

The Myth of the Mad Artist:

Works and Writings by Kusama Yayoi

GUNHILD BORGGREEN

Abstract

Kusama Yayoi has been active as an artist for more than 50 years, and is highly acclaimed both in her native Japan and in the United States, where she spent more than a decade of her career. A large corpus of critical reviews, catalogue texts, interviews and autobiographical writings by and about Kusama has been published over the years, and this paper investigates a specific topic in these texts concerning the discourse of madness. A persistent myth of Kusama as a 'mad' artist emerged in the early and mid-1980s, but has influenced the interpretations of her whole *oeuvre*. Based on three texts written by Kusama, this paper shows that the artist herself did not describe her artistic processes in psychopathological terms at the early stages of her art production. I shall argue for more accurate interpretations of Kusama's art, based on the artist's own accounts as well as trends on the contemporary international art scene.

Introduction

In the spring of 1999 I had the pleasure of visiting the renowned Japanese artist Kusama Yayoi in her studio in Tokyo. Accompanying me on this visit was Professor Chino Kaori, who is engaged in research on gender issues in Japanese art history

as well as in contemporary Japanese art. It was Professor Chino Kaori who had established the contact for me through the artist's gallery. After we entered the building and had descended a set of stairs, Kusama Yayoi welcomed us at the door to her studio. She was dressed in a plain orange T-shirt and black pants, both stained with bright spots of paint, apparently the clothes she works in. Kusama appeared youthful with her long black hair loose over her shoulders, and she was wearing red lipstick. We sat down at a large table in the office of the studio, where Kusama granted me an interview for more than an hour. I was particularly interested in Kusama's activities in Europe in the 1960s, and she answered questions and pulled out various exhibition catalogues and magazines from her personal library to show me. Kusama also showed video and movie clips, and was in every way helpful with information, as well as being patient with my inadequate Japanese.

A couple of days later, a friend of mine enquired about the visit. 'How did it go?', she asked, and added, 'Was Kusama Yayoi really mad, as they all say?' This remark probably derived from the fact that many art reviews, catalogue texts and other general articles about Kusama Yayoi convey an image of her as a 'crazy' or 'mad' artist. Having met the artist for only a single afternoon, I would of course have no way of knowing whether Kusama suffers from any kind of mental disorder or not. The issue did not come up during my conversation with the artist.

A Discourse of Madness

Anyone with the slightest interest in the art of Kusama Yayoi, will have encountered parts of a discourse concerning madness and insanity when reading recent publications about the artist. In numerous popular as well as scholarly texts Kusama is described as suffering from mental disease which has influenced not only her life but also her art works. It is frequently mentioned that Kusama lives at a psychiatric hospital,



PLATE 1. Photo from Kusama Yayoi's studio, March 1999.
From left: Chino Kaori, the artist Kusama Yayoi, the author

a reference that some art critics apply as a means of dramatizing Kusama's life events, as when art critic Monty DiPietro wrote:

'After scandalizing her adopted home for more than a decade, Kusama was finally driven out of New York by the mental illness that had afflicted her from childhood. She flew back to Japan and ended up in a Tokyo psychiatric hospital.'¹

Another critic, Andrew Solomon, wrote about Kusama: 'The mental problems she had long battled became unmanageable, and she opted for the silence of a Tokyo psychiatric hospital.'² Many critics suggest that art is a kind of therapy for Kusama which permits her to control the inner turmoil originating from her illness. For example, according to art critic Tanigawa Atsushi, Kusama unites symptoms of hallucinations with a way of objectifying these symptoms, and this functions as an unconscious artistic therapy.³ The idea of therapy is mentioned by independent art curator Alexandra Munroe, who refers to some of Kusama's early paintings like this: 'For Kusama, such purpose and method of art was instinctive. She had always used her art as a form of therapy, as a means to explore and expose the "primal source" of her psyche.'⁴

Mental instability is not only presented as the origin of Kusama's creativity, but is also noted to have influenced her style and aesthetic approach. In 1998, the Los Angeles County Museum of Art held a large exhibition entitled *Love Forever. Yayoi Kusama, 1958-1968*, focusing on the period Kusama lived in New York. In the catalogue text, curator Lynn Zelevansky warns against relating Kusama's history of mental illness too closely with her art. However, Zelevansky continues:

'Nonetheless, it is important to acknowledge that mental illness has deeply affected Kusama's work [...] Indeed, obsessive accumulation, arguably the most consistent element in Kusama's production, seems to be a by-product of her hallucinations.'⁵

In a review article about the *Love Forever* exhibition, art critic M. A. Greenstein comments on the intensity of Kusama's imagery. She relates it to Kusama's mental condition: 'This intensity [...]

is a powerful statement of the artist as visionary, as much as it is a stunning documentation of Kusama's aesthetics as determined by mental illness.⁶

The alleged madness of Kusama Yayoi is also understood within another context than the purely aesthetic one. Several critics apply a feminist interpretation because they see the works of Kusama as displaying a consistent and conscious criticism against a male-dominated art world and society in general. Alexandra Munroe, for example, applies a feminist interpretation of disorder and misbehaviour as signs of disapproval and dissent. Kusama's madness, according to Munroe, expresses itself as anger or outrage against social values and gender stereotypes, and is manifested through the repetition of the phallus shape, which appears in many of Kusama's works.⁷ Art critic Colette Cattopadhyay also suggests a feminist interpretation by identifying Kusama's mental illness as a protest against patriarchal dominance. After noting that Kusama in 1977 voluntarily entered a psychiatric asylum, Cattopadhyay writes:

'Perhaps her voluntarily commitment to live in an institution is a partial acquiescence to the triumphant patriarchal systems that insist on categorising her actions and expressions as excessive and thus abnormal. Certainly, the primal urgency and clarity of Kusama's forthright feminist version remains problematic to established patriarchal social structures of power.'⁸

All these interpretations are valid within the context in which they are presented. Some critics use the word 'mad' in the sense of 'unusual' or 'not normal' compared to mainstream artistic expressions in order to emphasize Kusama's individuality and uniqueness as an artist aspiring to a competitive international art environment. Other critics, as suggested above, apply the concept of madness as a means of emphasizing Kusama's defiance against social expectations and norms, for example as an expression of outrage towards patriarch dominance in society and in the art world. Such understandings are indeed relevant when considering Kusama Yayoi in her social role as artist or as woman.

In this paper, however, I would like to pose a question from a different angle, namely: does the image of Kusama Yayoi as 'mad' have any relevance to the way in which her art works are or can be interpreted? Does it make sense to connect 'madness' to a specific style or mode of expression in Kusama's art? Some critics, as discussed above, refer to distinct psychopathological terms and point out how hallucinations or psychosomatic obsessions have guided the style and the content of Kusama's art. There are numerous examples of the artist herself explaining such factors as the fundamental background for her art works.

I would like to argue, however, that detailed analyses and interpretations of Kusama's art can be conducted without a single reference to psychopathological conditions. Indeed, I believe that an accurate understanding of Kusama's work has been obscured by the recent discourse about her madness. This discourse of madness, although emphasizing the modernist ideals of an individual and creative artist, has constructed Kusama as a suffering victim, whose art production is based almost solely on a set of premises over which the artist herself had no influence, such as childhood traumas or a transient, unattended tendency towards schizophrenia. I believe this is a false image of Kusama's art production which does not rightfully acknowledge her conscious articulation of various artistic modes. Nor does it take into consideration the cultural and political contexts in which Kusama lived and worked.

