

Mirror Room (Pumpkin)—Yayoi Kusama's Psychological Space

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Abstract

Yayoi Kusama uses aspects of her mental illness in her creation of Mirror Room (Pumpkin) to welcome participants to experience her psychological space.

Keywords

Yayoi Kusama, Infinity Dots, Yellow, Phallic Sculpture, Pumpkin, Trauma, Psychological, Art Therapy

1. Introduction

Yayoi Kusama is a well-known pop artist, surrealist, feminist and minimalist. Her works, including paintings, sculptures, performances, Installations, novels, films, etc., presents the motifs of Kusama's art works, polka dots, infinity nets, phallic soft sculptures and pumpkins (Chiba, 2006). In my dissertation, I'll set a question about her art work, Mirror Room (Pumpkin) 1991, reflective chamber on a series of yellow gourds covered in black polka dots, one of Kusama's frequently used symbols (Gilman, 1892). Visitors will peep a mirrored space and fully immerse themselves in Kusama's creation, becoming part of the art. I concentrated on a question in my research, what's the meaning of this art piece, and try to find clues from Kusama's career (Hoptmann, 2003).

In 1991, Kusama exhibited *Mirror Room (Pumpkin)* (Figure 1) at Hara Museum of Contemporary Art in Tokyo. It's a whole yellow colored space, floor to ceiling with a black polka dots pattern. In the middle of the space stood a mirror cube (200 cm × 200 cm × 200 cm) with a peep hole on it in a manner 1965 *Peep Show* (Kusama, 1978). Through that window the viewer could gaze on what seemed to be an infinite field of papier mâché pumpkins, the same yellow and black polka dot design as the exterior gallery (Piling, 2012).

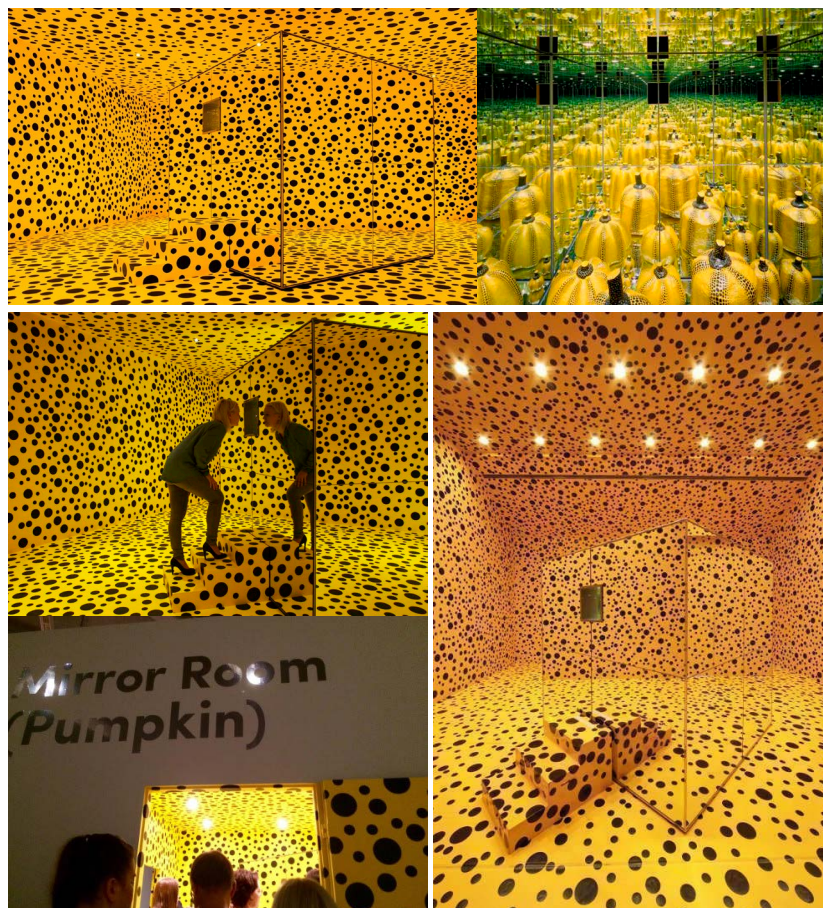


Figure 1. Mirror Room (Pumpkin) 1991, mirror, iron, wood, plaster, styrofoam, acrylic, 200 cm × 200 cm × 200 cm, Hara Museum of Contemporary Art, Tokyo.

In this pumpkin work, Kusama nearly shows all her iconic traits: yellow color with black dots, pumpkins, and an infinity made by the mirror.

