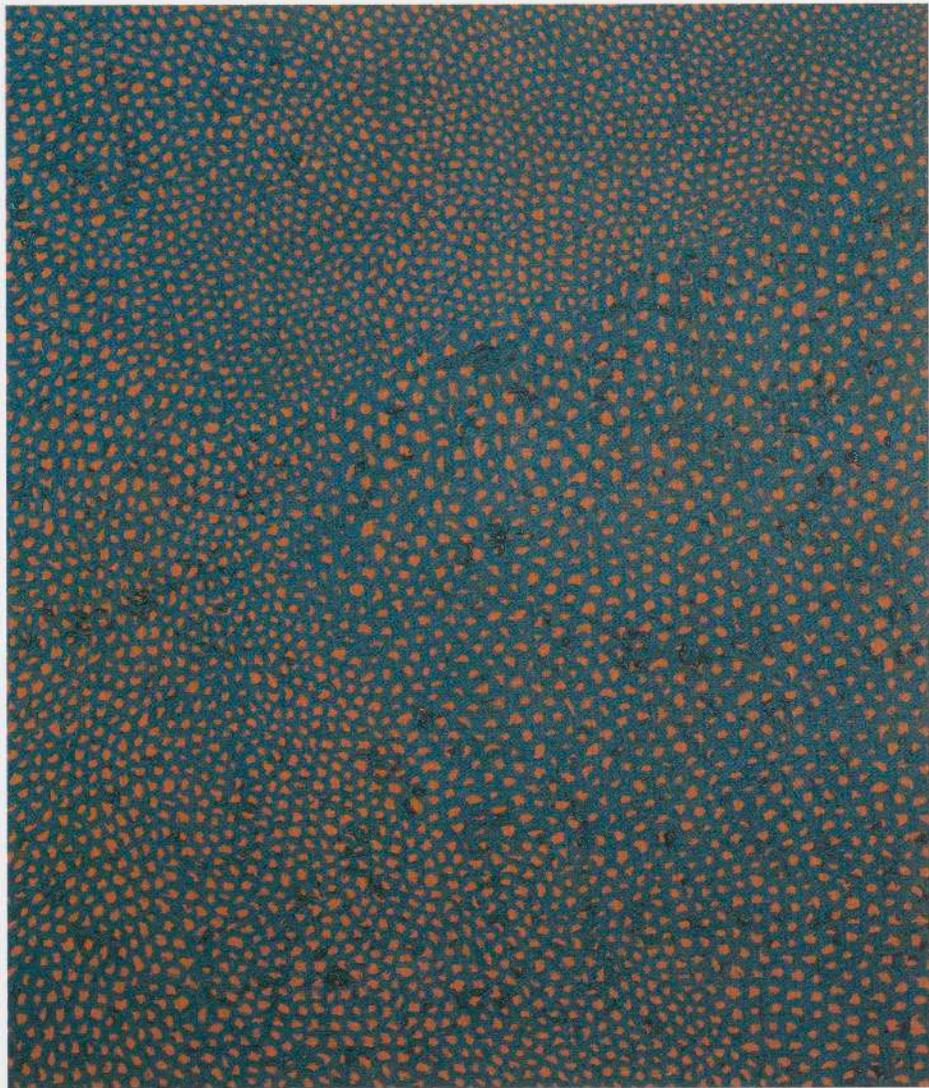
**[7]**

*No. P.Z., 1960*

Oil on canvas

106 x 70 in. (269.2 x 177.8 cm)

Nagano Prefectural Shinano Art Museum



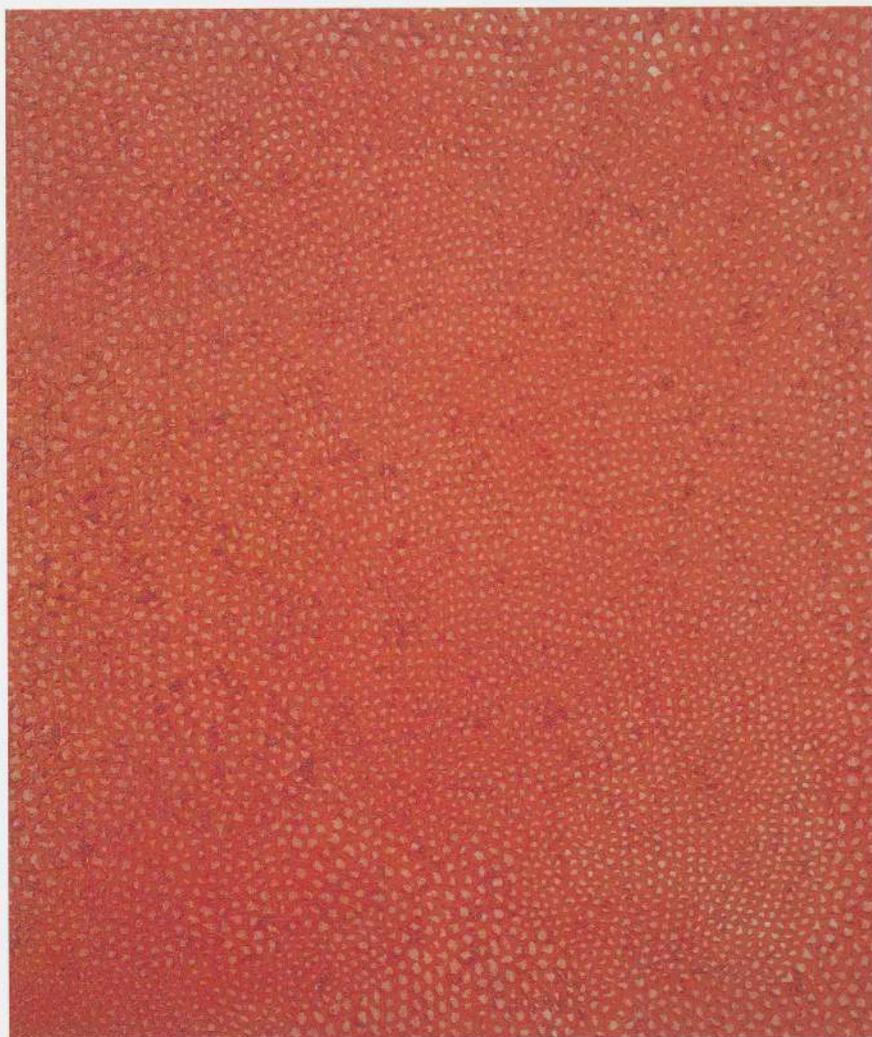
**[8]**

*No. F.C.H., 1960*

Oil on canvas

30 x 26 in. (76.2 x 66 cm)

Collection of Linda and Ronald F. Daitz



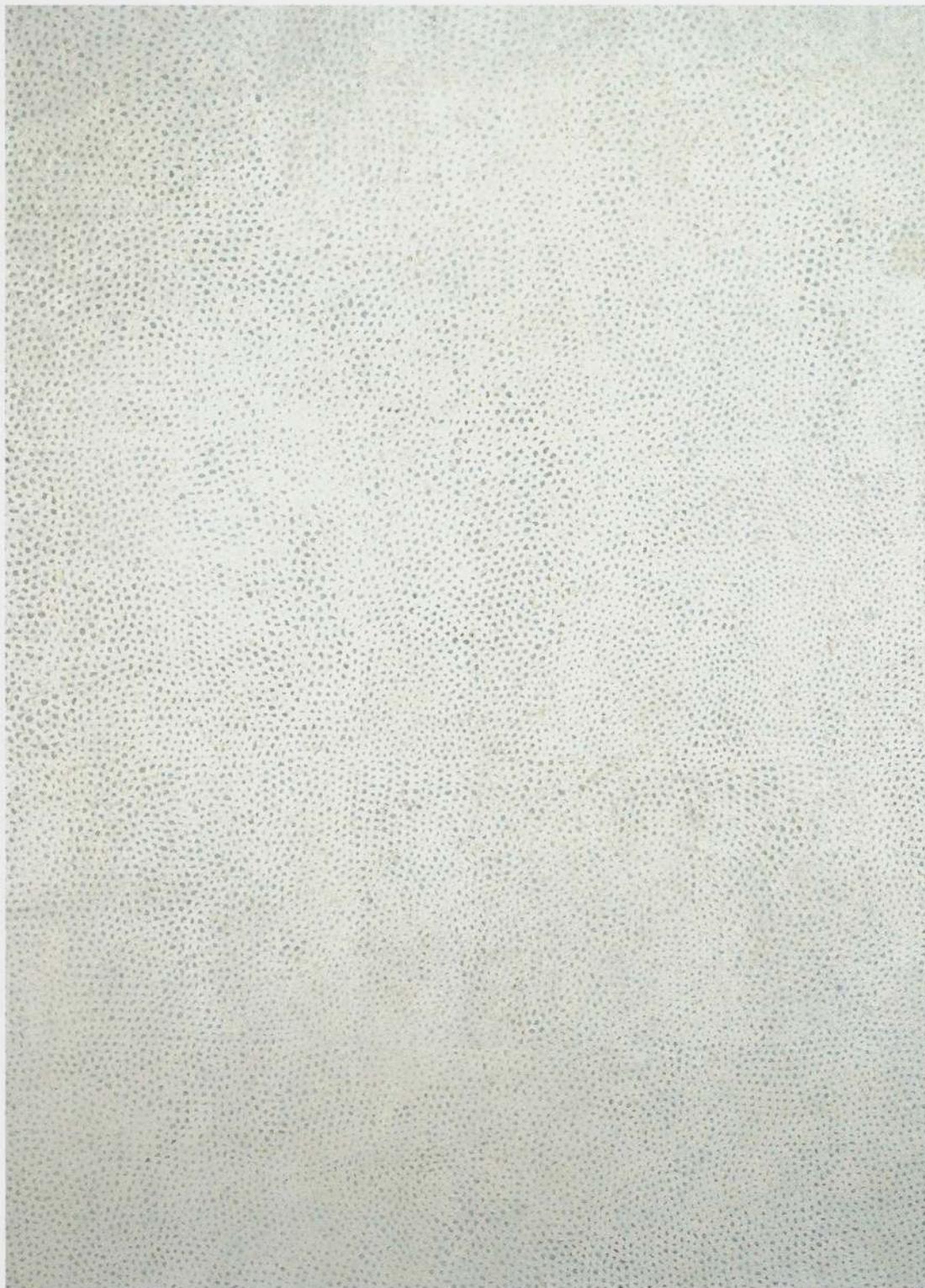
**[9]**

*No. Red B.C.F., 1960*

Oil on canvas

28 3/4 x 23 3/4 in. (72 x 60.3 cm)

Collection of Julie and Barry Smooke,  
Los Angeles



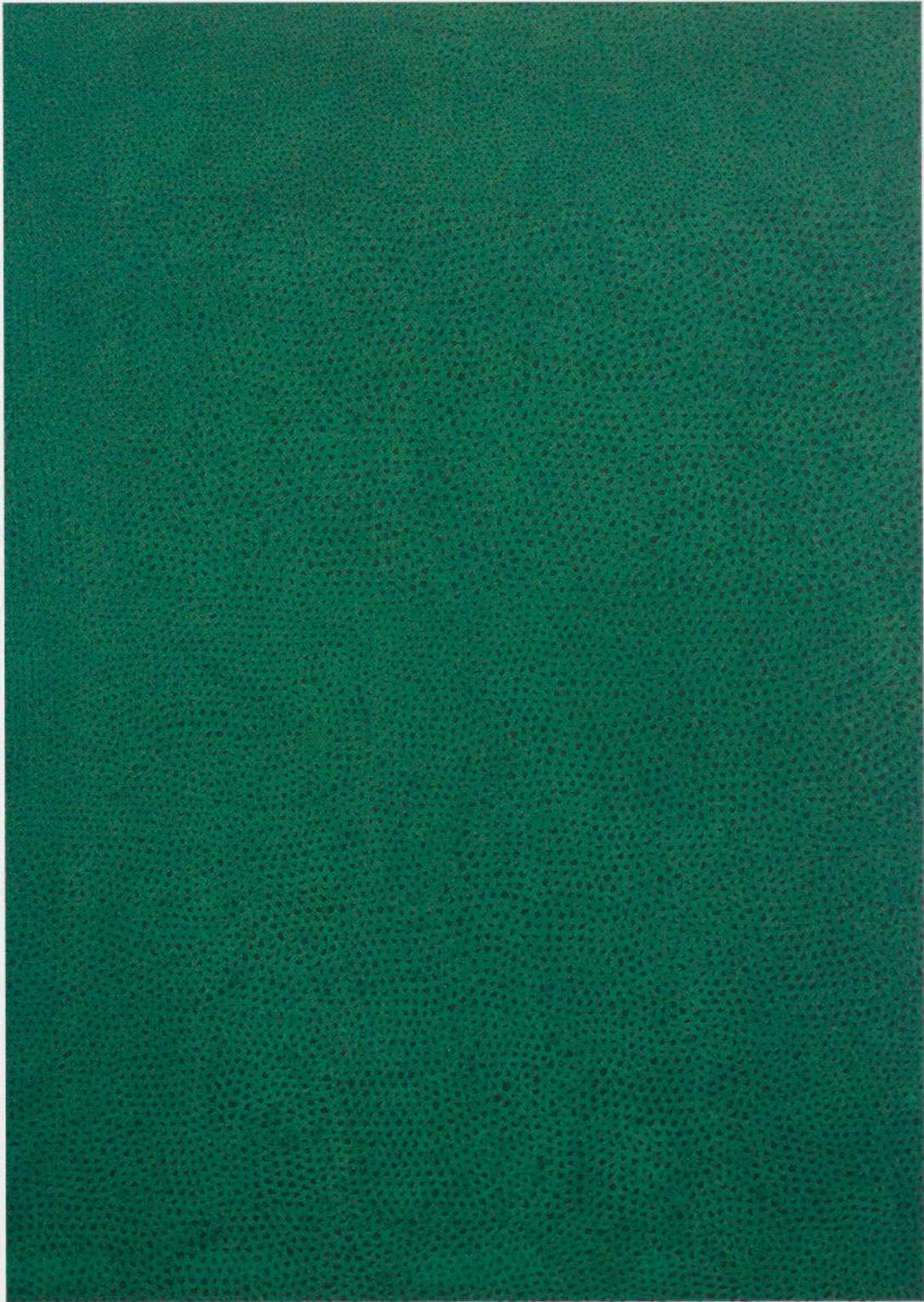
**[10]**

*No. T.W.3., 1961*

Oil on canvas

69 x 49½ in. (175.3 x 125.7 cm)

Collection of Agnes Gund



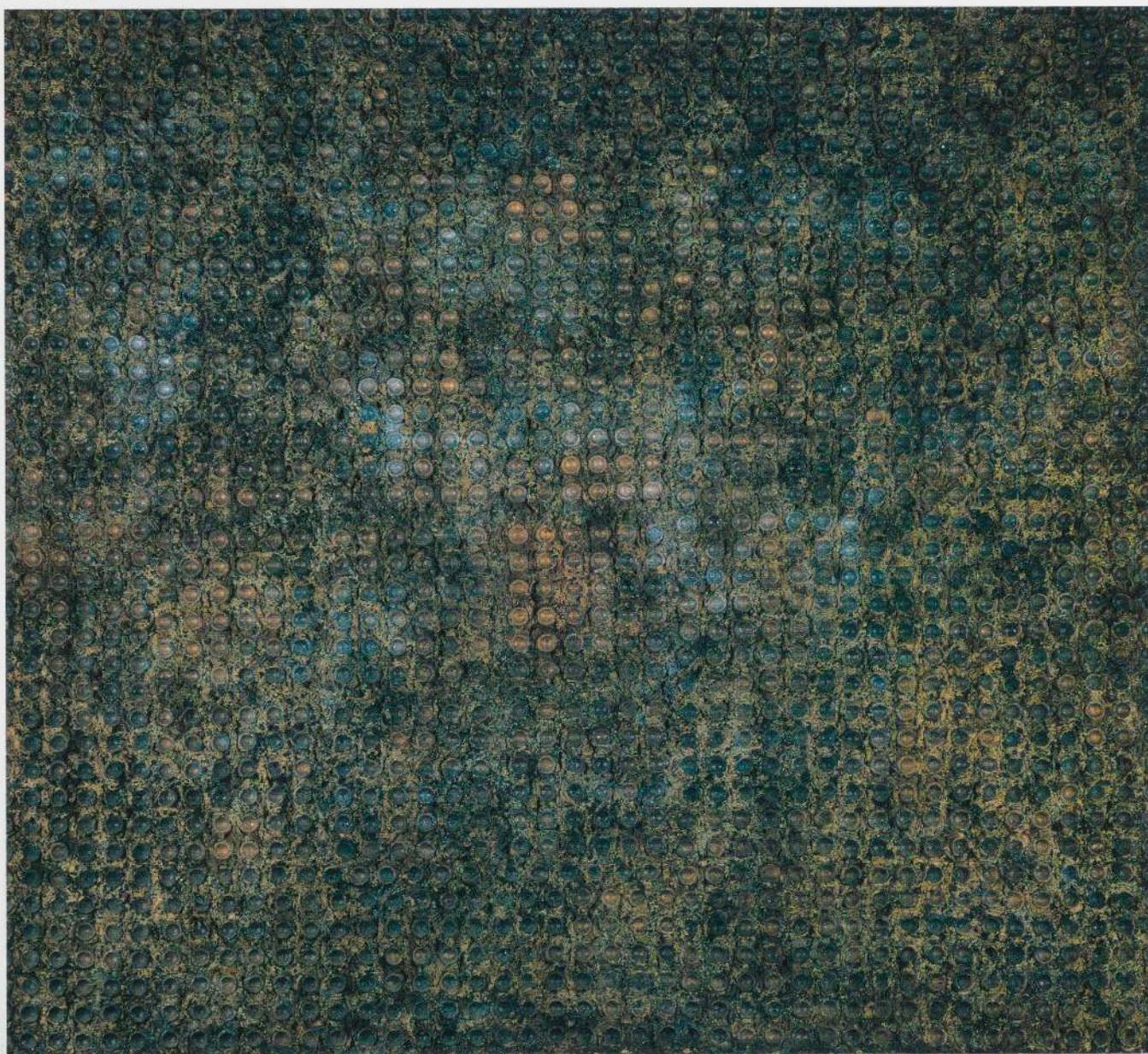
**[11]**

*No. Green No. 1*, 1961

Oil on canvas

70 x 49 1/2 in. (177.8 x 124.6 cm)

The Baltimore Museum of Art;  
Edith Ferry Hooper Bequest Fund



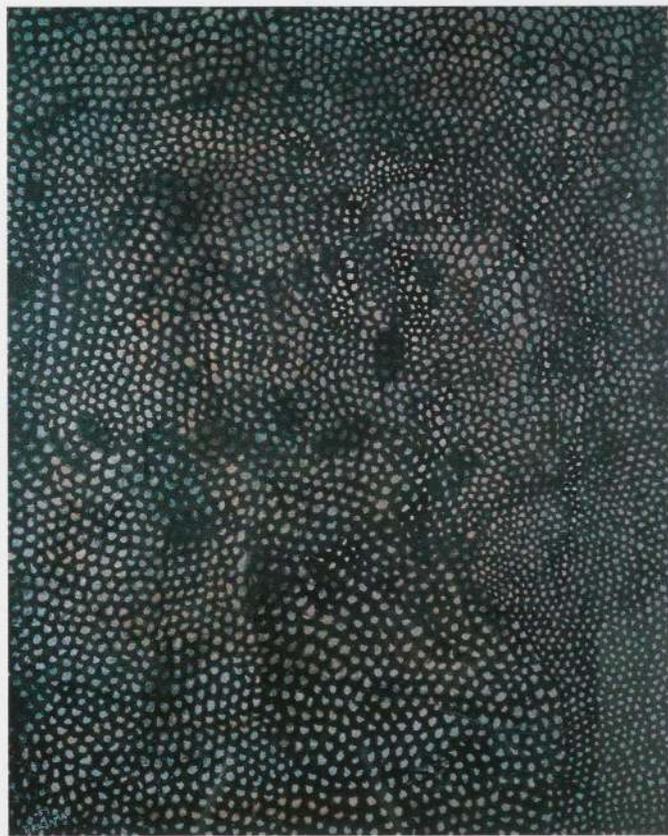
**[12]**

*No. 62 A.A.A., 1962*

Mixed mediums on canvas

70 x 78 in. (178 x 202 cm)

Archer M. Huntington Art Gallery, the University of Texas at Austin; gift of the Center for International Contemporary Arts; Emmanuel and Charlotte Levine Collection, 1992



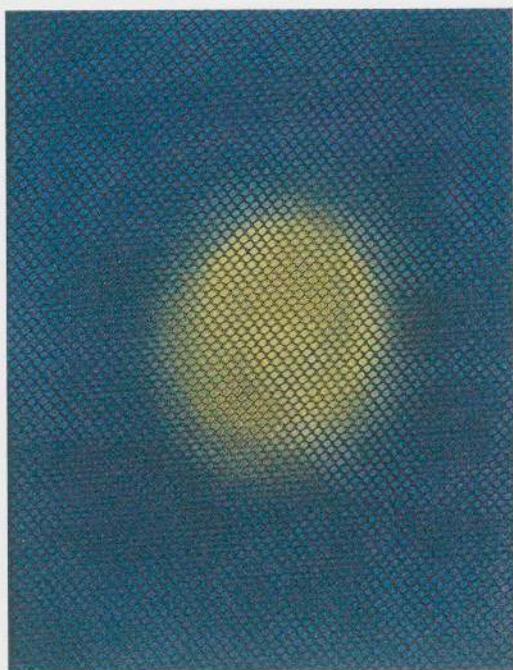
**[13]**

*Pacific Ocean*, 1959

Ink, watercolor on paper

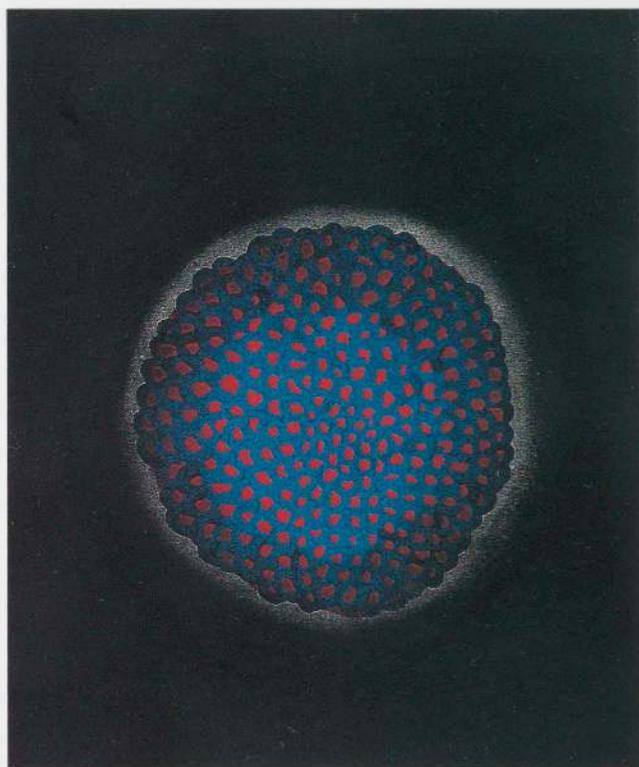
29 $\frac{7}{8}$  x 23 $\frac{7}{8}$  in. (75.9 x 60.6 cm)

Keiji Anzai



**[14]**

*Nets and Red No. 3*, 1958/c. 1963  
Pastel on paper with synthetic netting  
11 x 8 1/2 in. (27.9 x 21.6 cm)  
Private collection



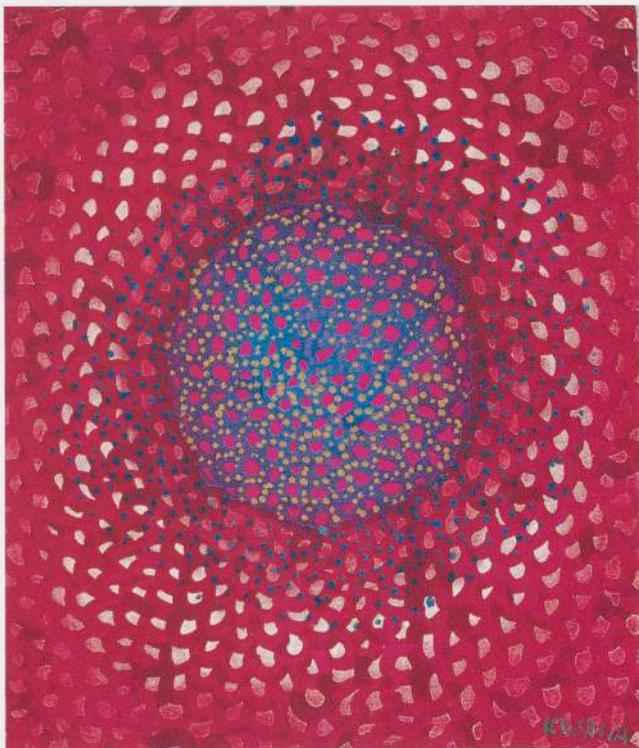
**[15]**

*Flower*, 1950s/c. 1963

Watercolor, pastel on paper

15 3/4 x 13 1/4 in. (40 x 33.7 cm)

The Museum of Modern Art, New York; purchased with  
funds provided by Sheldon H. Solow



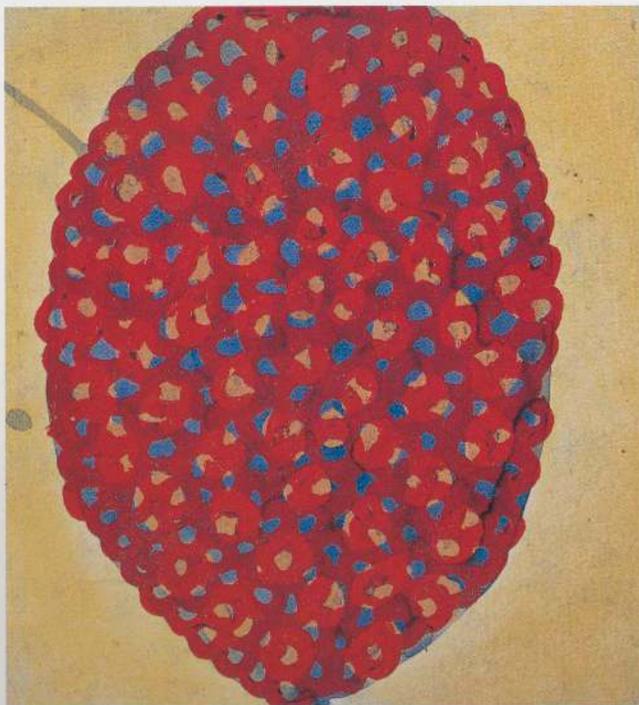
**[16]**

*Nets and Sun*, 1953/63

Gouache, pastel on paper

15 x 12¼ in. (38.1 x 32.4 cm)

Collection of Richard Castellane;  
courtesy D'Amelio Terras Gallery, New York



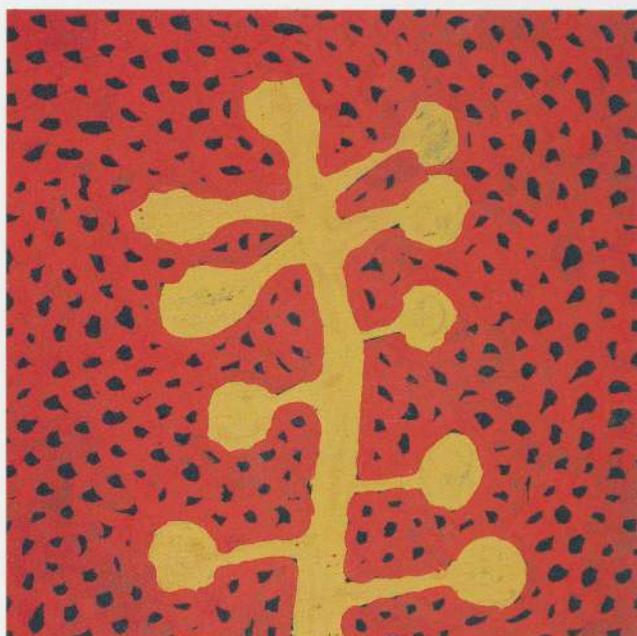
**[17]**

*Seeds*, 1953/c. 1963

Gouache on paper

13 x 11¾ in. (33 x 29 cm)