The main point in my argumentation is based on Kusama Yayoi's own writings. I have selected texts from three different stages of Kusama's artistic career in order to provide examples of how the artist herself articulated her art production. The first stage dates from 1955, when Kusama had become a recognized artist among avant-garde art circles in Tokyo. One particular text written by Kusama shows that from the start she formulated notions concerning the origin of her artistic creativity, and that she was well informed about trends on the international art scene. The second stage is around 1961 when Kusama had moved to New York and started a new series of oil paintings that were well received by critics and curators in New York and several places in Europe. In one particular text the artist

describes her working method and the background for her new works. The writings by Kusama from these early stages of her career contain a number of conceptions and ideas about her art, but there is no reference to mental illness.

Descriptions of pathological conditions begin to appear in the early and mid-1980s, when Kusama had returned from New York to Tokyo, and began to re-establish her artistic position in Japan. From this point on, remarks concerning Kusama's mental illness appear in various art critical texts, and a pathological understanding of her art starts to dominate, not only regarding the recent works, but also works from the previous stages of her career. I shall suggest why the discourse of madness emerged at this point, and shall consider not only Kusama's own accounts, but also relate the discourse of madness to a general interest in naïve art and art made by 'outsider artists' that occurred in Japan during the 1980s. Many interpretations of Kusama's early works are carried out from a retrospective position of the recent discourse of madness, and this may endanger the entire body of Kusama's work to be denigrated as pathological art.

I shall conclude that by interpreting works by Kusama in a context specific to the period in which the work was created, a more accurate and balanced understanding of Kusama's art will emerge which acknowledges the full range of her artistic talent.

Kusama in Japan in the 1950s

Kusama Yayoi was born on 22 March 1929 in the city of Matsumoto in Nagano prefecture. In 1948, after finishing her primary education in Matsumoto, Kusama went to Kyoto and was enrolled at Kyôto Shiritsu Bijutsu Kôgei Gakkô (Kyoto City School for Fine Arts and Industrial Arts), from which she graduated the following year. Here she was trained in *nihonga* or 'Japanese-style painting', which focuses on traditional painting materials such as mineral pigments on silk or paper. Kusama exhibited *nihonga*-style works during her eighteen months at art school, and in 1950 she started using other

materials, such as oil paints, ink drawings, water colours, pastel and gouache.

Kusama had her first solo exhibition in Matsumoto city in 1952, in which she exhibited over 200 ink drawings on paper. The exhibition was mentioned by the influential art critic and artist Abe Nobuya in the Japanese art magazine *Atorie* [Atelier] in January 1953. Although Abe only devoted a short paragraph to the exhibition, he notes that these are works by a person with a strong temperament, and that a vision of the artist's mind seem to flow over in the many drawings.⁹ A photo next to the paragraph on Kusama shows her sitting in a room in which the floor and walls are covered with her works on paper. The works here are mainly ink drawings, all abstract, each featuring a few thick lines of black ink, and with areas where thinner lines and dots occupy the spaces between the lines. Watercolour and pastel are added as well in places.

For her next solo exhibition, in October of the same year, several leading artists and critics contributed to the introduction, among them Abe Nobuya and Takiguchi Shûzô, poet and leading critic, who among other things was responsible for introducing Surrealism into Japan. Takiguchi was also among those who recommended Kusama for her first solo exhibition in Tokyo in February 1954.¹⁰

The ink drawing on Plate 2, entitled *Hana* [Flower] from 1952 is a good example of the type of drawings on paper that Kusama produced in this period. The drawing features a non-figurative pattern made by thick, uneven lines of black ink. The upper part of the drawing has a circular pattern which forms a spiral movement, and from which black lines emanate in different directions as if slung out from the centre by a centrifugal force. Within the spiral of this upper circular part, thinner lines make up a grid structure interlacing with the spiral, and small dots are placed in the middle of some of the squares in the grid. Small areas of thin parallel hatching are drawn where the emanating lines dispatch from the centre circle. The lower part of the drawing is a broad band of vertical brush strokes connecting the upper circular area with the bottom of the paper.



PLATE 2. Kusama Yayoi, *Hana* [Flower], 1952
Ink on paper, 27.0 x 18.7 cm
Collection of the artist

Dots and irregular shapes of black ink are painted or dripped on or between the vertical strokes, and thin lines connect some of the dots in an irregular net pattern. A short thick stroke of black ink at the bottom attaches the lower part to the left-hand side of the paper, while a thinner line on the opposite side connects it to the right-hand side. Another thick stroke of black ink runs vertically from the top of the paper in the right hand side, turns sharply to the left, and then follows the broad band in a vertical stroke at the lower part of the drawing. Thin, short dashes of ink are placed around in the composition, and thinner lines also make up a larger and less prominent spiral motion enclosing almost the entire figure. There is no colour added to this particular drawing, which measures 27.0 by 18.7 cm.

In spite of the lines emanating in various directions, the overall composition is balanced and stable. The circular centre draws the viewer's eyes towards a point almost at the middle of the upper part, and the vertical band grounds the figure to the bottom of the paper. The horizontal lines at the lower part support this grounding, and thick black vertical strokes keep the composition closed from the sides.

In the following years Kusama showed works at both solo and group exhibitions, several of which took place in Tokyo. Photos from various exhibition venues reveal that Kusama mainly displayed small-scale ink and water colour drawings at this time, such as the work described above.¹¹ Kusama also received attention from leading art magazines in Japan during this period, such as *Atorie*, *Mizue* and *Geijutsu Shinchô*, in which her works were reviewed, and to which Kusama herself contributed articles. It is in itself remarkable that a young and relatively inexperienced female artist could manage to gain such attention from the established art circles. Having work exhibited, being praised by other, already acclaimed artists, being recognized by influential art critics, and having works and photos displayed in art magazines, are crucial elements in the struggle to pursue a professional career as a modern artist.

Kusama was not affiliated with any particular art society or association. Although she received a lot of support from established artists in the avant-garde circles, she maintained her

independence as an artist throughout her career. This does not mean, however, that Kusama was isolated or had no knowledge of modern and contemporary art. On the contrary: Kusama was a part of the young post-war generation who sought new expressions and artistic modes, and she was acquainted with a number of influential avant-garde artists in the Japanese art environment.

The art environment in Japan had been restricted and censored in various ways by official regulations during the war-time period, especially in the early 1940s.¹² After the war, attempts were made to resume pre-war artistic endeavours and a number of exhibitions were put on, but the tense war-time atmosphere was not easily abandoned. Many artists, who had experienced the horrors of war at the front, sought ways to visualize the terrible scenes of death and destruction with which they had been confronted. To this end Surrealism, which had already been introduced in Japan during the 1930s, was a style that seemed particularly appropriate for depicting the grotesque and nightmarish experience of war.¹³ Other artists looked for new expressions and original artistic modes in order to start afresh without being burdened with confusions and conventions of the past.

From 1950 exhibitions of pre-war modern artists from the West, such as Picasso and Matisse, were organized, as well as exhibitions of contemporary French and American art. It was not only Western art that was on display. In 1955, for example, an exhibition of ancient and contemporary Mexican art was mounted at Tokyo National Museum.¹⁴

Dark and Demonic Creativity

In her early articles from the mid-1950s, Kusama comments on the styles of several American and other Western artists, and she places her own art in the context of international trends. In 1955 an article by Kusama entitled 'Iwan no baka' [Ivan the Fool] was published in *Geijutsu Shinchô*.¹⁵ The two-page article featured a few small reproductions of abstract ink drawings by

Kusama. The article appears to be autobiographic, and starts with the artist describing a childhood in which she was often severely scolded by her mother for no other reason than that she had been playing. Kusama recounts how she would run away crying, and wanting to destroy everything in anger. She had a secret place in the corner of the garden with a hole in which she would hide treasures such as flower buds, glass pearls, golden beetles and wings of cicadas. Peeping into the hole to look at these things would make her feel safe and happy.

Kusama describes in this same article how she feels an urge to paint in a certain way, and does not care about the flourishing of other art movements such as social realism or existentialism. She usually does not apply elements from everyday life, but listens instead to the great undercurrent of life, referring to things that are hidden in the shadows: 'My mind now searches for all attractive splendours which unfold from the shadow of the obscure world.' She speaks about this obscure or shadowy part, and how she wishes to reveal hidden things that people normally do not connect with art.

