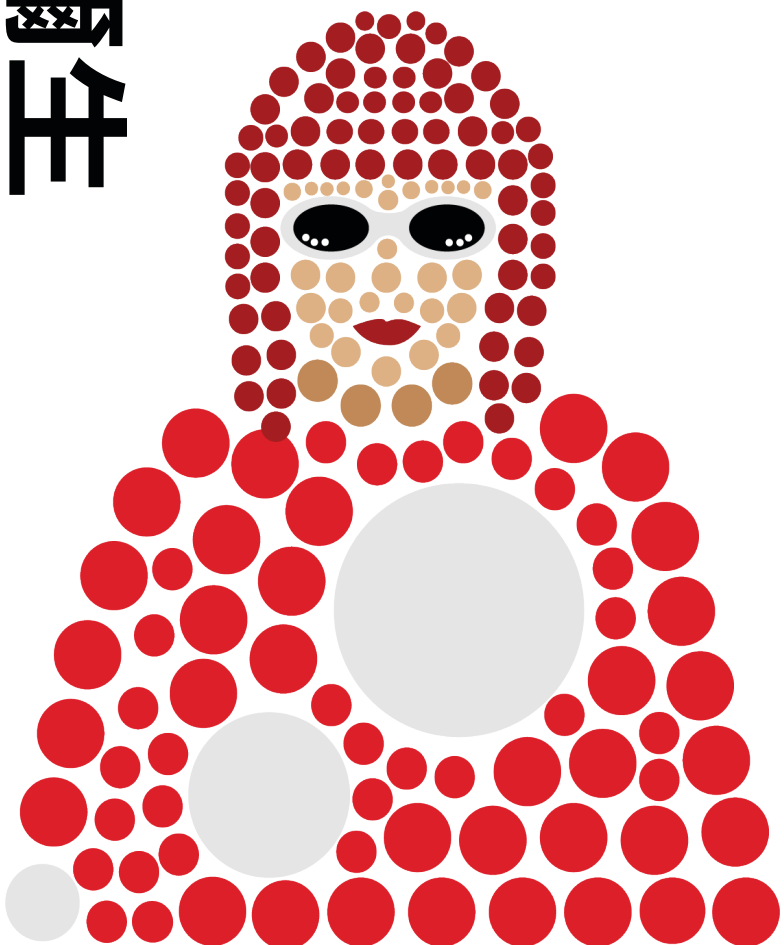


A brief  
summary of the  
extraordinary life  
of artist,  
Yayoi Kusama.



草間 彌生

YAYOI KUSAMA

A POLKA DOT PICTURE



尊聞彌生



**“My mother told me that I was not allowed to paint, that one day I would have to marry someone from a rich family and become a housewife. When I was a girl she took away all my inks and canvases.”**

Yayoi Kusama was born on March 22, 1929, Matsumoto, Japan to an affluent, albeit abusive, family of merchants. Her father was a serial cheater and her mother was physically abusive to her. She was often made to spy on her father’s extramarital affairs by her mother. This caused her to develop an aversion to male sexuality and sex that would make a lasting impact on her art.

At the age of 13, Kusama went to work in a defense factory where she sewed parachutes for the Japanese army in the World War 2. When talking about her time in the factory, she says that she spent her adolescence “in closed darkness”. Kusama’s parents had a certain vision for her future at this point and it was one that did not include art.

In 1948, she enrolled at the Kyoto Municipal School of Arts and Crafts, where she learned the traditional ‘Nihonga’ painting style of Japan. She began to garner an interest in the European and American avant-garde, and participated in several painting exhibitions in Tokyo, Kyoto, Osaka, and Matsumoto.

By 1950, Kusama was depicting abstract natural forms in water colour, gouache, and oil paint, primarily on paper. She began covering surfaces—walls, floors, canvases, and later, household objects, and naked assistants—with the polka dots that would become a trademark of her work.

