

Love forever : [brochure] Yayoi Kusama, 1958-1968 : July 9-September 22, 1998, the Museum of Modern Art, New York

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July 9 - September 22, 1998 • The Museum of Modern Art, New York

1958-1968

Yayoi Kusama,

LOVE
FOREVER



LOVE
FOREVER

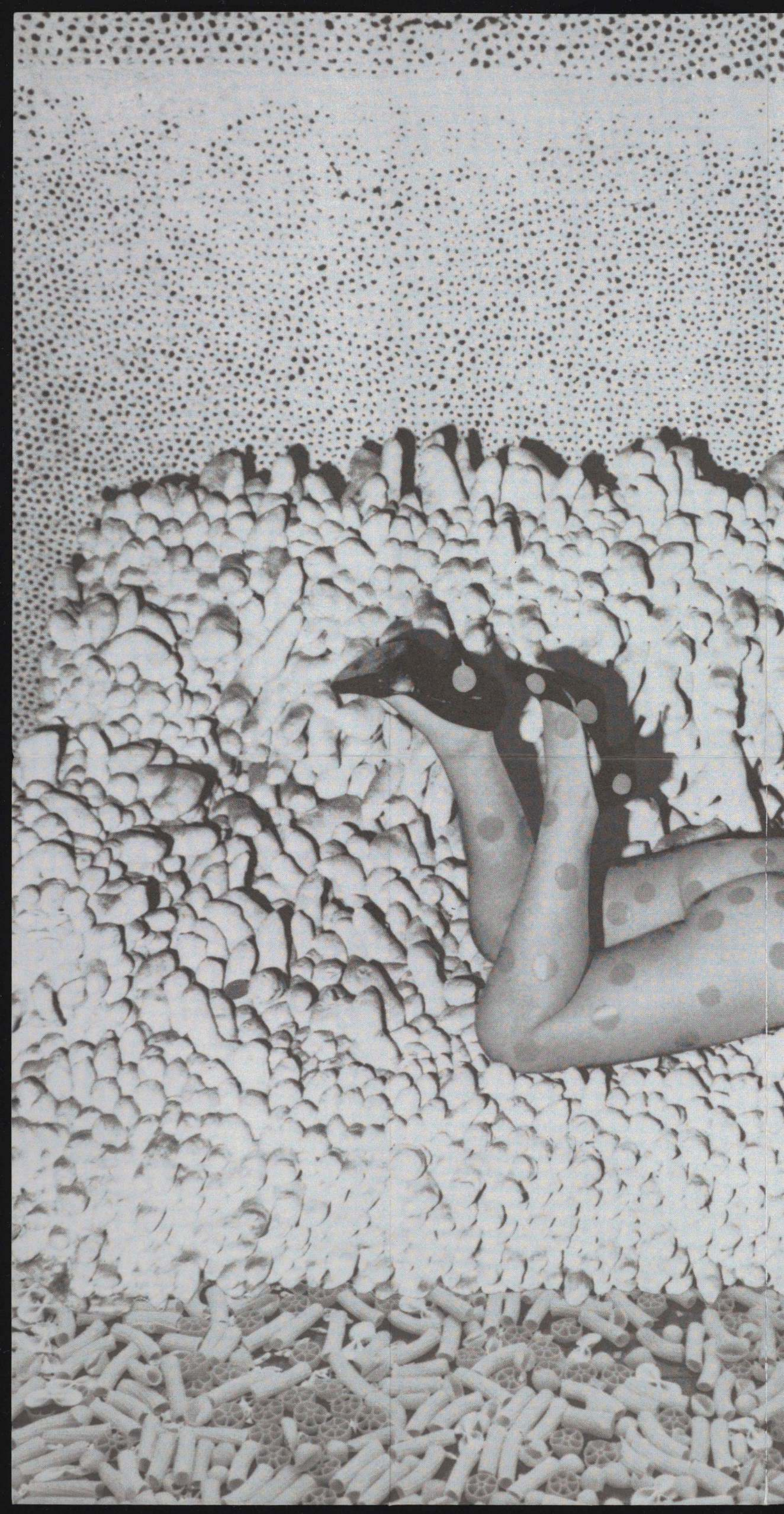
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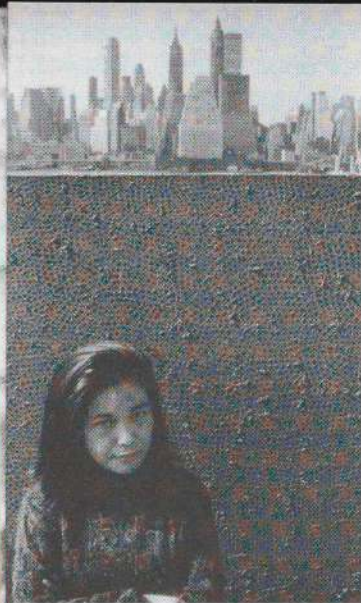
Kusama, **1958–1968**