Kusama evokes the devil by referring to Tolstoy's story about Ivan the Fool, stating that she too (like the good-hearted Ivan of the story) continues to work until the devil loses his patience and power. In this way, the devil should not be considered an enemy of art, but rather an ally:

'The devil lives only in freedom. Once everything has been decided, he is gone in an instant. In every era, the devil changes form, and the Mephisto of the twentieth century does not live in a form we know from old days. Instead he works inside the form and extreme colours of Léger, inside the geometric compositions of Mondrian or Nicholson, in Moore's pieces of stone, in Calder's tip of a wing. And if I may be allowed to add those I like, he also lives inside American artists such as Graves, Tobey, O'Keeffe, and the young Stamos, artists who like myself seek the world of mystery and symbol.'

In this article Kusama reflects upon how art is created, and what forces lie behind great art. She attributes the source of

creative power to a demonic or dark side, something unusual or abnormal that is concealed in shadows. Instead of fearing this devil as an enemy of art, the artist should form an alliance with demonic forces. Kusama identifies such power in the works of specific Western artists, and she recognizes an affinity between some American artists and her own work. Japanese artists, on the other hand, are in general dismissed for not being concerned or interested in the demonic sources of creative power.

Kusama's own art emerges from trying to control the demonic forces that she encountered in childhood through her mother's severe temperament. In dark and secret places Kusama could seek pleasure in her hidden treasures and lose herself in daydreams. Kusama speaks about creativity and individuality, and emphasizes that such elements can be found in the dark and hidden parts of the human psyche. In this article from 1955, however, there is no reference to specific psychopathological conditions as the source of creativity in her own art.

Mysticism and Surrealism

As is evident from this 1955 article by Kusama, she was keenly aware of works by foreign artists, and identified her own style with a contemporaneous mysticism, that was particularly prevalent on the American art scene.¹⁶ Kusama may have seen works by some of these artists at exhibitions in Tokyo, for example Mark Tobey and Theodoros Stamos, whose works were included in the special American section at the *Yomiuri Independent* exhibition in 1951. Others she would have encountered from reproductions in art magazines and books.¹⁷

The artistic mysticism Kusama identified in these artists was part of a broader interest in the archaic and mythical origins of human expression, which manifested itself both in the European and American art scenes before and after the Second World War. Some artists would search for a universal visual vocabulary in the elements of nature, often seen in microscopic detail and transformed into abstraction. For some artists the

search for a primitive or mystic force of creativity was a reaction against the brutality of the war they had witnessed, which had resulted in a disillusion concerning the so-called civilized conditions of the Western world. This approach would often include studies of art forms from prehistoric periods and/or non-Western cultures, such as pre-Columbian art, or sculptures and masks from the African continent and Oceania, thus continuing the interest in primitivism initiated in the first decades of the twentieth century. The interest in non-Western art and philosophy was also reflected in the widespread appreciation of classical ink painting from China and Japan as well as Japanese Zen Buddhism in USA during the 1950s.

For other artists, for example the American Abstract Expressionism, the interest in primitivism was based on a search for a mode of expression that was individual and personal, but also included universal elements in the reference to archaic expressions assumed to be fundamental to all humans.¹⁸

According to Kusama's 1955 article 'Iwan no baka' (discussed above), it is clear that Kusama was also preoccupied by the idea of forces of creative powers originating in hidden and mysterious corners of the unconscious. Kusama's description in this article of dark and demonic creative powers can be seen as a parallel to those of the unconscious, formulated by Sigmund Freud and applied by Surrealist poets and artists in their theories about psychic automatism and dream interpretations during the 1920s and 1930s. Surrealist theory claimed that elements from dreams and the unconscious should be accepted as a way of complementing the 'common' knowledge people acquired on a conscious level of everyday reality, and together these two aspects should form a complete superior or absolute reality. In Japan, Surrealism became prominent in the years just before and after the Second World War. Japanese Surrealism was largely influenced by the French version via Takiguchi Shûzô's translations of André Breton's *Surrealist Manifesto*, but it did also take a course of its own. Rather than transforming dream and reality into absolute reality, Japanese works of Surrealism often contain a juxtaposition of opposites, nature versus the supernatural, or reality versus hyperreality.¹⁹

Although Kusama never identified herself as a Surrealist painter, the ideas of Surrealism were probably not unknown to her through the writings and translations of Takiguchi Shûzô.²⁰ In her article, Kusama states that art is always born out of demonic darkness, and she describes how she herself searches the obscure undercurrents of everyday life in order to reveal a mysterious creative power in her own art. Kusama speaks of something hidden and unrecognized in the context of the ordinary. Kusama's accounts are not far from the ideas of the unconscious formulated by Surrealist theory, and the methods Kusama applied for her ink drawings may very well resemble what André Breton called psychic automatism, automatic writing or scribbling as a means of revealing elements of the artist's subconsciousness without any interference by the rational mind.²¹ The ink lines and strokes in Kusama's works on paper, such as the drawing *Hana* (Plate 2), have an overall spontaneous and irrational character, apparently applied to the paper without any predetermined composition or pattern. Dots and drips of black ink suggest that several of the drawings were made with a certain speed, and in some cases the lines appear as irregular runnings, as if the paper had been tilted while the ink was still wet in order to make it flow in random directions.

In most of the ink drawings, thinner lines and areas of colour have been added in a more conscious or restricted manner, seen for example on Plate 2 in the grid structure within the upper circular part, the net pattern between the dotted lines in the lower part, as well as the areas of hatching around the spiral. While these more determined additions may be seen as another type of automatic expression, they may also signify some degree of aesthetic concern, as if Kusama consciously wanted to emphasize certain areas of the composition or add decorative elements. Kusama has entitled the work *Hana* [Flower], thus suggesting a representational aspect of the object, and also alluding that the work has some relationship to ordinary and everyday reality.

Kusama in New York in the 1960s

As mentioned above, Kusama acknowledged an affinity with several American artists, and expressed disappointment concerning the appreciation of mysticist art in Japanese art circles in general. In November 1955 Kusama wrote a letter to the artist Georgia O'Keeffe and asked for advice in regard to her plans of going to the USA. Kusama also included a number of watercolours in the letter. The following month O'Keeffe sent a reply, in which she warned Kusama about the difficulty of establishing a career in the art environment in US cities such as New York. However, O'Keeffe was also encouraging in that she offered to help Kusama by showing her water colours to art dealers and others.²² In November 1957, Kusama herself arrived in Seattle, and she had her first solo exhibition at Zoe Dusanne's gallery in December.²³ Six months later Kusama left the west coast of the United States and went to New York, where she lived for the following ten years or more at various locations.