Collection of the artist



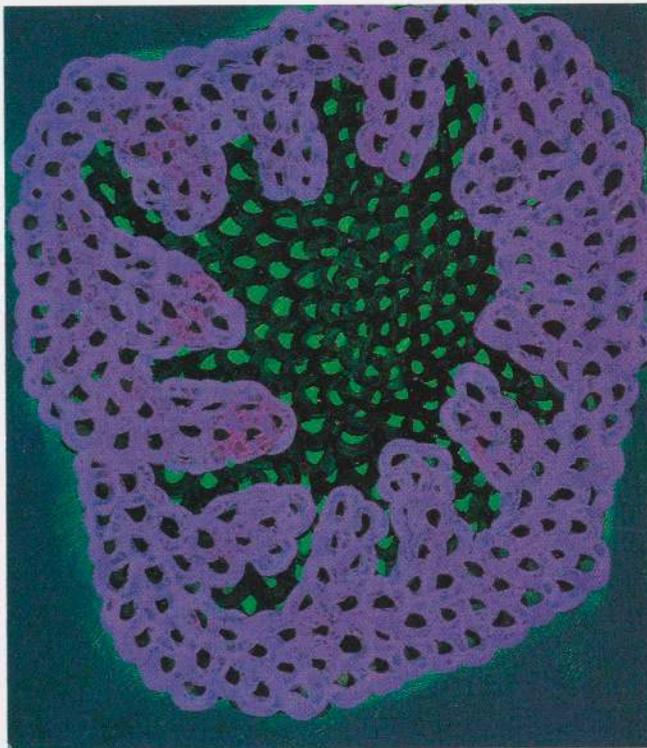
**[18]**

*Flower*, 1950s/62  
Gouache on paper  
12 x 12 in. (30.5 x 30.5 cm)  
Collection of the artist



**[19]**

*Flower*, 1950s/62  
Gouache on paper  
13 3/4 x 11 1/4 in. (35 x 30 cm)  
Collection of the artist



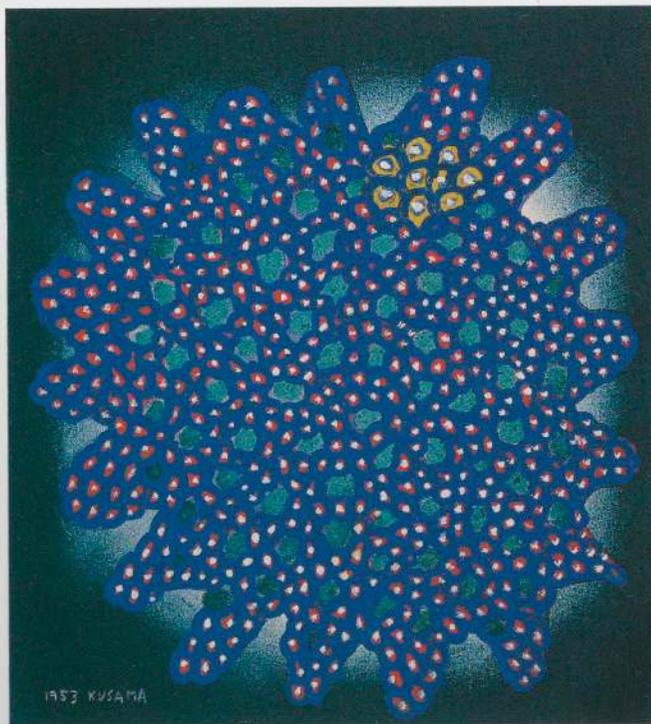
**[20]**

*A Flower with Nets*, 1952/c. 1963

Gouache on paper

13 3/8 x 11 3/4 in. (34 x 29.8 cm)

Collection of the artist



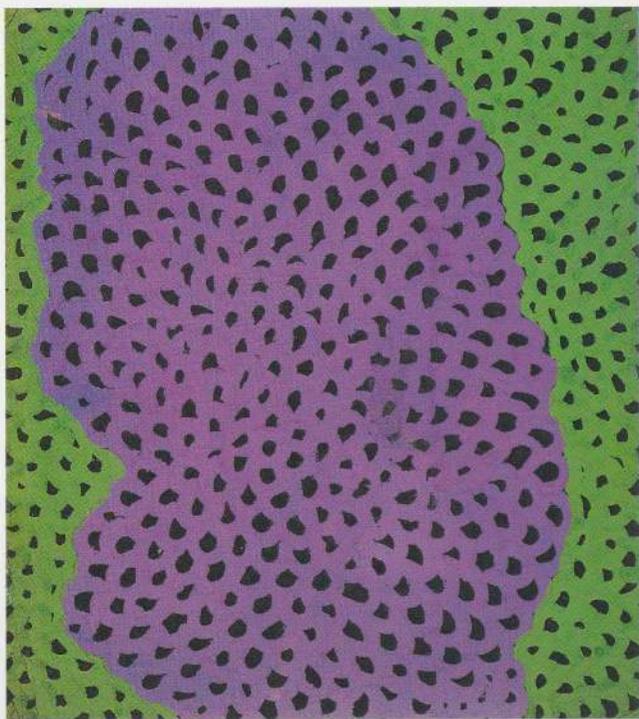
**[21]**

*Nets Flower No. Q. 121*, 1953/64

Gouache on paper

13 3/8 x 11 3/8 in. (33.5 x 29.5 cm)

Collection of the artist



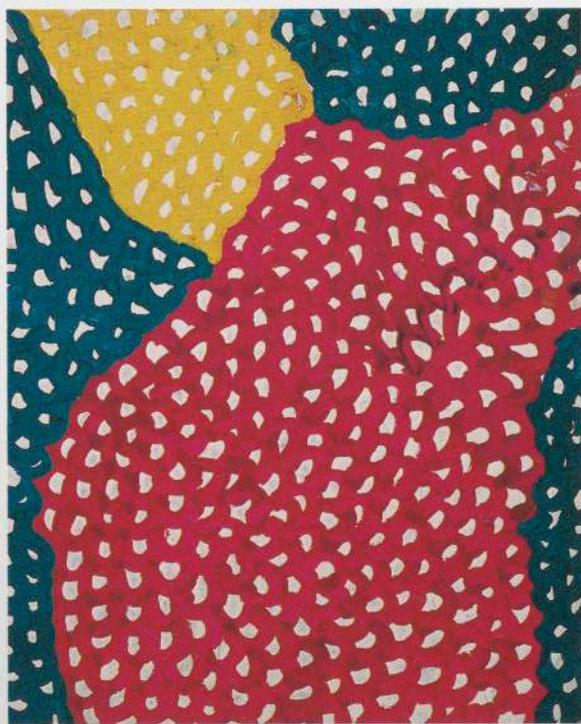
**[22]**

*Net Obsession*, 1950s/63

Gouache on paper

15 x 13 3/8 in. (38 x 34 cm)

Collection of the artist



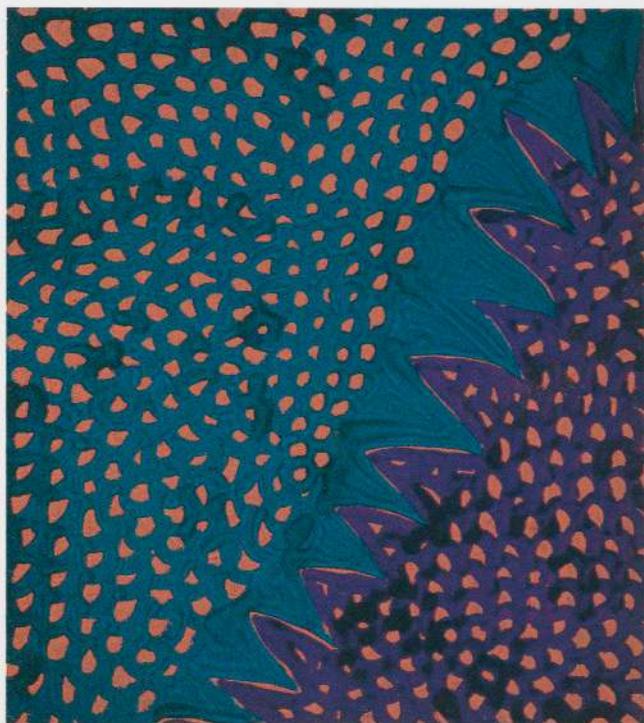
**[23]**

*Nets*, 1950s/64

Gouache on paper

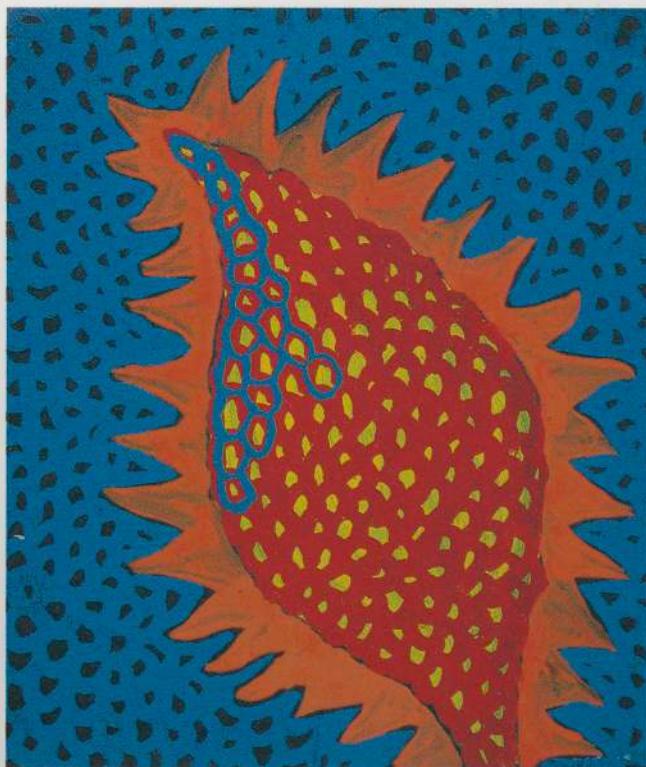
13 x 10 1/2 in. (33 x 27 cm)

Collection of the artist



**[24]**

*Flower*, 1950s/64  
Gouache on paper  
13 x 11 ¼ in. (33 x 30 cm)  
Collection of the artist



**[25]**

*Flower*, 1950s/64  
Gouache on paper  
13 ¾ x 11 ¼ in. (35.4 x 30 cm)  
Collection of the artist



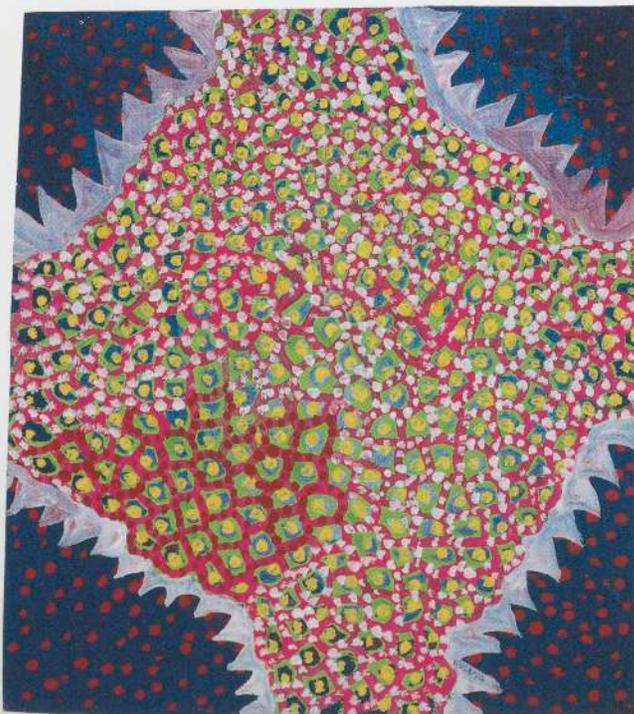
**[26]**

*Flower P.P.P.*, 1954/64

Gouache on paper

14½ x 12½ in. (36.6 x 31.8 cm)

Collection of the artist



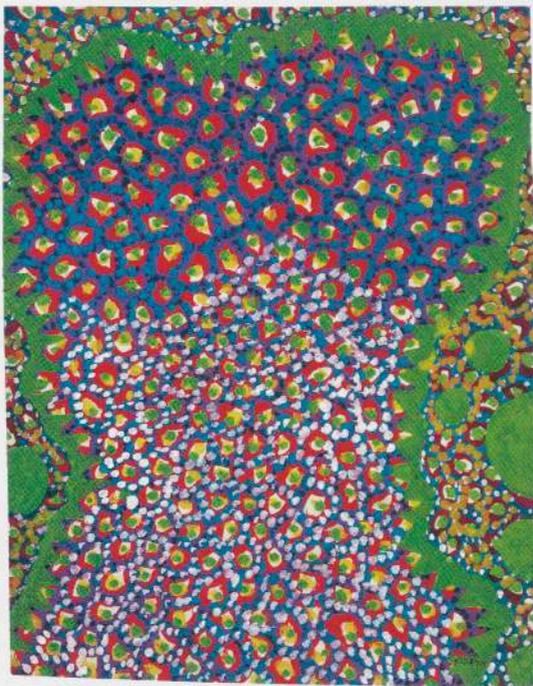
**[27]**

*Flower A.3.*, 1954/63

Gouache, pastel on paper

13 x 11½ in. (33 x 29.2 cm)

Collection of Richard Castellane



[28]

*Ground*, 1950s/63

Gouache, pastel on paper

11¼ x 8¾ in. (28.6 x 22.2 cm)

Collection of Richard Castellane



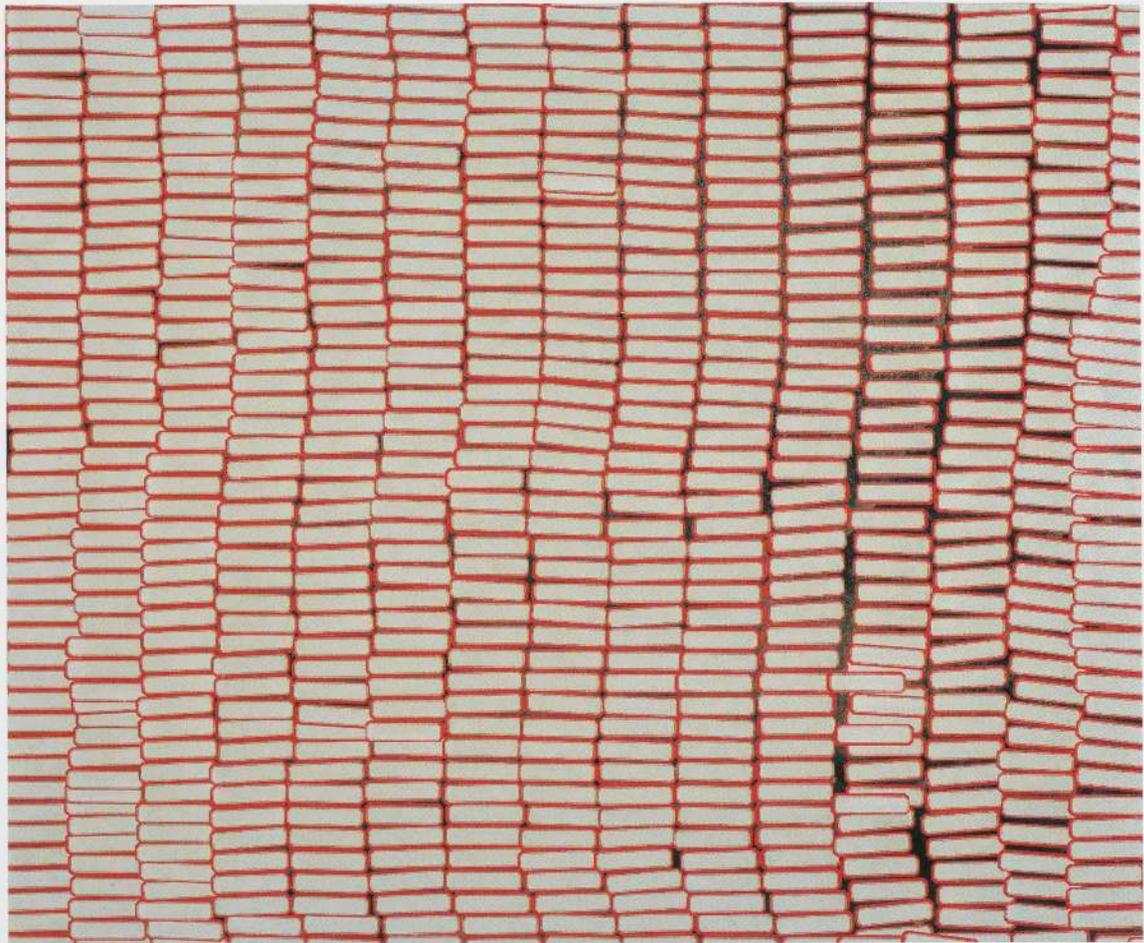
[29]

*M.A.M. Egg*, 1954/63

Gouache, pastel on paper

11½ x 13¼ in. (28.3 x 33.7 cm)

Collection of Richard Castellane



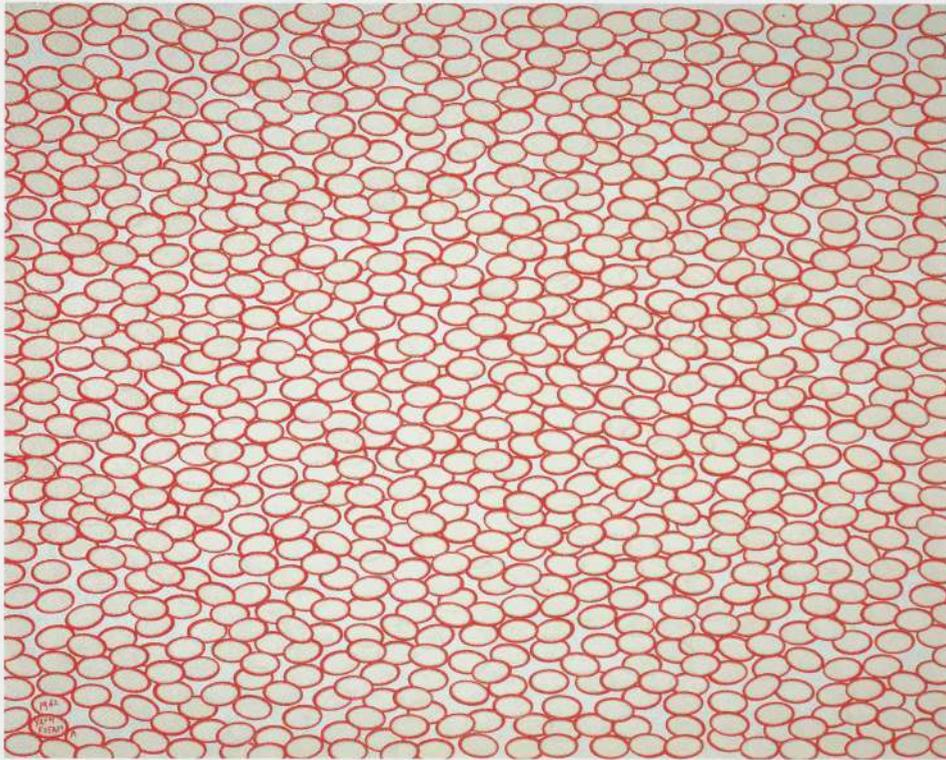
**[30]**

*Accumulation of Stamps No. 63, 1962*

Collage, watercolor on paper

23¼ x 29 in. (60.3 x 73.6 cm)

The Museum of Modern Art, New York;  
gift of Philip Johnson



[31]

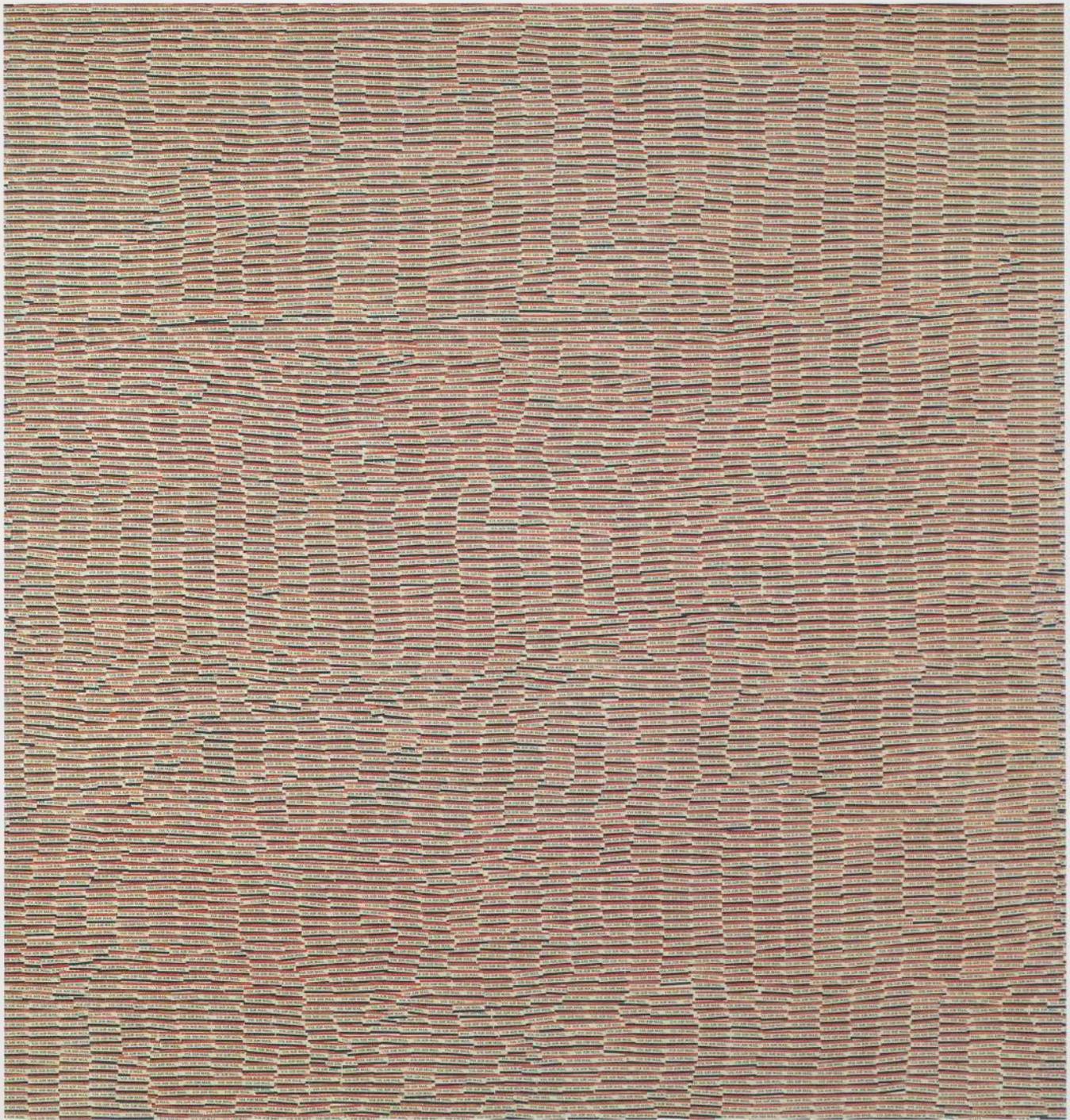
*Accumulation No. 15 A.*, 1962

Collage on paper

20¼ x 25¾ in. (51.5 x 65.5 cm)

Collection of Henk Peeters





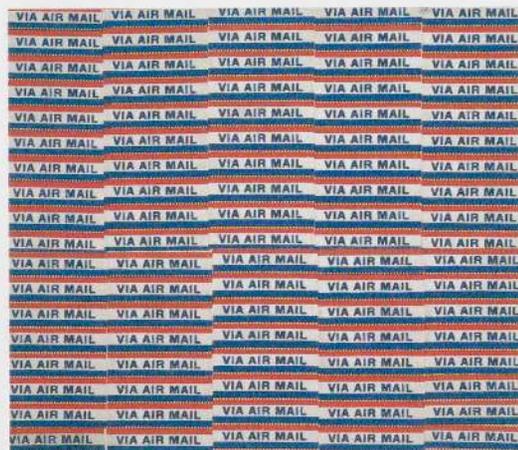
[32]

*Airmail Stickers*, 1962

Collage on canvas

71½ x 67½ in. (181.6 x 171.4 cm)

The Whitney Museum of American Art,  
New York; gift of Hanford Yang



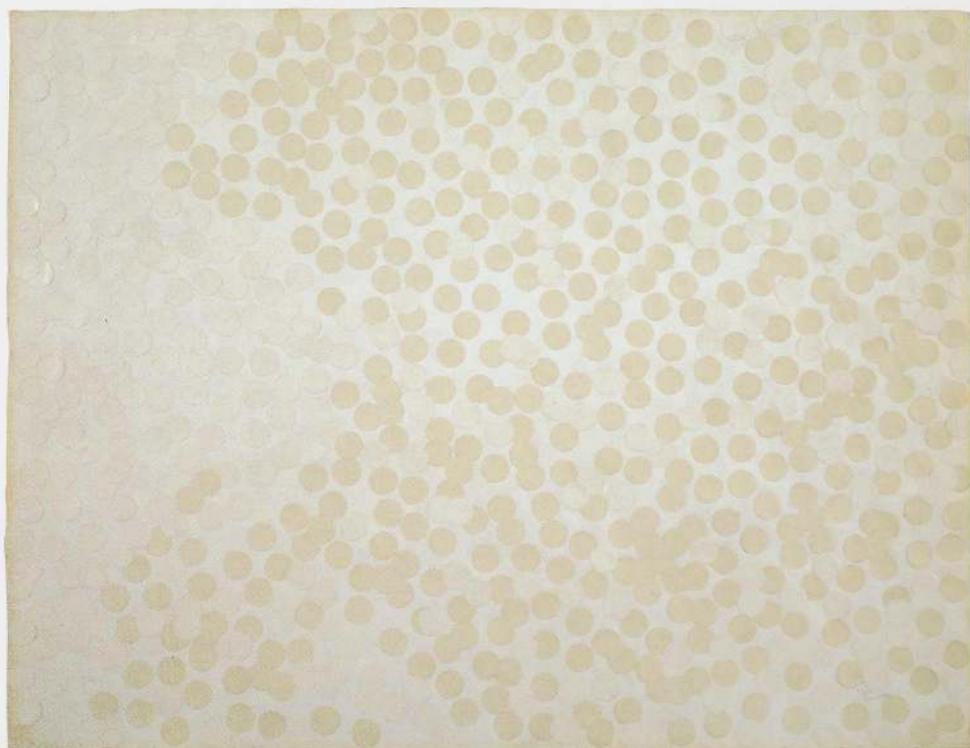
[33]

*Airmail No. Q.Z., 1963*

Collage on paper

9¼ x 10½ in. (23.5 x 26.7 cm)