YAYOI KUSAMA



*Yayoi Kusama, Red Pumpkin, 1992*

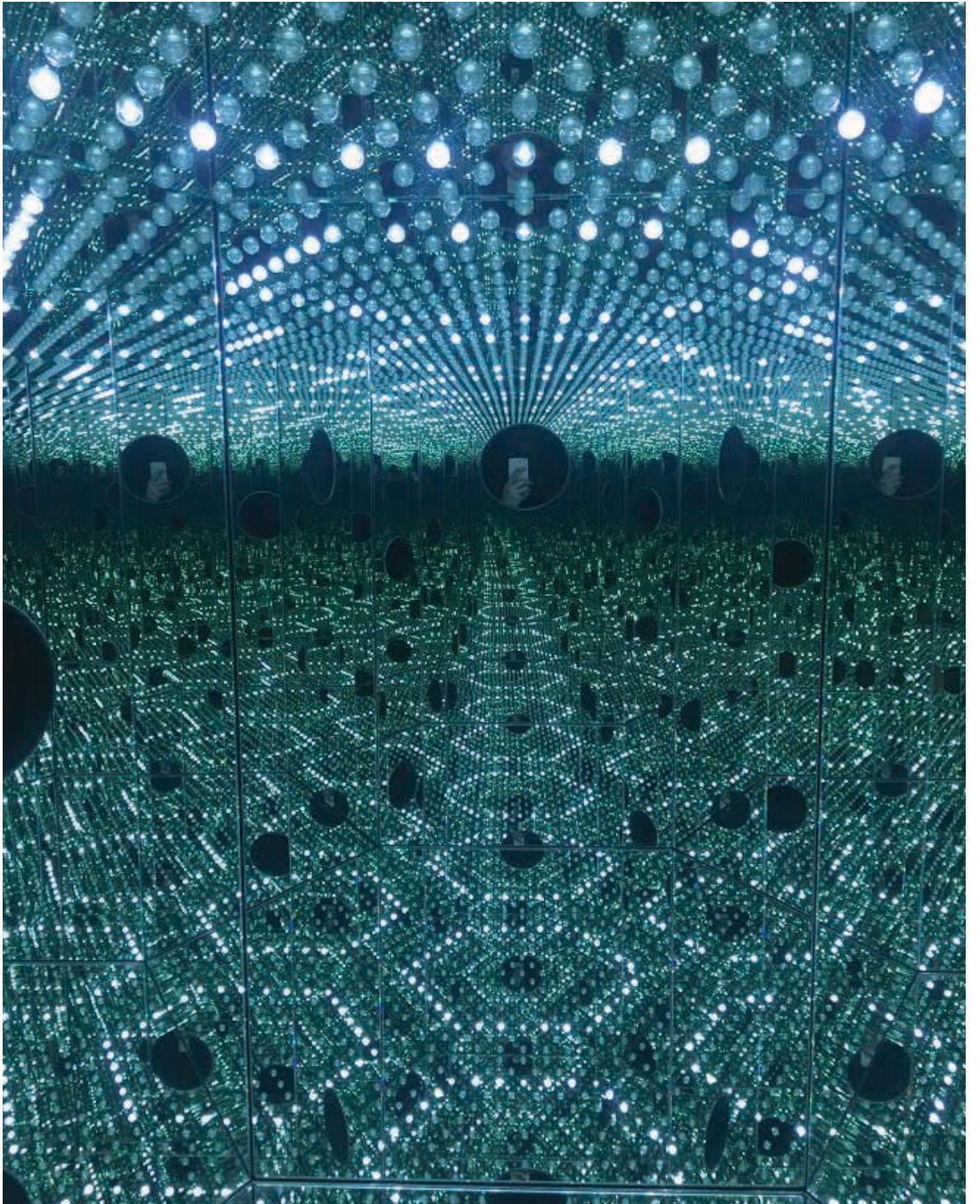
# HALLUCINATIONS



*Yayoi Kusama, Infinity Mirrors, 2018*

When Kusama was ten years old she started to experience vivid hallucinations which she described as “visual and aural hallucinations” or ‘flashes of light, auras, or dense fields of dots’ which would come to life, multiply and engulf herself and her surroundings in a process she called ‘self-obliviation’. She was also fascinated by the smooth white stones covering the bed of the river near her family home, which is another reason behind her lasting fixation on dots.

These hallucinations also included flowers and pumpkins that spoke to her, and patterns in fabric that she stared at coming to life, multiplying, and engulfing or expunging her. By 1950, whilst still working in Japan, Kusama began covering walls, floors canvases and household objects with her trademark polka dots in reference to these early childhood hallucinations. These hallucinations are the main source of inspiration and would follow her all throughout her life, still occurring to this day.