Once Kusama had settled in her New York studio, she began to work in a new manner. In Japan, most of her works had been small-scale water colours or ink drawings, as seen in Plate 2 above. Now she began to work on large-scale canvases, such as the painting *Pacific Ocean* (1960), reproduced in Plate 3. Kusama produced a large number of works of this type. The overall theme for the many canvases are net patterns, a continuation of a pattern from Kusama's earlier ink drawings, only now realized in oil paint and in much larger formats. Kusama's net pattern consists of a number of short strokes of ink or paint connecting each other, sometimes made with straight strokes enclosing small areas of square or rhombic forms. At other times the strokes are curved, enclosing small semicircular areas like a lace pattern. The ground of the canvas or paper is covered first, on top of which the net pattern is painted, either in a colour similar to the ground colour, or in a different and often contrasting colour. In the cases where the strokes are curved

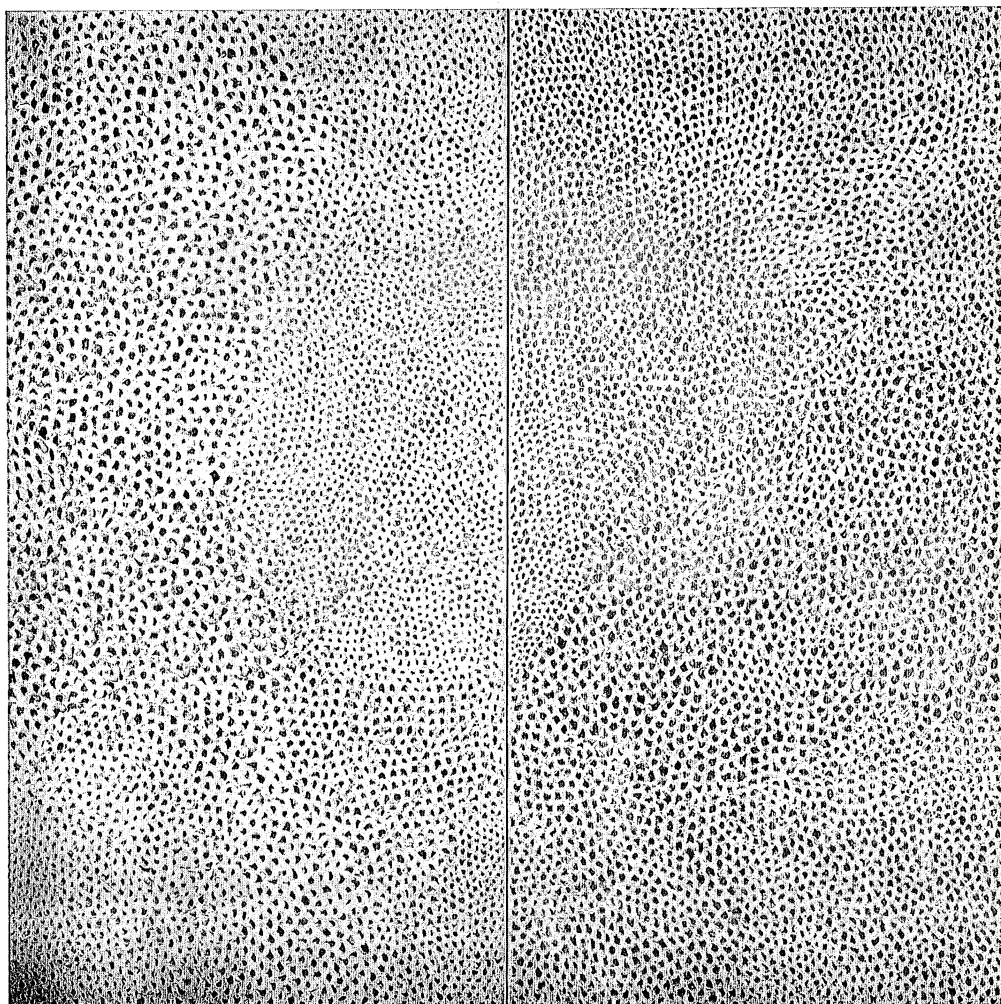


PLATE 3: Kusama Yayoi, *Pacific Ocean*, 1960.
Oil on canvas, 183 x 183 cm
Museum of Contemporary Art, Tokyo

and short, the area within the nets may resemble dots. Some of Kusama's paintings from around 1959 and 1960 are painted with a white net pattern on almost white ground, making the net pattern less distinctive, especially when seen from some distance. The painting *Pacific Ocean* (Plate 3) is an example in which the net pattern is made with white paint on a grey-bluish ground, in which the darker ground is visible through the holes in the white net. The work is made of two vertical panels placed close together, forming a square 183 by 183 cm. The length and the width of the brush strokes in the net vary within the same work so that some areas of the canvas seem more dense while other areas are of a more open net pattern. Also the thickness of the oil paint on the brush may differ, leaving at places thick bumps of actual paint on the canvas, like a three-dimensional relief. The variations in stroke direction, thickness of paint, and length and width of the brushstrokes contribute to make the surface vibrate and create a visual or optical sensation of both light and space in the composition.

The net pattern usually extends to the very edge of the canvas, suggesting to the viewer that the pattern would have continued even further had the canvas had been larger, thus emphasizing a continuation of the painting outside or beyond the actual physical format. Kusama has entitled several of her net paintings *Mugen no ami* [Infinity Nets], thereby alluding to such endless continuation. Other net pattern paintings have titles indicating the colour scheme such as *Yellow Nets, No. Red B.C.F.*, or *No. Green No. 1*. Other titles again seem to suggest specific visual or conceptual figurative associations such as *Kawa o ôu ami* [Net Covering a River], *Hana* [Flower], or *Pacific Ocean*, as in the work reproduced in Plate 3. In this case, the title may be alluding to the infinite movements of the waves of the Pacific Ocean, or the white dots of paint may refer to foam on top of the waves.

Trends in the American Art Scene

As with Kusama's debut in the Tokyo art world, the speed at which Kusama was recognized by established critics and people connected to art circles in New York is remarkable. It was the result of Kusama's hard work and dogged perseverance, as well as her extraordinary talent for sensing the currents of artistic innovations and ideas on the avant-garde art scene in New York at that time. The painting style Kusama began to explore after her arrival in New York fitted very well with some of the trends of avant-garde painting in New York in the late 1950s. During the late 1940s and early 1950s the leading movement was Abstract Expressionism, represented by artists such as Jackson Pollock and Willem de Kooning, and promoted by influential critics such as Clement Greenberg and Harold Rosenberg during the 1950s.

Abstract Expressionist works are often large-scale canvases filled with gesticulatory lines and drips of various colours, emphasizing the physical movement of the artist's hand or body during the process of creation. For many, abstraction indicated a liberation from representational likeness of objects on the content level of the painting, while expressionism was linked to an unrestrained movements of the body during the painting process. Thus within modern art movements Abstract Expressionism became a symbol of post-war freedom on various levels, freedom from artistic conventions and illusionary effects as well as the notions of freedom in American lifestyle.

By the late 1950s other art forms challenged the dominance of Abstract Expressionism in the United States, for example a formalist approach with less expressionist attitudes of lines and a focus instead on colour as the primary visual element. Several artists such as Clyfford Still, Ellsworth Kelly and Ad Reinhardt produced paintings of flat, unmodulated areas of monochrome colour or a few restricted areas of colour. Some artists of the monochrome trend sought a purity in art by eliminating brushwork, drawing, design, light, space and other elements

conventionally associated with paintings. Unlike the Abstract Expressionists, the monochrome painters also questioned the romantic idea of the artist's subjectivity in gesture and composition.

Kusama's works with net patterns from her first years in New York can be seen stylistically to occupy a place in between these two main movements of avant-garde painting in the United States, viz. Abstract Expressionism and monochrome painting. The painting *Pacific Ocean* made by Kusama in 1960 (Plate 3), may serve as an example. On the one hand, there is a significant presence of brush strokes applied in various lengths and with different levels of intensity, at some places leaving thick bumps of paints. These physical marks of the artist's handling of the brush and the paint may place the work within the category of expressionist gesticulation. On the other hand, the same net pattern, while it allows for some variation, creates an overall surface which can be conceived of as unmodulated or uniform in colour scheme, if the work is seen from some distance. In the case of Kusama's white-on-white net paintings, the surface appears monochrome. This, combined with the large formats used by the artist, would make the painting seem insignificant and become one with the white walls of the gallery, as if questioning the very essence of a painting as something visual and visible. The infinite repetition of the same pattern may represent the artist's detachment from personal expression and subjectivity.