Collection of Eileen and Michael Cohen



**[34]**

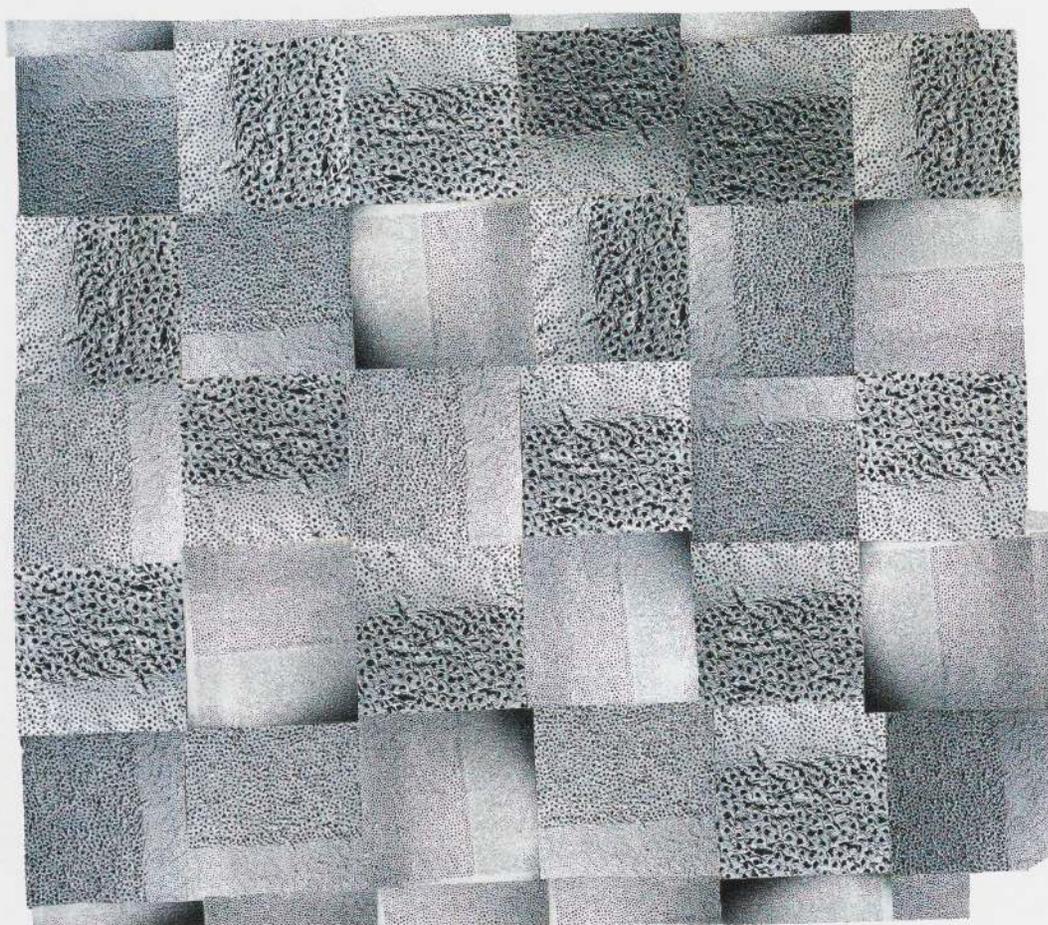
*Accumulation of Spaces No. B.T.*, 1963

Collage on paper

19½ x 25¼ in. (49.5 x 64.8 cm)

The Walker Art Center, Minneapolis:

T. B. Walker Acquisition Fund, 1996



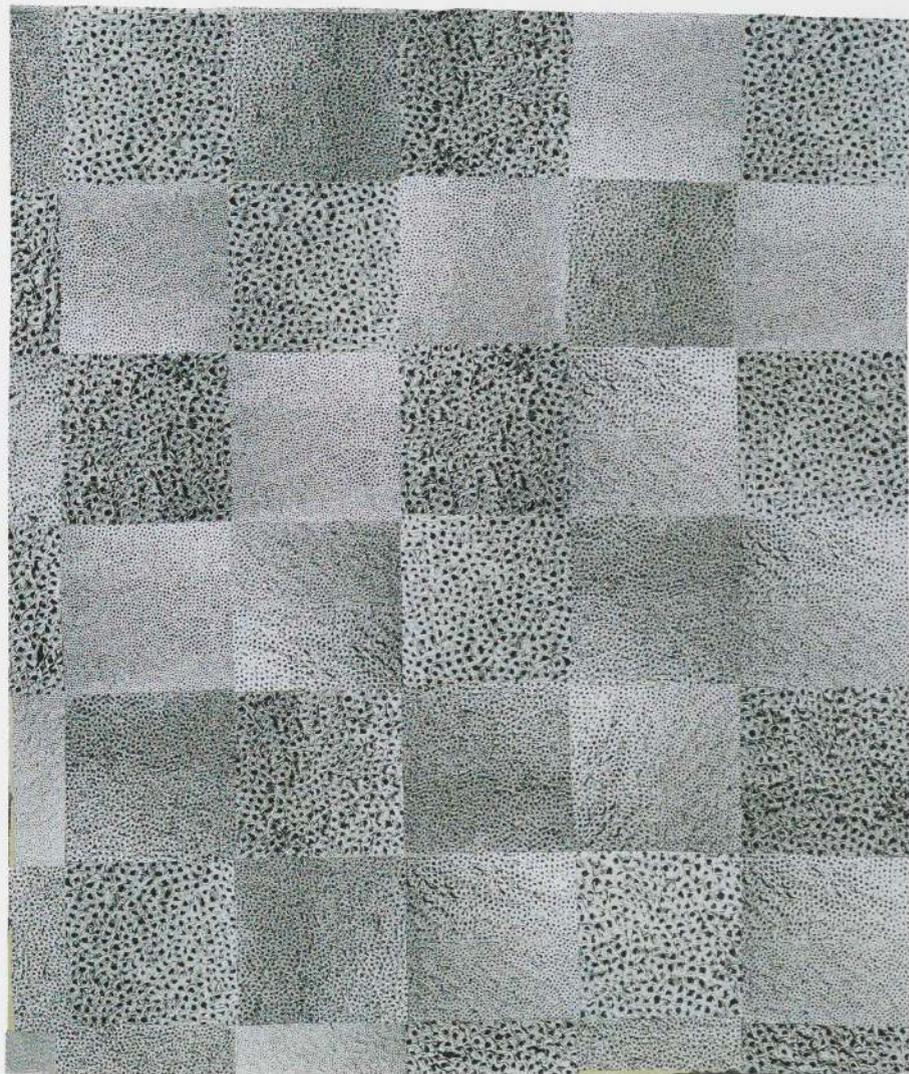
**[35]**

*Accumulation of Nets*, 1962

Photcollage

23 3/8 x 28 1/8 in. (59.4 x 71.4 cm)

The Los Angeles County Museum of Art; purchased with funds provided by the Ralph M. Parsons Discretionary Fund, Blake Byrne, Tony and Gale Ganz, Sharleen Cooper Cohen, Stanley and Elyse Grinstein, and Linda and Jerry Janger



[36]

*Accumulation of Nets No. 7, 1962*

Photocollage

29 x 24½ in. (73.7 x 62.2 cm)

The Museum of Modern Art, New York;  
gift of Agnes Gund





**[37]**

*Accretion No. 3, 1964*

Collage on paper

43 $\frac{3}{4}$  x 27 $\frac{1}{2}$  in. (110.8 x 70.2 cm)

Oita City



[38]

*Compulsion Furniture (Accumulation)*,

c. 1964

Photocollage, paint

8 x 9 $\frac{3}{4}$  in. (20.4 x 25.1 cm)

Collection of Christopher D'Amelio, New York



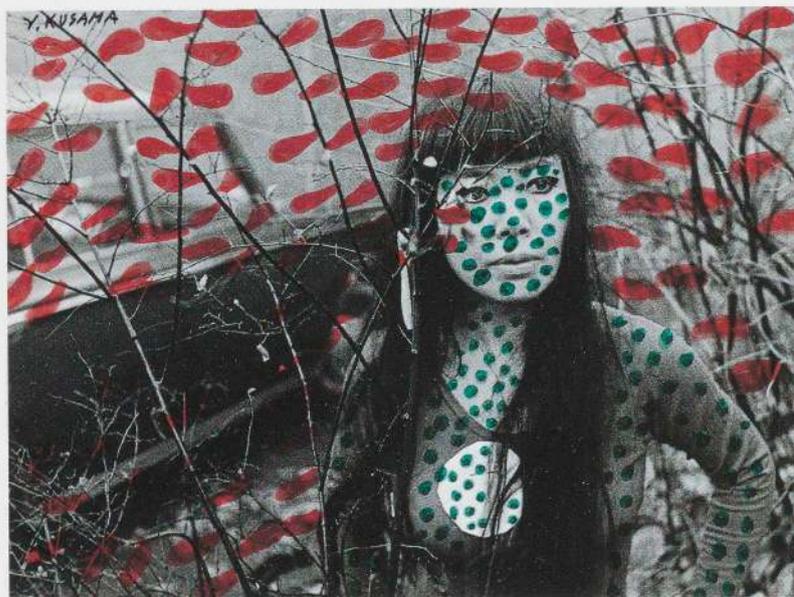
**[39]**

*Love Forever Collage*, 1966

Photocollage

14 x 11 in. (35.6 x 28 cm)

Beatrice Perry Family Collection



**[40]**  
*Self-Obliteration*, 1967  
Black-and-white photograph, ink  
7 1/4 x 9 1/2 in. (18.2 x 24 cm)  
Ota Fine Arts



**[41]**

*Self-Obliteration (Net Obsession Series),*

c. 1966

Photocollage

8 x 10 in. (20.3 x 25.4 cm)

Ota Fine Arts



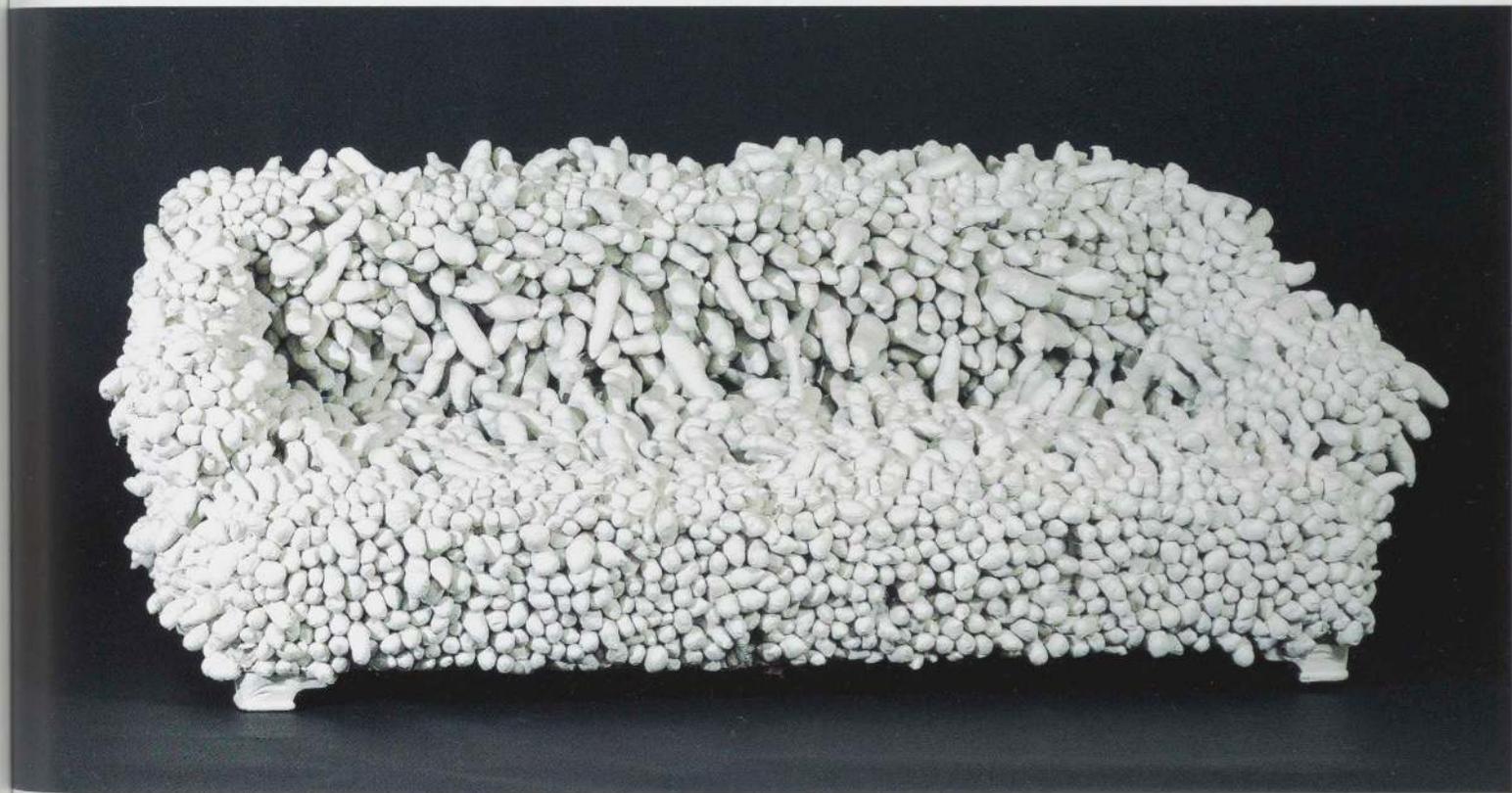
**[42]**

*Accumulation No. 1, 1962*

Sewn stuffed fabric, paint, fringe on chair frame

37 x 39 x 43 in. (94 x 99.1 x 109.2 cm)

Beatrice Perry Family Collection



**[43]**

*Accumulation No. 2*, 1962

Sewn stuffed fabric, paint on sofa frame  
35 x 88 x 40 ¼ in. (88.9 x 223.5 x 102.2 cm)  
Hood Museum of Art, Dartmouth College;  
gift of Mr. and Mrs. Harry L. Tepper





**[44]**

*My Flower Bed*, 1962

Stuffed cotton gloves, bedsprings, paint  
98½ x 98½ x 98½ in. (250.2 x 250.2 x 250.2 cm)

Musée national d'art moderne,  
Centre Georges Pompidou

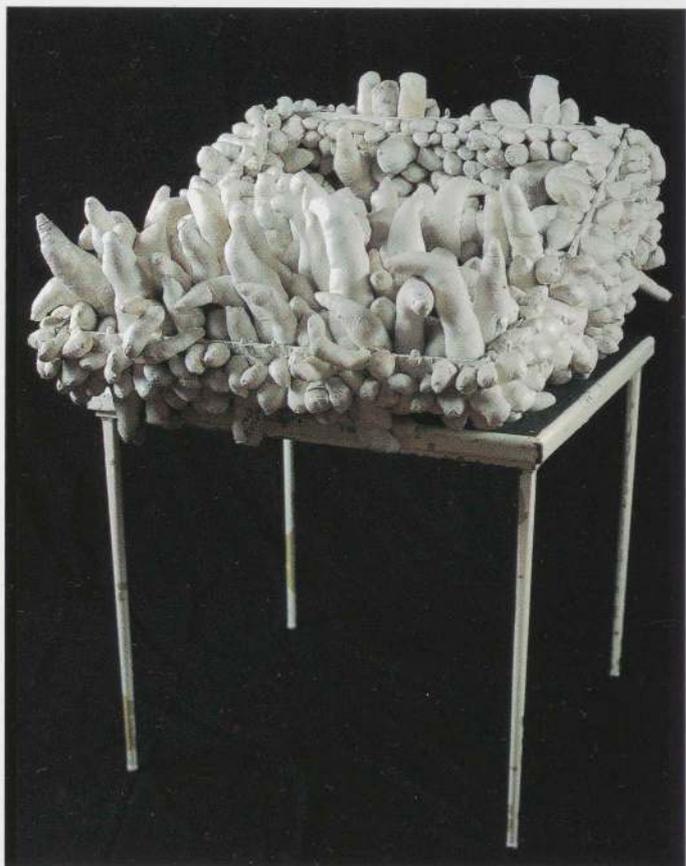
**[45]**

*Ironing Board*, 1963

Sewn stuffed fabric, iron, ironing board, paint  
44 x 56 x 27½ in. (111.8 x 142.2 x 69.9 cm)

Storm King Art Center; gift of Hanford Yang





**[47]**

Untitled, 1963

Sewn stuffed fabric, suitcase,  
folding table, paint

39 x 32 x 30 in. (99.1 x 81.3 x 76.2 cm)

Des Moines Art Center Permanent  
Collections; gift of Hanford Yang

**[46]**

*Traveling Life*, 1964

Sewn stuffed fabric, women's shoes,  
wooden stepladder

97 <sup>7</sup>/<sub>8</sub> x 32 <sup>1</sup>/<sub>4</sub> x 59 <sup>1</sup>/<sub>2</sub> in. (248 x 82 x 151 cm)

The National Museum of Modern Art, Kyoto



**[48]**

*Bronze Coat*, c. 1962

Sewn stuffed fabric, raincoat, clotheshanger

42 x 35 x 3 in. (106.7 x 88.9 x 7.6 cm)

Collection of Ikkan Sanada, New York



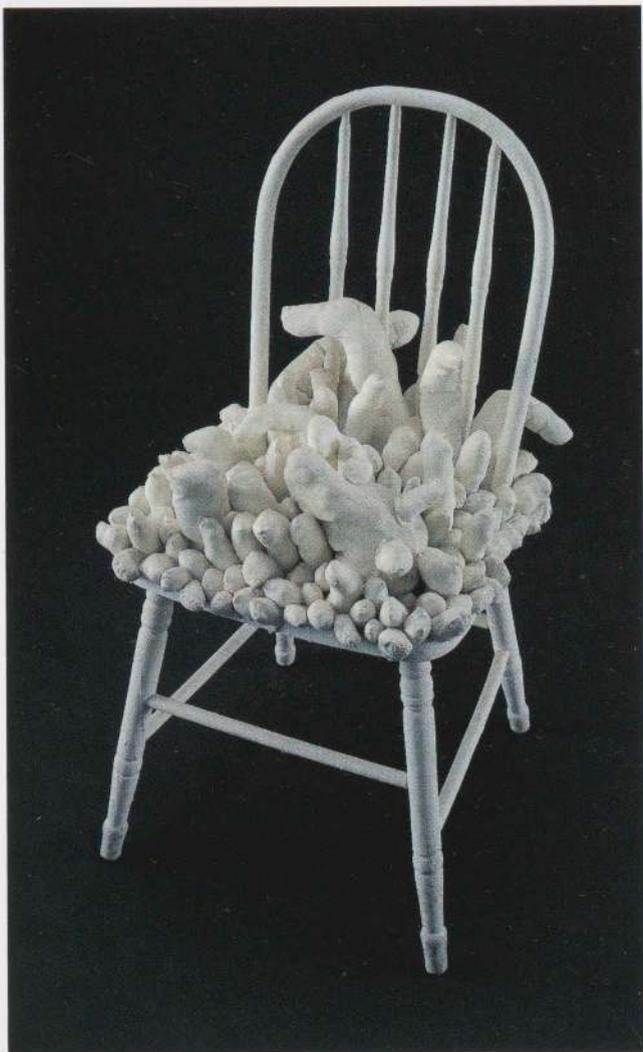
**[49]**

*Suit*, c. 1962

Sewn stuffed fabric, jacket, skirt,  
clothes hanger, paint

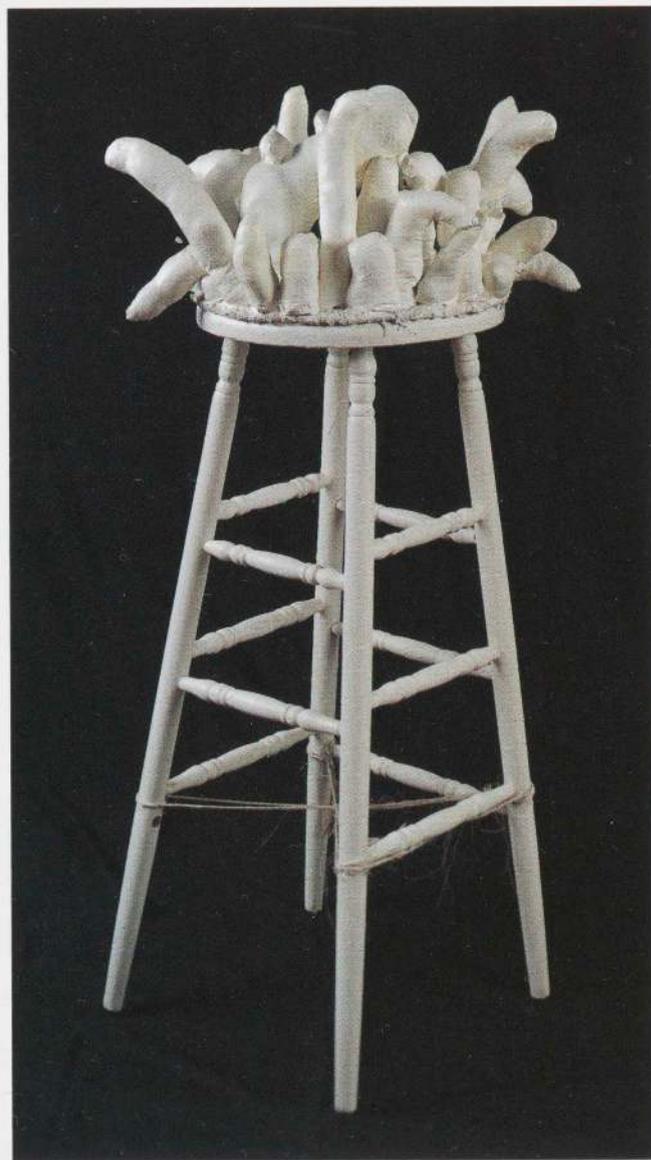
40 x 30 x 4 in. (101.6 x 76.2 x 10.2 cm)

Collection of Richard Castellane; courtesy D'Amelio Terras Gallery, New York



**[50]**

Untitled Accumulation, 1963  
Sewn stuffed fabric, wooden chair, paint  
34 x 16 x 16 in. (86.4 x 40.6 x 40.6 cm)  
Toyota Municipal Museum of Art



**[51]**

Untitled, 1963  
Sewn stuffed fabric, wooden stool, paint  
46 x 19 x 19½ in. (116.8 x 48.3 x 49.5 cm)  
Des Moines Art Center Permanent  
Collections; gift of Hanford Yang



**[52]**

Untitled, 1963

Sewn stuffed fabric, metal baking pan, metal tongs, paint  
12 x 18 x 18 in. (30.5 x 45.7 x 45.7 cm)

Collection of Helen Lewis and Marvin Meyer



**[53]**

Untitled Accumulation, 1963  
Sewn stuffed fabric, ten pairs of  
women's shoes, paint  
Variable dimensions  
Anzai Art Office Inc.



[54]

*Aggregation: One Thousand Boats Show*, 1964

Sewn stuffed fabric, wooden rowboat, paint [As a full-scale installation *Aggregation: One Thousand Boats Show* includes 999 posters depicting the rowboat (see fig. 5).]

104 $\frac{3}{8}$  x 51 $\frac{1}{8}$  x 23 $\frac{3}{8}$  in. (265 x 130 x 60 cm)

Stedelijk Museum, Amsterdam



**[55]**

*Chair, 1965*

Sewn stuffed fabric, wooden chair, paint

35 1/8 x 31 1/2 x 33 1/2 in. (90 x 80 x 85 cm)

Toyota Municipal Museum of Art



[56]

*Baby Carriage*, c. 1964–66

Sewn stuffed fabric, baby carriage, stuffed toy kangaroos, paint  
38 x 23¼ x 40 in. (96.5 x 59 x 101.7 cm)

The Allen Memorial Art Museum, Oberlin College;  
gift of Mr. and Mrs. Harry L. Tepper



[57]

*Flower Shirt*, 1964

Shirt, artificial flowers, clotheshanger, paint  
31 $\frac{1}{8}$  x 41 $\frac{3}{8}$  in. (81 x 105 cm)

Gallery HAM



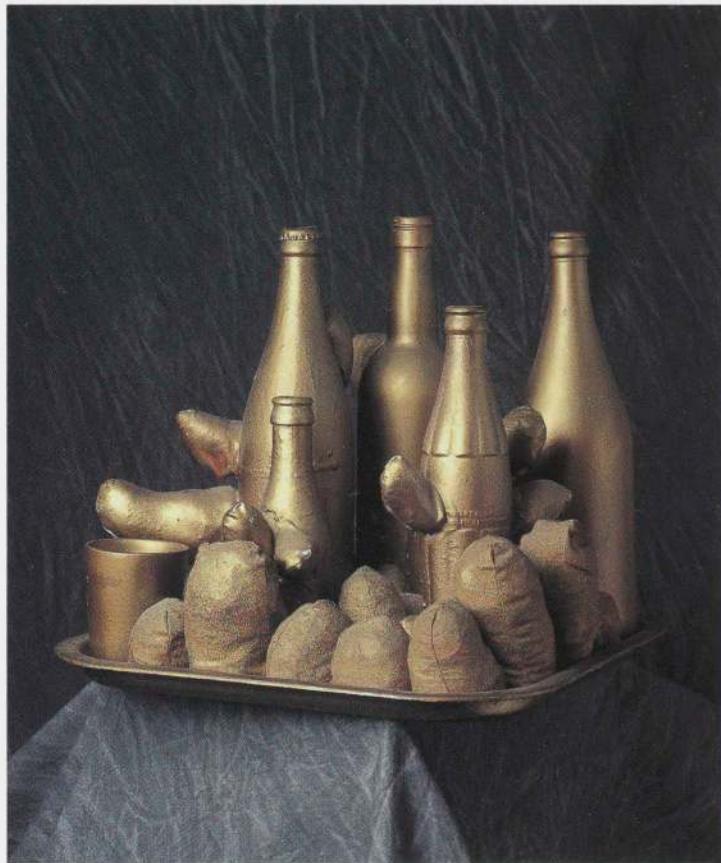
[58]

*Silver Dress, c. 1964*

Dress, artificial flowers, clotheshanger, paint  
45 1/4 x 22 1/2 x 7 7/8 in. (115 x 57 x 20 cm)

Museum Moderner Kunst,  
Stiftung Ludwig, Vienna





[59]

*Phallic Bottle Tray*, 1965

Sewn stuffed fabric, bottles, cup, metal tray, paint  
13 3/8 x 13 3/8 x 12 1/4 in. (34 x 34 x 31 cm)  
Collection of Caroline de Westenholz



**[60]**  
*Macaroni Handbag*, 1965  
Handbag, macaroni, paint  
13 $\frac{3}{8}$  x 13 x 5 $\frac{7}{8}$  in. (34 x 33 x 15 cm)  
Collection of Henk Peeters



[61]

*Macaroni Shirt*, 1965

Shirt, macaroni, clotheshanger, paint  
33 1/8 x 59 1/4 in. (84 x 152 cm)

Collection of Caroline de Westenholz



[62]

*Macaroni Coat*, 1963

Coat, macaroni, clotheshanger, paint  
46½ x 31½ x 4¾ in. (118 x 80 x 12 cm)

Itabashi Art Museum



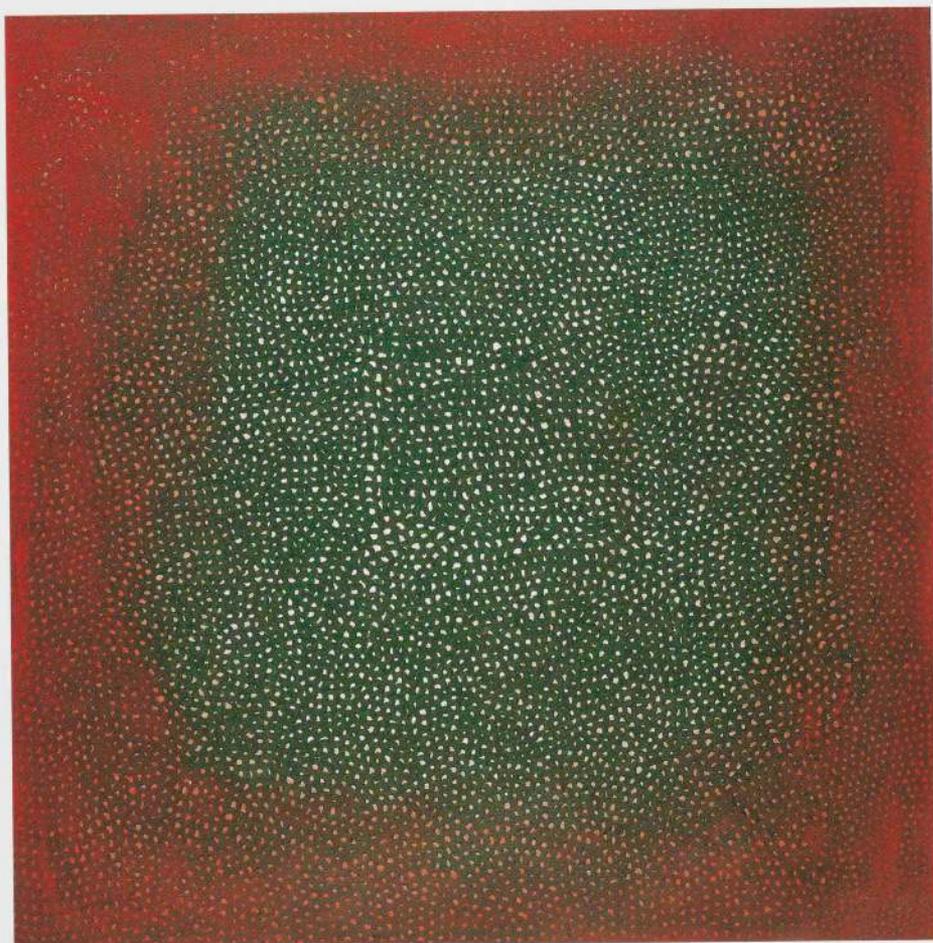
**[63]**

*Macaroni Pants*, c. 1963  
Shorts, macaroni, clotheshanger, paint  
19 3/8 x 18 3/4 in. (50 x 48 cm)  
Collection of Albert-Udo Stappert



