

Infinite Quest

An artist conquers the world, one polka dot at a time

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INFINITY NET: THE AUTOBIOGRAPHY OF YAYOI KUSAMA TRANSLATED BY RALPH MCCARTHY CHICAGO: UNIVERSITY OF CHICAGO PRESS. 256 PAGES. \$35.

In her newly translated 2002 autobiography, Japanese artist Yayoi Kusama describes her dense all-over paintings as “white nets enveloping the black dots of silent death against a pitch-dark background of nothingness.” Such a mystic, existential idea of art places Kusama on the long roster of modernist artists, from Wassily Kandinsky to Barnett Newman, convinced that abstraction is a gateway to the unknown, the eternal, the universal—that simplified compositions can plumb the psyche’s deepest secrets, or even reach the holy. For Kusama, her signature dots are a “spell,” “mysterious,” “magical,” and, what’s more, her ticket to worldwide fame: “Bring on Picasso, bring on Matisse, bring on anybody!” she writes with typical bravado about her first New York solo show, in 1959. “I would stand up to them all with a single polka dot. . . . I was betting everything on this and raising my revolutionary banner against all of history.”

In *Infinity Net*, esoteric musings are interspersed with art-world gossip, creating an eccentric mix that is part manifesto on artistic form, part juicy tell-all. Kusama’s memoir is also a classic immigrant narrative: It begins with her moving to New York in 1957, eager to escape her conservative family. As in many expat tales, she adores her adopted culture and scorns what she left behind—the Japanese, she reports, are “backward.” On the first page she opines that Japan “lags so far behind” the US in terms of art because museums struggle while money is wasted on “all sorts of frivolities,” and continues: “Such foolishness is never seen in America, even during the leanest of times.” This early misapprehension indicates that the author is not quite in her right mind, and indeed this is the case: Kusama has been voluntarily living in an institution since 1975.

Mental illness plays a significant role in Kusama’s practice. For her, making art is not just an avant-garde exercise but the fulfillment of a psychological need. She talks about her artistic process in the language of therapy—it is a way to exorcise her demons, gain mastery over her fears, and “go on living in this world.” As a girl, she experienced visual and aural hallucinations, such as talking flowers and dogs that barked words at her. Anyone hunting for the ostensible origins of Kusama’s patterned art will find plenty of fodder here. She chronicles a childhood experience in which she stared at a floral tablecloth until she “saw the entire room, my entire body, and the entire universe covered with red flowers.” Throughout her memoir, Kusama shares her many diagnoses, from asthma and arrhythmia to panic attacks, neurosis, and anxiety. She also lucidly describes her battles with depersonalization as “a thin, silk-like curtain of indeterminate grey that would fall between me and my surroundings”—a barrier that prevents her from connecting with people and makes her “a slave to the act of creation.”

Kusama writes that her drive to create is a compulsion so strong that at times she resorted to stealing supplies in order to keep up her relentless pace. The art that resulted—abstract paintings, soft sculptures, experiments with psychedelic light effects, immersive environments—has been highly acclaimed (and, in recent years, ever more valued on the market). From that first New York solo show, “Obsessional Monochrome,” to the prizes she received in 2000 from the Japanese government, the book charts her astonishing international achievements. She didn’t float effortlessly to the top; Kusama’s first years in New York were poverty-stricken, and she subsisted on handfuls of shriveled chestnuts or broth made from discarded fish heads. However, her commitment to art “made me forget my hunger,” and her work was soon embraced by the art world. She narrates her rise as a series of resounding successes and sensations. The book is a storehouse of gushing quotes from critics such as Sir Herbert Read and Félix Guattari (who asserts that Kusama “re-enchants our world”). Some of her first reviewers struggled with the idea that such a young artist—who is, not incidentally, a Japanese woman—produced such mature canvases so attuned to “advanced” Western art. Her wide-ranging work was at the forefront of many artistic movements, and she forged prescient links

between Abstract Expressionism, Pop, post-Minimalism, kinetic installation, feminism, and performance.

Kusama’s story gains momentum in the 1960s, when her “revolutionary banner” was hoisted high by the counterculture. Her shocking Happenings made her infamous, including a 1967 piece in which a group of naked hippies burned flags, draft cards, and Bibles in front of St. Patrick’s Cathedral



Yayoi Kusama with *Accumulation No. 1* and *Egg Carton Relief No. B, 3* (both 1962), New York.

during Sunday Mass. As if that were not quite enough scandal for one event, some of the performers had public sex—Kusama avowed that free love was a way to accomplish world peace. She also attracted notoriety for painting dots on naked bodies, and was arrested and tried for her 1968 anti-Vietnam War protest work, *Body Paint Festival*. Though many of these performances were political, they were equally rooted in her abstruse philosophies—for instance, she believed that her trademark polka dots, when painted on bare flesh, “caused that person’s self to be obliterated and returned him or her to the natural universe.”