Kusama Yayoi herself wrote about these net pattern paintings around the time they were made. The May 1961 issue of the Japanese art magazine *Geijutsu shinchô* published a four-page article by Kusama entitled 'Onna hitori kokusai gadan o yuku' [A woman on her own in international painting circles]. In the article Kusama tells about her travel to the United States, and explains in detail the style and method of the net paintings she made during the first years from 1958 to 1961. She relates her present work with ideas emerging in earlier works throughout her ten years of artistic activities, and notes that during this period she was able to encompass certain sentiments about painting. The result of this search is manifested in the five

paintings at her first solo exhibition in New York in October 1959, the exhibition entitled *Obsessional Monochrome*. Kusama describes them as

'five works, the largest measuring almost 14 feet, which are unfoldings of macrocosmic space based on accumulation of microcosmic light, as if under an unconsciousness which is both simple black and white, and yet complicated. The works are all at once bluntly pure white painted surfaces of nothing but [also]endless tedium. With these works I made my debut in 1959 in New York, the radical centre of international art.'²⁴

Kusama emphasizes the formal aspects of the pure white colour of her works, as well as the large, uniform surfaces, but she also relates to the effect of the white brush strokes as light accumulating into a large spatial structure under the influence of an unconscious state of mind. Kusama does not, however, connect this unconsciousness to an expressionist automatism. In another paragraph, Kusama explicitly dissociates herself from the Abstract Expressionist movement, here referred to as 'action painting', a term often used at the time. 'My paintings consist of a static, indivisible surface which is fixed flat onto the canvas,' Kusama writes, and then continues in parenthesis:

'(Of course, in my works I apply a method which is exactly opposite to the emotional space of action painting, one of the leading trends originating from New York, and my method is also different from Tobey's continuous search for an Oriental space, which is an expression also present in the field of action painting.)'²⁵

In other words, Kusama dissociates her own work from the gestured expressionism of action painting, as well as the dynamic calligraphic brush strokes in works by Mark Tobey, which he developed from an aesthetic appreciation of classical Chinese and Japanese painting and calligraphy. By doing so, Kusama highlights her own artistic mode as truly individual in a kind of reverse inspiration – she knows well about other artistic trends, but rather than following the ideas, she deliberately keeps her distance.

Inner Visions and External Reality

Kusama describes her works as well as her working processes very consciously and precisely in the article. She elaborates on the concepts of space, rhythm and light as follows:

'I continue applying microscopic clumps [of paint] one after another, and the surface will have a skin as concrete as possible, which then in a strange way visualizes a gathering of expanding mass. During the act of applying touches of paint one after another, the repeated layers of dry white paint add an infinite embodiment to the space in the midst of the very realistic and visible field of vision. This endlessly repeating rhythm and monochrome surface introduce an attempt at creating new paintings and at possessing a heterogeneous 'light' which cannot be defined from the conventional constructions and methods of regulated paintings. Fixed focus points and centres are entirely abandoned in these paintings. This is my invention, and the idea can be found everywhere in my work from more than ten years ago.'²⁶

Kusama continues by describing her previous works, and refers to her childhood during the war. From her house at that time, she could see a river beach on which thousands of small white stones were shining in the midsummer sun. This sight of a natural phenomenon apparently caused a mysterious vision for Kusama, although she took up the motif in an abstract rather than a naturalistic manner.

'This image was not revealed directly from the natural world but from my inner mind. The image became clear from a insignificant incident and with a non-objective incentive, and seemed to be possessed by some strange world.'

In this paragraph Kusama connects her paintings directly with a vision she had as a child, based on a realistic occurrence, but transformed inside of her by some unknown forces. The painting reproduced in Plate 3 may be interpreted in a figurative manner as a view looking down on a beach full of tiny white stones or pebbles reflecting the sunlight. The description of the inner experience is not far from what Kusama wrote in 1955, in

which she recognizes the source of creative powers in a demonic or dark side of the artist's personality, and in which she advocated an art based on the non-realistic world of mystery and symbols.

In this 1961 article, Kusama for the first time comments on her own mental health in connection with her methods of painting. However, I think her remarks on this occasion are not meant to be taken seriously. In the beginning of the article Kusama describes how she moved to New York, and how she became engaged in working on the huge canvases.

I rented a spacious studio, confronted pure black canvases so large I needed a step ladder to reach them, and produced works on which I kept painting the whole surface with white nets, often thousands of tiny units as narrow as possible and with almost no tonality at all. I would get up every morning while it was still dark and continue painting from dawn to dusk until the middle of the night without doing anything except eating and going to the toilet, and whatever canvas in the studio you turned over, there would be nothing but nets. Gradually my friends became anxious, peeped in nervously with their blue eyes, and asked seriously worried, "Why do you only paint the same thing day after day, are you alright?" There was no need to worry since there was a mental hospital on Long Island, but the circumstances were bad because I did not feel like painting anything else.²⁷

It is not clear whether Kusama at this time was actually visiting a mental hospital for treatment. However, even if she did receive treatment, rather than being a reference to a pathological condition, I believe the paragraph cited above is meant as an ironic comment by Kusama regarding the way her friends tried to deal with her way of working. Kusama wants to emphasize her hard work and her stamina, and she does so by alluding that her friends (and not herself) got worried and asked her to see a psychiatrist. She hereby also indicates that only a few people would understand her commitment to art. In other words, although a mental hospital is mentioned in this article, psychopathological conditions are not given serious credit as the background for her art.

Instead, Kusama offers another and quite different reason for her style of painting in this period. She describes how she does not want to paint any motif other than the endless net patterns. But rather than interpreting this mania as an indication of a pathological obsession, Kusama gives another reason which is connected to her external life experience in New York.

'In the end, I merely adopted one method of self-expression, but the result of this was that in the noise of busy New York where the struggle for existence is rough; at the bottom of the light and darkness of contemporary civilization one may think of as a squeak of a cogwheel; in the middle of this big city which symbolizes American pragmatism, I painted some damned uninteresting paintings. In this way my works have also become a posture of resistance.'²⁸

She describes her paintings as deliberately boring, as a reaction against a shallow and monotonous lifestyle of an American metropolitan centre such as New York. In other words, the background for her uniform net pattern paintings may have been an inner vision, but this is not necessarily related to any mental or nervous disorder. Instead, according to Kusama's own interpretation, her net pattern paintings are a protest against the lifestyle of a large American city and a response to her own fight for artistic recognition and endurance in her everyday social life.

Back in Japan from the 1970s

During the later part of the 1960s and the first years of the 1970s Kusama did not hold as many regular exhibitions of paintings and drawings as previously. Instead, she engaged increasingly in film production, 'happenings', fashion shows, as well as writing novels and poems. These activities took place in USA as well as in Europe and in Japan. After some travelling, Kusama returned permanently to Japan in 1973.

Thereafter she held a number of exhibitions, both group and solo shows, but not more than a one or two a year. This represented a considerable decrease compared to her exhibition

activities in New York ten years earlier. According to biographies, Kusama was examined at a hospital in Shinjuku for a period in 1975, and in 1977 was admitted to a psychiatric hospital, where she still lives today.²⁹ It is not unlikely that medical treatment and general exhaustion have been factors behind Kusama's decreasing exhibition activities in the mid and late 1970s. However, it should also be remembered that Kusama had been away from the Tokyo art scene for 15 years, and it was not easy for her to make a comeback in her native country after such a relatively long absence.

During the 1980s, Kusama again participated in exhibitions in Japan as well as abroad, and she seems gradually to have re-established her position in the Japanese art circles. Kusama's reputation as international artist was verified in earnest in 1993, when she was the sole official representative for Japan at the International Art Biennale in Venice.