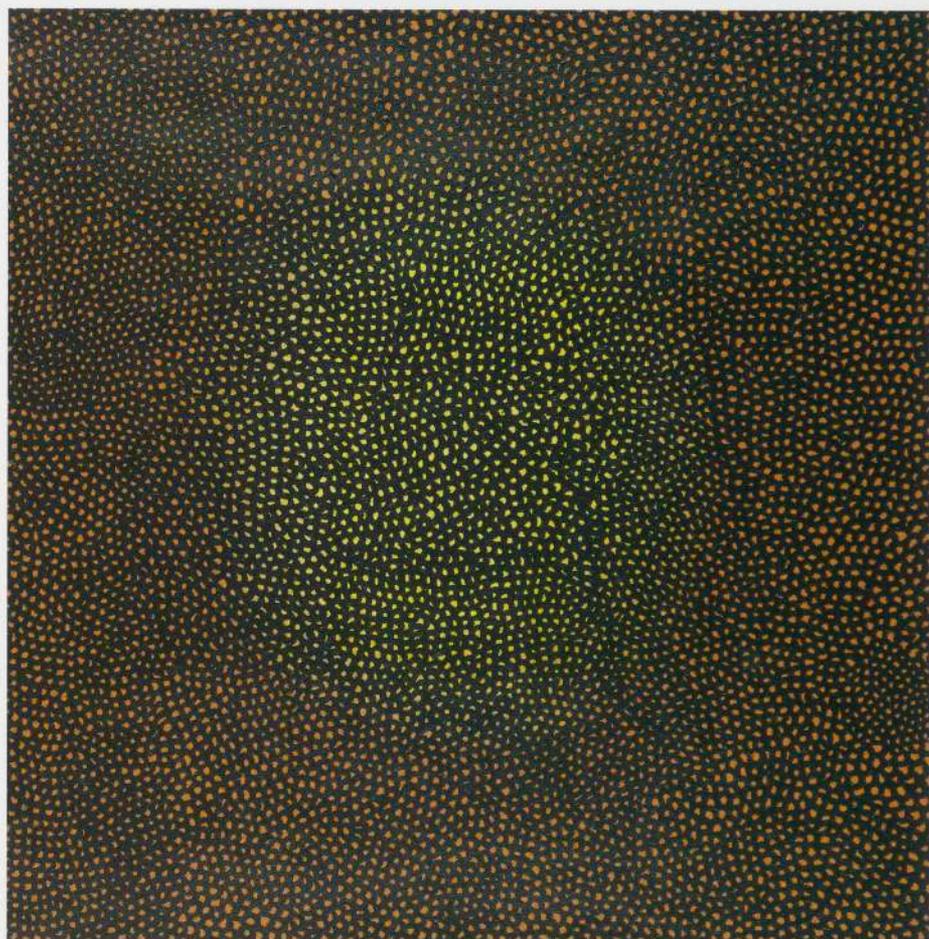
**[64]**

*Macaroni Suitcase*, 1965  
Suitcase, macaroni, paint  
14 1/8 x 21 1/4 x 6 1/4 in. (36 x 54 x 16 cm)  
Collection of Dr. and Mrs. Virgilio Giambi



[65]

*Infinity Net A.*, 1965  
Oil on canvas  
52 x 49 3/8 in. (132 x 126 cm)  
Collection of the artist



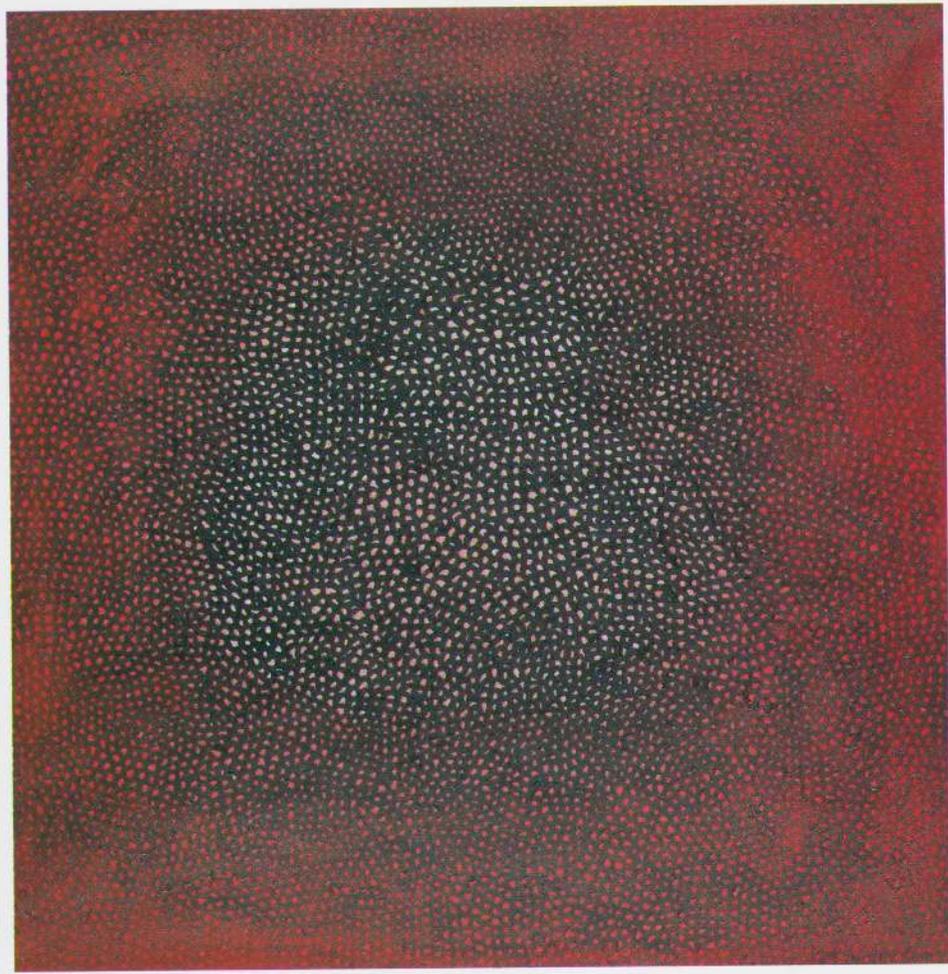
**[66]**

*Infinity Net B.*, 1965

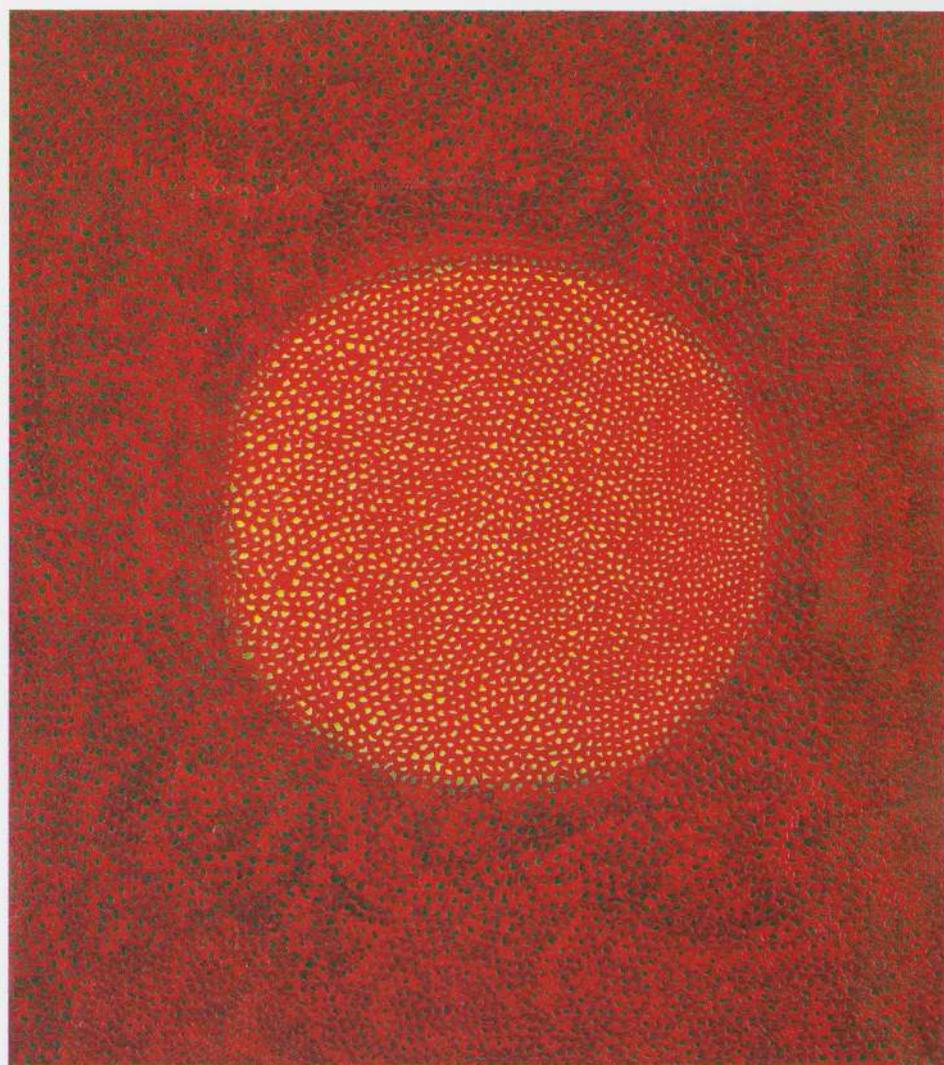
Oil on canvas

52 x 49 1/2 in. (132 x 126 cm)

Collection of the artist



**[67]**  
*Infinity Net C.*, 1965  
Oil on canvas  
51½ x 50 in. (131 x 127 cm)  
Collection of the artist



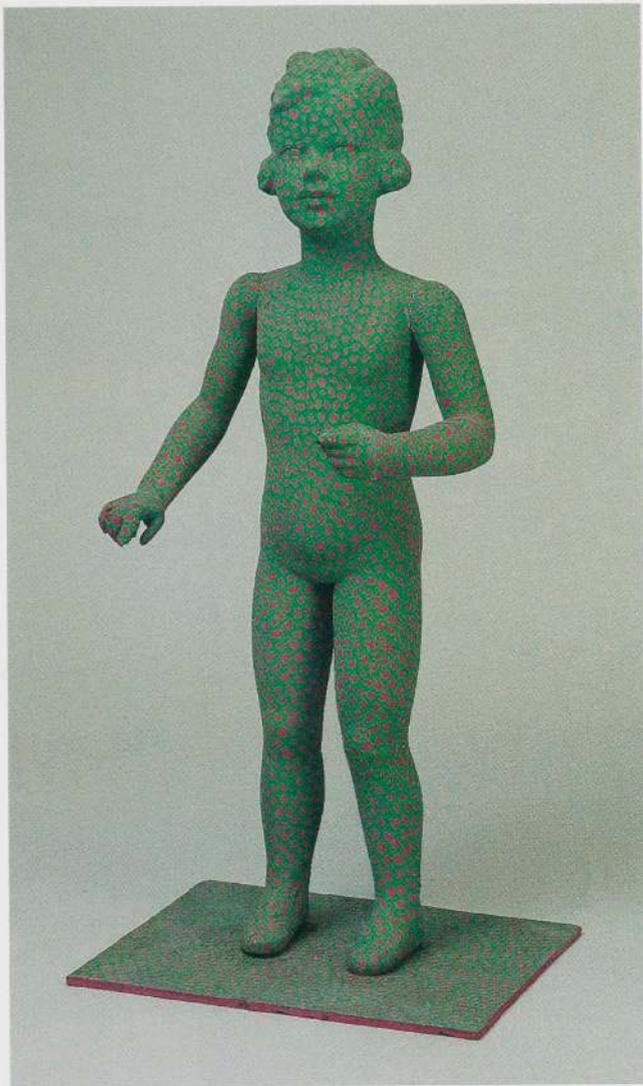
**[68]**

*Infinity Net*, 1965

Oil on canvas

60 x 52 in. (152 x 132 cm)

Collection of Daisuke Miyatsu,  
courtesy Ota Fine Arts



**[69]**  
Untitled, 1966  
Mannequin, paint  
41 $\frac{3}{8}$  x 20 $\frac{1}{8}$  x 15 in. (105 x 51 x 38 cm)  
Collection of Udo Kultermann



**[70]**  
Untitled, 1966  
Wooden stool, paint  
17 $\frac{1}{4}$  x 13 $\frac{3}{4}$  x 13 $\frac{3}{4}$  in. (45 x 35 x 35 cm)  
Collection of Udo Kultermann



**[71]**  
Untitled, c. 1966  
Mannequin, wig, shoes, paint  
H: 66 ½ in. (169 cm)  
Galleria d'Arte del Naviglio, Milan



[72]

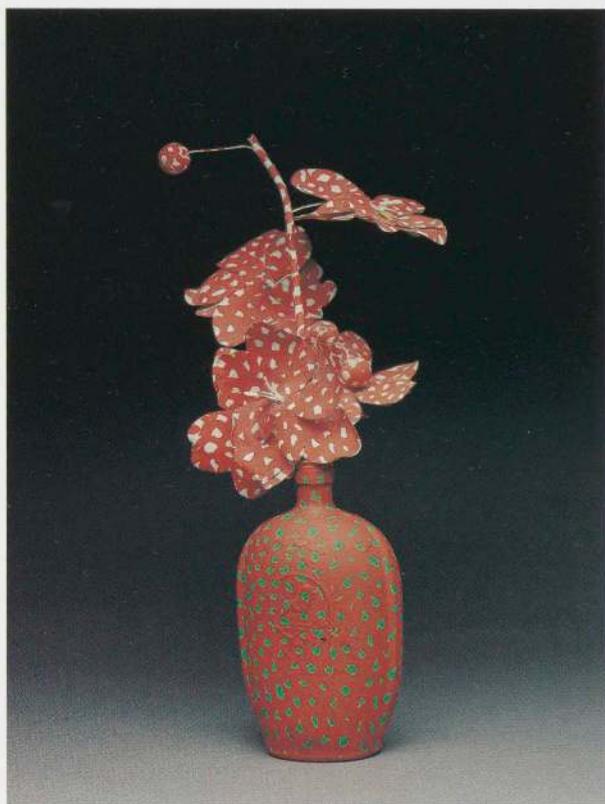
*Still Life*, 1966

Bottle, fabric, wire, book, paint

Bottle:  $10\frac{3}{8} \times 2\frac{1}{4}$  in. (26.5 x 7 cm); flower:  $22\frac{7}{8} \times 8\frac{5}{8} \times 4$  in. (58 x 22 x 10 cm);

book:  $7\frac{1}{2} \times 10\frac{7}{8} \times 1$  in. (19 x 27.7 x 2.4 cm)

Städtisches Museum Abteiberg Mönchengladbach



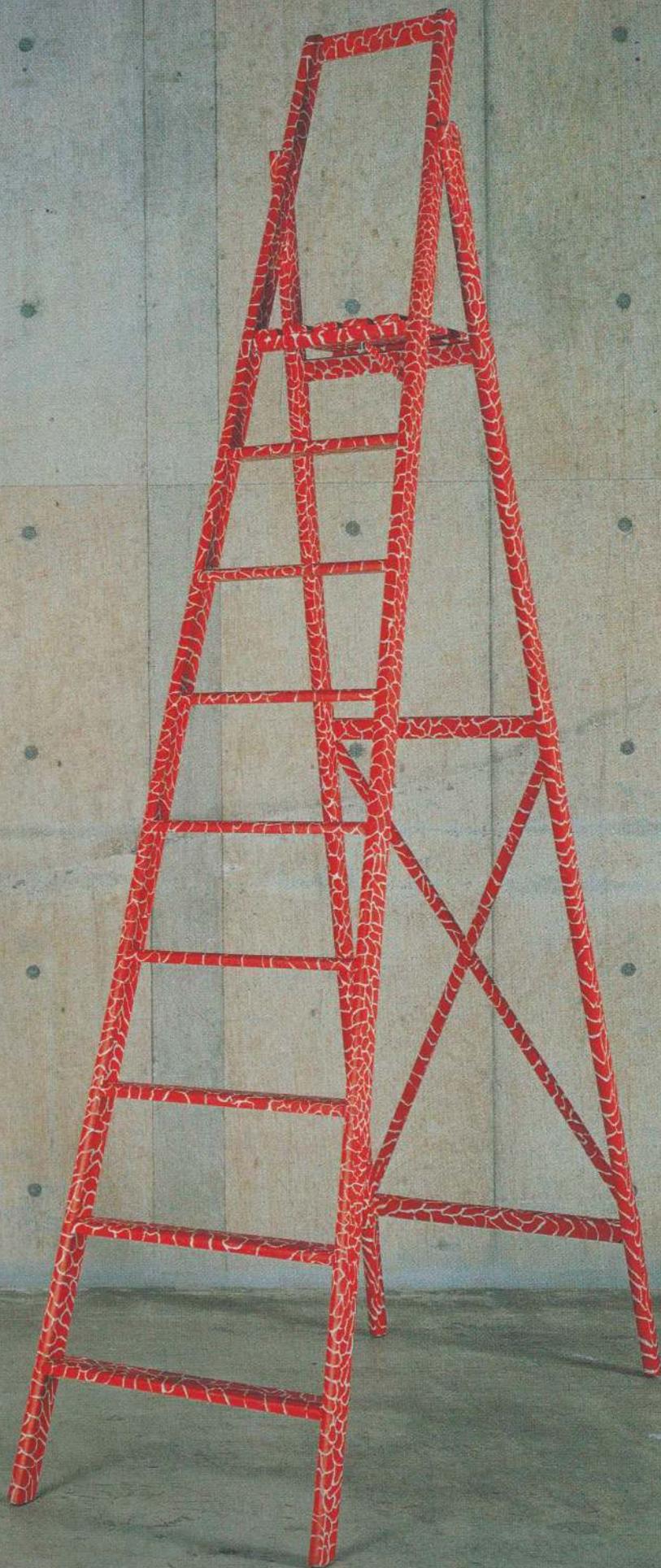
[73]

Untitled, 1966

Bottle, paper, wire, paint

16 3/4 x 9 x 7 7/8 in. (42.5 x 23 x 20 cm)

Collection of Albert-Udo Stappert



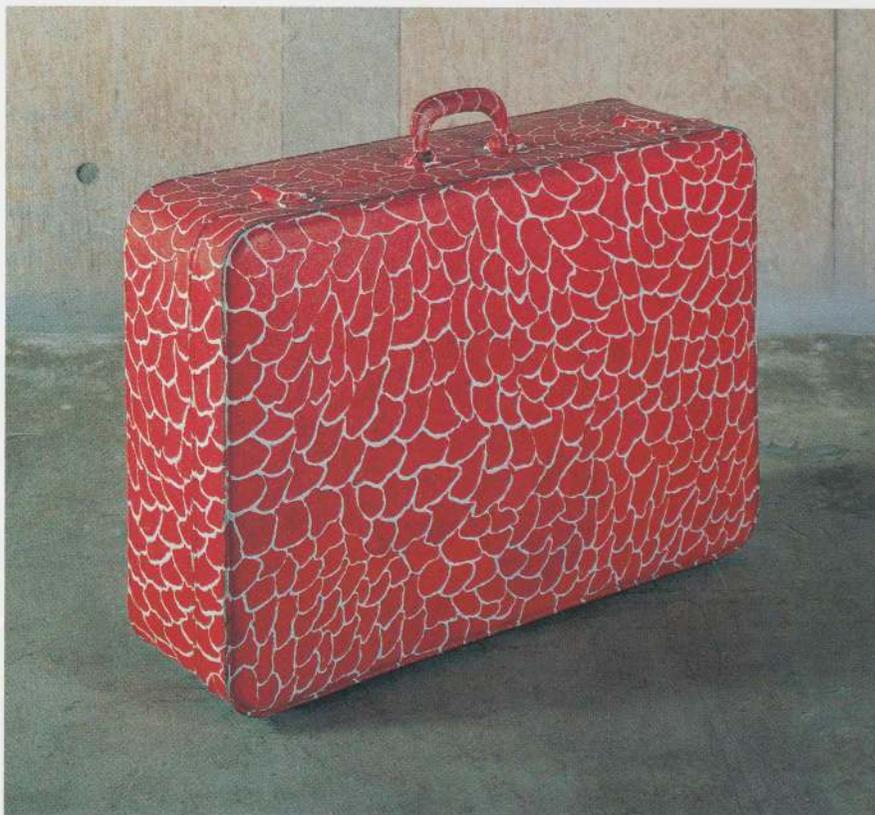
**[74]**

*Stepladder*, 1966

Wooden stepladder, paint

98 3/8 x 23 3/8 in. (250 x 60 cm); depth variable

Gallery HAM



**[75]**

*Suitcase*, 1966

Suitcase, paint

18 1/8 x 27 1/2 x 7 1/2 in. (46 x 70 x 19 cm)

Gallery HAM



**[76]**

*Valise*, 1965-66

Sewn stuffed fabric, fabric-covered valise

16 x 25 x 18 in. (40.6 x 63.5 x 45.7 cm)

Beatrice Perry Family Collection

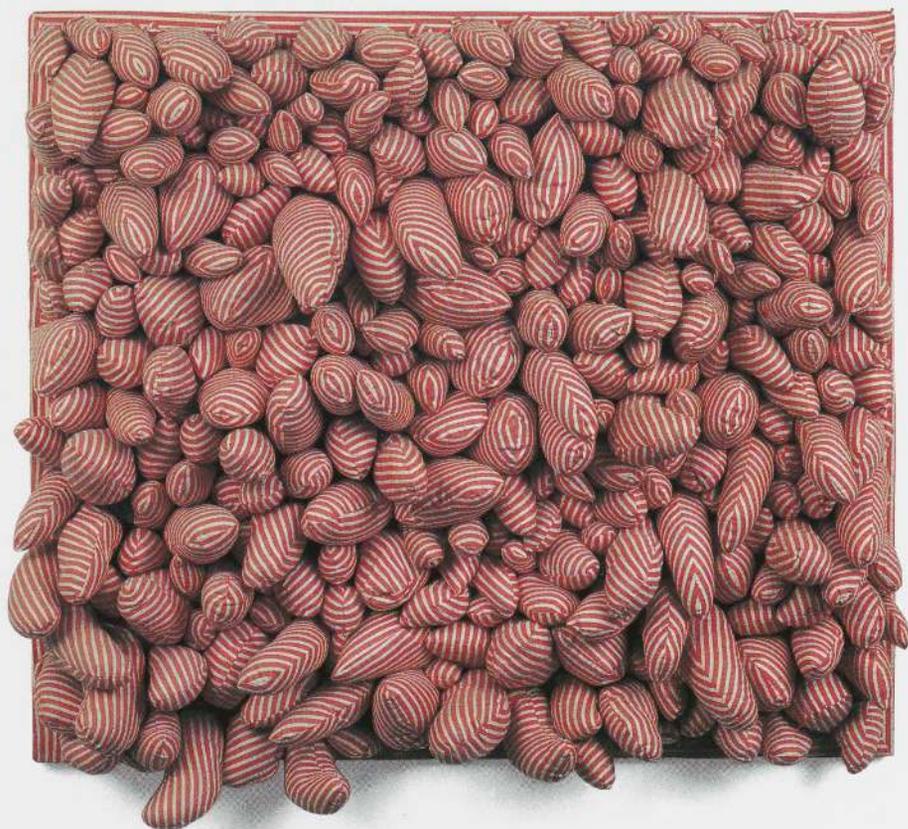


[77]

*Dustpan*, 1965

Sewn stuffed fabric, fabric-covered dustpan  
8 x 12 x 11 1/2 in. (20.3 x 30.5 x 29.2 cm)

Private collection;  
courtesy D'Amelio Terras Gallery



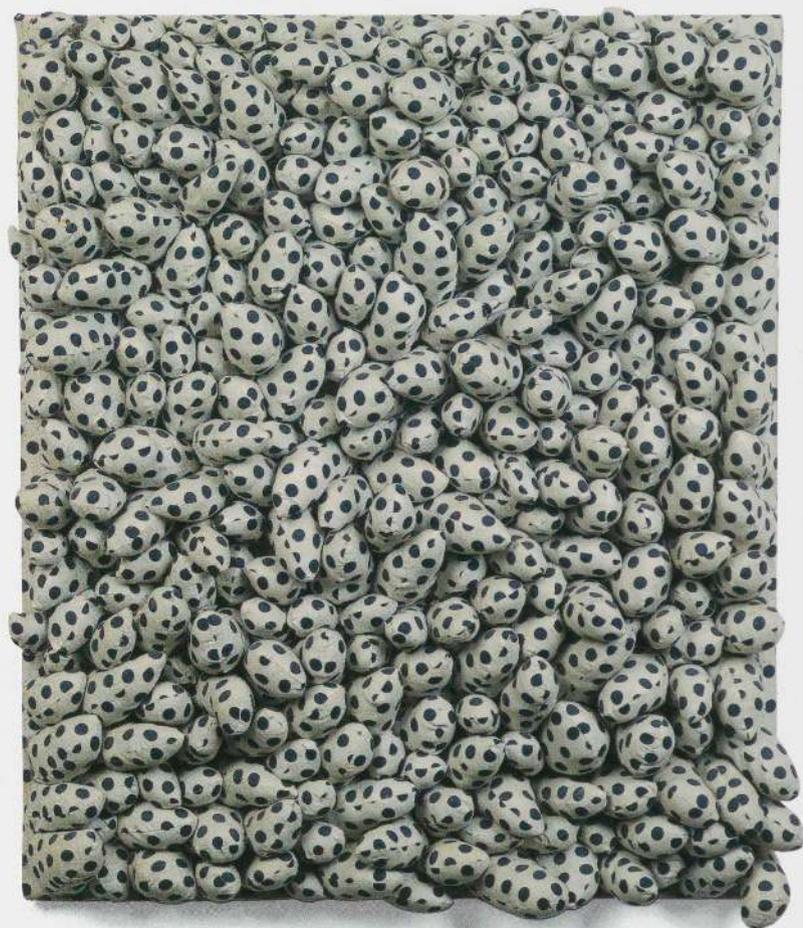
[78]

*Red Stripes*, 1965

Sewn stuffed fabric on wood

27 1/2 x 32 3/8 x 7 1/8 in. (70 x 83 x 20 cm)

Collection Becht, Naarden, Netherlands



[79]

*Blue Spots*, 1965

Sewn stuffed fabric on wood

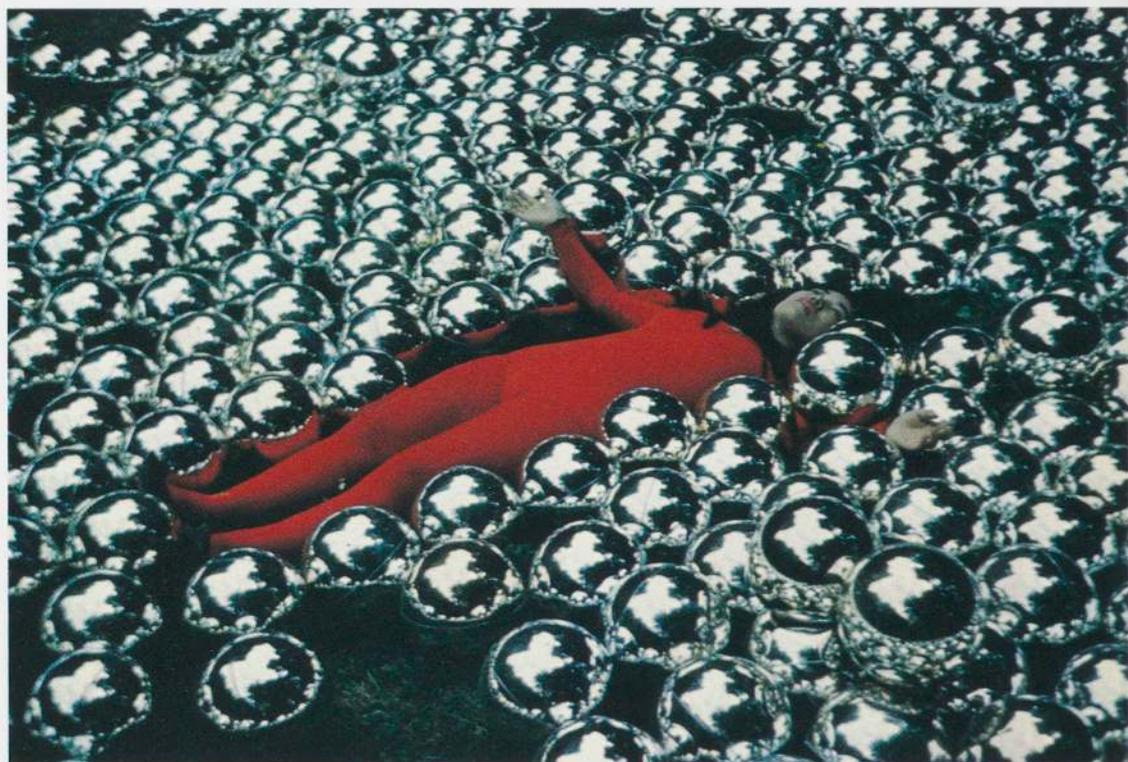
32 3/8 x 27 1/2 x 5 1/8 in. (83 x 70 x 13 cm)

Collection Becht, Naarden, Netherlands



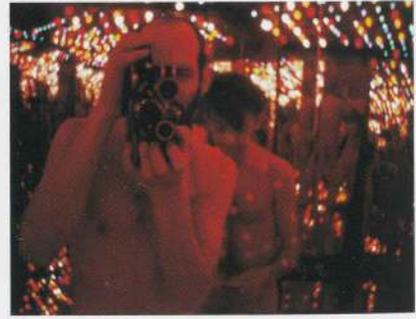
**[80]**

Installation view, *Infinity Mirror Room—  
Phalli's Field* (or *Floor Show*), 1965  
(no longer extant); reconstructed 1998  
Sewn stuffed fabric, plywood, mirrors  
98 3/4 x 196 7/8 x 196 7/8 in. (2.5 x 5 x 5 m)



**[81]**

Installation view, *Narcissus Garden*, 1966  
(no longer extant); reconstructed 1998  
1,500 plastic mirror balls  
Each ball 7 7/8 in. (20 cm) dia.