# MOVE TO AMERICA

Yayoi had found herself bored and tired of the conservative and traditional methods of her teachers and the art scene in Japan and longed to branch out. While living in Matsumoto, Japan, Yayoi had found one of Georgia O'Keeffe's books and became enraptured in her paintings. This caused her to send O'Keeffe a letter and some paintings and O'Keeffe wrote back. O'Keeffe had warned Yayoi that the United States was a tough place for a young artist. This didn't scare of Yayoi so in 1957 she managed to get a passport and a visa, and sewed dollars into her dresses to circumvent postwar currency controls.

## The Big Apple

She arrived in Seattle, Washington at first where she held an exhibition at a small gallery. Then she made her way to New York, where she had a rude awakening: "Unlike post-war Matsumoto, New York was in every way a fierce and violent place. I found it all extremely stressful and was soon mired in neurosis," she wrote in her autobiography.

Making matters worse, she found herself in abject poverty. Her bed was an old door, and she scavenged fish heads and old vegetables from dumpsters and boiled them into soup. This poverty only inspired Yayoi to work harder, so she began to throw herself into her work.





*Yayoi Kusama's New York studio (1968)*

She began producing her first trademark “Infinity Net” paintings, and by working so hard she was able to stave off neurosis...for the most part. She often found herself suffering from psychotic episodes and eventually wound up in a hospital.

Yayoi's time in New York turned out to be a success. She found herself in the in-crowd, hanging out with artists such as Andy Warhol, and Mark Rothko. She also became close friends with Eva Hesse, after moving her studio into the same building as Hesse and Donald Judd. She did have one known romantic relationship with the artist Joseph Cornell. Neither party had an interest in sex, so this pairing was ideal for Yayoi.

**“When I arrived in New York, I went to the top of the Empire State Building. Seeing this big city, I promised myself that one day I would conquer New York and make my name in the world with my passion for the arts and mountains of creative energy stored inside myself. In New York, I devoted myself to my work.”**

Kusama quickly established a reputation as a leader of the avante-garde movement, with her work highly praised by legendary art critic Herbert Read. She became increasingly popular as she would hold exhibitions in packed galleries and her art had started to garner collectors.

Despite Yayoi's success, she almost seems to be written out of the history of the pop art and avant-garde movements, claiming that artists such as Warhol and Oldenburg had copied or stolen her ideas. This topic is touched on heavily in the documentary about Kusama titled “Kusama: Infinity” by Heather Lenz.



*With just one polka dot, nothing can be achieved.*

*Universe, there is the sun, the moon, the earth.*

In the universe, and hundreds of millions of stars.

All of us live in the unfathomable mystery and infinitude of the universe.

*Accumulation of the Corpses (Prisoner Surrounded by the  
Curtain of Depersonalization) 1950*



# WISDOM POLITICAL ACTIVISM

Kusama has always been politically inclined, being very influenced by the wars that have taken place early in her life. Some of her earliest surviving paintings relate to the horrors of war: *Accumulation of the Corpses (Prisoner Surrounded by the Curtain of Depersonalization)* and *Earth of Accumulation*, both dating from 1950, show bleak, war-torn landscapes where even plant life struggles to survive.

In the 1960s, during the Vietnam War, Kusama staged demonstrations called “Happenings” in New York. These events counteracted violence with activism in the form of naked body painting happenings and love-ins. Her first *Anatomic Explosion* featuring naked dancers took place on 15 October 1968 opposite the New York Stock Exchange. The artist’s press release stated, ‘The money made with this stock is enabling the war to continue. We protest this cruel, greedy instrument of the war establishment.’



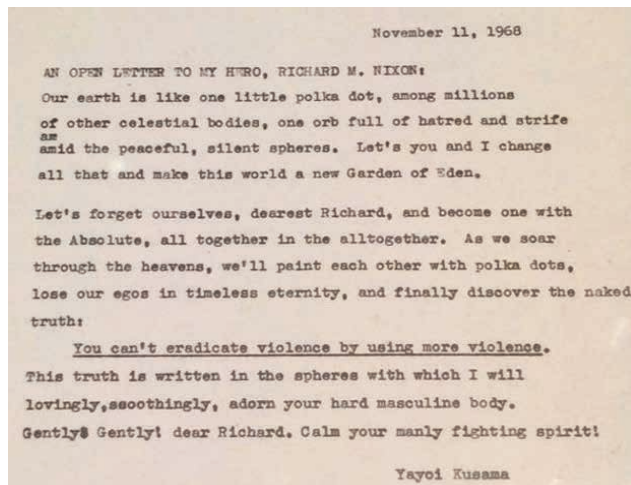
*Yayoi Kusama Anatomic Explosion on Wall Street 1968*

## Controversy

As her infamous stunts gained more and Her “Happenings” garnered much attention. On 25 November 1968 she staged New York’s first “homosexual wedding”, for which she had created a “wedding dress for two”.