It was during the 1980s that Kusama herself, as well as several art critics, began to focus more on her mental condition. This may of course be self-evident since Kusama, as mentioned, was seeking medical treatment from 1977 onwards, and she may have felt a need to try to resolve and explain conflicting experiences in her personal life. The interesting point, however, is that Kusama and her critics did not limit themselves to describing her present mental condition in relation to her new works, but also retrospectively re-interpreted early parts of her *oeuvre* from a pathological viewpoint. In an interview for the art magazine *Bijutsu Techô* (April 1982), for example, Kusama is asked if she would like to go to New York again. She answers by diagnosing her illness and describing the background:

'My body is not well. I am now suffering from a manic-depressive illness. Manic-depression borders on schizophrenia, and there can be auditory and visual hallucinations. During the depressive state I cannot even get out of bed, and I am only one step from suicide, and during the manic state I become agitated and climb up trees. But this is not something that occurred yesterday or today, I have had transient schizophrenia since I was 20 years old. At that time I peddled and begged, and because I did not have any money, I could not be

admitted to a mental hospital. So my disease only grew worse, for sure.³⁰

In this article, Kusama seems clear about the psychopathological diagnosis of her mental disease, describing the various stages of her manic-depressive condition. She also points out retrospectively that her illness has been transient and thus had influenced her life even 30 years back in time, although she could not afford at that time to seek psychiatric treatment.

Focus on Psychopathological Conditions

An essay by Kusama Yayoi published in 1986 may be seen as the declaration of a pathological background *par excellence*. Under the title 'Doraingu imeeji. Naze ni geijutsu suru ka?' [Driving Image. Why do I make art?], the short one-page text, printed also in an English translation, contains almost no reference to concrete art works or events, and restricts itself to general remarks about her illness. In the essay Kusama emphasizes several times how close she has been to committing suicide. She accounts for the struggle of not only dealing with hallucinations and other symptoms, but also overcoming other people's ignorance or contempt towards her illness.

'I was afraid that hallucinations would appear in front of my eyes and make me unable to walk. Auditory hallucinations disturbed my thoughts, and manic-depressive insanity and numerous other symptoms caused a friction with the outside society. People in the external world did not have any understanding of this, and they were ignorant about my disease.'

In the course of several paragraphs she situates the origin of her illness in her childhood, or even as something she was born with, and she repeatedly connects her creative and artistic originality with her mental illness. For example, when she refers to the various styles and subject matter in her works and states: 'All kinds of themes originate from my mental and nervous disease, and there are expressed in my art.' In another paragraph Kusama writes: 'The outside society rigidly refused

to admit that I had developed my own individual art out of an illness of the mind.' She emphasizes the individual and original aspects of her own art by linking formal elements directly to her illness, and at the same time denying influence from other artists, as when she writes:

'The main themes in my art, repetitive vision and accumulation, are born from my experience, and are not copied from Arman or Andy Warhol. They originate from the experience of monotonous and repetitive illusion deriving from my illness, which I have always had since I was very young.'

In the few concrete references in the text, Kusama mentions the names of Japanese psychiatrists in Japan and in New York who had treated her, and she acknowledges the help she had received from doctors and nurses at various hospitals. At one point she even refers to her artistic activity as 'art therapy.'³¹

When comparing this essay with the two earlier texts by Kusama discussed above, a significant difference is apparent with regard to the psychopathological aspects of her works. In the article 'Ivan no baka' from 1955, Kusama writes about seeking a mysterious and symbolic visual vocabulary in the dark or demonic side of human existence. However, nowhere in this early article does she mention any specific mental illness, nor does she refer to pathological conditions for either her own or other artists' creative practice. The reference to demonic or dark secrets is described in the mode of a romantic search for creative powers rather than in medical or psychiatric terms.

In the second example from 1961, in which Kusama writes about her early years in New York, she emphasizes the formal elements of her works, and reveals a conscious distancing from some of the current art movements in American avant-garde circles of the day. In this article too she speaks of an inner vision as the basis for her artistic activities, based in part on a natural phenomenon she experienced as a child. Again though, there is no suggestion of this vision having any connection with hallucinations or other psychopathological symptoms. Kusama also accounts for how the experience of managing everyday life in a large city like New York has affected the style and content of her paintings, thus referring mainly to external influences on

her work. Only briefly does Kusama mention a mental hospital in this article, and she does so as an ironic comment on her friends' concern and lack of comprehension regarding her own commitment to her art. She does not describe her inner visions in psychopathological terms, nor does she suggest any direct connection between mental illness and her artistic production.

Twenty years later, from the early 1980s onwards, the tone in Kusama's description of her works changed remarkably. From now on accounts of her mental condition began to dominate the story of her life and art work, and pathological terms such as obsession, auditory and visual hallucinations, manic-depressive insanity, and so on, are used to describe her childhood as well as her artistic background. Especially the short essay from 1986 appears as one long story of sickness and disease, lacking any of the details concerning her formal and stylistic considerations seen in her earlier writings.

There may be several explanations for this shift of attention from an external and formal description of her art towards an inner psychological approach with a pathological classification of her works. It is very likely that once Kusama was admitted on a long-term basis to a psychiatric hospital in 1977, she became conscious and more articulate concerning certain aspects of her earlier life and art work. Conversations with psychiatrists may have made Kusama aware of symptoms in her childhood and youth which previously she could not name or relate to. It is also possible that art therapy was actually applied by the doctors and medical institutions she consulted, or that Kusama was encouraged to continue her art production as therapeutic device, thus underscoring the link between mental disease and art in a direct manner. The interviews and articles written in the early and mid-1980s may be seen as representing a notion that Kusama developed around this period concerning her illness and the source of her own creative powers.

General Interest in Outsider Art

Another factor behind the emphasis on the psychological aspect of Kusama's art production from the mid-1980s onwards may have been the renewed interest being shown in Japan at that time for primitivist art and art made by children and mentally ill persons. Linking madness and creativity is not a recent phenomenon, and can be found in many cultures. Creative individuals such as poets and artists have long been thought to possess great, overwhelming resources of unique creativity which the so-called normal observing member of the society does not possess. In Europe in the early twentieth century, at the same time as psychiatry was developing as a specific medical discipline, scientists such as doctors, anthropologists and criminologists began to collect drawings and paintings executed by the mentally ill at asylums and mental hospitals. The idea behind this was to construct theories not only about mental illness, but also about the sources of unique creativity. The collection of art by psychotic patients conducted by the German art historian and psychiatrist Hans Prinzhorn, for example, became the largest collection of its kind in Europe. The book published in 1922 on the basis of this collection became very influential among psychiatrists and psychologists, and even more so among artists, art theorists and art historians.³²

Various modern art movements of the early twentieth century were sympathetic to art created by mentally ill, and it was generally believed that the insane had access to authentic and extraordinary creative powers within them and were able to express inner visions uncensored by rational thoughts.³³

A few Japanese artists had also expressed an interest in art made by the insane, and some of the works in Hans Prinzhorn's collection were published in Japanese art magazines in the early 1930s. The painter Koga Harue, one of the principal figures in the Japanese avant-garde and influenced by European Surrealism, among other things, made several drawings and paintings copied from works in Prinzhorn's book. Evidence of

this direct influence of Prinzhorn's collection of works by mentally ill on the Japanese Surrealist painter Koga Harue was published in Japanese media in the early 1980s, not only in art-related magazines, but also in medical journals.³⁴

Another related interest in the search for unrestricted and 'primitive' access to sources of creative power was evoked by a large-scale art exhibition entitled *Geijutsu to soboku* [Art and Simplicity], which was held as the inaugural exhibition at Setagaya Art Museum in Tokyo in 1986. The show was intended to introduce various aspects of naïve art and included works by untrained and naïve artists, as well as primitivist art, ethnic art from non-Western cultures, and works made by children.³⁵

The interest in primitivist art and in art by psychotic persons, which surfaced in Japanese art circles in the early and mid-1980s, may have contributed to the renewed interest in works by Kusama Yayoi and the emergence of a discourse of madness that evolved around her *oeuvre* at this time. Art critic Abe Nobuo, who had participated in discussions concerning the influence on Koga Harue of art made by the mentally ill, also wrote a lengthy review of an exhibition of works by Kusama Yayoi. The first half of the review deals with pathological approaches to art in general, and only in the second part does the critic discuss specific works by Kusama.³⁶