[82]

*Kusama's Self-Obliteration*, 1967

Eight stills from 16mm color film

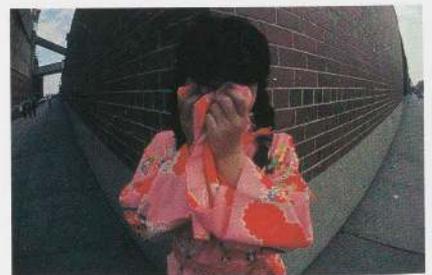
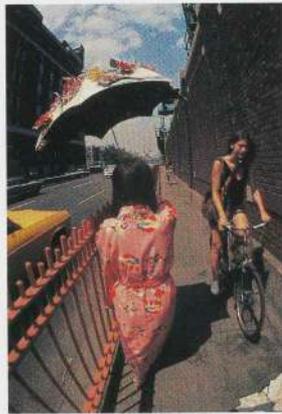
Artistic direction, Yayoi Kusama; cinematography and editing, Jud Yalkut  
23 min.

Collection of Jud Yalkut



**[83]**

*14th Street Happening*, 1966  
Performance documented with color slides  
by Eikō Hosoe  
Collection of the artist



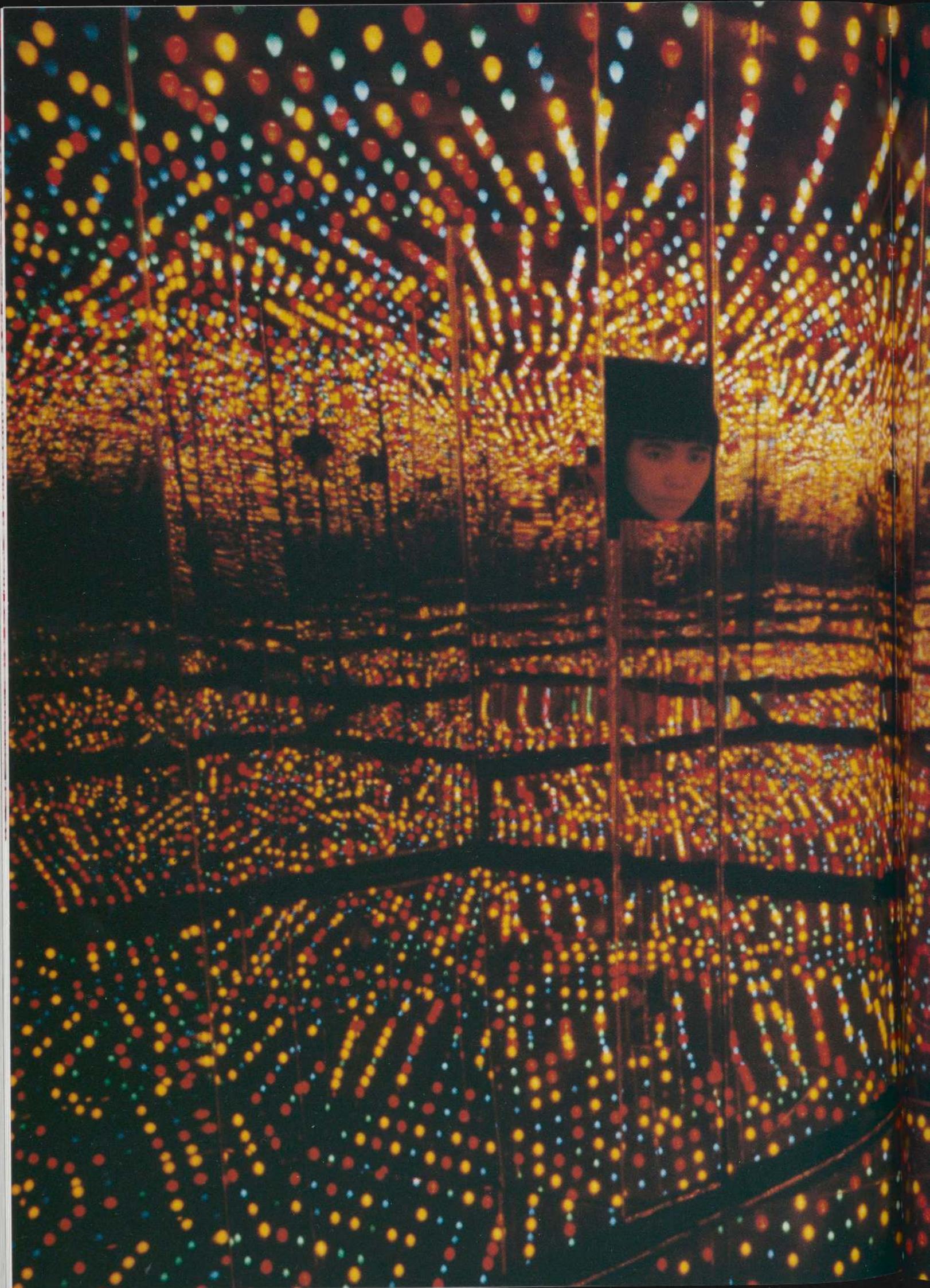
[84]

*Walking Piece*, c. 1966

Performance documented with color slides

Collection of the artist







# Selected Exhibition History

Compiled by Kristine C. Kuramitsu  
with the collaboration of Julie Joyce

This chronology details Yayoi Kusama's exhibition activity from 1957 to 1968, during the time she lived in the United States. It also lists subsequent exhibitions of work made during that period.

Titles of exhibitions, opening dates, and works included have been provided whenever available. In the case of group exhibitions, other participating artists are listed when known. Pieces, especially works on paper, have occasionally been reworked by Kusama; dates and titles have sometimes been changed or added later, making the exact identification or dating of certain works a challenge. Catalogue numbers are given at the first mention of items appearing in *Love Forever: Yayoi Kusama, 1958–1968*. Thereafter these are marked with an asterisk.

**1957** 8 December

Kusama's first solo exhibition in the United States opens at Zoe Dusanne Gallery, Seattle. She shows approximately sixty watercolors, including two large works entitled *Laughing Bones* and *Old Animal* ("Japanese Woman Painter to Hold Seattle Exhibit," *Mainichi*, 12 November 1957).

**1958** 14 November

Group exhibition, *Modern Japanese Paintings*, Brata Gallery, New York. One of several artist-run avant-garde galleries at this time on East Tenth Street in Manhattan, Brata Gallery represented Ronald Bladen, Ed Clark, Al Held, and George Sugarman, among others.

13 December

Group exhibition, *Japanese Prints from the Eighteenth Century to the Contemporary/Paintings and Woodblock Prints by Artists in America Working in the Oriental Spirit*, Mrs. Samuel Louis Slosberg's private collection, Slosberg residence, Brookline, Massachusetts. Two Kusamas, *The Sea* (n.d.), oil on canvas, and *Pacific Ocean at Twilight* (n.d.), watercolor on paper, are included. The works were acquired from New York art dealer/bookseller E. Weyhe Inc. (Center for International Contemporary Arts archive, Archer M. Huntington Art Gallery, University of Texas at Austin).

**1959** 7 April

Group exhibition, *Twentieth Biennial International Watercolor Exhibition*, the Brooklyn Museum. Kusama, included in the United States section, contributes *Work No. 11* (n.d.), which

sells to Brooklyn collector James Fenner (Center for International Contemporary Arts archive, Archer M. Huntington Art Gallery, University of Texas at Austin).

3 June

Group exhibition, Nova Gallery, Boston. Kusama exhibits three large net paintings, including *Large White Net* (1958). Among the other artists are Wilfred Croteau, William Hegelheimer, and Marilyn Quint-Rose.

9 October

Solo exhibition, Brata Gallery, New York. Kusama shows five large white net paintings. The exhibition receives overwhelmingly positive reviews in nationally circulated art magazines, from well-known critics such as Dore Ashton, Sidney Tillim, and Donald Judd. Tillim writes, "Hers is an 'Impressionism' true to the abstract aesthetic in which there is no center of interest. . . . Having labored for ten years over many 'tests' to arrive at this moment, Miss Kusama would seem to possess the required patience and, ultimately, the flexibility to extend one of the most promising new talents to appear on the New York scene in years" (Tillim, "In the Galleries: Yayoi Kusama," *Arts* 34, no. 1 [October 1959]: 56).

23 November

Solo exhibition, *Recent Paintings by Yayoi Kusama*, Nova Gallery, Boston. A review in the *Boston Herald* by Robert Taylor mentions ten white-on-black net paintings as well as a number of watercolors. One of the paintings is *No. A.B.* (1959; cat. 3). The painter and theorist Gyorgy Kepes visits this exhibition.

Previous pages: Installation view, *Kusama's Peep Show*; photographer Peter Moore takes picture through one viewing window while Kusama looks through another, Castellane Gallery, New York, 1966; © the Estate of Peter Moore

15 December  
Group exhibition, *Exhibition of Smaller Works*, Nova Gallery, Boston.

**1960** February  
Group exhibition, Brata Gallery, New York City. Exhibition travels to Gallery One, Baltimore.

18 March  
Group exhibition, *Monochrome Malerei*, Städtisches Museum, Leverkusen, West Germany. Introducing Kusama's work to Europe and bringing together for the first time a diverse group of international artists and artists' groups because of their common interest in monochrome painting and sculpture, *Monochrome Malerei* exhibits members of the German Zero group (Heinz Mack, Otto Piene, Günther Uecker), the Italian Azimuth (Enrico Castellani, Piero Manzoni), and the French Nouveaux Réalistes (Yves Klein). After this exhibition these groups would show together frequently throughout the sixties under the umbrella terms New Tendency and New Style. Kusama shows *Composition* (1959), a large white canvas. She and Mark Rothko are the only New York-based artists exhibited.

26 March  
Group exhibition, *Contemporary Paintings in a Modern House (The First Tour of Private Art Collections and Artists' Studios)*, Washington, D.C., a project sponsored by the Women's Committee of the Corcoran Gallery of Art. Kusama shows *No. F.C.H.* (1960; cat. 8) and *Untitled* (red-on-white net; n.d.) at the Georgetown residence of Mr. and Mrs. H. Gates Lloyd (Lynn Zelevansky, notes from interview with Beatrice Perry, 23 July 1996). Works by Jean Arp, Georges Braque, Arshile Gorky, Morris Graves, Paul Klee, and Joan Miró are also shown.

19 April  
Solo exhibition, Gres Gallery, Washington, D.C. The exhibition includes several Infinity Net canvases and smaller net studies. Beatrice Perry, the gallery's founder and director, recalls meeting Kusama for the first time when the artist walked into the gallery and introduced herself and her work (Perry, 23 July interview).

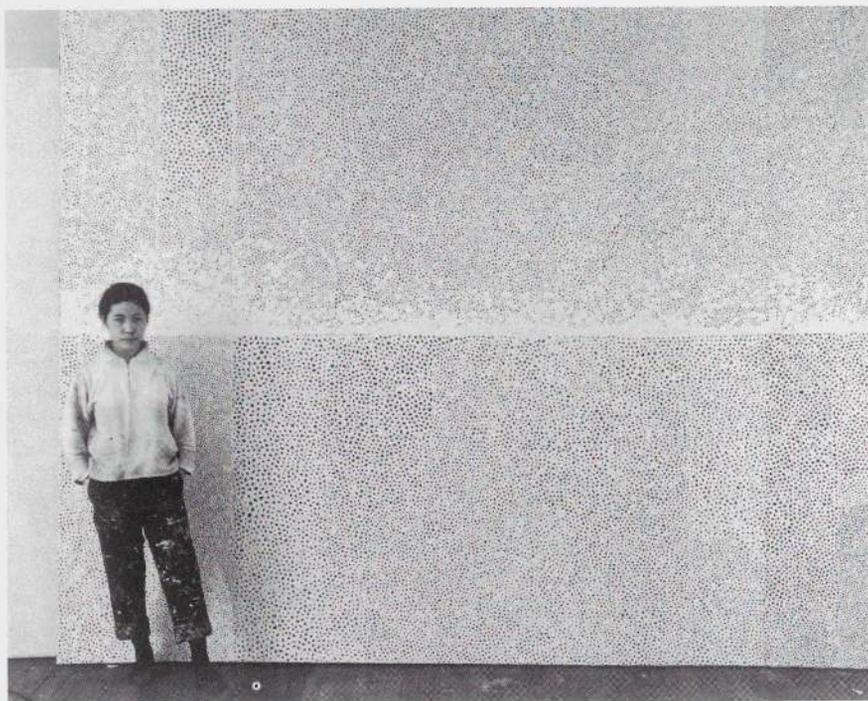
27 September  
Group exhibition, *Drawings, Paintings, and Sculpture*, Stephen Radich Gallery, New York. Other artists include Peter Agostini, Seymour Boardman, Mary Frank, Ilse Getz, Dimitri Hadzi, Matsumi Kanemitsu, Henry Pearson, and Sugarman.

23 October  
Group exhibition, *Painting, Sculpture, and Drawings from the Collection of Mr. and Mrs. Patrick B. McGinnis*, De Cordova Museum, Lincoln, Massachusetts. On display is *Pacific Ocean* (1960), a painting commissioned by Mrs. McGinnis for her Boston apartment. The couple later commissions other works from Kusama, including a red bed-stand, for their Staten Island home (Perry, 23 July interview).

15 November  
Group exhibition, *Japanese Abstraction*, Gres Gallery, Washington, D.C. Other artists include Yukiko Katsura, Minoru Kawabata, and Kenzo Okada, all based in New York, as well as Toshinobu Onosato and Takeo Yamaguchi, based in Japan. All works in the exhibition are oil on canvas.

4 December  
Group exhibition, *Japan-America Women Artists Exchange Exhibition in Commemoration of the Centennial of the Japan-U.S. Amity Treaty*, Riverside Museum, New York (the show is also scheduled to travel to Japan). Kusama shows one work. The show's organizer, the National Association of Women Artists, was founded in 1898 to provide professional American women artists with a venue for showing their work. The organization still exists, headquartered in New York City.

18 December  
Group exhibition, *Gala Holiday Group Show*, Hilda Carmel Gallery, New York. Kusama is one of forty-eight participating artists. Others include Elaine de Kooning and Joan Semmel.



Kusama in front of mural-size white painting (no longer extant) once owned by Finch College, c. 1961

**1961** 2 May  
Solo exhibition, *Recent Paintings: Yayoi Kusama*, Stephen Radich Gallery, New York. Includes *White A.B. 3* (n.d.) as well as *Infinity Nets* (1959) and probably *Yellow Net* (1960; cat. 6), later owned by Frank Stella ("Yayoi Kusama," *Pictures on Exhibit*, May 1961, 31). Radich recalls, "The show was comprised of five or six paintings, all large in scale. One of them covered an entire gallery wall... The white and off-white canvases created an almost dream-like atmosphere, and the exhibition attracted a fair amount of attention" (Stephen Radich, letter to Julie Joyce, 3 February 1996).

15 July  
Group exhibition, *Internationale Malerei 1960–1961*, Galerie 59, Aschaffenburg, Wolframs-Eschenbach. Kusama shows *Infinity Net* paintings *No. White O.X.* (1960), *No. 2 J.B.* (1960), and *No. H. Red* (1961).

26 September  
Group exhibition, Gres Gallery, Washington, D.C. A watercolor, *No. U.Q.Z.* (1959), and two *Infinity Nets*, *No. E. 5* (1960) and *Black and Black* (1961) are shown.

7 October  
Group exhibition, *Avantgarde 61*, Städtisches Museum, Trier, West Germany. Kusama shows an *Infinity Net* painting. The exhibition also includes work by the Zero and Nul groups as well as Castellani, Gianni Colombo, Lucio Fontana, Klein, Francesco Lo Savio, and Manzoni.

26 October  
Group exhibition, *The 1961 Pittsburgh International Exhibition of Contemporary Painting and Sculpture*, Carnegie Institute, Pittsburgh. Kusama shows an *Infinity Net* painting, *The West* (1960).

21 November  
Two-person exhibition, *Yayoi Kusama: Watercolors* (with Franco Assetto), Gres Gallery, Washington D.C.

22 November  
Group exhibition, *Gres Artists Selected for the Pittsburgh International Exhibition of Contemporary Painting and Sculpture*, Gres Gallery, Chicago. The inaugural show of the Chicago branch of Gres. Kusama watercolors, including *The Sea* (1959) and *U.Q. 2* (1959), are exhibited. Also included are works by Karel Appel, Franco Assetto, José Bermudez, Grace Hartigan, Alexander Kobzdej, Luis Martinez-Pedro, Antonio Tapiés, and Rajmund Ziemski.

13 December  
Group exhibition, *Whitney Annual Exhibition: Contemporary American Painting*, Whitney Museum of American Art, New York. Kusama shows the *Infinity Net* painting *No. 3 P.B.* (n.d.).

**1962** January  
Group exhibition, *Accrochage 1962*, Galerie A, Amsterdam. Includes artists from all New Tendency groups. Kusama shows an *Infinity Net* painting.

9 March  
Group exhibition, *Tentoonstelling Nul*, Stedelijk Museum, Amsterdam. Organized by Henk Peeters, the show includes artists from the Nul, Zero, Azimuth, and Nouveau Réaliste groups and affiliates from other parts of Europe, among them Arman, Fontana, Hans Haacke, and Manzoni. Kusama, the only participant from the United States, shows the paintings *J.Q.* (1960),

## Selected Exhibition History

*No. T.W. 3* (1961; cat. 10), *No. 1 A.* (1960), *No. H. Red* (1961), *No. White X.X.A.* (1961), and an egg-carton relief, *No. 3 B.* (1961). The exhibition runs for only sixteen days but is seen by 13,000 visitors. The press response, according to Peeters, varies from "amused to angry" (letter to Kusama from Henk Peeters, 7 April 1962).

14 March

Group exhibition, *Nieuwe Tendenzen*, State University Gallery, Leiden, Netherlands. Organized in conjunction with the *Tentoonstelling Nul* exhibition at the Stedelijk Museum. Kusama exhibits a piece listed as *Fotomontage* (n.d.). Other artists shown include Mack, Manzoni, Peeters, and Uecker.

18 March

Solo exhibition, Robert Hanamura's Gallery, Detroit. Kusama shows smaller works in this architect's exhibition space, including studies for oil paintings, early watercolors made in Japan, collages, Infinity Net paintings, blank sticker pieces (red-rimmed ovals and green-rimmed rectangles), airmail sticker collages, and photocollages of her Infinity Net paintings (Joy Hakan-son, "Gifted Young Painter from Japan," unidentified Detroit newspaper, 1962).

16 June

Group exhibition, Guy Dorekens Gallery, Antwerp. Includes works by Fontana, Klein, René Magritte, and Peeters. Kusama shows the same six works sent to the *Tentoonstelling Nul* exhibition in March.

September

Group exhibition, Green Gallery, New York. Kusama shows her first sculptures, *Accumulation No. 1* (1962; cat. 42), an armchair covered with stuffed phallic protuberances and painted white, and *Accumulation No. 2* (1962; cat. 43), an eight-foot couch similarly covered. Other artists included are Robert Morris, Claes Oldenburg, James Rosenquist, George Segal, Richard Smith, and Andy Warhol. Founded by Richard Bellamy in 1961, the Green Gallery was the cradle of pop-art activity in New York.

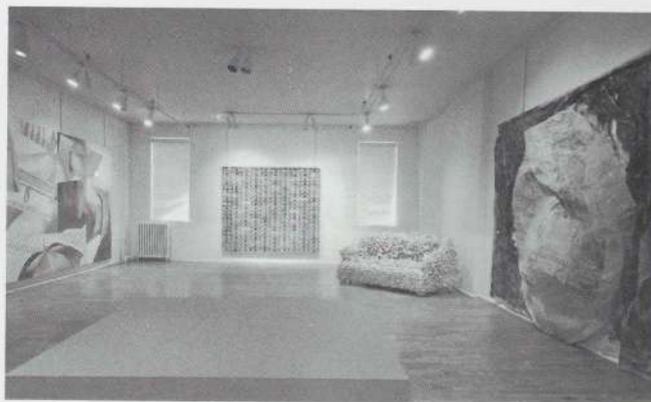
3 November

Group exhibition, *Anno 62*, Galerie 't Venster, Rotterdam. Included on the suggestion of Henk Peeters, Kusama shows three smaller collages: *Accumulation No. 13* (1962), *Accumulation No. 15 A.* (1962), and *Accumulation No. 18 A.* (1962). Other participants include Dadamaino, Fontana, Peeters, Dieter Rot, and Jan Schoonhoven.

November

Group exhibition, Penthouse Gallery, The Museum of Modern Art, New York. The exhibition is sponsored by the museum's art-lending service and includes Kusama's ink-on-paper *Q.Z.* (1957).

Installation views by Rudolph Burckhardt of group exhibition at Green Gallery, New York, 1962; visible are Kusama's *Accumulation No. 1* and *Accumulation No. 2*



Selected Exhibition History



Kusama in front of Henri Rousseau's *The Dream* (1910) at The Museum of Modern Art, New York, c. 1960

**1963** 8 January  
Group exhibition, *New Work Part I*, Green Gallery, New York. Other participating artists are Millet Andrejevic, Dan Flavin, Donald Judd, Morris, Larry Poons, Lucas Samaras, and Segal. Kusama again shows *Accumulation No. 2*<sup>o</sup> (1962) along with other work.

5 May  
Group exhibition, *Panorama van de nieuwe tendenzen*, Gallery Amstel, Amsterdam. Along with New Tendency artists Klein, Manzoni, Peeters, Rot, and Uecker this show includes work by Julio Le Parc, founder of the Paris-based Groupe de Recherche d'Art Visuel (GRAV).

8 October  
Group exhibition, *No Show*, Gertrude Stein Gallery, New York. Kusama shows "several...packed assemblages of white stuffed-cloth verticals" (Jill Johnston, "In the Galleries," *Artnews* 62 [November 1963]: 16). Other artists include Rocco Armento, Stanley Fisher, Esther Gilman, Sam Goodman, Gloria Graves, Allan Kaprow, Jean-Jacques Lebel, Boris Lurie, Gertrude Stein, Michelle Stuart, and Richard Tyler. The *No Show* was a manifesto exhibition of "No Art," the brainchild of the collage artist and theorist Boris Lurie. Nihilistic and antiestablishment, *No Art* had its base of operations at the Gertrude Stein Gallery.

10 November  
Two-person exhibition, *Kusama/Onosato*, Zuni Gallery, Buffalo. Kusama shows seven watercolors and gouaches, one pastel, *No. A.* (1958), and the oils *No. 91* (1960) and *Black Net* (1961).

17 December  
Solo exhibition, *Aggregation: One Thousand Boats Show* (cat. 54), Gertrude Stein Gallery, New York. Kusama's first room-sized installation consists of a rowboat filled with white protrusions in a room whose walls are covered with black-and-white reproductions of the boat sculpture. The anteroom is darkened to maximize the dramatic effect. Critic Brian O'Doherty described the installation: "[A]round the spot-lit boat, the aggre-

gation of single images again papering the walls comes back at one like a series of telescoped echoes." He feels it necessary to caution viewers: "This genuine, obscurely poetic event should not be dismissed as a surrealist caper. Kusama has produced an object and an environment that are weirdly moving" (Brian O'Doherty, untitled review, *New York Times*, 29 December 1963).

**1964** 1 March  
Group exhibition, *The New Art*, Davison Art Center, Wesleyan University, Wesleyan, Connecticut. This exhibition puts Kusama in the company of pop artists Richard Artschwager, Jim Dine, Robert Indiana, Roy Lichtenstein, Robert Moskowitz, Rosenquist, Oldenburg, Wayne Thiebaud, Warhol, Tom Wesselman, and others. *Accumulation* (1963); *Ten-Guest Table* (1963), a table covered with utensils covered with stuffed phalluses made from brightly colored fabric; and a collage, *Accretion* (1964), are included.

21 April  
Solo exhibition, *Driving Image Show*, Castellane Gallery, New York. Infinity Net paintings, the protuberance-covered rowboat from *Aggregation: One Thousand Boats Show*<sup>o</sup> (1963), and phallic furniture, including a chair, sofa, table, and dresser, are arranged in an installation that fills the gallery. Additionally, two dresses and several mannequins covered with dried macaroni are shown; pasta is also strewn about the floor. Cut paper leaves cover a painted table by the door (Donald Judd, "Yayoi Kusama," *Arts* 38 [September 1964]: 68-69). Kusama alters *Accumulation No. 2* (1962) by placing one glove on each arm of the sofa and puts phallus-stuffed shoes in the rowboat. At the opening of the exhibition she lets loose two dogs covered with macaroni. She writes proudly of the show's success, "It not only attracted a great many audience but interested people enormously and acquired huge publicity. It is still art circle's episode even now after about 1/2 a year..." (letter from Kusama to Henk Peeters, 19 October 1964). Nothing, however, is sold. The exhibition travels to Gallery Ten, Woodstock, New York, in August 1964.