She sold polka dot fashion designs from a boutique, with holes to reveal breasts and buttocks, which cemented her notoriety not only in America but also in her native – and deeply conservative – Japan. Media interest in her work had shifted from serious critical attention to exposés in the tabloids where her name became synonymous with skin painting and orgies.

One exhibit of Kusama’s, “Narcissus Garden” (1966), at the Venice Biennale was deemed so controversial that organizers barred her from performing alongside the display.



1968 Letter to Nixon

## Dear Mr. President

Continuing her political activism and protest of war, she even offered to sleep with President Nixon if he stopped the Vietnam War: “Let’s paint each other with polka dots,” she wrote him. These controversial stunts led to a waning interest in her work, and she found herself out of favor and out of money.



# RETURN TO JAPAN

Due to the controversial nature of Kusama's stunts and work, many in New York criticized Kusama as an attention seeker, who would stop at nothing for publicity. Increasingly dejected. Out of money and favor, she returned to Japan in 1973 where she was forced to start her career over. News of Kusama's escapades had made it back to Japan, turning her into a "national disgrace" and leading her mother to say she wished that Kusama had died during a childhood illness.

## Mental Decline

Kusama had found that her depression prevented her from painting. Following another suicide attempt, Kusama decided to check herself into the Seiwa Mental Hospital, where she has lived ever since. There she was able to begin making art again. She embarked on a series of collages, which center on birth and death.

From 1977, by her own choice, she lived in a mental hospital. She continued to produce art during that period and also wrote surreal poetry and fiction, including *The Hustlers Grotto of Christopher Street* (1984) and *Between Heaven and Earth* (1988).

She reported in an interview she did with *Infinity Net*:

**"I fight pain, anxiety, and fear every day, and the only method I have found that relieved my illness is to keep creating art. I followed the thread of art and somehow discovered a path that would allow me to live."**

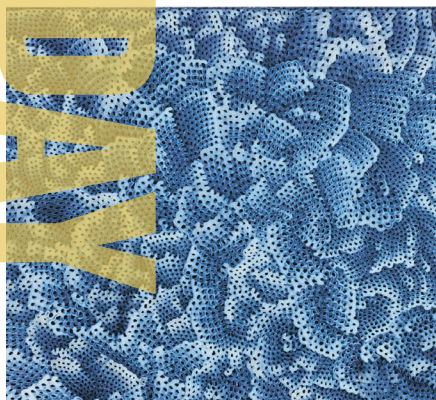


# KUSAMA TODAY

in 1989, the Center for International Contemporary Arts in New York put on a retrospective of her work. This began a revival, if slow, of interest in her art. She filled a mirrored room with pumpkins for the Venice Biennale in 1993, then in 1998 held a major show at the Museum of Modern Art in New York.

Kusama has become a global phenomenon in the past few years. The Tate Modern in London and the Whitney Museum in New York have held major retrospectives, drawing huge crowds, and her signature polka dots are immediately recognizable. Not only has she held numerous exhibitions, but she's also had documentaries made about her, books published, and even designed a float in the 2019 Macy's Day parade.

*Nets Obsession, 2004*



The age of social media has only helped the Kusama craze, many flocking to her Infinity Room exhibits and large sculptures in hopes to snag a picture. Often times at these exhibits, visitors have to wait in line, sometimes for hours, to get a chance to snap a selfie. One of these works, Yellow Pumpkin (right), was a popular tourist spot in Naoshima, Japan. Sadly, in August of 2021, Yellow Pumpkin fell into the ocean when a typhoon wracked island.

## Moving Forward

Yayoi Kusama is a phenomenal artist worthy of the same praise and craze the likes of Warhol has garnered. She may be in her 90s but she isn't planning on slowing down any time soon.

## KUSAMA'S MOST EXPENSIVE WORKS

- "White 28" \$7.1 Million
- "No. Red B" \$7 Million
- "Interminable Net 3" \$5 Million
- "No. 2 (1959)" \$5.8 Million
- "Pumpkin 1981" \$4.5 Million
- "No.Red.A.B.C (1960)" \$3.7 Million
- "No. G.A. White" \$3.3 Million
- "NO. E (1959)" \$3 Million





*Yellow Pumpkin, 1994*

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