The Museum of Modern Art, New York • July 9–September 22, 1998

Collage (c. 1966, no longer extant) with photograph by Hal Reiff of Kusama reclining on Accumulation No. 2







Kusama with *Infinity Net*, c. 1961.
Photograph courtesy the artist

Yayoi Kusama in New York

From the time she arrived in New York in June of 1958 until performance began to dominate her oeuvre a decade later, Yayoi Kusama produced a powerful body of work that was as wide-ranging in its experimentation with an array of mediums as it was prescient in its anticipation of subsequent artistic developments in the United States. Exhibited in this country and in Europe alongside many of the most influential painters and sculptors of the moment, her work during the sixties was admired by her peers and praised by critics, but Kusama did not receive the long-

term critical and financial support that might have secured her artistic legacy. After her return to her native Tokyo in the mid-seventies, her work was largely overlooked in this country. Recently, the intense interest of a younger generation of artists and critics has brought Kusama's achievement to international attention once again. *Love Forever: Yayoi Kusama, 1958–1968* offers a comprehensive picture of Kusama's most prolific period during her years in the United States.

Infinite repetition is at the heart of Kusama's enterprise and it characterizes all of her work from her early white-on-white and subtly two-toned *Infinity Net* paintings, to sculptures carpeted with soft phallic forms, to installations, performances, and film. Because all of her works are fundamentally performative, the process involved in making the art always takes precedence over the final product. Kusama's willingness to paint over drawings, reassemble collages, and combine finished paintings and sculptures to create environments also foreshadows the increasingly ephemeral nature of her work as the sixties progressed. In many cases only photographs remain to document her installations or her performances.

Since her work strives to be nothing less than all-encompassing, no distinction exists for Kusama between her self and her art. In a marathon dance of obsessive productivity that obliterates any separation between art and life, the daring that she displays in her unusually raw form of invention is inextricable from the courage it has taken to make it against great odds.

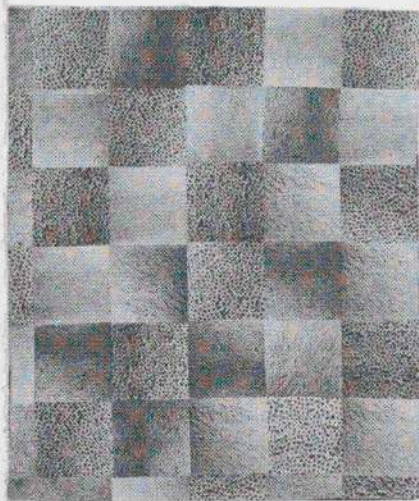
Works on Paper, Gouaches, Collage, Photocollage

Although it is not known how many small pen-and-ink drawings and gouaches Kusama produced before coming to the United States, she, herself, estimates that she had as many as two-thousand with her when she arrived. Throughout the sixties Kusama continued making large- and small-scale works on paper, expanding her use of media to include fluorescent poster paint and collage elements like mailing stickers and cut-and-pasted photographs. Often, she would rework older drawings from Japan, and it is not uncommon to find a heavily painted fluorescent net painted directly on top of a much earlier pen-and-ink or charcoal drawing. This practice has made the dating of Kusama's drawings a difficult task. Sometimes works begun in Japan in 1952 or 1953 were not "completed" until a decade or more later.