Installation view, *Driving Image Show*,  
Castellane Gallery, New York, 1964

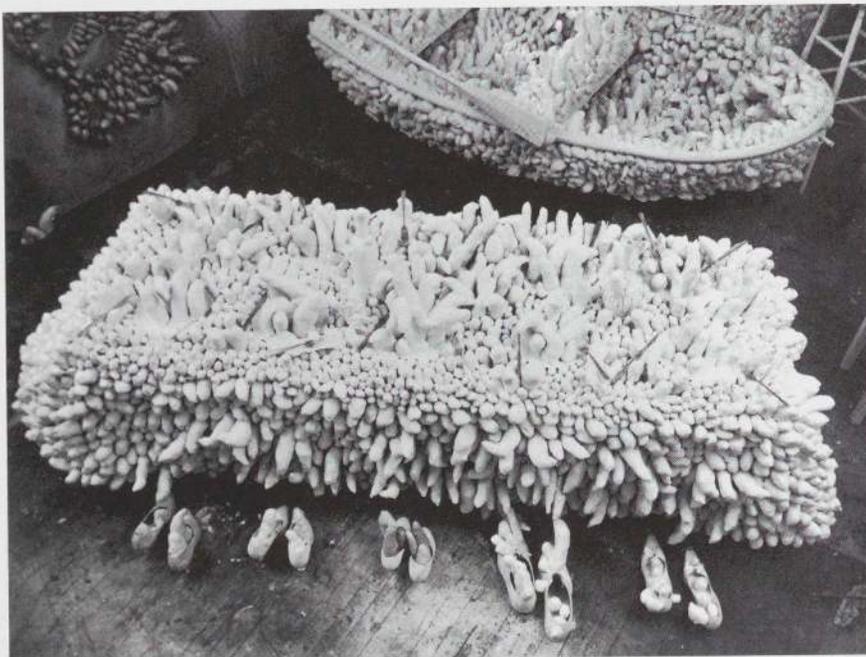
Selected Exhibition History



Poster announcing *Driving Image Show*, 1964

30 April  
Group exhibition, *Around Travel*, PVI Gallery, New York. Includes work by Arman, Chryssa, Marcel Duchamp, Kaprow, and others. Kusama's name does not appear on the invitation, but *Traveling Life* (1964; cat. 46), a phallus-covered stepladder festooned with high-heeled shoes, is in the exhibition.

*Ten-Guest Table* (no longer extant), 1963



2 June

Group exhibition, *Best of 1964*, Southampton Art Gallery, New York. Kusama exhibits with major pop artists including Indiana, Lichtenstein, Oldenburg, Warhol, and Wesselman.

7 August

Group exhibition, *Mikro Zero/Nul/ Mikro nieuw realisme*, Galerie Delta, Rotterdam. Kusama is represented by a work (probably a collage) identified as *Accumulation* (1962) along with macaroni-covered shoes. Other artists participating include Arman, Christo, Fontana, Haacke, Klein, Manzoni, George Rickey, Daniel Spoerri, and Jean Tinguely. The two-part exhibition divides Nul artists from the so-called Nouveaux Réalistes. Kusama is listed as a Nul/Zero artist. The exhibition travels to the Rhedens Lyceum, Velp, Holland, and on 31 August opens at Galerie Amstel 47, Amsterdam.

October

Group exhibition, International Gallery Prague. This exhibition is curated by Albert Vogel, co-owner of Internationale Galerij Orez in the Hague, which later represents Kusama's work in Europe.

30 October

Group exhibition, *Group Zero*, the Institute of Contemporary Art, University of Pennsylvania, Philadelphia. This survey, organized by Zero member Piene, is one of the first exhibitions in the United States to focus on the contemporary European avant-garde. Kusama shows three oils, *The West* (1960), *No. Green No. 1* (1961; cat. 11), and *No. T.W. 3<sup>a</sup>* (1961), as well as *No. B. 3* (1962), a large relief made from egg cartons. The show travels to the Washington Gallery of Modern Art, Washington, D.C., opening 9 January 1965.

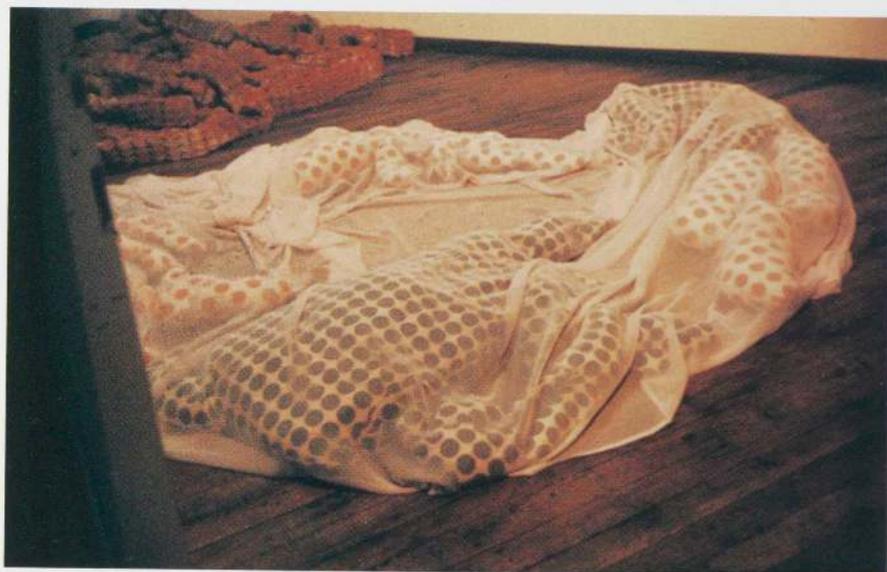
N.d.

Group exhibition, Galerie J., Paris.

1965 16 January

Group exhibition, *Aktuell 65*, Galerie Aktuell, Bern. Includes 120 artists affiliated with New Tendency groups such as Zero, Nul, Arte Programmatica, Anti-Peinture, GRAV, and Recherche Continuelle.

*Sex Washed Up at the Beach*, (no longer extant), 1965–66



17 February

The documentary *L'Ecole de New York*, produced by Radio Télévision de la Communauté Française de Belgique, airs on Belgian national television. The program focuses on New York artists and includes extensive interviews and footage of studio and gallery visits. In addition to Kusama the artists profiled are Lee Bontecou, Dine, Lichtenstein, Marisol, Segal, and Warhol.

8 April

Group exhibition, *De nieuwe stijl: Werk van de internationale avantgarde*, Galerie de Bezige Bij, Amsterdam. The show is organized in conjunction with the *Nul 1965* exhibition at the Stedelijk Museum and includes artists from the same groups. Both exhibitions coincide with the publication of the first issue of *De Nieuwe Stijl: Werk van de Internationale Avant-Garde*, edited by Armando, Peeters, Hans Sleutelaar, Cornelis Bastiaan Vaandrager, and Hans Verhagen. The cover of the magazine features Kusama standing amid her work. Prominently featured in the photograph are a protrusion-covered armchair, probably *Accumulation No. 1\** (1962), and a large white egg-carton relief, probably *No. B. 3* (1962), owned by Beatrice Perry (Armando et al., *De Nieuwe Stijl*, exh. cat. Amsterdam: De Bezige Bij, 1965).

9 April

Group exhibition, *nul negentienhonderd vijf en zestig* (Nul nineteen sixty-five), Stedelijk Museum, Amsterdam. This show unites, in addition to members of the Nul and Zero groups, participants from the Italian Gruppo T and the Japanese Gutai ("concrete") group. Kusama's *Aggregation: One*

*Thousand Boats Show\** (1963), listed as *Aggregation—Rowboat* in the catalogue, is exhibited in its own gallery, with black-and-white images of the boat covering the floor and walls. Kusama donates the piece to the museum after the exhibition.

21 April

Group exhibition, *New Eyes*, Chrysler Museum of Art, Provincetown. Kusama's *Ten-Guest Table* (1963) and *Macaroni Overcoat* (1964) are exhibited.

May

Solo exhibition, Internationale Galerij Orez, the Hague. Works exhibited include two phallic protrusion pieces, *Blue Spots* (cat. 79) and *Red Stripes* (cat. 78); a phallic Accumulation sculpture, *Chair* (cat. 55); *Macaroni Handbag* (cat. 60); *Macaroni Shirt* (cat. 61); *Macaroni Trousers*; *Phallic Bottle Tray* (cat. 59); an altered mannequin, *Phallic Girl*; two orange-dotted mannequin sculptures; and a green-dotted mannequin (all 1965) (Caroline de Westenholz, letter to Julie Joyce, 12 September 1996). Founded by Leo Verboon and Albert Vogel, the gallery's name is the word "zero" spelled backwards; it concentrates on Zero, Nul, and other New Tendency artists. As thanks for his help with the exhibition and for promoting her art in Europe, Kusama gives Peeters a high-heeled shoe sculpture (letter to Henk Peeters from Yayoi Kusama, 1965).



Video still from *L'Ecole de New York*, a documentary for Belgian television, 1965

### Selected Exhibition History

4 May

Group exhibition, *Zero Avanguardia*, curated by artist-designer Nanda Vigo, Galleria del Cavallino, Venice. Among the twenty-eight participants are Fontana, Haacke, Klein, and Peeters. This gallery is owned and managed by the Milanese gallerist Renato Car-dazzo, who also owns the Galleria d'Arte del Naviglio in Milan, a presti-gious outlet for work by many of the most important artists of the European avant-garde.

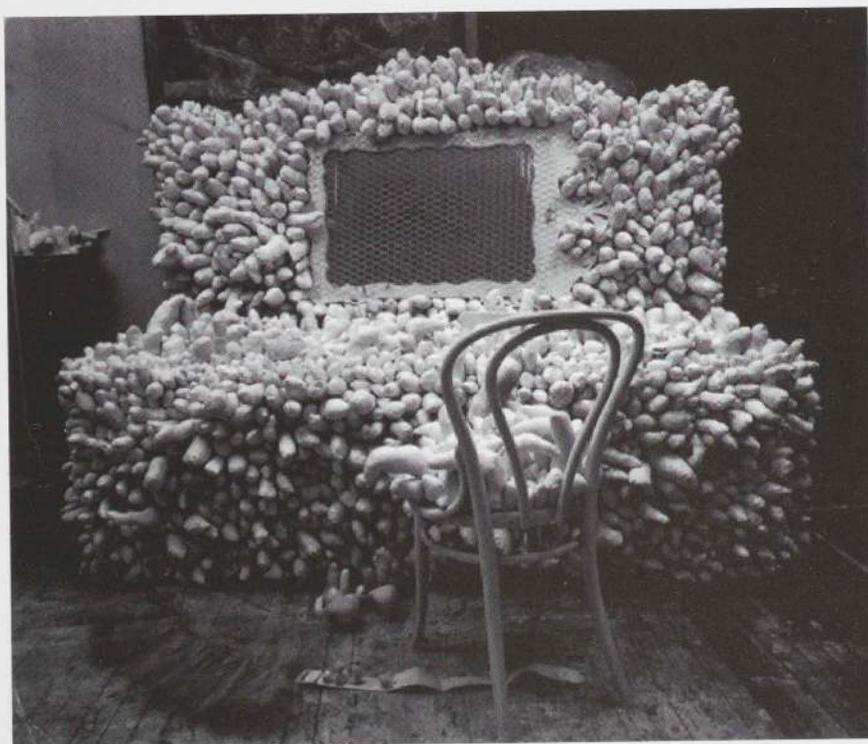
26 May

Group exhibition, *Recent Acquisitions*, Whitney Museum of American Art, New York. Kusama's largest collage, *Airmail Stickers* (1962; cat. 32), a gift to the museum from architect Hanford Yang, is shown along with a Dine sketch of toothbrushes, Frank Gallo's *Swimmer*, Mike Todd's *T-21*, and Warhol's *Bow Ties*.

June

Group exhibition, *Zero Avanguardia*, Galleria il Punto, Turin. This may have been another venue for the exhibition that opened at Galleria del Cavallino on 4 May.

Accumulation sculpture (no longer extant),  
c. 1963



July

Two-person exhibition, *Yayoi Kusama and Clifford La Fontaine*, Castellane Gallery, New York.

10 October

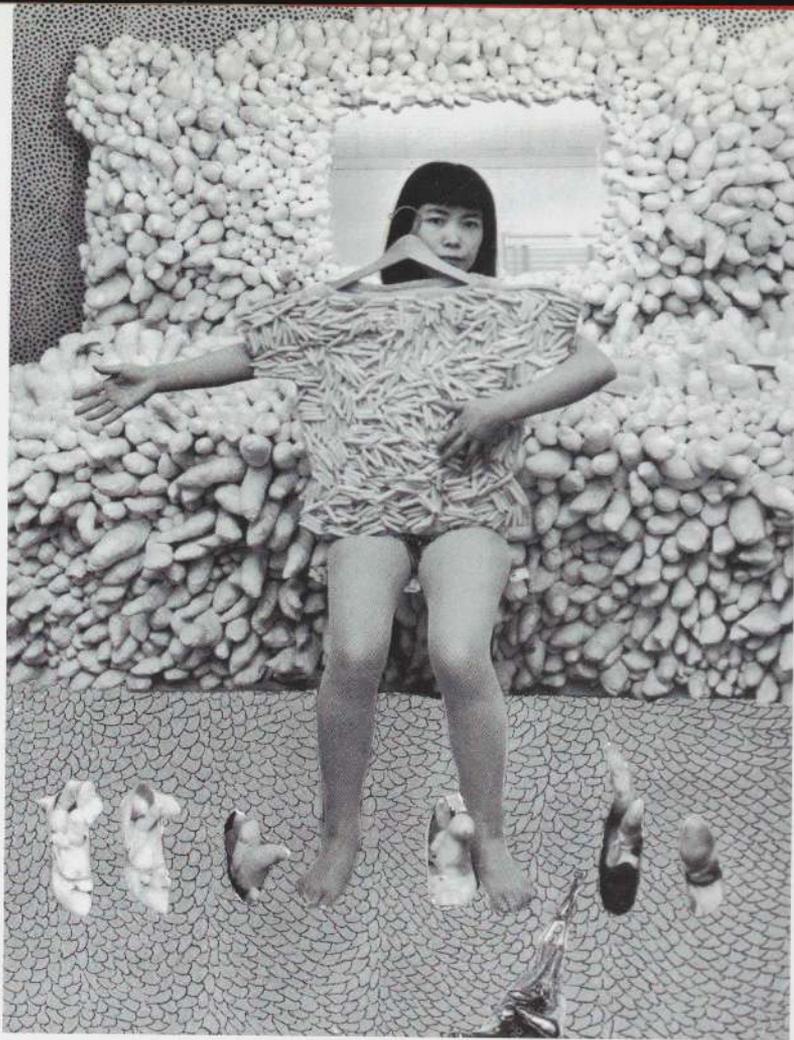
Group exhibition, *White on White*, De Cordova Museum, Lincoln, Massachusetts. Kusama shows *Accumulation No. 1°* (1962). Also on exhibit are monochrome works by Josef Albers, Arp, Chryssa, Fontana, Jasper Johns, Louise Nevelson, Peeters, Piene, Tapiés, and Wesselman, among others.

15 October

Group exhibition, *Zaigai nihon sakka ten: Yoroppa to Amerika (Japanese artists abroad: Europe and America)*, the National Museum of Modern Art, Tokyo. Kusama is represented by a few phallus-covered domestic objects.

3 November

Solo exhibition, *Floor Show*, Castellane Gallery, New York. This includes *My Flower Bed* (1962; cat. 44), *Kitchen Utensils* (1963), a number of stuffed shoes (1964), and the phallus-covered *Baby Carriage* (c. 1964–66; cat. 56), as well as Kusama's environmental sculpture *Infinity Mirror Room—Phalli's Field* (1965; cat. 80) ("Floor Show," *Arts 40*, no. 2 [December 1965]: 18). *Baby Carriage* is made with red-and-off-white striped material, but shortly after the exhibition Kusama adds three toy kangaroos to the carriage interior and spraypaints the entire piece silver (Martha Buskirk, letter to Lynn Zelevansky, 10 September 1996). Half of the exhibition consists of *Infinity Mirror Room*, in which mirrored walls and ceiling reflect a floor of protrusions covered in red spots of different sizes. Critical reaction to the exhibition focuses on the bizarre and obsessive qualities of Kusama's oeuvre. One critic writes, "Stylistically, Miss Kusama may indeed be an original. Spiritually, however, she is one with the ingenious fanatic who constructs an Eiffel Tower of toothpicks, engraves the Lord's Prayer on a pinhead, or meticulously paints a full page of legible newsprint" (Jay Jacobs, "In the Galleries," *Arts 40* [January 1966]: 16).



Collage (no longer extant), c. 1964

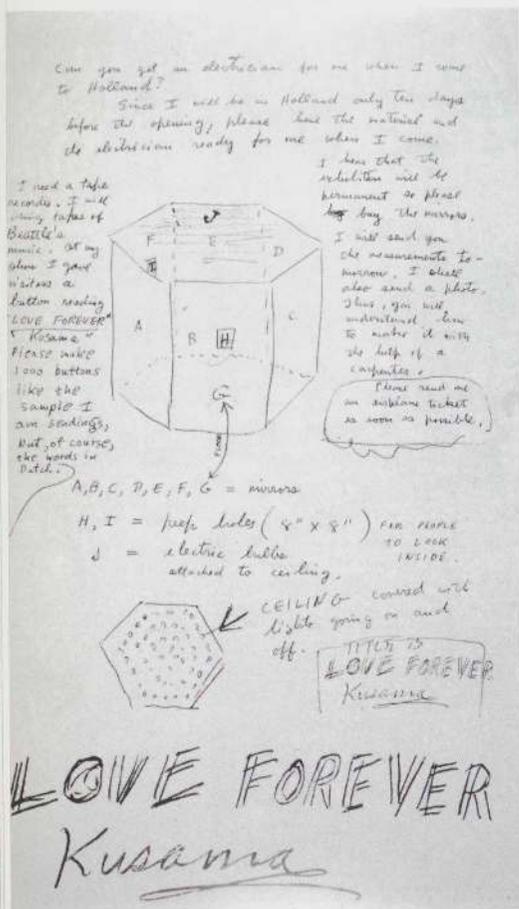


Collages (no longer extant), c. 1966

**1966** 26 January  
Solo exhibition, *Yayoi Kusama: Driving Image Show*, Galleria d'Arte del Naviglio, Milan. The exhibition includes thirty large sculptures shipped from New York as well as eight new works that Kusama makes during a two-month period working in artist Lucio Fontana's Milan studio. A macaroni-strewn environment houses polka-dotted mannequins, furniture, and accessories (including books, bottles, a vase, a mirror, and a place-setting). Macaroni-covered pieces include a dress, shirt, and handbag. Also included are some Accumulation pieces, such as *Compulsion Furniture* (1966), one of the works created in Italy. This consists of two planks joined to form a table, which is covered with brightly colored and patterned fabrics and strewn with domestic objects. (Unbeknownst to the artist *Compulsion Furniture* is later divided in half by an art dealer in search of greater profits. Half is acquired by the collector Peter Ludwig and enters the collection of the Museum Ludwig, Cologne. The other portion surfaces in Germany years later and is purchased by a Japanese dealer.) Kusama, eager to show her work in England, arranges for Galleria d'Arte del Naviglio to send the exhibition to London. The works are held by British customs due to a longshoremen's strike until March

1967, when Albert Vogel and Leo Verboon of Galerij Orez purchase them and bring them to Holland. It is during this stay in Milan that Claudio Cardazzo of Galleria d'Arte del Naviglio suggests that Kusama present a proposal for an outdoor installation at the upcoming Venice Biennale.

16 March  
Solo exhibition, *Kusama's Peep Show* (also titled *Endless Love Show*), Castellane Gallery, New York. This exhibition contains neither paintings nor sculpture but rather a single multimedia installation. It consists of a mirror-lined hexagonal room with a mirrored ceiling embedded with small red, white, blue, and green bulbs flashing on and off in sequence. During the opening, music by the Beatles is played, and Kusama distributes "Love Forever" buttons to visitors. "My *Endless Love Show* of 1966 combined ideas of mechanization, repetition, obsession, compulsion, dizziness, and unrealizable, interminable love," writes Kusama in a promotional brochure. "I also called it my 'Peep Show' because spectators could see what was inside the room but never touch it" (archive of Richard Castellane).



Instructions by Kusama for mounting Kusama's *Peep Show* in Holland, 1965

15 April

Group exhibition, *Zero op Zee*, Internationale Galerij Orez, the Hague. Artists exhibit preparatory sketches for a festival at the pier of Scheveningen planned for August 1965. The organizing group, Exploitatie Maatschappij Scheveningen, headed by Reiner Zwolsman, cancels the festival due to the potential for stormy weather. The entire pier was to have become an ephemeral Zero installation, with "smoke paintings, food sculptures for hungry seagulls, foam islands floating in the sea, mills, fireworks, etc. Armando was to reinforce the sound of the sea with giant loudspeakers, Jan Henderikse would send out boats to fish for art, and a... Klein project was to be executed posthumously (a climate room without a roof into which no rain would enter). Kusama wanted to do [*Peep Show*]...." (Caroline de Westenholz, letter to Julie Joyce, 12 September 1996). The catalogue of unfulfilled projects includes a photograph of Kusama reclining in her *Floor Show* installation as well as a sketch of *Kusama's Peep Show*. Additional participants in the exhibition are Colombo, Fontana, Haacke, Mack, Peeters, Piene, Schoonhoven, Uecker, and members of the Gutai group (*Forum voor architectuur en daarmee verbonden kunsten* 20 [June 1967]).

29 April

Solo exhibition, Galerie M. E. Thelen, Essen, West Germany. This exhibition includes many pieces from the *Driving Image* exhibition in Milan earlier in the year as well as new works created during Kusama's stay at an artists' colony in Halfmannshof near Essen. A critic places her work squarely in the realm of optical art, calling it an "exercise in the semantics of monosurfacing and multiplied elements" (Ed Sommer, "Letter from Germany," *Art International* 10 [20 October 1966]: 46-48).

14 June

Group exhibition, *33rd Venice Biennale*. During a two-month stay in Milan in late 1965 and early 1966 Kusama plans an outdoor installation for the Biennale. She creates an environmental piece, *Narcissus Garden* (cat. 81), composed of fifteen hundred mirrored plastic balls strewn across a grassy lawn. Kusama personally hawks the spheres at 1,200 lire (or \$2.00) each as a comment on art-world commercialism, until her interactive performance is stopped by the Biennale authorities, who object to her selling art in the manner of "hot dogs or ice-cream cones" (unattributed quote, Karia, 87). Lucio Fontana lends Kusama money to fabricate this installation; in return Kusama gives him a phallus-covered suitcase sculpture. Standing among the spheres, wearing a gold kimono with a red obi, she hands out flyers printed with glowing commentary on her creative abilities by Herbert Read, written two years earlier for the *Driving Image Show* at Castellane Gallery, New York: "I discovered Kusama's art in Washington, several years ago, and at once felt that I was in the presence of an original talent. Those early paintings, without beginning, without end, without form, without definition, seemed to actualize the infinity of space. Now, with perfect consistency, she creates forms that proliferate like mycelium and seal the consciousness in their white integument. It is an autonomous art, the most authentic type of super reality. This image of strange beauty presses on our organs of perception with terrifying persistence" (Kusama, personal archive, transcription of original flyer from Venice Biennale).

28 June

Group exhibition, *The Object Transformed*, The Museum of Modern Art, New York. Kusama exhibits *Handbag* and *Dress* (both 1964), each covered with macaroni and painted silver. Other works in the show include Meret Oppenheim's *Object*, a fur-lined cup, saucer, and spoon (1936); Robert Rauschenberg's *Bed*, a painted assemblage (1955); several objects by Man Ray; Johns's sculp-metal *Book* (1957); and an untitled sculpture by Samaras (1962).

## Selected Exhibition History



Kusama at 1966 Venice Biennale, standing amid the 1,500 mirror balls of *Narcissus Garden*

Summer

Group exhibition, *New Collection*, Chrysler Museum, Provincetown. Features Kusama's *Ten-Guest Table* (1963) and *Macaroni Overcoat* (1964) in a macaroni environment. Among the artists included in the exhibition are Franz Kline and Hans Hoffman.

23 October

Group exhibition, *Total-Realismus*, Galerie Potsdamer, in conjunction with Galerij Orez, the Hague. Kusama exhibits the egg-carton relief *No. B. 3* (1962), macaroni-covered clothing, and a large phallic sofa. Others participating are Michel Cardena, Hans J. Spesshardt, and Gerard Verdijk. Kusama is featured on the cover of the brochure, kneeling beside her Venice Biennale *Narcissus Garden* installation.

26 December

Group exhibition, *Inner and Outer Space*, the Moderna Museet, Stockholm. Curated by Pontus Hulten and including more than fifty international artists, the exhibition attempts to define technological, hard-edge abstraction from Russian constructivism to New Tendency. Kusama's *Aggregation: One Thousand Boats Show* (1964), from the Stedelijk Museum, is included along with work by Castellani, Piero Dorazio, Fontana, Sam Francis, Judd, Barnett Newman, Kenneth Noland, Ad Reinhardt, Rothko, and Frank Stella.

1967 10 February

Group exhibition, *Objecten: Made in U.S.A.*, Galerie Delta, Rotterdam. Kusama shows her *Silver Macaroni Dress* (c. 1964) in this pop-art exhibition, which also includes work by Allan d'Arcangelo, Oldenburg, Larry Rivers, and Wesselman.

22 May

Group exhibition, *Serielle Formationen*, Studio Galerie, Goethe Universität, Frankfurt. Organized by Paul Maenz and Peter Roher, this exhibition explores the tendency toward serial repetition.

16–18 June

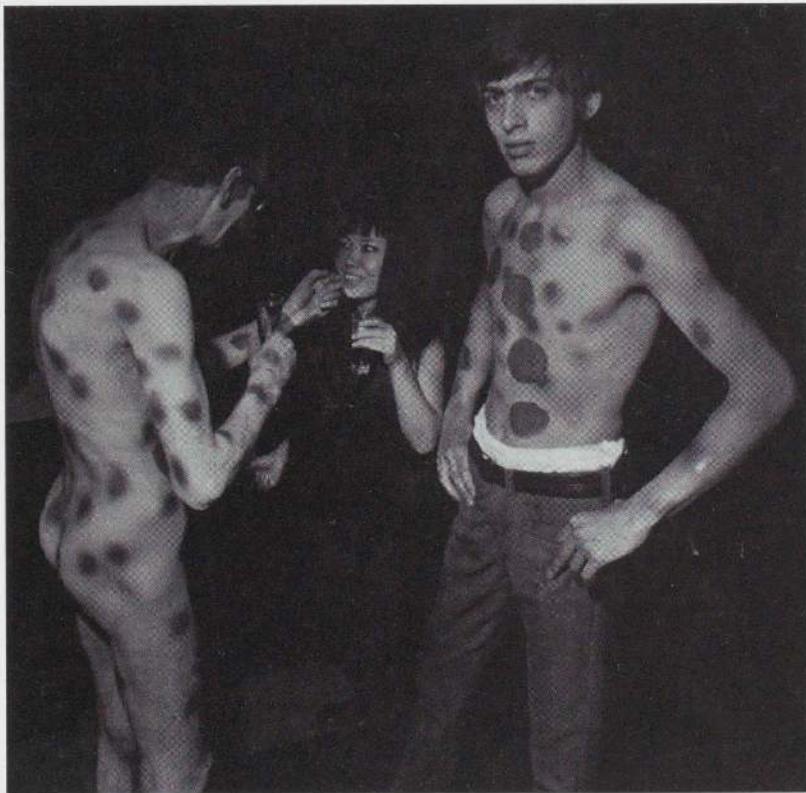
Performance, *Self-Obliteration: An Audio-Visual-Light Performance*, the Black Gate Theater, New York. This is the first in a two-year series of public happenings, some of them staged at her own studio, which Kusama will call Body Festivals. A press release announces that "during the course of the happening Kusama will obliterate her environment, live bikini models and herself. All will be asked to wear polka dots for a polka dot dance party" (press release for *Self-Obliteration*, June 1967). She calls the environment *Love Room*; it contains mannequins and walls covered with polka dots that glow under black light. As part of the performance the audience paints polka dots on each other with fluorescent paint. In a subsequent Body Festival Kusama distributes paddles with balls dipped in fluorescent paint to attendees. In the darkness the theater is filled with luminescent balls darting through the air (Laura Hoptman and Lynn Zelevansky, interview with Yayoi Kusama, 10 May 1997). Live music is provided by Joe Jones and the Tone Deafs. In press releases and posters generated for these events Kusama lists herself as director of the Happening Poster Corporation.

