

ABOUT THE ARTWORK

Artist: Yayoi Kusama (pronounced *Yay – yoi Koo – sar – mar*)

Title: *Self obliteration by dots*

Date: 1968

Medium: Back-lit digital image reproduced from gelatin silver photograph

Dimensions: Variable

This photograph records a performance by Yayoi Kusama in which the artist attempts to obliterate (or erase) her sense of self. Kusama's placement of dots on her body and her surroundings aims to absorb the image of herself into an endless world of dots. It is a way of reducing the world and the self into an infinite web of simple parts. The dots are like the molecules or fine matter that form the substance of life. They represent the 'sameness' that connects people but also the 'sameness' that threatens our sense of self. In her performance of 'self-obliteration', Kusama draws attention to the creation of self identity by reversing the process. Instead of creating her sense of self, the artist attempts to obliterate it.

ABOUT THE ARTIST

Yayoi Kusama has been working as a painter, sculptor and environmental artist for the last 50 years. Born in 1929 in Matsumoto, Japan, she has been extremely influential and is undoubtedly one of the most significant artists to emerge from Asia in the second half of the twentieth century. Kusama moved in 1957 from Japan to the USA, where she lived and worked for 15 years in the vibrant artistic environment of New York. She returned to Tokyo in 1973. Kusama developed a motif in her work which she refers to as the 'infinity net'; she explores this through a variety of materials and forms. She traces this recurring interest to her early childhood experiences in which she states that she '... was often troubled by a thin silk-like greyish-coloured veil that came to envelop me ...'. Her acute sensitivity to environmental stimuli is sometimes overwhelming, but as an artist she has directed that sensitivity and energy into creative work. Images of nets, dots, repeated patterns and mirrors are the artist's devices for understanding and coming to terms with the vastness of life, its infinite scale and its intangibility.

SUGGESTED DISCUSSION TOPICS

- Discuss the artist's statement in relation to the work in the exhibition.
- Where might you experience 'sensory overload' to the point where you felt disoriented?
- Consider and discuss the concept of infinity. Try to identify other visual means of depicting or suggesting infinity.



References:

- Adams, Brooks and Munroe, Alexandra. 'Proliferating obsessions'. *Art in America*, vol.78, no.4, April 1990, pp.228–33.
- Devenport, Rhana. 'Yayoi Kusama: It started from hallucination'. In *Asia-Pacific Triennial of Contemporary Art 2002* [exhibition catalogue]. Queensland Art Gallery, South Brisbane, 2002, pp.58–61.
- Hoptman, Laura and Zelevansky, Lynne. *Love Forever, Yayoi Kusama, 1958–1968*. <www.moma.org/exhibitions/1998/kusama>
- Hoptman, Laura et al. *Yayoi Kusama*. Phaidon, London, 2000.
- Kuresawa, Takemi. 'An unwritten biography: overturning the narrative of Yayoi Kusama's self-obliteration'. *Art AsiaPacific*, no.30, 2001, pp.68–76.
- Munroe, Alexandra. 'Radical will'. *Art AsiaPacific*, no.16, 1997, pp.28–9.
- Solomon, Andrew. 'Dot dot dot: Yayoi Kusama'. *Artforum*, vol.35, no.6, February 1997, pp.66–73, 100, 104, 109.

The 1960s

Marwick, Arthur. *The Sixties: Cultural Revolution in Britain, France, Italy, and the United States, c.1958–c.1974*. Oxford University Press, Oxford, 1998.

Performance art

Goldberg, RoseLee. *Performance Art: Live Art 1909 to the Present*. Harry N. Abrams, New York, 1988.