Abe Nobuo connects the concept of creativity with madness, and mentions the case of Van Gogh as an example of how often madness is misconceived as the direct source for creativity. Abe argues that although hallucinatory experiences may provide a background for an artist to draw from, it is not enough for the artist merely to reproduce the hallucinatory vision as it is. The artist has to confront his or her personal experience of hallucinations with a conscious approach and connect the experience with a specific artistic intent; only then does the painted surface become a work of art. Abe applies this definition of artistic process directly to the works of Kusama Yayoi. Abe notes that Kusama's works may be too strange for many people to understand, but her works are not cut off and isolated in a personal universe. It is necessary to recognize the works as being suffused with Kusama's will to be an artist. 'The greatest

appeal in Kusama's works is that she seizes the devilish malice which comes spouting up from the unconscious darkness, and turns it into art.³⁷ Abe also notes that in the midst of Kusama's very unique and personal artistic mode, it is possible to detect expressions of a human existence in the works displayed at the exhibition.

In this article the critic Abe Nobuo applies a pathological understanding in his discussion of Kusama's art by referring to hallucinations, mental illness, and the medical field of psychiatry. But Abe does not refer to the concepts of madness in a sensationalizing manner; he does not portray Kusama as an odd and maladjusted individual. Instead Abe tries to explain Kusama's pathological hallucinations as a background for her artistic process. Such a background is not in itself a valid criterion for art; rather it is because of the artist's conscious approach and response to her inner visions that the painting becomes a work of art. The critic furthermore alludes to more general social or cultural elements behind Kusama's personal expressions in his discovery of a human existence in her works, thus attributing an open and attentive attitude to the artist in contrast to the introverted and isolated state of mind of the 'real' insane. In other words, while Abe relates psychopathology to Kusama Yayoi, he attributes her artistic merits not to mental illness but to her conscious intentions as artist, as well as her ability to reflect aspects of human existentialism in general in her work.

In 1993, another large-scale exhibition focusing on art made by mentally ill persons was displayed at Setagaya Art Museum, namely the exhibition *Parallel Visions. Modern Artists and Outsider Art*. This had earlier been organized by the Los Angeles County Museum of Art in 1992 and shown also in Madrid and Basle before Tokyo. In this exhibition 'outsider art' and 'insider art' were displayed together to show how artists from mainstream modern art movements have been inspired by outsider artists' works. Outsider artists were defined as

'self-taught individuals, sometimes mentally disturbed, who have created their work while isolated generally from mainstream culture and particularly from the complex infra-

structure of the art world, that is, from galleries, museums, and universities with which mainstream artists are regularly associated.³⁸

When the exhibition *Parallel Visions* was shown in Japan in 1993, a section including eight Japanese artists was added, and a separate catalogue was published by the Setagaya Art Museum.

Kusama Yayoi was included in the *Parallel Visions* exhibitions when it was shown in Setagaya, although art critic Shioda Jun'ichi, who wrote the catalogue text, admits the problems of categorizing Kusama as an 'outsider artist'. Shioda argues that Kusama is an insider and an outsider at the same time:

'The ambivalent state of being both insider and outsider, the freedom to pass back and forth between inside and outside, is Kusama's privilege, won as compensation for her mental suffering.'³⁹

According to Shioda, Kusama has the ability, or the freedom as he calls it, to make conscious use of her mental condition for artistic purposes. This interpretation of Kusama's conscious approach to artistic expression is similar to the one offered by Abe Nobuo in the article from 1981 discussed above. The two examples show that art works by Kusama Yayoi in several cases have been linked directly to psychopathological descriptions of her mental condition, although her works at the same time are exempted from pathological art as such.

The inclusion of Kusama Yayoi as outsider artist in the *Parallel Visions* exhibition goes to show how difficult it is to define a clear border between insider and outsider art. According to the definition given for 'outsider artists' in the introduction to the main catalogue for the Los Angeles County Museum of Art display, Kusama should perhaps not have been included within this categorization. It may be questioned whether Kusama is 'self-taught' since she did receive formal training, albeit only for a year and a half. It would also be difficult to argue that Kusama was 'isolated [...] from the complex infrastructure of the art world' since she, as biographical records throughout this paper indicate, was very active

indeed in exhibiting and publicizing her activities in the art-related media. The only thing that seems to qualify Kusama as an outsider artist is that she has received psychiatric treatment, and that her life and her work at some point became encapsulated in a discourse of madness.

Conclusion

By analysing three texts written by Kusama Yayoi at various stages in her artistic career, I have focused on how Kusama herself has described her artistic processes and the sources of her creativity. It is clear that Kusama was attentive towards many of the current art movements, especially in the United States. Her art works, such as the abstract ink drawings as well as the large-scale oil paintings of net patterns from the first decades of her career, can be placed within such different modes as Surrealist automatism, Abstract Expressionism, and monochrome paintings, although none of these categories is completely adequate.

It is also clear that Kusama was attentive towards inner visions and layers of unconsciousness, but in the 1950s and early 1960s such creative sources were described in terms associated with Surrealism and Mysticism, or related to external experiences of everyday life. Not before the early and mid-1980s did a specific psychopathological approach appear in Kusama's self-presentations. Nevertheless, the myth of the mad artist has come to dominate the whole of her *oeuvre*.

The attempt to include Kusama in the discourse of madness may be seen in the light of a general acclaiming focus on primitivist and insane art forms in Japan from the early 1980s onwards. Linking the art by Kusama with madness within this positive context would not construct her as a marginalized outcast, but rather, such as seen in the article by Abe Nobuo, places her in a more socially acceptable and less damaging position as an artist who may suffer from mental illness but whose artistic production is based mainly on her conscious will and talent.

For Kusama herself, after she encountered professional psychiatric treatment in 1977, the pathological aspect may have become a key approach for her self-understanding. This, combined with the general sympathetic understanding of primitivist and outsider art in Japanese art circles, may explain why in writings such as the 'Driving image' essay discussed above, she emphasizes her mental illness to an almost pathetic degree. However, as two of the examples of Kusama's own writings clearly demonstrate, work from her early period can easily be described and analysed without a single psychopathological reference. As I have pointed out by relating works and writings by Kusama to specific situations in her career, it is misleading to regard her art as the product of a mad artist. It is much more rewarding to consider Kusama Yayoi as an artist who during her 50 years of artistic endeavour not only has been highly conscious about her own creative processes and the origin of her ideas, but also has interacted with great awareness and sensitivity to the leading trends of international art circles.

*Gunhild Borggreen received her Ph.D. from the University of Copenhagen in 2000 for a dissertation about gender issues in contemporary Japanese art. She is currently researching exhibitions of Japanese art in Denmark from 1950 to 2000, supported by the Danish Research Council for the Humanities, and is affiliated with Department of Art History, Dance, and Theatre Research, University of Copenhagen, Njalsgade 80, DK-2300 Copenhagen S, Tel. (+45) 35 32 88 90.
E-mail: gunhild@hum.ku.dk*

Acknowledgements

I would like to thank the Danish Carlsberg Fondet and the Japanese Monbushô Scholarship, who have provided financial support while working on this paper. An early version of this paper was read at a meeting in the Image and Gender Kenkyûkai in Tokyo, 21 March 1999. I wish especially to thank Professor Chino Kaori and students at Gakushûin University for encouragement and help, as well as the members of the study group for useful comments.