Kusama's photocollages present a different problem altogether. Many of them appear to have been made primarily as mock-ups for posters advertising Kusama's exhibitions, and most only exist in their

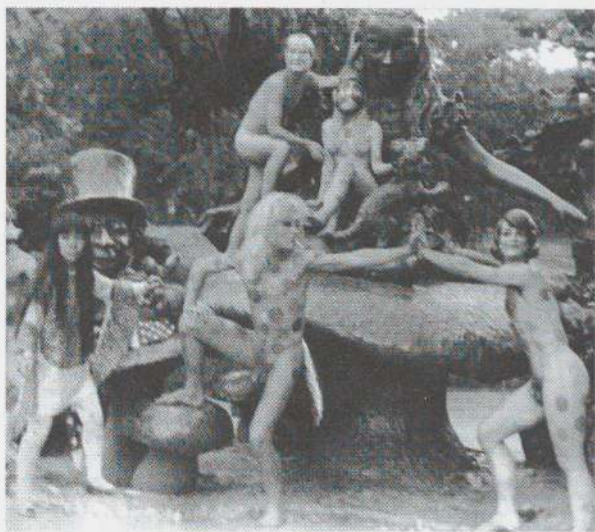
printed form with their originals lost or discarded. The six photocollages in the exhibition are the sole representatives of, most likely, a far larger number of similar works that are either lost or no longer extant.

Kusama's interest in obsessive repetition caused her to produce works in series, but, unlike contemporaries like Andy Warhol, she did not choose to utilize methods of mechanical reproduction to turn out exact replicas. *Accumulation of Nets* and *Accumulation of Nets No. 7* are both made from black-and-white photos of *Infinity Net* paintings arranged in a grid



Accumulation of Nets No. 7, 1962. Photocollage. 29 x 24 1/2" (73.7 x 62.2 cm). The Museum of Modern Art, New York. Gift of Agnes Gund

formation but the composition of the individual photos varies from work to work as does the structure of the grid itself. Like a patchwork quilt that displays creative variation within a strict matrix, each of the two photocollages has its own singular logic and identity.



Alice in Wonderland performance, Central Park, New York, 11 August 1968.
Photograph courtesy the artist

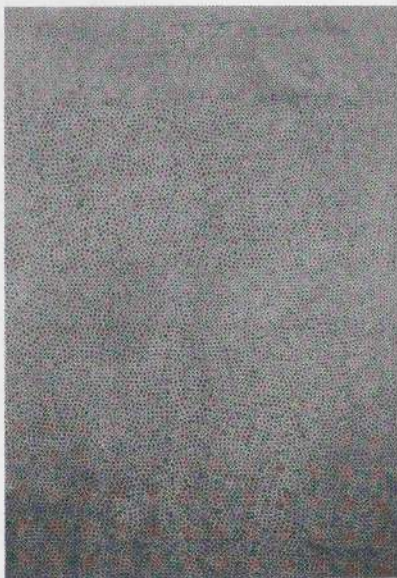
Performance

In documenting the making of her mural-sized paintings through photography, in her interactive installations, or even in the maniacal production of posters, flyers, and press releases that accompanied her projects, the element of performance played a large role in all of Kusama's work from early on in her career. Although she did not use the term "performance" until 1967, her actual move to performance, first featuring herself and growing to include other participants, began as early as 1965 with a handful of events on the streets of New York that had no audience but were documented by a hired photographer. In 1967 Kusama began to stage *Body Festivals* and *Anatomic Explosions* in public parks and at historic landmarks in New York City and later in The Netherlands. Whereas *Body Festivals* simply offered the public the chance to be covered with polka-dots painted by the artist and her assistants, *Anatomic Explosions* featured nude, polka-dot covered dancers who gyrated in front of sites like the New York Stock Exchange and the Statue of Liberty. In each case the happenings ended when the police inevitably broke them up. Kusama continued to stage ever more elaborate *Body Festivals* and *Orgy Happenings* through 1969. One of them, *Grand Orgy to Awaken the Dead at MoMA (Otherwise Known as The Museum of Modern Art)—Featuring Their Usual Display of Nudes*, achieved the apex of public display by its immortalization on the cover of New York's *Daily News*.

Infinity Net Paintings

Kusama never abandoned one medium for another, but at different times, one mode of expression dominated. In the first three years that Kusama lived in New York, she concentrated primarily on painting. Arriving in New York at the age of twenty-nine, in June of 1958, Kusama carried with her a large number of relatively small ink and gouache works that she had produced in Japan. Delicately drawn biomorphic abstractions, many of these works recalled the language of European and American postwar painters like Joan Miró and Arshile Gorky.