During this era, she also expanded her art into a wider brand that included many business enterprises; along with her friendly competitor Andy Warhol, she investigated art as commerce and prefigured the merchandising efforts of artists such as Takashi Murakami. She hosted gay male sex parties, edited a weekly newspaper called *Kusama Orgy*, sold sex toys and porn as part of the Kusama Sex Company, and designed clothes that were mass-produced and sold in a “Kusama corner” of Bloomingdale’s. It’s an exaggeration when Kusama writes that at the time she was “reported on almost as much as Jackie O. or President Nixon,” but her public persona, along with her art, made her famous enough to appear on *The Tonight Show* with Johnny Carson.

Kusama’s memoir is nonlinear, told in looping episodes that recall her paintings of small, interlocking circles, and is

punctuated by archival photos of the artist and interludes of her depressive poetry (“Sorrow Like This”). Along the way, she shares anecdotes about celebrity artists she has encountered, including her unlikely American mentor, Georgia O’Keeffe, former neighbor (and supportive critic) Donald Judd, drinking buddy Salvador Dalí, and “rival gang leader” Warhol. She describes an affair with Joseph Cornell—who, like a lovelorn teenager, hectored her with constant phone calls and filled her mailbox with letters—and Kusama’s account of their relationship is among the book’s most intriguing and tragicomic passages. She says they kissed but never had sex, and claims Cornell was impotent because his mother taught him that “women are filthy.” Kusama writes that she could not overcome her disgust at his penis, which she characterizes as being “like a big, desiccated calzone.”

Although she is famous for orchestrating orgies and for her phallus-sprouting sculptures, Kusama declares, “I am a person who has no sex.” She calls both male and female genitalia “objects of horror.” But she isn’t averse to all erotic activities, as she reports enjoying disciplining unruly members of her gay male entourage: “Cracking the whip against their white skin and seeing the red welts rise, I felt an indescribable pleasure.” She was also an early gay-rights activist, officiating at a 1968 Happening, *Homosexual Wedding* (featuring unisex outfits that she designed), and writing a song with the refrain “That’s why men should all become homos / Ladies, let’s all become lesbians.” Since her work is full of contradictions—serene agitation, or frenzied stasis—perhaps her stance as a shy exhibitionist, or frigid sex fiend, has a perverse logic. Indeed, Kusama’s story is propelled by such oppositions and conflicts—she is psychologically wounded yet incredibly self-confident, an antiestablishment agitator who courted mainstream publicity.

Living in New York during this heady era took its toll on Kusama’s mental health, and her hallucinations returned in the early 1970s—this time as “swirling blue, red, and white configurations.” Though she does not mention the significance of these colors, they suggest that her breakdown was due, in part, to an overdose of America. Upon returning to Japan in 1975, she says she keenly felt the disconnection of a returning exile, especially in readjusting to her native language after thinking and speaking in English for so many years. She checked herself into a Tokyo asylum, and soon after became a prolific writer; her debut novel, *Manhattan Suicide Addict*, appeared in 1978, and many other books, including collections of poetry, have since been published.

Throughout *Infinity Net*, Kusama often mixes metaphors and tips into cliché. A typical passage reads, “I feel as if I am driving an endless highway, all the way to my death. It is like drinking thousands of cups of coffee cranked out of automatic dispensing machines.” Other aspects of the writing are more difficult to take, such as her unceasing chauvinism about Japan. Kusama is, in some regards, stuck in an earlier time, which makes sense, since she’s been living in an asylum for more than three decades. She has been isolated from society’s increased cultural sensitivity, and this might partially explain the most troubling aspect of the book: her extremely regressive representation of African Americans, who are exoticized, hypersexualized, and fetishized.

Kusama has built a studio across the street from her open ward, and she currently works every day of the week. In a renunciation similar to “I am a person who has no sex,” she proudly announces that she now associates “with no one.” Removed from the parties, openings, and public events that ruled her life in the late ’60s and early ’70s, she focuses entirely on creating art. Her ambition is undiminished, and her new goal reaches beyond mere artistic success. As she writes: “There are nights when I cannot sleep simply because my heart is bursting with the aspiration to make art that will last forever.” Kusama hopes to cheat death, casting her infinite nets out in a quest for immortality. □

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