July–August

Kusama stages Body Festivals in Tompkins Square Park and Washington Square Park, New York. Kusama and Japanese artist Minoru Araki paint polka dots on paper and on willing participants on weekend afternoons. Kusama prints flyers and sends out press releases to publicize the happenings. The flyers are covered with polka dots and sometimes feature a cartoon drawing of Kusama as she appears in a Hal Reiff photograph, reclining on her sofa sculpture, *Accumulation No. 2* (1962). They also contain slogans such as "Please the Body" (6 August), "50% is Illusion and 50% is Reality" (13 August), and "Learn, Unlearn, Relearn" (20 August).

1–2 September

Kusama stages a Body Festival at the Chrysler Art Museum, Provincetown. Her flyer proclaims "The Body Is Art."



Kusama stages her first European Body Festival, 1967; artist Jan Schoonhoven is at left

3 November

Solo exhibition, *Love Room*, Galerij Orez, the Hague. The exhibition consists of a version of the *Love Room* created in New York in June. Mannequins covered in fluorescent multi-colored polka dots that glow under black light inhabit the gallery. (Kusama, 10 May 1997 interview). Shortly after the opening Kusama stages the earliest of her European Body Festivals. At the first, one of her canvases is the Nul artist Schoonhoven. She holds other highly visible happenings throughout the month in Holland, and the Dutch press gleefully follows her activities.

1968 January–February

Multiple screenings of the film *Kusama's Self-Obliteration* (cat. 82) take place at venues in New York. Kusama had been collaborating with filmmaker Jud Yalkut since the summer of 1967 to record her happenings throughout New York. The resulting film wins prizes at the Fourth International Experimental Film Competition at Knokke-le-Zoute, Belgium, the Ann Arbor Film Festival, and the Second Maryland Film Festival. *Kusama's Self-Obliteration* begins with Kusama in Woodstock, New York, painting polka dots on a horse, a field, and a pond (by dipping a paint-loaded brush into the water), then shifts to a montage of polka-dot orgy-happenings in studios. The instrumental soundtrack features music by Group Image.

6 April

Group exhibition, "Three Blind Mice" *de Collecties: Visser, Peeters, Becht*, Stedelijk van Abbemuseum, Eindhoven, Netherlands. Agnes and Frits Becht, longtime collectors of modern and contemporary art, exhibit several pieces by Kusama including *Blue Spots*,<sup>o</sup> *Chair*,<sup>o</sup> and *Red Stripes*,<sup>o</sup> (all 1965). Among the other artists in the show are Christo, Dine, Flavin, Fontana, Morris, Oldenburg, Segal, Tetsumi Kudō, Warhol, and Wesselman. On 15 June the exhibition opens in Aint Pieterbdij, Ghent.

27 April

Group exhibition, *Visual Arts Committee Presents Selections from the NYU Art Collection*, NYU Gould Student Center Gallery, New York. Includes Kusama's *No. Red A*. (1958).

9 June

Solo exhibition, Galerie Mickery, Loenersloot, Holland. Kusama shows thirty-seven pieces including sculptures made using coats, jackets, dresses, pants, and shoes, as well as kitchen utensils and various reliefs in many colors. Most of the works are probably from her January 1966 exhibition in Milan (exhibition checklist courtesy Henry Ruhé, Galerie A, Amsterdam).

July–November

Kusama's next series of happenings, the Anatomic Explosions, begins in July with an event late Sunday morning, 14 July, at the New York Stock Exchange. In all of the Anatomic Explosions Kusama, clothed, directs four nude, polka-dot-covered men and women, who dance in locations throughout the city, usually only for a brief time until policemen break up the activity. On 17 July Kusama and her dancers perform at the Statue of Liberty, on 9 August they appear at St. Mark's Church, and on 11 August they dance at the Alice in Wonderland statue in Central Park. In the fall Kusama stages events at the United Nations Building, at the headquarters of the United Federation of Teachers, on Wall Street, and, on 3 November, at the Board of Elections headquarters. On 17 November the last happening in the series occurs on the subway. Each is publicized heavily with flyers

### Selected Exhibition History



Alice in Wonderland performance, Central Park, New York, 11 August 1968

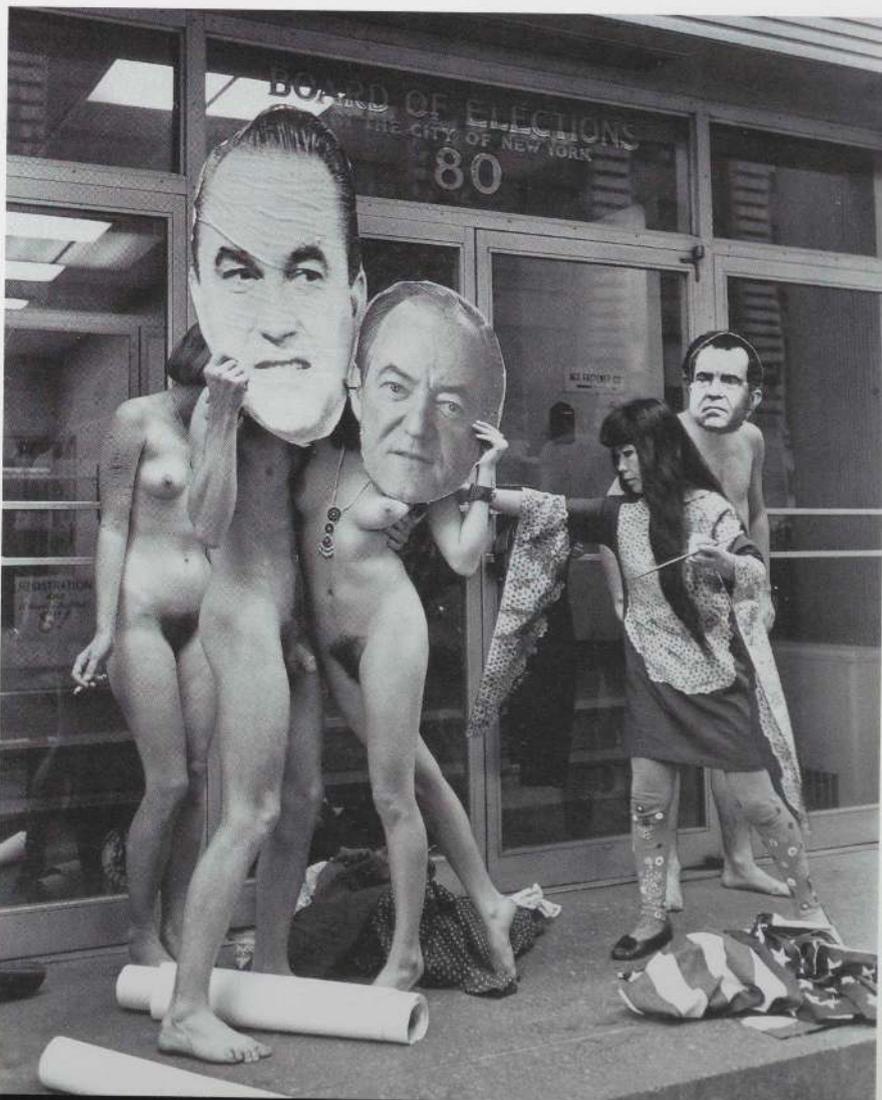
and press releases. The press release for the Statue of Liberty event reads: "...take it off, liberty!... Nudism is the one thing that doesn't cost anything. Clothes cost money. Property costs money. Taxes cost money. Stocks cost money. Only the dollar costs less. Let's protect the dollar by economizing! Let's tighten our belts! Let's throw away our belts! Let the pants fall where they may!... Forget yourself and become one with nature! Obliterate yourself with polka dots!" (Yayoi Kusama, press release for "Naked Event at the Statue of Liberty," July 1968). Kusama continues to perform *Anatomic Explosions* in various public places around the city. She also organizes similar "orgy happenings" in studios and other spaces such as the *Avanti Galleries* and *Nirvana Headshop*, all in New York.

October

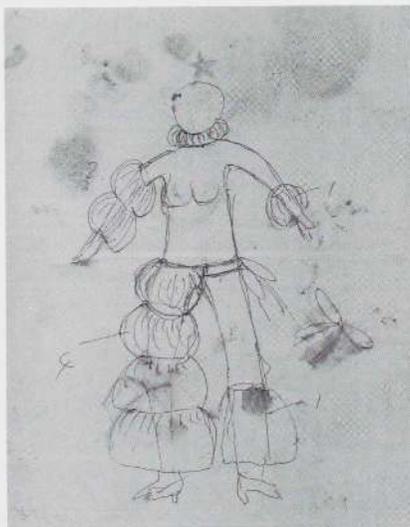
Solo exhibition, Galerie Lichter, Frankfurt. The exhibition includes a suitcase painted with an Infinity Net and striped and dotted *Accumulation* sculptures ("E Su Questa Pietra Fondera La Sua Chiesa" [On this rock she has founded her church], *Men: attualità e politica e cultura e costume* 3, no. 46 [November 1968]).

6 October

Group exhibition, *Soft and Apparently Soft Sculpture*, Cedar Rapids, Iowa, and New York. The exhibition, organized by critic Lucy Lippard for the American Federation of the Arts, also includes work by Louise Bourgeois, Eva Hesse, Paul Kaltenbach, Morris, Bruce Nauman, Oldenburg, Richard Serra, Keith Sonnier, Jackie Winsor, and others. The exhibition travels to venues across the country over the course of approximately one year.



Performance at the Board of Elections, New York, 3 November 1968; photograph by Fred W. McDarrah



Fashion drawings by Kusama, c. 1968

25 November

Kusama presides over *Homosexual Wedding* at the Church of Self-Obliteration, a large rented loft at 31-33 Walker Street, New York. Wedding invitations and press releases proclaim that Kusama, the "High Priestess of the Polka Dots," will perform the ceremony. Falcon McKendall and John deVries, the couple, share a single wedding gown designed for them by Kusama. This creation is the first of her many designs for "natural" clothing for both men and women. In the press release Kusama declares that "the purpose of this marriage is to bring out into the open what has hitherto been concealed... Love can now be free, but to make it completely free, it must be liberated from all sexual frustrations imposed by society..." (Yayoi Kusama, press release for *Homosexual Wedding*, November 1968).

6-7 December

Kusama stages naked happenings at the Fillmore East rock music palace on New York City's Lower East Side, sharing billing with Fleetwood Mac, Country Joe and the Fish, and the Joshua Light Show.

1969 6 April

Kusama and artist Louis Abolafia launch his campaign for mayor of New York, running on the "Love and Nudity" platform, in Central Park's Sheep Meadow on Easter Sunday. Both appear covered in polka dots; Kusama wears only a bra and veil, which she removes later in the happening. Several in the crowd sport Kusama's multiple-occupant "orgy dress."

28 April

Kusama opens a fashion boutique at 404 Sixth Avenue, New York. Her "nude, see-through, and mod" garments include a dress called the Silver Squid, with two holes cut into the front for the breasts. The boutique doubles as the New Village Studio, offering models and private studios for body painting and photography.

24 August

Kusama directs *Grand Orgy to Awaken the Dead* at MOMA (*Otherwise Known as the Museum of Modern Art*)—*Featuring Their Usual Display of Nudes*, a happening featuring eight nude participants striking artistic poses in the fountain of the museum's sculpture garden. Her press release reads, in part, "At the Museum you can take off your clothes in good company: RENOIR, MAILLOL, GIACOMETTI, PICASSO." The spectacle receives front-page coverage in the next day's *Daily News*, which reports that for twenty minutes MOMA security officers were unable to coax the performers out of the pool (see fig. 11). Kusama called the museum the "Mausoleum of Modern Art," saying, "What is modern there?... Van Gogh, Cézanne, those other ghosts, all are dead or dying. While the dead show dead artists, living artists die" ([New York] *Daily News* [25 August 1969]: 4). Kusama continues to organize orgies, happenings, and performances-cum-parties in studios throughout the year.

1970 24 April

Group exhibition, *Zero-Unexecuted*, Institute of the History of Arts, University of Amsterdam. Features the maquettes and drawings of projects for the canceled *Zero-op-Zee* festival, scheduled for August 1965. The catalogue features Kusama's plans for a version of her *Peep Show* (see pg. 180) (Henk Peeters, letter to Julie Joyce, June 1996).

1971 12-17 November

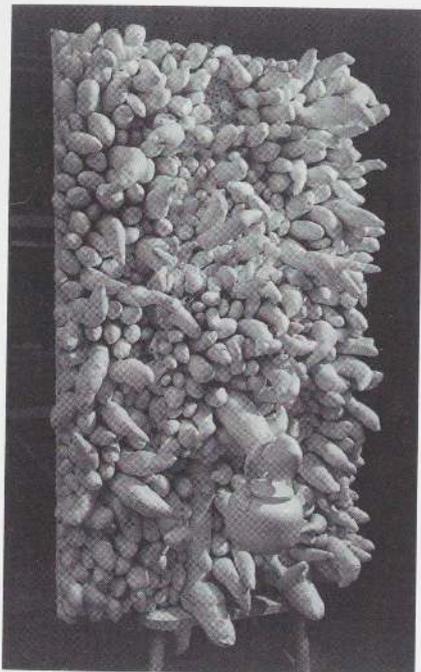
*Kusama's Self-Obliteration* is featured at the first annual *New York Erotic Film Festival*.

1975 Kusama is now living in Japan.

24 January

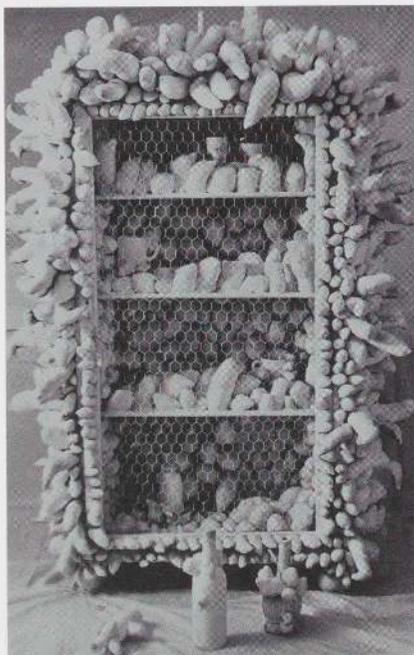
Group exhibition, *Contemporary Art from the College Collection*, Jaffe-Friede Gallery, Dartmouth College, Hanover, NH. Includes *Accumulation No. 2* (1962), the phallus-covered couch acquired the year before as a gift of New Jersey collectors Mr. and Mrs. Harry L. Tepper.

## Selected Exhibition History



Accumulation sculpture with teapot  
(no longer extant), c. 1963

- 1976** 20 December  
Group exhibition, *Tenth Street Days: The Co-ops of the 50s*, takes place at several New York galleries. Kusama is included as a former Brata Gallery artist.
- 1977** 10 March  
Group exhibition, *Improbable Furniture*, Institute of Contemporary Art, University of Pennsylvania, Philadelphia. The exhibition, which includes *Accumulation No. 2°* (1962), travels to the Museum of Contemporary Art, La Jolla (opening May 20), and to the Museum of Contemporary Art, Chicago (opening July 23).
- 1978** 8 December  
Group exhibition, *Acquisitions 1974-1978*, Jaffe-Friede, Strauss, and Barrows Galleries, Dartmouth College, Hanover, NH. *Accumulation No. 2°* (1962) is shown.
- 1979** 16 November  
Group exhibition, *Weich und Plastisch/Soft Art*, Kunsthhaus, Zurich. Includes Kusama's *Accumulation No. 2°* (1962), half of *Compulsion Furniture* (1966), probably the portion in the Museum Ludwig's collection, and a reconstruction based on *Kusama's Peep Show* (1966). Additional artists with works on view include Hesse, Kaprow, Kudō, and Manzoni.
- 1980** 24 April  
Group exhibition, *International Moderns from the Permanent Collection*, the Chrysler Museum, Norfolk, Virginia. The shoes and bottles from Kusama's *Ten-Guest Table* (1963) are shown along with twenty-four works by other artists, including Shūsaku Arakawa, Salvador Dalí, Ralph (Rafael Montañez) Ortiz, Robert Smithson, and Victor Vasarely.
- 14 August  
Solo exhibition, Tokyu Department Store, Nagano, Japan. Kusama shows several pieces begun in New York and completed in Japan (Kusama, 10 May interview).
- 1981** March  
Group exhibition, *Two Decades of Contemporary Japanese Art*, Kodoshia Gallery, Ichinoseki. Kusama is one of thirty artists represented.
- 4 December  
Group exhibition, *The 1960s—A Decade of Change in Contemporary Art*, the National Museum of Modern Art, Tokyo. Included are *Net Accumulation* (1958), *Accumulation of Stamps No. 63* (1962; cat. 30), and a model based on her 1965 *Infinity Mirror Room*. The exhibition travels to the National Museum of Modern Art, Kyoto, on 10 February 1982.
- 1982** 16 March  
First solo exhibition containing older work at Fuji Television Gallery, Tokyo, includes nine large paintings from 1959 to 1961 and three objects covered with stuffed protrusions, some from the 1960s and 1970s, in addition to more recent work. Also includes a work based on *Kusama's Peep Show* (1966).
- 9 December  
Solo exhibition, *Yayoi Kusama*, Galleria d'Arte del Naviglio, Milan. The catalogue features a photograph of Kusama lying in her *Narcissus Garden* at the Venice Biennale.
- 1983** 17 February  
Solo exhibition, Jardin de Luseine, Tokyo. Includes several unidentified works dated to the 1960s.
- 6 June  
Solo exhibition, *Yayoi Kusama: 1950-1970*, Galerie Ornis, the Hague. The exhibition, organized in conjunction with the Holland Festival, includes forty-two of Kusama's works. From her New York period are *Macaroni Handbag*,<sup>o</sup> *Macaroni Shirt*,<sup>o</sup> *Macaroni Trousers*, *Phallic Bottle Tray*,<sup>o</sup> *Phallic Girl*, two orange-dotted mannequin sculptures, a green-dotted mannequin, and an untitled red-and-white protrusion piece in an acrylic box (all 1965), and other macaroni-covered clothing, including sweaters and shoes (Caroline de Westenholz, letter to Julie Joyce, 12 September 1996).



Accumulation sculpture (no longer extant), c. 1963

22 October

Group exhibition, *Trends of Japanese Art in the 1960s II—Toward Diversity*, Tokyo Metropolitan Art Museum. Kusama is represented by *Infinity Nets 2* (1959).

20 November

Group exhibition, *The First Show: Paintings and Sculptures from Eight Collections: 1940–1980*, inaugural exhibition at the Museum of Contemporary Art, Los Angeles. Includes the half of *Compulsion Furniture* (1966) in the Museum Ludwig's collection.

1984 16 March

Group exhibition, *Collectie Becht*, Stedelijk Museum, Amsterdam. Kusama works featured in the Becht collection include *Airmail Accumulation* (1961), Untitled (rectangular sticker collage, 1962), *Chair*<sup>o</sup> (currently in the collection of the Toyota Municipal Museum of Art), *Coca Cola Bottle*, and the reliefs *Blue Spots*<sup>o</sup> and *Red Stripes*<sup>o</sup> (all 1965).

20 September

Group exhibition, *Blam! The Explosion of Pop, Minimalism, and Performance, 1958–1964*, Whitney Museum of American Art, New York. The exhibition includes Kusama's *Accumulation No. 1*<sup>o</sup> (1962) and the egg-carton relief *No. B. 3* (1962). Among the many other well-known works shown are Rauschenberg's *Bed* (1955), Johns's *White Flag* (1955–58), works from Oldenburg's *The Street* (1960) and *The Store* (1961), Segal's *Dinner Table* (1962), and Warhol's *Orange Disaster* (1963). The exhibition also features a section of Fluxus ephemera and an overview of independent cinema during this period.

1985 8 December

Group exhibition, *Reconstructions: Avant-Garde Art in Japan, 1945–1965*, Museum of Modern Art, Oxford. The exhibition, which includes *Chair*<sup>o</sup> (1965), then in the Becht collection, also travels to Fruitmarket Gallery, Edinburgh, opening 22 February 1986.

1986 31 March

Solo exhibition, *Yayoi Kusama*, Musée Municipal, Dole, France. Although the exhibition focuses on works from the 1980s, two earlier works are featured: the eight-panel *Infinity Nets O.P. 13* (1961) and *Shoes* (1963). It travels to Musée des beaux-arts de Calais, opening 13 December.

11 December

Group exhibition, *Japon des Avant-Garde, 1910–1970*, Musée national d'art moderne, Centre Georges Pompidou, Paris. Kusama works included are *Net Accumulation* (1958), owned by the National Museum of Art at Osaka, and *Chair*<sup>o</sup> (1965). The show features Japanese artists, architects, and designers of the twentieth century, among them Genpei Asegawa, On Kawara, Noboru Kitawaki, Tomio Miki, Isamu Noguchi, Kohshiroh Onchi, Yoko Ono, Kazuo Shiraga, Shūzō Takiguchi, Kudō, and Jiro Yoshihara.

1987 3 March

Solo exhibition, Kitakyushu Municipal Museum of Art, Fukuoka, Japan. This retrospective spans forty years and includes seventy-nine works, many attributed to the late fifties and early sixties, as well as two small-scale models based on the 1965 *Infinity Mirror Room (Mirrored Room Love Forever No. 2 and Mirrored Room Love Forever No. 3)*.

3 April

Group exhibition, *Zauber der Medusa: Europäische Manierismen*, Künstlerhaus, Vienna. The show includes *Silver Dress* (1966), a dress covered with plastic flowers and spray paint. Among the other contemporary artists are Arman, Frank Gehry, and Kudō; historical artists include Aubrey Beardsley, Hans Bellmer, William Blake, Albrecht Dürer, Eugène Delacroix, and Max Ernst. The exhibition is held in conjunction with the Wiener Festwochen 1987.

Selected Exhibition History



Kusama with *Accumulation No. 1* at Center for International Contemporary Arts retrospective, 1989

23 September  
Group exhibition, *Collection Agnes et Frits Becht*, Centre régional d'art contemporain Midi-Pyrénées, Lagère, France. Includes *Airmail Accumulation* (1961), *Untitled* (rectangular sticker collage, 1962), *Blue Spots*,<sup>o</sup> *Chair*,<sup>o</sup> *Coca Cola Bottle*, and *Red Stripes*<sup>o</sup> (all 1965).

**1988** 16 September  
Group exhibition, *Gruppe Zero*, Galerie Schoeller, Düsseldorf. Also includes works by Arman, Fontana, Klein, Mack, Manzoni, Peeters, Piene, Uecker, and others.

**1989** 30 June  
Group exhibition, *The "Junk" Aesthetic: Assemblage of the 1950s and Early 1960s*, Whitney Museum of American Art at Equitable Center. The Whitney's large *Airmail Stickers*<sup>o</sup> (1962) is included along with works by Bontecou, Christo, Joseph Cornell, Dine, Kaprow, Morris, Oldenburg, Nam June Paik, and others.

27 September

Solo exhibition, *Yayoi Kusama: A Retrospective*, Center for International Contemporary Arts (CICA), New York. Early work exhibited includes *No. 2* (1959), *Pacific Ocean* (1959), *Accumulation* (1960), *No. 91* (1960), *The West* (1960), *Yellow Net*<sup>o</sup> (1960), *No. T.W. 3*<sup>o</sup> (1961), *Accumulation No. 1*<sup>o</sup> (1962), *Accumulation No. 15 A.* (1962), *Airmail Stickers*<sup>o</sup> (1962), *No. B. 3* (1962), *Accumulation of Spaces No. B.T.* (1963; cat. 34), *Airmail Accumulation* (1963), *Airmail No. Q.Z.* (1963; cat. 33), *Untitled* (bronze high heels, 1963), *Untitled* (silver high heels, 1964), and *Untitled* (silver low-heeled shoe and flat, 1964). This exhibition proves pivotal for the revival of interest in Kusama's work in the United States. Roberta Smith, in her review in the *New York Times*, writes: "The 1960's are not so long ago, yet the art history of the period already has its gaps. One is being filled by the Center for International Contemporary Arts, whose inaugural exhibition is a small retrospective of the work of Yayoi Kusama" (Roberta Smith, "Intense Personal Visions of a Fragile Japanese Artist," *New York Times*, 20 October 1989). CICA, dedicated to showcasing cutting-edge work from abroad and fostering international dialogue about art, proves to be a short-lived venture, closing in 1992.

5 November

Solo exhibition, *In Context: Yayoi Kusama, Soul-Burning Flashes*, Museum of Modern Art, Oxford. This exhibition features Kusama's work from the 1970s and 1980s but also includes the painting *Infinity Nets A.B.Q.* (1961) and a group of nine acrylic-on-canvas works identified as "infinity net paintings," improbably dated 1943-89. (Although the net motif can be traced to certain early watercolors, Kusama's true Infinity Nets, in oil and occasionally acrylic, began during her New York years.)

**1992** 21 September  
Solo exhibition, *Yayoi Kusama: Bursting Galaxies*, Sogetsu Art Museum, Tokyo. A retrospective that includes *Net Accumulation* (1958), *No. B. White* (1959), *Pacific Ocean* (1959), *Infinity Nets B.* (1961), *Macaroni Coat* (1963; cat. 62), and screenings of *Kusama's Self-Obliteration*.<sup>o</sup>

**1993** 22 April  
Group exhibition, *Highroads of the 60s*, Galerie Delta, Rotterdam. Includes works by Arman, Christo, Ad Dekkers, Kudō, Luther, Manzoni, and Schoonhoven. Kusama's *Accumulation Shoe* (1966) is displayed in a Jugendstil copper case owned by gallery director Hans Sonnenberg. The exhibition announcement features the Reiff photograph of Kusama lying naked on *Accumulation No. 2* (1962).

June  
Solo exhibition, Galleria Cardazzo, Venice, Italy. This small show contains a few older works.

13 June  
Solo exhibition, *Yayoi Kusama*, Japanese Pavilion, 45th Venice Biennale. This is in effect the first time an individual artist is featured in the Japanese pavilion. (Though photographer Kishin Shinoyama exhibited alone in 1976, that exhibition, because of its design by architect Arata Isozaki, had the character of a collaboration between the two.) The show includes twenty of Kusama's early works, among them *Yellow Net*<sup>o</sup> (1960) and *My Flower Bed*<sup>o</sup> (1962). In the exhibition catalogue Akira Tatehata, Tama Art University professor and the Japanese commissioner for the Biennale, writes that "Kusama's achievement is wide-ranging and unique, and it can be approached from many different directions. She has been seen as a pioneer at the forefront of the postwar avant-garde. Her work has been seen as reflective of political and social realities and reevaluated in terms of feminist and formalist criteria. . . . The pure light that appeared to her in the nineties provides images of another world which can only be described as disquieting and mysterious and intensely fascinating" (Akira Tatehata, "Magnificent Obsession," catalogue for the 45th Venice Biennale, 12).

23 June  
Group exhibition, *Abject Art: Repulsion and Desire in Contemporary Art*, Whitney Museum of American Art, New York. Kusama's *Valise* (1965–66; cat. 76) is included along with works by Bontecou, Duchamp, Hesse, Johns, Oldenburg, Jackson Pollock, and Hannah Wilke, as well as the younger artists Chris Burden, Mary Kelley, Adrian Piper, Cindy Sherman, and Kiki Smith, among others.

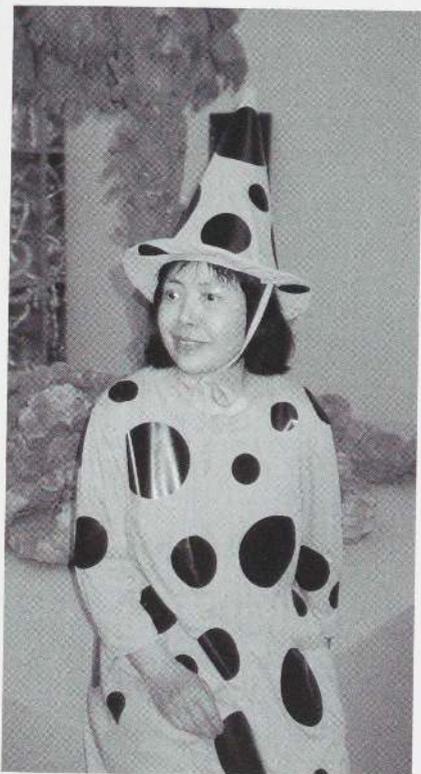
30 September  
Group exhibition, Setagaya Art Museum, Tokyo.