Over and below: Yayoi Kusama Japan b.1929
Self obliteration by dots 1968 Gelatin silver photographs Dimensions variable Collection: The artist Courtesy: Ota Fine Arts, Tokyo Photograph: Hal Reiff

ARTIST'S WORDS

'A polka dot has the form of the sun which is a symbol of the energy of [the] whole world and our living life, and also the form of the moon which is calm, round, soft, colourful, senseless and unknowing. Polka dots can't stay alone, like the communicative life of people ... Our earth is only one polka dot among the million stars in the cosmos ... When we obliterate nature and our bodies with polka dots, we become part of the unity of our environment, I become part of the eternal, and we obliterate ourselves in love.' Yayoi Kusama, *Manhattan jisatsu misui joshuhan (Manhattan Suicide Addict)*, Kosakusha, Tokyo, 1978, (extract) reproduced in Hoptman et al., *Yayoi Kusama*, p.124.



Yayoi Kusama has worked as a painter, sculptor and environmental artist. She has lived in Tokyo and the USA and is one of Asia's most important artists.

Kusama's work emerged out of feelings of nothingness. She uses repeated and accumulated forms, including mirrors, as a way to explore ideas of infinity and nothingness. Her work explores the idea of an 'infinity net'. The 'net' is represented both as a screen to protect you from the world and also as a celebration of the intangible and the vastness of life.

Critics often use the term 'modernism' in Asia and for a wide range of diverse artworks. This is an example of where a Western term has been used to try and describe Asian art. The problem with this is that people in the West need to try and imagine 'seeing' what Asian art looks like from an Asian point-of-view, rather than imposing Western art classifications. It is important to remember that terms such as 'modernism' have evolved from a Western understanding of art. If these terms are applied to Asian-Pacific art, it is important that this is done in a thoughtful manner that is sensitive to the history and culture captured in the materials and images used by the artist.

ACTIVITY

What is modernism (see <<http://www.artsmia.org/modernism/>> for more information)? How did modernists view the arts of Asia?

Complete a Web search to locate Western artists who appropriated Asian aesthetic influences in the production of modernist works.

ACTIVITY

Work in groups to explore the influences of one of the following aesthetic influences originating from Asia:

- Orientalism <<http://www.artlex.com/ArtLex/o/orientalism.html>>
- Japonism (Japonisme) <<http://www.utagawa.or.jp/eigobann/ENGLISH.html>>
- Chinoiserie <<http://www.artlex.com/ArtLex/Ch.html#anchor86544>>.

Present your findings in the form of a performance piece, collaborative artwork or four-dimensional time-related piece, such as a soundscape or video.

After the Second World War, Japanese artists pushed the boundaries against authority. In the process setting off an art movement which had an impact internationally. They rejected traditional authority, including the authority of the art world, and ideas that art was about creating something beautiful, decorative and permanent. This led to the development of the idea that art could exist as an idea or concept rather than an actual physical object. Japanese art of the 50s and 60s was outward-looking and internationalised.

The Gutai Group (<<http://perso.wanadoo.fr/articide.com/gutai/fr/ss.htm>> and search for 'Gutai Group' at <<http://images.google.com/>>), which were based in Osaka, challenged local art authorities by introducing performance and the avant garde (new and radical ideas). They wanted to get away from the idea that art was about something that hung in a gallery. They made large site-specific works, such as sand sculptures, large hanging murals and a ball on a footpath. They wanted art to be exposed to the elements of wind, sun, rain and time. The fame of this group spread widely and they received a great deal of international attention which led to more widespread fascination with art and performance and the avant garde.

Websites

http://www.artcyclopedia.com/artists/kusama_yayoi.html

<http://www.bombsite.com/archive/kusama/portfolio/>

<http://images.google.com/> (search for 'Yoyoi Kusama')

ACTIVITY

Look at other Japanese artists, such as Yoko Ono, Shozo Shimamoto and Jiro Yoshihara. These artists believed in the importance of the act or process of making art. This led to things like throwing painted balls at the canvas and applying paint with watering cans! While this appears so radical and 'anti' the skill of art, the ideas behind this process emerged from the traditions of Zen Buddhism and traditional calligraphy, where the state of mind of the artist and the process of applying ink to page, was as much about inner reflection and action as it was about the end product.