Within only eighteen months, Kusama radically transformed her art. In October of 1959, at her first solo exhibition in New York, at Brata Gallery on East 10 Street, she showed five mural-sized white monochrome paintings. Kusama limited her means in these works to a single motif—an intricate, net-like pattern that covered her canvases from edge to edge. Executed in many colors on surfaces ranging from canvas to mannequins and household objects, the *Infinity Net* would become Kusama's signature motif. In the spring of 1961, for her second solo exhibition in New York, at Stephen Radich Gallery, Kusama painted a series of large monochrome paintings that practically covered the walls of the gallery. One work, no longer extant, is estimated to have measured thirty-three feet. These expanses of tightly wrought, white-on-white repetitions relate to the boundaryless canvases of Abstract Expressionists like Jackson Pollock and anticipate the more minimal experiments of contemporaries like Robert Ryman and Frank Stella. Kusama's *Infinity Nets*, though, differ from both Abstract Expressionism and Minimalism in their sheer obsessiveness. Created in working sessions that lasted forty-to-fifty hours at one stretch, they are less examples of "all-over" painting as they are feats of endurance.



No. Green No. 1. Oil on canvas. 70 x 49 1/8" (177.8 x 124.6 cm). The Baltimore Museum of Art. Edith Ferry Hooper Bequest Fund

Accumulation Sculpture

By 1961, Kusama had also begun to experiment with three-dimensional work, developing an ongoing series of soft sculptures that she dubbed *Accumulations*. In these works, Kusama transforms everyday objects like clothes and household furniture into hilarious and aggressive send-ups of sex and power by covering them with bristling seas of fiber-stuffed phallic forms. Praising the *Accumulations* as kooky variants of Pop art, critics in 1960s New York generally avoided discussing the fact that these works made explicit fun of male sexual potency. In 1962 *Accumulations* were included in two ground-breaking exhibitions of Pop art at Richard Bellamy's Green Gallery, along with works by Claes Oldenburg, Andy Warhol, Roy Lichtenstein, James Rosenquist, and others.

The *Accumulation* sculptures were later displayed as part of installations that mimic their repetitive patterns. Often these installations included mannequins painted with the *Infinity Net* pattern, walls covered by Kusama's net paintings, and floors strewn with dried macaroni. Hiring photographers well known in the fashion and art worlds, Kusama used these environments as backdrops for photographic sessions that featured herself amongst her paintings and sculptures. Those who worked with her report that Kusama closely directed every detail of each shot. These "assisted" self-portraits continued to stretch the boundaries of taste and sexual stereotypes, with Kusama appearing in various guises: *femme fatale*, mod fashion plate, or living doll.



Kusama lying on *My Flower Bed*, New York, c. 1965–66. Photograph by Peter Moore. © Estate of Peter Moore



Kusama in front of her thirty-three-foot white net painting (no longer extant) at solo exhibition, Stephen Radich Gallery, New York, 1961. Photograph courtesy the artist

Return to Japan

As Kusama's work at the end of the 1960s became increasingly ephemeral, her reputation in the New York art world waned. By 1973 she had returned to Tokyo where she continued to produce her signature *Infinity Nets* and *Accumulations* and has since written eleven novels and books of poetry. Through these writings Kusama was rediscovered by a younger Japanese audience, and since the early 1980s she has become a venerated elder stateswoman in the Tokyo contemporary art community. In this country, interest in Kusama's work has been building over the last decade as a result of a few small but influential exhibitions in New York, Los Angeles, and Chicago.

Although she is still actively producing paintings, sculptures, installations, and ephemeral objects, it was during her decade in New York that Kusama found her mature artistic voice as well as the motifs that still remain her signature. During ten prolific years, Kusama produced an astonishing number of paintings, sculptures, collages, photocollages, installations, performances, and even a film. Whether part or prescient of Pop, Minimalism, and post-Minimalism, Kusama's body of work does not fit comfortably under any of these rubrics. It is unique, and if history has the ability to absorb and tame some art that might once have been considered shocking, thirty years after its production Kusama's work remains every bit as bizarre, as difficult, and as dazzling as it was when she first made it.