**1994** 5 February  
Group exhibition, *Japanese Art after 1945: Scream Against the Sky*, Yokohama Museum of Art. Among the Kusama works shown are *No. A.B.*<sup>o</sup> (1959), *Accumulation No. 1*<sup>o</sup> (1962), and *Airmail Stickers*<sup>o</sup> (1962), along with work by artists of the same generation, including Kawabata, Kudō, Okada, and Yoshihara. On 14 September the exhibition opens at the Guggenheim Museum SoHo, New York. On 31 May 1995 it opens at the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art.

9 April  
Group exhibition, *When the Body Becomes Art*, Itabashi Art Museum, Tokyo. Kusama's works include *Macaroni Coat*<sup>o</sup> (1963). Other participating artists include Arakawa, Reiko Ike-mura, and Jiro Yoshihara.

22 April  
Solo exhibition, *Yayoi Kusama*, Shinano Art Museum, Nagano Prefecture. This retrospective includes the net paintings *No. A.B.*<sup>o</sup> (1959), *No. B. White* (1959), *Pacific Ocean* (1959), *Accumulation* (1960), *No. B.B.B.* (1960), *No. P.Z.* (1960; cat. 7), and *No. X.* (1960); the sculptures *My Flower Bed*<sup>o</sup> (1962) and *Flower Shirt* (1964; cat. 57); the white-protrusion-covered *Untitled Accumulation* (1963; cat. 50) and *Traveling Life*<sup>o</sup> (1964); the red net-covered *Stepladder* (1966; cat. 74) and *Suitcase* (1966; cat. 75); and *Self-Obliteration* (1968), an original painting for a poster advertising a screening of the film.

**Selected Exhibition History**



Kusama at the installation of her works, Japanese pavilion, 1993 Venice Biennale

18 June

Group exhibition, *Against All Odds: The Healing Powers of Art*, Ueno Royal Museum, Tokyo. Kusama shows *Infinity Net A* (cat. 65), *Infinity Net B* (cat. 66), and *Infinity Net C* (cat. 67) (all 1965). The exhibition travels to the Hakone Open-Air Museum (opening 13 July).

16 November

Solo exhibition, *Infinity of Space and Light in the 1950s and 1960s: Yayoi Kusama from the Collection of Richard Castellane*, Esquire, Picker Art Gallery, Colgate University. Twenty-seven works are shown, including *Suit* (1962; cat. 49), *Silver Coat* (1962), two multicolored Infinity Net paintings from 1967, small collages, and other works on paper.

**1995** 17 February

Group exhibition, *Division of Labor: "Women's Work" in Contemporary Art*, Bronx Museum of the Arts. The exhibition includes *Coat\** (1962), *Silver Coat* (1962) and *Valise\** (1965–66). It travels to the Museum of Contemporary Art, Los Angeles, fall 1995.

22 February

Group exhibition, *New York Art Fair*, Seventh Regiment Armory, New York; Untitled, a red net painting from 1961, is shown by Paula Cooper Gallery.

4 March

Group exhibition, *Maux Faux*, Ronald Feldman Fine Art, New York. Includes three works by Kusama: *Yellow Net\** (1960), Untitled (protrusion-covered baking pan with spoon, painted silver, 1967), and a photo-collage on oaktag with felt-tip marker, *Accumulation of Faces No. 2* (1962). Other artists shown are Morton Bartlett, David Clarkson, Nancy Davidson, Lucky DeBellevue, James Esber, Carl Fudge, Rico Gaston, Barbara Gallucci, Robert Melee, Bruce Pearson, Steven Salzman, Peter Soriano, Lawre Stone, and Gordon Voisey.

17 May

Group exhibition, *Human Figures*, Ota Fine Arts, Tokyo; includes an untitled protrusion-stuffed shoe sculpture painted gold, from the early 1960s.

1 July

Solo exhibition, *Yayoi Kusama: I Who Committed Suicide*, Ota Fine Arts, Tokyo; includes a small, untitled, oil-on-board painting from 1965.

5 September

Group exhibition, *Photographs*, Ota Fine Arts, Tokyo; includes a photo-collage, *Compulsion Furniture (Accumulation)* (1963; cat. 38).

29 September

Group exhibition, *Revolution: Art of the Sixties from Warhol to Beuys*, Museum of Contemporary Art, Tokyo. Includes *Pacific Ocean* (1960; cat. 5), *Infinity Nets B*. (1961), and *Traveling Life\** (1964).

**1996** 30 January

Group exhibition, *Inside the Visible: An Elliptical Traverse of 20th-Century Art*, the Institute of Contemporary Art, Boston. This group exhibition of art by women, coorganized by the Kanaal Art Foundation, Belgium, is arranged by eras (1930s–1940s, 1960s–1970s, and 1990s). Kusama's works include three pieces from the collection of Richard Castellane, *Suit\**, *Hat*, and *Silver Coat* (all c. 1962). Other artists shown in the 1960s–1970s section include Theresa Hak Kyung Cha, Lygia Clark, Hanne Darboven, Lili Dujourie, Gego, Hesse, Agnes Martin, Ana Mendieta, Carol Rama, Martha Rosler, Mira Schendel, Nancy Spero, and Francesca Woodman. The exhibition subsequently opens on 5 June at the National Museum of Women in the Arts, Washington, D.C., and the Whitechapel Art Gallery, London, on 11 October.

20 April

Group exhibition, *Art of Postwar 1960s Avant-Garde*, Kurashiki Municipal Art Museum, Okayama Prefecture. Kusama's Untitled Accumulation\* (1963) is shown along with works by Cornell, Johns, and others.

3 May

Solo exhibition, *Yayoi Kusama: The 1950s and 1960s*, Paula Cooper Gallery, New York. Exhibition includes *No. F.* (1959–60), *No. F.C.H.*° (1960), *No. Red B.C.F.* (1960; cat. 9), *No. Green No. 1*° (1961), *No. T.W. 3*° (1961), *Untitled* (1961), *Accumulation of Faces* (1962), *Accumulation of Nets No. 7* (1962; cat. 36), *Accumulation No. 1*° (1962), *Airmail Stickers*° (1962), *No. B. 3* (1962), *Untitled* (1962), *Accumulation of Spaces No. B.T.*° (1963), *Airmail No. Q.Z.*° (1963), *Compulsion Furniture (Accumulation)*° (1963), *Accretion No. 3* (1964), *Untitled* (1964), *Blue Nets* (1966), the film *Kusama's Self-Obliteration*° (1967), now transferred to video, and *Strainer and Basket* (1969). Reviews of the show are glowing. One reviewer writes, "Having disappeared, for a long time, into the infinite realm of her own obscurity, Kusama has reemerged at last to claim her rightful place in the history of Postmodernism" ("From Here to Infinity," *Time Out*, May 15–22, 1996). Roberta Smith writes in the *New York Times*: "The Cooper show is an amazing mix of references and sources, given the continuity of Ms. Kusama's style. Her accumulating technique has enabled her to flit among media and cultures with the greatest of ease, mixing East and West, insider and outsider in the process." The exhibition is named "Best Gallery Show of the 1995–96 Season" by the United States chapter of the International Association of Art Critics.

22 May

Group exhibition, *L'informe: Mode d'emploi*, Centre Georges Pompidou, Paris. This massive exhibition is organized by art historians Rosalind Krauss and Yves-Alain Bois, inspired by surrealist writer Georges Bataille's notion of the "formless." The *informe* is an anti-systematic approach to art-making opposed to the formalistic precepts of high modernism; it includes (though is not limited to) notions of abjection, inversion, and entropy. This show explores the concept as manifest in art throughout the twentieth century. The "Pulse" portion of the exhibition

includes Kusama's sculpture *My Flower Bed*° (1962), shown with works by Bellmer, Jacques-André Boiffard, Brassai, André Breton, Duchamp, Alberto Giacometti, Hesse, Morris, Nauman, Man Ray, Serra, and others.

23 May

Solo exhibition, *Yayoi Kusama: Ten Paintings from the '60s to the Present*, Ota Fine Arts, Tokyo. Included in the exhibition is the oil painting *Infinity Net* (1965).

4 June

Group exhibition, *1953 Light Up*, Meguro Art Museum, Tokyo. Kusama shows *Pacific Ocean* (1959). The exhibition also includes works by Nobuya Abe, Ken Domon, and Noguchi.

21 September

Group exhibition, *Art/Fashion*, Forte Belvedere, Florence. The exhibition, which is part of the first Florence Biennale, *Il tempo e la moda*, explores the interconnection of art and fashion. Kusama's *Flower Overcoat* (1964), owned by Harry Ruhé, is shown along with collaborations between contemporary artists and fashion designers, and clothing by Vito Acconci, Sonia Delaunay, Man Ray, Warhol, and many others.

9 October

Group exhibition, *Female Identity*, Okayama Prefectural Art Museum. The exhibition includes *Traveling Life*° (1964). Other participating artists include Kawara and Kudô.

**1997** 17 January

Solo exhibition, *Recent Work and Paintings from the New York Years*, Baumgartner Galleries Inc., Washington D.C.. This show, which focuses primarily on work from the 1980s and 1990s, also features the oil-on-canvas *Pacific Ocean* (1958), *No. B* (1959), and *No. A* (1960).

## Selected Exhibition History

25 January

Group exhibition, *Drawing the Line (and Crossing It)*, Peter Blum Gallery, New York. This show of drawings and works on paper features Kusama's *Flower* (1950s–1963); *River* (1963), a gouache; an untitled gouache-and-charcoal work (n.d.); and an untitled gouache created before she came to the United States (n.d.). The exhibition also includes works by Bourgeois, Francesco Clemente, Helmut Federle, Simon Frost, Alex Katz, Brice Marden, Joseph Marioni, Martin, David Rabinowitch, Robert Ryman, and Karin Sander.

8 February

Group exhibition, *De-Genderism*, Setagaya Art Museum, Tokyo. Kusama's *Infinity Nets* (1959) is on view. Other artists include Marina Abramovic, Acconci, Janine Antoni, Matthew Barney, Robert Gober, Marie-Ange Guilleminot, Kazuhiko Hachiya, Mona Hatoum, Hesse, Rebecca Horn, oo Kato, Soo-Ja Kim, Ma Liuming, and Minako Nishiyama.

12 March

Group exhibition, *Art Fashion*, Guggenheim Museum SoHo, New York. This exhibition is a version of one component of the first Florence Biennale (see 21 September 1996 entry). Kusama's *Suit*<sup>®</sup> and *Silver Coat* (both c. 1962) are exhibited.

10 May

Group exhibition, *Contemporary Art: How Can They Possibly Understand It?*, Itabashi Art Museum, Tokyo. Kusama is represented by one piece, *Macaroni Coat*<sup>®</sup> (1963). Also included are works by Miran Fukuda, Natsuyuki Nakanishi, and Nobuo Sekine among others.

11 June

Solo exhibition, *Yayoi Kusama: Obsessional Vision*, the Arts Club of Chicago. Includes the oil-on-Masonite painting *Net No. 2 Yellow* (1960), the oil-on-canvas *Untitled* (1960), and an untitled oil and collage on canvas.

8 July

Solo exhibition, *Kusama's Kusama*, Ota Fine Arts, Tokyo. This retrospective includes the oil *No. N. 2* (1961), a protrusion-stuffed wine bottle sculpture painted white (1961), and an installation of a painted table, chair, and mannequins entitled *Self-Obliteration* (1967–74).

20 July

Group exhibition, *Floating Images of Women in Art History*, Tochigi Prefectural Art Museum. The show includes Kusama's *Infinity Nets* (1965) as well as works by Kiki Smith and Warhol, among others.

3 September

Solo exhibition, *Yayoi Kusama: Recent Work*, Margo Leavin Gallery, Los Angeles. Features mostly recent pieces, but also includes the black-ink-on-colored-paper works *Lips* and *Feet* (both 1964).

**1998** 8 February

Group exhibition, *Out of Actions: Between Performance and the Object, 1949–1979*, Museum of Contemporary Art, Los Angeles. As this book goes to press, the exhibition charts the relationship between sculpture and performance in post–World War II art and features 150 artists grouped by decade. Kusama's works include *Hat* and *Silver Coat* (both c. 1962), as well as *Dress No. 1* (n.d.), *Dress No. 2* (n.d.), and *Pink Outfit* (1968). Other artists showing in the 1960s group include Joseph Beuys, Dine, Vallie Export, Gilbert and George, Red Grooms, Kaprow, Oldenburg, Ono, Niki de Saint-Phalle, Carolee Schneemann, and members of the Fluxus, Hi Red Center, and Viennese Actionism groups. The exhibition opens at the Österreichisches Museum für angewandte Kunst in Vienna on 14 June, the Museu d'Art Contemporani de Barcelona on 27 September, the Museum of Contemporary Art Tokyo in early 1999, and the National Museum of Art in Osaka in spring 1999.

## Acknowledgments

The realization of an exhibition such as this one, which examines matters contemporary with the lifetimes of many of us but also requires extensive art-historical research, would be impossible without the help of numerous individuals. We have been extremely fortunate in the support and assistance that we have received.

First we would like to thank the lenders, public and private, who have generously agreed to part with significant works for the extent of the tour so that Yayoi Kusama's achievement can be represented in the richest and most accurate way. They are individually acknowledged elsewhere in this publication, and we are grateful to them all.

When she lived in the West Kusama lacked the means to catalogue and track her work. During the three years of planning for this exhibition, recognition of her contribution has grown steadily, and many of the works in the show have recently changed hands. Consequently, locating her art from this period has been a complex process that required the goodwill and cooperation of a variety of people. In the United States Alexandra Munroe, curator of the 1989 retrospective at the Center for International Contemporary Arts (CICA) in New York and a contributor to this book, was helpful at the crucial beginning stages of this project, as was Barbara Bertozzi. We also depended on information generously shared by Reiko Tomii, who researched the chronology for the CICA catalogue; our annotated exhibition history builds on the findings of that document. We would like to thank Kusama's early supporters in New York, including Richard Castellane, Udo Kultermann, and Beatrice Perry, who have been extremely generous with their time, remembering vitally important details and evoking the spirit of the era; they have also graciously lent key works to the exhibition. In addition, Richard and Miles Bellamy, Rudolph Burckhardt, James Golata, Jon Hendricks, art supervisor Peter Ballantine and conservator Bettina Landegrebe of the Donald Judd estate, Barbara Moore, Carolee Schneemann, Gertrude Stein, Jud Yalkut, and Hanford Yang shared important recollections and significant archival materials. Polly Apfelbaum, Mike Kelley, and Rona Pondick courteously submitted to interviews regarding Kusama's impact on contemporary art. Ralph Rugoff kindly provided information on Jessica Diamond. Martha Buskirk helped with research on a particular work. Judy Spence kindly and graciously read manuscripts and gave comments. We also appreciate the help of Machiko Oyama, our first contact at the Nippon Foundation. Paula Cooper of Paula Cooper Gallery, New York, and Peter Miller of Robert Miller Gallery, New York, have been very helpful to this effort, as have Christopher D'Amelio of D'Amelio Terras Gallery, New York, and Frank Born of Frank Born Fine Arts, San Francisco.

In Europe we are extremely grateful to Henk Peeters and Caroline de Westenholz, both of whom shared memories, lent works, and connected us with other Kusama collectors. Similarly, Renato Cardazzo of Galleria d'Arte del Naviglio, Milan, Dr. and Mrs. Virgilio Gianni (also lenders to the exhibition), Heinz Mack and Günther Uecker, Otto Piene, Harry Ruhé of Galerie A, Amsterdam,

Leo Verboen of Gallery Orez, the Hague, and Nanda Vigo shared their memories of Kusama's activities in Europe in the sixties. Mr. and Mrs. Giobatta Meneguzzo of the Casa Bianca in Malo Vicenza, Helmut Dudé, and Mr. and Mrs. Helmut Klinker opened their collections and gave kind hospitality during our research. We also appreciate the help of Michela Scotti.

In Japan Toshio Hara took an early interest in this project, and we are very grateful for his sage advice and that of his staff. Akira Tatehata, curator of Kusama's important 1993 Venice Biennale exhibition, expertly helped us to negotiate the Japanese art world. Isao Takakura, secretary and general manager of Kusama's studio, was extremely responsive, diligently sending us large quantities of requested material and information over the last few years. Sachie Gocho and Yoko Miyazaki patiently guided us through interviews and archival materials at the artist's studio. Johnny Walker and Kara Beshler greatly helped to make Tokyo accessible and comfortable. We also wish to thank Michiyasu Itsutsuji of Itsutsuji Gallery, Tokyo, for his help. Mariko Ito of Itochu Gallery, Tokyo, Kimio Jinno of Gallery HAM, Nagoya, Hidenori Ota of Ota Fine Arts, Masami Shiraishi of SCAI the Bathhouse, Mayumi Uchida of the Hakone Open Air Museum, Susumu Yamamoto and Mariko Goto of Fuji Television Gallery, and Arthur Zegelbone, cultural attaché at the United States embassy in Tokyo, all assisted this project and have our appreciation.

At the Los Angeles County Museum of Art we thank Andrea Rich, president and CEO, for her encouragement. Graham W. J. Beal, LACMA's director, traveled to Japan in support of this exhibition and has our deep appreciation. Stephanie Barron, in her capacity as senior curator of modern and contemporary art, strongly endorsed the endeavor from its inception three years ago, when few people in Los Angeles knew Kusama's work. Robert Singer, curator of Japanese art and indispensable guide to all things Japanese, played a vital role in this project and has our sincere thanks. Beverley Sabo, coordinator, exhibition programs, capably and with understanding oversaw the budget for the show. We much appreciate the efforts of Renee Montgomery, assistant director, collection management, and Sandy Davis, assistant registrar. Thomas Frick edited the catalogue with skill and intelligence; Peter Brenner, supervisor of photographic services, ably oversaw photography for both the publication and the exhibition; Jim Drobka, head graphic designer, was responsible for the excellent exhibition graphics; Sandy Bell designed this vibrant and exciting publication, which communicates the energy and spirit of Kusama's work; Rachel Ware Zooi was instrumental in coordinating production; Bernard Kester designed the exhibition itself with a sensitivity and flexibility that are rare; and Jeff Haskin oversaw the reconstruction of *Narcissus Garden*.

Working closely with the curators Jill Martinez has, for the last nine months, been the tireless and extremely efficient curatorial assistant for this exhibition as well as an invaluable aide. Kristine Kuramitsu compiled the exhibition history and did much of the library research for this exhibition and publication without any possibility of financial reward, and we are extremely grateful to

her. Our thanks go as well to Julie Joyce who, also because she believed in the project, helped with research for the exhibition history and the show. Tom Jacobson, head grants and foundations coordinator, was both collegial and effective in his role as fund-raiser, providing essential expertise and direction. Victoria Blyth-Hill, senior conservator; Steve Colton, conservator; Joseph Fronck, senior conservator; Catherine McLean, conservator; and Virginia Rasmussen, associate conservator, all contributed their time and skill to this project, and we are grateful.

At The Museum of Modern Art our thanks are due to Glenn D. Lowry, director, and Jennifer Russell, deputy director of exhibitions and collections, for making the exhibition possible at MoMA. Margit Rowell, chief curator, department of drawings; Kirk Varnedoe, chief curator, department of painting and sculpture; and Robert Storr, curator, department of painting and sculpture, enthusiastically supported this exhibition from its inception. Jerome Neuner, director of exhibition design and production; Eleni Cocordas, associate coordinator, exhibition program; Stephanie Ruta, office of the registrar; and Rebecca Stokes, department of development, exhibited their professional expertise in producing the best possible version of the exhibition for MoMA. Mikki Yoda, curator at the Hakone Open Air Museum in Tokyo and an intern in MoMA's department of drawings, provided invaluable scheduling assistance, research, and translation during the all-too-short time that she was in New York. Patricia Houlihan and Erica Moser provided much-needed conservation help at crucial moments. William Rubin, chief curator emeritus, department of painting and sculpture, negotiated a key loan for us and has our sincere appreciation.

Finally, and most importantly, our deepest thanks go Yayoi Kusama, whose remarkable early work is the subject of this exhibition. This is a story with a happy ending, for over the last few years Kusama's art has come to prominence again. Our hope is that this major museum exhibition and international tour will help to ensure that her unique contribution will never again be eclipsed.

**Laura Hoptman**

**Lynn Zelevansky**

## Lenders to the Exhibition

- The Allen Memorial Art Museum,  
Oberlin College
- The Baltimore Museum of Art
- Des Moines Art Center
- Hood Museum of Art,  
Dartmouth College
- Archer M. Huntington Art Gallery,  
the University of Texas at Austin
- Itabashi Art Museum
- Los Angeles County Museum of Art
- Musée national d'art moderne,  
Centre Georges Pompidou
- Museum Moderner Kunst,  
Stiftung Ludwig, Vienna
- Museum of Contemporary Art, Tokyo
- The Museum of Modern Art, New York
- Nagano Prefectural Shinano Art Museum
- The National Museum of Modern Art,  
Kyoto
- Oita City
- Shizuoka Prefectural Museum of Art
- Städtisches Museum Abteiberg  
Mönchengladbach
- Stedelijk Museum, Amsterdam
- Storm King Art Center, Mountainville,  
New York
- Toyota Municipal Museum of Art
- Walker Art Center, Minneapolis
- Whitney Museum of American Art,  
New York
- Keiji Anzai  
Anzai Art Office Inc.  
Collection Becht, Naarden, Netherlands  
Michael and Gabrielle Boyd  
Richard Castellane  
Eileen and Michael Cohen  
Linda and Ronald F. Daitz  
Christopher D'Amelio, New York  
Galleria d'Arte del Naviglio, Milan  
Dr. and Mrs. Virgilio Gianni  
Agnes Gund  
Gallery HAM  
Donald Judd Estate  
Udo Kultermann  
Yayoi Kusama  
Helen Lewis and Marvin Meyer  
Daisuke Miyatsu  
Ota Fine Arts  
Henk Peeters  
Beatrice Perry Family Collection  
Private collection  
Private collection, California  
Private collection, courtesy of D'Amelio  
Terras Gallery  
Ikkan Sanada, New York  
Julie and Barry Smooke, Los Angeles  
Albert-Udo Stappert  
Frank Stella  
Caroline de Westenholz  
Jud Yalkut

**Los Angeles County Museum of Art  
Board of Trustees,  
Fiscal Year 1997-98**

Robert F. Maguire III, **Chairman**  
William A. Mingst, **President**  
James R. Young, **Secretary/Treasurer**

Andrea L. Rich, **President and  
Chief Executive Officer**  
Graham W. J. Beal, **Director and  
Executive Vice President**

**County of Los Angeles  
Board of Supervisors, 1998**

Yvonne Brathwaite Burke, **Chair**  
Michael D. Antonovich  
Don Knabe  
Gloria Molina  
Zev Yaroslavsky

David E. Janssen, **Chief Administrative  
Officer**

William H. Ahmanson  
Daniel N. Belin  
Mrs. Lionel Bell  
Stephen F. Bollenbach  
Dr. George N. Boone  
Mike R. Bowlin  
Donald L. Bren  
Gerald Breslauer  
Eli Broad  
Mrs. Willard Brown  
Iris Cantor  
Mrs. William M. Carpenter  
Mrs. Edward W. Carter  
John F. Cooke  
Robert A. Day  
Jeremy C. Fair  
Michael R. Forman  
Mrs. Camilla Chandler Frost  
Julian Ganz Jr.  
Herbert M. Gelfand  
Stanley Grinstein  
Robert H. Halff  
Mrs. Dwight M. Kendall  
Mrs. Harry Lenart  
Herbert L. Lucas, Jr.  
Steve Martin  
Mrs. David H. Murdock  
Mrs. William Pagen  
Mrs. Stewart Resnick  
Dr. Richard A. Simms  
Michael G. Smooke  
Mrs. Jacob Y. Terner  
Walter L. Weisman

**Honorary Life Trustees**

Mrs. Howard Ahmanson  
Robert H. Ahmanson  
Robert O. Anderson  
The Honorable Walter H. Annenberg  
Mrs. Anna Bing Arnold  
R. Stanton Avery  
Mrs. Freeman Gates  
Joseph B. Koepfli  
Eric Lidow  
Mrs. Lucille Ellis Simon  
Mrs. Lillian Apodaca Weiner

**Past Presidents**

Edward W. Carter, 1961-66  
Sidney F. Brody, 1966-70  
Dr. Franklin D. Murphy, 1970-74  
Richard E. Sherwood, 1974-78  
Mrs. F. Daniel Frost, 1978-82  
Julian Ganz Jr., 1982-86  
Daniel N. Belin, 1986-90  
Robert F. Maguire III, 1990-94

The Museum of Modern Art



300025595

*Lynn Zelevansky, co-curator of Love Forever, is assistant curator in the modern and contemporary art department at the Los Angeles County Museum of Art.*

*Lava Hagman, co-curator of Love Forever, is assistant curator in the department of drawings at the Museum of Modern Art, New York.*

*Atsuo Takahagi, artist and poet, is Professor at Gama Art University and lecturer at Tokyo University.*

*Alexander Monroe is an independent curator based in New York and Tokyo and MacQuacken Fellow of East Asian Studies at New York University.*

Published by  
the Los Angeles County Museum of Art

PRINTED IN JAPAN

**Los Angeles County Museum of Art  
Board of Trustees,  
Fiscal Year 1997-98**

Robert F. Maguire III, Chairman  
William A. Mingst, President  
James R. Young, Secretary/Treasurer

Andrea L. Rich, President and  
Chief Executive Officer  
Graham W. J. Beal, Director and  
Executive Vice President

**County of Los Angeles  
Board of Supervisors, 1998**

Yvonne Brathwaite Burke, Chair  
Michael D. Antonovich  
Don Knabe  
Gloria Molina  
Zev Yaroslavsky

David E. Janssen, Chief Administrative  
Officer

William H. Ahmanson  
Daniel N. Belin  
Mrs. Lionel Bell  
Stephen E. Bollenbach  
Dr. George N. Boone  
Mike R. Bowlin  
Donald L. Bren  
Gerald Breslauer  
Eli Broad  
Mrs. Willard Brown  
Iris Cantor  
Mrs. William M. Carpenter  
Mrs. Edward W. Carter  
John F. Cooke  
Robert A. Day  
Jeremy C. Fair  
Michael R. Forman  
Mrs. Camilla Chandler Frost  
Julian Ganz Jr.  
Herbert M. Gelfand  
Stanley Grinstein  
Robert H. Halff  
Mrs. Dwight M. Kendall  
Mrs. Harry Lenart  
Herbert L. Lucas, Jr.  
Steve Martin  
Mrs. David H. Murdock  
Mrs. William Pagen  
Mrs. Stewart Resnick  
Dr. Richard A. Simms  
Michael G. Smooke  
Mrs. Jacob Y. Turner  
Walter L. Weisman

**Honorary Life Trustees**

Mrs. Howard Ahmanson  
Robert H. Ahmanson  
Robert O. Anderson  
The Honorable Walter H. Annenberg  
Mrs. Anna Bing Arnold  
R. Stanton Avery  
Mrs. Freeman Gates  
Joseph B. Koepfli  
Eric Lidow  
Mrs. Lucille Ellis Simon  
Mrs. Lillian Apodaca Weiner

**Past Presidents**

Edward W. Carter, 1961-66  
Sidney F. Brody, 1966-70  
Dr. Franklin D. Murphy, 1970-74  
Richard E. Sherwood, 1974-78  
Mrs. F. Daniel Frost, 1978-82  
Julian Ganz Jr., 1982-86  
Daniel N. Belin, 1986-90  
Robert F. Maguire III, 1990-94

The Museum of Modern Art



300025595

**Lynn Zelevansky**, co-curator of **Love Forever**, is associate curator in the modern and contemporary art department at the Los Angeles County Museum of Art.

**Laura Hoptman**, co-curator of **Love Forever**, is assistant curator in the department of drawings at the Museum of Modern Art, New York.

**Akira Tatehata**, art critic and poet, is Professor at Tama Art University and Lecturer at Tokyo University.

**Alexandra Munroe** is an independent curator based in New York and Tokyo and MacCracken Fellow of East Asian Studies at New York University.

Published by  
the Los Angeles County Museum of Art

PRINTED IN JAPAN



ISBN

MOMA  
025358  
\$29.95

9 780875 871813