Kusama has traced the origins of these motifs back to hallucinations that first struck when she was ten years old. Dr. Nishimura, a psychiatric physician, diagnosed as “atypical psychosis”, which resulted in schizophrenia and irritability (Kusama, 2002). Kusama’s mental disease comes from her “Childhood trauma”.

An upper-middle-class family of seedling merchants, it seemed that little Kusama had a good family. However, Kusama’s father was a playboy, continually have sexual relationship with whores, geishas, even housemaids one after another. Kusama’s mother was the proud daughter of the head of the family and owner of bad temper (Kusama, 2011). She became hysterical when her husband left for trysts, and forced young Kusama to follow him and report back. After Kusama’s reports, her mother would vent all her rage on little Kusama, and would send her again next time. That may be the reason why Kusama kept a platonic relationship for ten years with her lover, Joseph Cornell, a famous American contemporary artist. It is said that they don’t have sex in their relationship. Thus, I get the first clue; Kusama had tremendous fear of sex.

In this awful family atmosphere, the only thing that kept her in peace was

drawing. However, her mother had a strong opposition to Kusama's art pursuits (Takako, 2008). In conservative Japanese families, girls who pursue art are considered shameful. Kusama's mother wanted Kusama to be like an art dealer rather than an artist. She always kicked Kusama's palettes, ripped up her works and threw them away. The earliest recorded work, the image of her mother in a kimono (Figure 2), is covered and obliterated by dots, looks sad and depressing (Yayoi, 2016). It is not like a portrait of a mother, but an expression of hate and anger.

During World War II, Kusama decided to escape from that toxic family. She wrote a letter to Georgia O'Keeffe, O'Keeffe has been recognized as the "Mother of American modernism". Kusama expressed her willingness to go to America and received advice from her on visiting the US and conducting artistic activities there. So, in 1957, Kusama moved to New York to start her art career. Before she went to America, her mother gave Kusama a sum of cash and told Kusama never to come back. When she left, she burned down thousands of works on the river bank outside her home, expressing her anger at her mother. It was a way to eliminate the memories of the past (Young, 2010).

Kusama formally started her art career after arriving in New York in 1957, and her enormous productivity was also during her first years after her arrival in New York. She continually drew white circles on a huge black canvas, after it was done, the painting seemed like numerous black dots on a white background. Kusama repeated this kind of work again and again. Reproducing the objects again and again, was her own way of conquering the fear. It was a kind of self-therapy. *Infinity net* (1959), is the debut of Yayoi Kusama, were taken directly from her hallucinations.

From then on, switching to sculpture and performance as her primary mediums, Kusama became a fixture of the New York avant-garde, associated with the pop art movement. Once, Andy Warhol came to Kusama's opening, saw the



Figure 2. *Untitled*, 1939, pencil drawing, 35 cm × 25 cm Japan.

One Thousand Boats 1963, and shouted, “Yayoi, what is this? Its fantastic!” A few years later, when Andy Warhol papered the ceiling and walls at Leo Castelli Gallery with silkscreen posters of Cow’s face (Figure 3), it was an appropriation or imitation of Kusama’s one thousand boats, a set of thousands soft phallic soft sculptures, in order to heal Kusama’s feelings of disgust toward sex, Kusama wrote in her biography.

2. Conclusion

Happenings, Kusama’s performance art, were released from 1965, a awful lot in New York in 1968 and also in Netherland 1967, gathered a bunch of hippies, covered polka dots on their bodies and danced nude in front of the statue of George Washington across from the New York Stock Exchange. Through “happenings”, Kusama bridged the gap between herself and the viewers—between acts of creation and reception—and audiences became indispensable participants in the enactment of art. She obliterate herself in naked crowd who covered with dots pattern, meanwhile, eliminating herself in the fear of sex (naked bodies) and visual hallucination (polka dots).

Repeating the things that horrified her, it helped Kusama to heal the wounds in her heart. That explained why she made infinite dots to escape from visual hallucination and made phallic soft sculptures to suppress the fear of sex. Then, what about Pumpkins? There’s one opinion that during WORLD WAR II, when food was scarce, Japanese people lived off pumpkins. But it’s the reason for kusama keen on pumpkins? By researching about her pumpkins, dots and phallic works, I found some subtle connections among these motifs in Kusama’s psychological world.

Kusama said. “Dot is a symbol of life.” Dots like cells, eggs and sperms, are the smallest units of organisms. These units pile up tissues, organs, and living bodies.



