KUSAMA, IN HER OWN WORDS

by Edward M. Gómez

Yayoi Kusama; translated by Ralph McCarthy

Infinity Net: The Autobiography of Yayoi Kusama
(University of Chicago Press, 2012)

Tatakau
(Access Co., Ltd., Japan, 2011)

With her colorful wigs, bug-eyed gaze and paintings, sculptures, and clothes covered with swarms of her signature polka dots, “infinity net” patterns, or phallic-shaped protrusions, the Japanese-born artist Yayoi Kusama has become one of the most visible figures on today’s international art scene. Her look, as much as her art’s distinctive motifs, has become an indelible emblem of the globally recognizable Kusama brand. Now 83, Kusama is one of those artists whose singular vision of the “real world” and elaboration of a very personal world of her own creation in and through her art are inescapable whenever one encounters any example of her painting, drawing, sculpture, mixed-media environments, or performance-based works. As Kusama makes plain in these two autobiographical books, the forms her art has taken have grown directly out of the deeply rooted neuroses with which she has wrestled all her life. If her work looks distinctly different from that of other modern artists, it is, she might argue, largely due to how and where it originated.

Kusama recounts her art-making career in detail in Infinity Net, the English-language edition of an autobiography she first published in Japan in 2002. Tatakau (Japanese for “to fight” or “to struggle against”), published in Japan late last year, is a photo-filled memoir of her formative years in New York in the 1960s, when she developed some of her work’s most enduring themes and motifs. For now, Tatakau is only available in this Japanese edition.

If the real-imaginary world to which she has given oddly alluring form and feels hallucinatory, it is because, as the artist explains in these books, her art has always flowed from and, for Kusama, has always served as a potent antidote to the neuroses that have long haunted her. In Japan, she grew up in an affluent family but an emotionally hostile home: Her mother was discouraging and psychologically abusive, and her father annoyed her mother with his constant womanizing. As a girl, Kusama discovered art and valued its therapeutic effects; making art allowed her to escape from the unhappiness and dysfunction that surrounded her. She dreamed of leaving what she saw as her repressive homeland and managed to head to the United States in 1957 after boldly writing a letter to Georgia O’Keeffe and asking the distinguished, older American artist for advice. “When you get to New York, take your pictures under your arm and show them to anyone you think may be interested,” O’Keeffe wrote back, to Kusama’s astonishment.

As both Infinity Net and Tatakau make clear, Kusama was ambitious and determined to succeed. Her first solo gallery show in New York in 1959, featuring five of her “Infinity Net” paintings—canvas-covering, lace-like, random patterns of white or colored nets against dark grounds, which pushed abstraction, then in post-abstract-expressionist transition, into new formal-psychological territory.

She explains that her first soft sculptures “were shaped like penises” because she “had a fear of sex as something dirty.” She notes that she has not created multitudes of those bulbous forms because she has been “mad about sex.” To the contrary, she observes, “I make the objects because they horrify me.” For Kusama, reproducing such forms en masse or affixing fields of macaroni to the surfaces of an array of different objects, as she also did in the past, have provided ways, she notes in Infinity Net, “of conquering the fear … a kind of self-therapy, to which I gave the name ‘Psychosomatic Art.’ ”

Becoming “self-obliterated,” as she puts it, by her art-making’s obsessive, immersive, repetitive processes, has allowed her to survive—mentally, spiritually, even physically—and to keep working. Similarly, about those oceans of polka dots that also have become her emblems, Kusama writes in Infinity Net: “By covering my entire body with polka dots, and then covering the
background with polka dots as well, I find self-obliteration.”
(For those who seek a little Zen in all things Japanese, there’s a
strong shot of liberating transcendence in the Kusama Method.)

All those polka dots painted or stuck onto hats, handbags, cats,
panties, balloons, and naked bodies frolicking on the Brooklyn
Bridge, around Wall Street, in Central Park, and at the base of
the Statue of Liberty! All those Kusama fashions with holes for
breasts or tummies or butts to hang out and hang loose! All that
polka dot wisdom proffered to the world, including Kusama’s
typewritten 1968 letter to President Richard M. Nixon, which
advised: “You can’t eradicate violence by using more violence.
This truth is written in the spheres with which I will lovingly,
soothingly [sic], adorn your hard, masculine body. Gently!
Gently! dear Richard. Calm your manly fighting spirit!”

In Tatakau, Kusama recalls that she routinely spoke out against
the Vietnam War. Indeed, the political currents underlying
many of her artistic expressions merit closer, deeper exami-
nation, and for as sex-wary a person as she says she was, her
sincere advocacy of sexual revolution was of a kind that
today would spell T-E-R-R-O-R to the good, chaste citizens of
Santorum Nation. After all, her excited promotion of getting
naked and orgies and even homosexual weddings (she staged
one in the 1960s) was fundamentally as iconoclastic as it was
superficially spectacular. In retrospect, Kusama’s perceived
kookiness helped camouflage her—for the mainstream—more
radical ideas. Occupy Wall Street? That might have sounded
like child’s play to Kusama’s erstwhile confrères. In the press
release for her 1968 “Anatomic Explosion” event, a “naked
demonstration” in Wall Street, Kusama commanded: “Don’t
pay taxes…Burn Wall Street…OBLITERATE WALL STREET
MEN WITH POLKA DOTS.”

For all her madcap’s persona, Kusama was completely serious
about her work’s themes—love; peace; liberating, uninhibited
self-expression—and deeply upset that critics and the media
back in Japan dismissed her as a mere sensationalist. She left
the U.S. and returned to Japan in 1973, where she continued
making art, and wrote and published numerous literary works.
Starting in the late 1980s, her art was rediscovered in the West,
and her star rose again, culminating in her representation
of Japan at the 1993 Venice Biennale, among other honors.

In the early period of her New York sojourn, Kusama writes in
Infinity Net, her outlook could be summed up like this: “Bring
on Picasso, bring on Matisse, bring on anybody! I would stand
up to them all with a single polka dot . . . I was betting every-
thing on this and raising my revolutionary banner against all
of history.” If such bravado sounds defiant in today’s era of
market-focused, Damien Hirst-style hype and self-promotion,
it also seems a bit quaint. Still, it reflects a current of creativ-
ity and self-awareness that have made Kusama both a prolific
artist and a fascinating character. With her countless dots and
phallics, and her ever-expanding nets, her creations may be
seen, in contrast to so much post-Duchampian, appropriation-
ist, or intellectually weak conceptual art, which often alludes
to death, as symbols of some kind of unstoppable, healing
fecundity. With this in mind, both of these books remind us that
Kusama’s abiding, driving energy, which has found compel-
ling expression in her work’s love-sexy titillations, despite—or
because of—her magnificent obsessions, is and has been the
real, central subject of her art. Unlike so many self-consciously
detached, irony-filled art exercises, it is, unabashedly, a strange
but irresistible affirmation of life.

A retrospective exhibition, Yayoi Kusama, is on view at Tate
Modern, in London, through June 5. It will open at the Whitney
Museum of American Art, in New York, on July 12 (and run
through September 30).

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Journalist, critic and independent scholar Edward M. Gómez
wrote about post-World War II Japanese modern art in Le
dictionnaire de la civilisation japonaise (Paris: Éditions Hazan,
1994) and contributed to Yes: Yoko Ono (New York: Harry N.
Abrams, 2000). A selection of his publications can be found at