Laura Hoptman

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Public Programs

The following program will be held in conjunction with the exhibition *Love Forever: Yayoi Kusama, 1958–1968*:

Kusama in New York: The 1960s
Tuesday, September 15, 6:30 p.m.
The Roy and Niuta Titus Theater 2

A panel discussion with Udo Kultermann, art historian; Lucy Lippard, writer; Alexandra Munroe, Director, The Japan Society Gallery, New York, and others. Moderated by Laura Hoptman, Assistant Curator, Department of Drawings, The Museum of Modern Art.

This program has been organized by The Museum of Modern Art in association with The Japan Society, New York.

Tickets: \$8; members \$7; students and seniors \$5. Tickets are available at the Lobby Information Desk.

For more information, please call the Department of Education at 212-708-9781.

Publication

Love Forever: Yayoi Kusama, 1958–1968. With essays by Lynn Zelevansky, Laura Hoptman, Akira Tatehata, and Alexandra Munroe. 8 1/2 x 12". 196 pp.; 121 col. ill., 66 b/w. Paper, \$29.95.

The exhibition is organized by the Los Angeles County Museum of Art and the Japan Foundation in collaboration with The Museum of Modern Art, and supported by a generous grant from the Nippon Foundation. Transportation assistance was provided by Japan Airlines.

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The accompanying catalogue is supported in part by a grant from The Andy Warhol Foundation for the Visual Arts.

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ABOVE: Kusama with macaroni mannequin (no longer extant) from her *Food Obsession* series, c. 1966. Photograph by Eikō Hosoe, courtesy the artist

FRONT COVER: Kusama in *Infinity Mirror Room—Phalli's Field*. Installation view, Castellane Gallery, New York, 1965. Photograph Eikō Hosoe, courtesy the artist

BELOW: *Red Stripes* (detail). 1965. Sewn stuffed fabric on wood, 27 1/2 x 32 5/8 x 7 1/8" (70 x 83 x 20 cm). Collection Becht, Naarden, The Netherlands

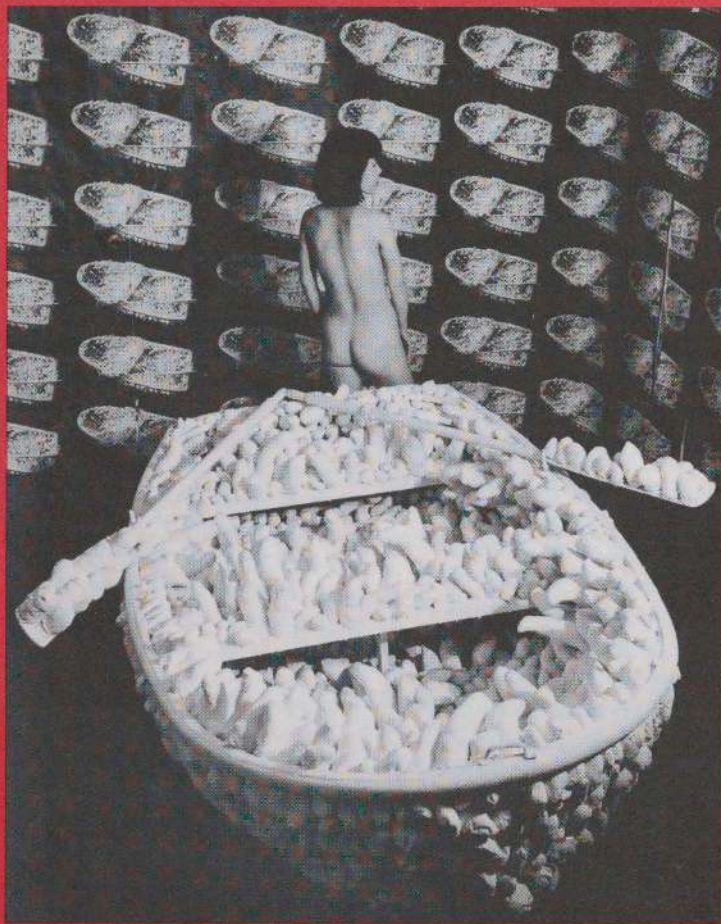
Installation

Kusama's desire to create all-encompassing environments and her preoccupation with endless repetition found a natural outgrowth in installation work. *Aggregation: One Thousand Boats Show*, her first installation, was shown in December 1963 at Gertrude Stein Gallery, New York, and consisted of a single *Accumulation* sculpture of a rowboat that sat in a small room off a dark corridor. Both the corridor and the room that contained the sculpture were wallpapered with black-and-white images of the boat, so that the visitor would pass along the boat-filled corridor only to dramatically dead-end in a small room and be confronted by the real thing. This eerie, unabashedly theatrical work used modular repetition in a new way, conjuring images of infinitely reproducible artworks and, ultimately, questioning the difference between original and copy.