Figure 3. *Cow C*, 1966, Leo Castelli Gallery, *Andy Warhol*; *One Thousand Boats*, 1963, Yayoi Kusama.



Figure 4. Kusama's happening at the Statue of Liberty, Liberty Island, New York, 1968/Image courtesy: Ota Fine Arts, Tokyo.

The textures composed by these dots, stretching and crossing, represent the flow of life. Since the sexual organs are tools for reproduction, Kusama uses polka dots pattern on Phallic works, and give them the meaning of breeding, living and regeneration (**Figure 4**).

And then I found some subtle connections between penis and pumpkin, since pumpkin's segment is very similar to phallic size and shape, both of them are curved, soft bars. (**Figure 6**) Thus I suppose that pumpkin is a collection of penis in kusama's works. When I see kusama's solo exhibitions, I found in 1984, Fuji Television Gallery exhibition (**Figure 5**) is a good depiction of the process of her pumpkin idea. Kusama set a sequence of works in one space: Bunches of white with black topped penises, yellow black dots paintings and penises, pumpkin paintings, and pumpkin sculptures. This arrangement showed intention of connections among these art works.

Dots compose cells, form the yellow-black dots pattern, representing life, and penises compose the segments of pumpkins. Thus, pumpkins are the final form for Kusama's fear of sex.

Back to the *Mirror Room (Pumpkin)* (1991), now all the elements have a logical explanation. Due to the presence of mirror cube in the center, the hall seems to become an infinite space, filled with infinite yellow black dots. It's like countless cells and lives in it, and the cube disappears, assimilated into the universe, like Kusama herself. Meanwhile, inside the mirror cube, is Kusama's inner world, is also an infinite world, filled with pumpkins, filled with her desire to recover from the fear of sex. It's a concentrated reflection of Kusama's psychological space (**Figure 6**).

3. Discussion

Similarly, Some other art work show mental illness situations like Kusama's



Figure 5. Installation view, 1984, Fuji Television Gallery.

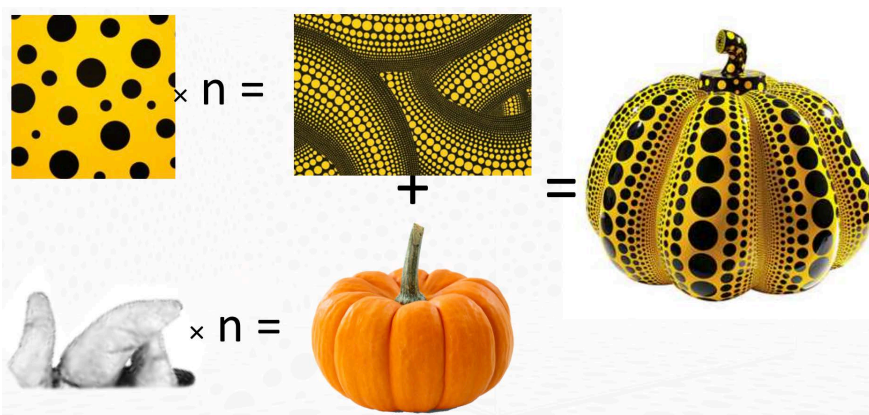


Figure 6. Mirror room (Pumpkin) 1991, is a concentrated reflection of Kusama's fear of sex.

psychological world. The novel, *The Yellow Wallpaper*, depicting the effect of under-stimulation on the female narrator's mental health and her descent into psychosis.

She imagines there are women creeping around behind the patterns of the yellow wallpaper and believe she is one of them. She locks herself in the room, refusing to leave. It is very similar to Kusama's Pumpkin works. *The Yellow wallpaper* room and pumpkin are both a small, yellow space, with patterns on them. They are safe places for both women to keep themselves in and refuse to go outside. But, unlike Charlotte's yellow wallpaper room, which is shabby and smelly, Kusama's pumpkins, especially after she back to Japan, are vibrant and vivid. Although they also show self-protection and lonely feelings, pumpkins give people a sense of hope and happiness. Kusama's recent works style changed from restlessness to kawaii and peace, like *Red Pumpkin* (2006) (**Figure 7**). Maybe kawaii style reminds kusama of her lack of love and memories of childhood.

Kusama is a longevous and productive artist. Although her mental illness gave



Figure 7. Give Me Love, 2015.

her infinite pain, she takes this pain to create art, and pursue art for her entire life. It could be said, Yayoi Kusama creates art, and art saved her.

Conflicts of Interest

The author declares no conflicts of interest regarding the publication of this paper.

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