

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)

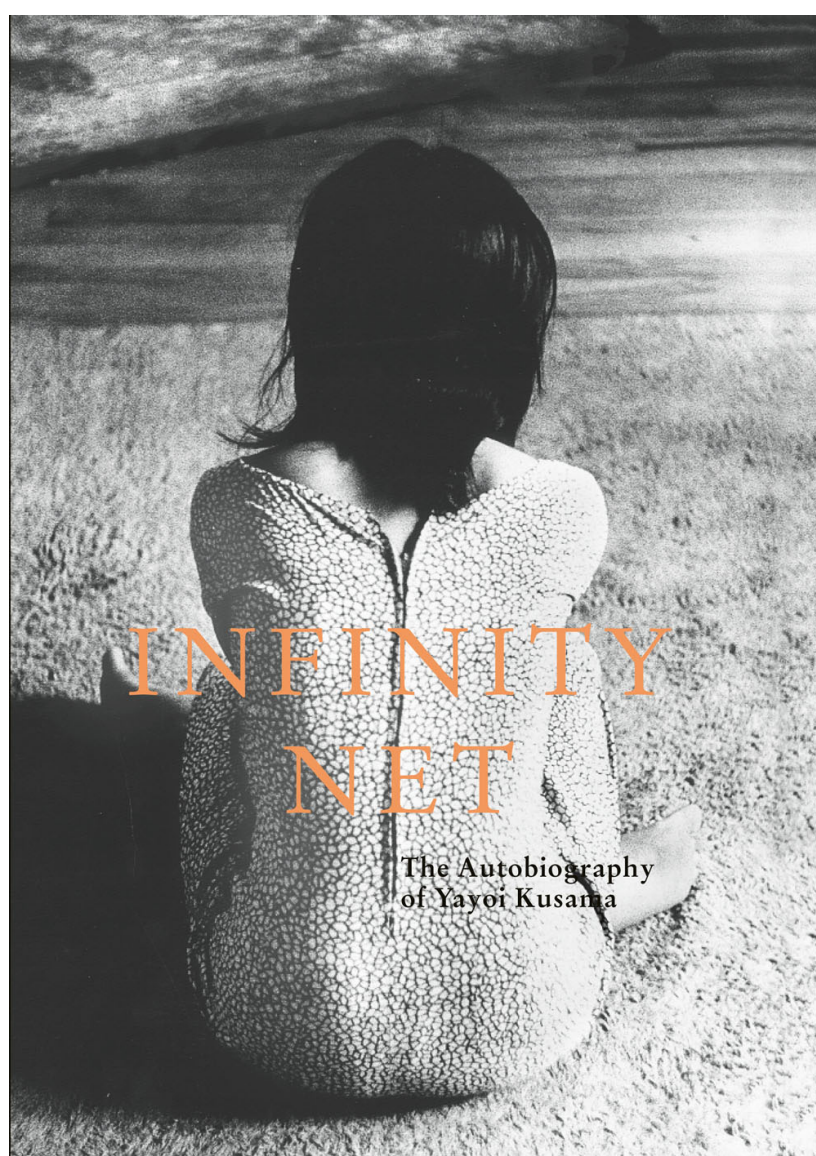
Yayoi Kusama
Tatakau
(Access Co., Ltd., Japan, 2011)

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 looks 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, was a career-spurring success. During the following decade, she struggled and worked with an obsessive drive that was, she recalls, her instinctive response to her neuroses and hallucinations. She made her name with her early “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-obiterated,” 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 examination, 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 everything 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 creativity and self-awareness that have made Kusama both a prolific artist and a fascinating character. With her countless dots and phalluses, and her ever-expanding nets, her creations may be seen, in contrast to so much post-Duchampian, appropriationist, 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 compelling 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 www.edwardmgomez.com.