In August of 1964, Richard Castellane Gallery in New York presented the *Driving Image Show*, a room-sized installation of Kusama's paintings, sculptures, and objects. With *Infinity Net* paintings lining the walls and loose macaroni noodles covering the floor, the room was additionally crowded with *Accumulation* furniture, a rowboat, and a group of mannequins covered from top to toe in dried macaroni. Since her early painting exhibitions in

which mural-size monochrome paintings lined the walls of the gallery space, Kusama had been working towards the creation of an all-enveloping environment. With its dizzying patterns covering every available surface (it was reported that Kusama even covered the gallery owner's two dogs with dried macaroni), the experience of *Driving Image* for the viewer was meant to be total—a three-dimensional equivalent of the artist's *Infinity Net* paintings.

In January of 1965, Kusama repeated a version of the *Driving Image* installation at Galleria d'Arte del Naviglio in Milan, Italy. The show included elements similar to the one in New York, but in the Milan version, all the sculptural elements were painted with the *Infinity Net* pattern in a range of hot, Day-Glo colors, creating a much more psychedelic effect.



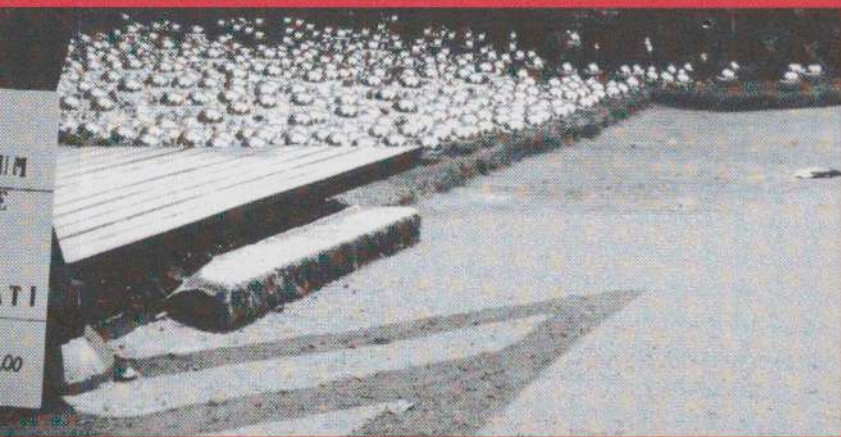
Kusama in *Aggregation: One Thousand Boats Show* installation, Gertrude Stein Gallery, New York, 1963. Photograph by Rudolph Burckhardt



Narcissus Garden, 1966. Installation at 1966 Venice Biennale

Like many others in Europe and the United States in the mid-sixties, Kusama incorporated kinetic elements into her work, building structures with mirrors, lights, and piped-in music to create environments that affected all the senses simultaneously. Installations such as *Infinity Mirror Room—Phalli's Field* were discrete structures meant to welcome spectators inside where they would be completely enveloped in the environment. Perhaps Kusama's best known kinetic installation was *Narcissus Garden*, a site-specific environmental installation created for the 1966 Venice Biennale. In its original configuration, *Narcissus Garden* consisted of 1,500 mirrored plastic balls scattered on a twenty-two-foot area of lawn in front of the Italian Pavilion at the center of the exhibition grounds. This dazzling reflective display

was enlivened by an unauthorized performance by Kusama on the first day of the exhibition, where, dressed in a traditional kimono, the artist posted a hand-lettered sign and attempted to sell the balls to passersby for 1,200 lire apiece. Seeing this crass reminder of the commercial aspects of fine art as a breach of decorum, Biennale organizers asked Kusama to desist. She did so but not without granting interviews to a number of international newspapers and magazines in which she expressed the desire to make contemporary art as accessible to all as products in a supermarket. In a Biennale roundly criticized for being weak and insipid, *Narcissus Garden* was singled out by many art writers as the highlight of the show.



1966 Venice Biennale. Photograph courtesy the artist