Notes

- ¹ Monty DiPietro, 'The Vindication of Kusama Yayoi', *The East*, vol. 33, no. 5, January/February 1998, p. 36.
- ² Andrew Solomon, 'Dot Dot Dot. Artforum Profile: Yayoi Kusama', *Artforum International*, vol. 36, no. 6, February 1997, p. 66.
- ³ Tanigawa Atsushi, 'Zôshoku no genma' [Phantom of Multiplication], *Bijutsu techô*, vol. 45, no. 671, June 1993, p. 67.
- ⁴ Alexandra Munroe, 'Obsession, Fantasy and Outrage: The Art of Yayoi Kusama', in Bhupendra Karia (ed.) *Yayoi Kusama. A Retrospective*. New York: Center for International Contemporary Arts, 1989, p. 16.
- ⁵ Lynn Zelevansky, 'Driving Image: Yayoi Kusama in New York', *Love Forever. Yayoi Kusama, 1958-1968*, Los Angeles County Museum of Art, 1998, pp. 14, 15.
- ⁶ M. A. Greenstein, 'Love forever. Yayoi Kusama in retrospective', *Art Asia Pacific*, no. 20, Sydney: Fine Arts Press, 1998, p. 35.
- ⁷ Munroe, op. cit., p. 24.
- ⁸ Collette Chattopadhyay, 'On Her Own Terms', *Asian Art News*, vol. 8, no. 3, May/June 1998, p. 63.
- ⁹ Abe Nobuya, 'Saitô Hiroyuki, Kusama Yayoi ten' [Exhibitions of works by Saitô Hiroyuki and Kusama Yayoi], *Atorie*, no. 314, January 1953, p. 60.
- ¹⁰ 'Dokumento. Kusama Yayoi 1929 - . Jidai o shikku suru shaaman' [Document. Kusama Yayoi 1929 - The shaman scampering the ages], ed. Tomii Reiko, *Bijutsu techô*, vol. 45, no. 671, June 1993, p. 81.
- ¹¹ At Kusama's first solo exhibition at Matsumoto City First Citizens' Hall in March 1952, works on paper in various sizes were displayed, while her second solo exhibition at the same venue in October 1952 as well as her solo exhibition at Gallery Shirokiya in Tokyo in February 1954 showed similar watercolour and ink drawings in uniform small-scale sizes mounted and hung next to each other at eye level. 'Dokumento...', op. cit., pp. 81-82.
- ¹² In the early 1940s, certain modern painting styles, such as Abstract painting and Surrealism, were under suspicion by the authorities for their relationship to international communist organizations, and leading supporters of these styles were arrested. Fukuzawa Ichirô, leader of one Japanese Surrealist art group, Bijutsu Bunka Kyôkai (Art Culture Society), and the surrealist poet Takiguchi Shûzô were both arrested in 1941. Kaidô Kazo, 'Saikôsei: Nihon no zen'ei no hitotsu no nagare' [Reconstruction: one current in Japanese avant-garde art], *Art Vivant*, no. 21, 1986, p. 4.
- ¹³ As seen in works by for example Aimitsu, Yamashita Kikuji and Hamada Chimei. *Nihon no kindai bijutsu, 10: Fuan to sensô no jidai* [Japan's Modern

- Art, vol. 10: The Age of War and Anxiety), ed. Mizusawa Tsutomu, Tokyo: Ootsuki Shoten, 1992.
- ¹⁴ Asano Shôichirô, *Sengo bijutsuten ryakushi* [Brief History of Post-war Art Exhibitions), Tokyo: Kyûryûdô, 1997.
- ¹⁵ Kusama Yayoi, 'Iwan no baka' [Ivan the Fool], *Geijutsu shinchô*, vol. 6, no. 5, May 1955, pp. 164-165.
- ¹⁶ Kusama also specifically mentions Mark Tobey, Morris Graves and Georgia O'Keeffe in another article: Kusama Yayoi, 'Koten o owatte' [After my solo exhibitions], *Geijutsu shinchô*, vol. 6, no. 4, April 1955, p. 35.
- ¹⁷ Segi Shin'ichi, *Sengo kûhakuki no bijutsu* [A Period of Vacuum in Post-war Art), Tokyo: Shichôsha, 1996, pp. 198-203.
- ¹⁸ *Art in Theory 1900-1990: An Anthology of Changing Ideas*, eds. Charles Harrison and Paul Wood, Oxford: Blackwell, 1992, pp. 549-550.
- ¹⁹ Irmtraud Schaarschmidt-Richter, 'The Growth of Modern Japanese Painting' in *Japanese Modern Art. Painting from 1910 to 1970*, ed. Irmtraud Schaarschmidt-Richter, Zurich: Edition Stemmler, 2000, p. 32.
- ²⁰ Furthermore, some of Kusama's early figurative works can be interpreted as Surrealist in mode, as argued recently by art critic Akira Tatehata. Akira Tatehata, 'Kusama as Autonomous Surrealist', *Love Forever...*, op. cit., pp. 61-69.
- ²¹ André Breton, 'The First Manifesto of Surrealism', reprinted in excerpts in *Art in Theory 1900-1990*, op. cit., p. 438.
- ²² Monroe, 'Obsession...', op. cit., p. 17. 'Dokumento...', op. cit., p. 83, has a reproduction of O'Keeffe's answer to Kusama. The correspondence between the two artists continued for some years.
- ²³ 'Piipuru: Kusama Yayoi' [People: Kusama Yayoi], *Geijutsu shinchô*, vol. 9, no. 6, June 1958, p. 31. The short article is accompanied by a photo of Kusama, wearing formal kimono, next to Zoe Dusanne, who is wearing a light coloured Japanese *haori* jacket over a dark dress.
- ²⁴ Kusama, 'Onna hitori..', op. cit., p. 129.
- ²⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 128.
- ²⁶ *Ibid.*
- ²⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 127.
- ²⁸ *Ibid.*
- ²⁹ 'Dokyumento...', op. cit. p. 104.
- ³⁰ Kusama Yayoi, 'Ima ga ichiban shiawase' [Now Is My Most Happy Moment), *Bijutsu techô*, vol. 34, no. 495, April 1982, p. 15.
- ³¹ Kusama Yayoi, 'Doraivingu imeeji. Naze ni geijutsu suru ka?', *Kusama Yayoi. Driving Image*, Tokyo: Parco, 1986, p. 50.
- ³² Hans Prinzhorn, *Bildnerlei der Geisteskranken*, Berlin, 1922.
- ³³ John M. MacGregor, *The Discovery of the Art of the Insane*, Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1989.

- ³⁴ Shioda Jun'ichi, 'Ikai no hito – Nihon no autosaidaa aato' [People of Another World – Japanese Outsider Art], *Parareru vishon – 20 seiki bijutsu to autosaidaa aato: Nihon no autosaidaa aato / Japanese Outsider Art: Inhabitants of Another World*, Tokyo: Setagaya Bijutsukan, 1993, notes 5 and 6.
- ³⁵ 'Geijutsu to soboku' [Art and Simplicity], *Gekkan Bijutsu*, vol. 127, April 1986, p. 206. Over 50.000 people visited the exhibition during the two and a half months of display in 1986. Asano, *Sengo bijutsuten...*, op. cit., p. 295.
- ³⁶ Abe Nobuo, 'Tenpyô. Tôkyô: Kusama Yayoi ten' [Exhibition Review. Tokyo: Kusama Yayoi Exhibition], *Bijutsu techô*, vol. 33, no. 477, February 1981, pp. 202-203. The critic Abe Nobuo should not be mistaken for the critic Abe Nobuya mentioned in the beginning of this paper.
- ³⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 203.
- ³⁸ Maurice Tuchman and Carol S. Eliel, *Parallel Visions. Modern Artists and Outsider Art*, Los Angeles County Museum of Art and Princeton University Press, 1992, p. 10.
- ³⁹ Shioda, 'Ikai no hito...', pp. 12, 13. Quoted from the English version in the catalogue, *Parareru vishon...*, op. cit., p. 38.