

YAYOI KUSAMA

LOVE & INFINITY



草間彌生

TABLE OF CONTENTS

BACKGROUND	02
OBSESSION	04
PREFORMING THE BODY	12
INFINITY & MORE	18
LIFE OF KUSAMA	25



BACKGROUND

Kusama was born in 1929 into a well-off but dysfunctional family in Nagano, Japan. Largely shielded from the horrors of World War II, she was, as she has claimed, nevertheless scarred by her mother's cruelty, her father's infidelities, and her family's discouragement of her interest in art making. She started painting at the age of 10 when she began experiencing the visual and auld plague her, while also fueling her creativity, for the rest of her life. She has maintained that her "artwork is an expression of my life, particularly of my mental disease."

After a stint studying traditional Japanese painting in Kyoto, Kusama left school and moved to New York in 1958. There she felt she could pursue her art unfettered—and make waves. She began by making large-scale monochromatic paintings, for which she quickly gained critical attention. By the 1960s, the prolific artist was producing paintings, drawings, sculpture, Happenings, installation, fashion, and film. In 1969, she founded Kusama Enterprises, a commercial outlet selling clothing, bags, and even cars. These products feature her singular aesthetic, characterized by her liberal use of polka dots and dense, repeating patterns to create a sense of infinity.

In 1973, Kusama returned to Japan. Two years later, seeking treatment for her obsessive-compulsive neurosis, she entered a facility where she lives and works to this day. She continues to produce paintings and sculpture, and, in the 1980s, added poetry and fiction to her range of creative pursuits.



INFINITY NETS [FBB]
Acrylic on canvas
97 x 130.5 cm

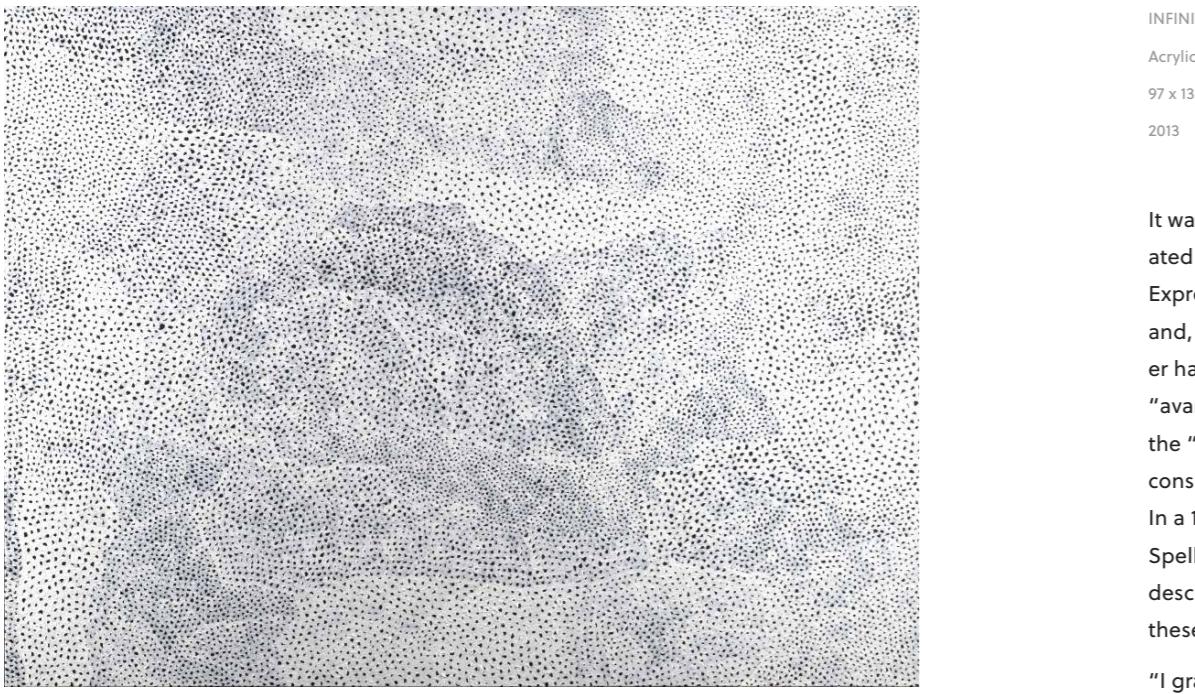
2013

OBSESSION

OBSESSION

After writing to Georgia O'Keeffe from Japan and receiving an encouraging response, Kusama relocated to the U.S., first landing in Seattle and then New York. She was quickly accepted by the city's avant-garde community of artists, who admired her rejection of the action painting popularized by the likes of Jackson Pollock and Willem de Kooning. "I wanted to be completely detached from that and start a new art movement," Kusama said.

Instead of adopting the dramatic marks of Abstract Expressionism, Kusama made all-over compositions of a different, more restrained sort. She called these increasingly large, white-on-white canvases painted with tight-knit patterns of dots "Infinity Nets." In 1959, they became the subject of her first New York solo exhibition and created an immediate sensation, inspiring a rare rave review from then-critic Donald Judd, who'd later be crowned the king of Minimalist art.



INFINITY NETS [FBB]

Acrylic on canvas

97 x 130.3 cm

2013

It was these paintings that created a bridge between Abstract Expressionism and Minimalism, and, as writer Grady T. Turner has pointed out, balanced "avant-garde aesthetics" and the "hallucinatory images" that consumed Kusama's own mind. In a 1961 article titled "Under the Spell of Accumulation," Kusama described the impulses behind these canvases:

"I gradually feel myself under the spell of the accumulation and repetition in my 'nets' which

expand beyond myself, and all over the limited space of canvas covering the floor, desk and everywhere," she wrote. Over the course of her life, Kusama has continued to make "Infinity Nets." While they range in color and scale, they all retain the repetitive marks of what she refers to as her "obsessional" practice.



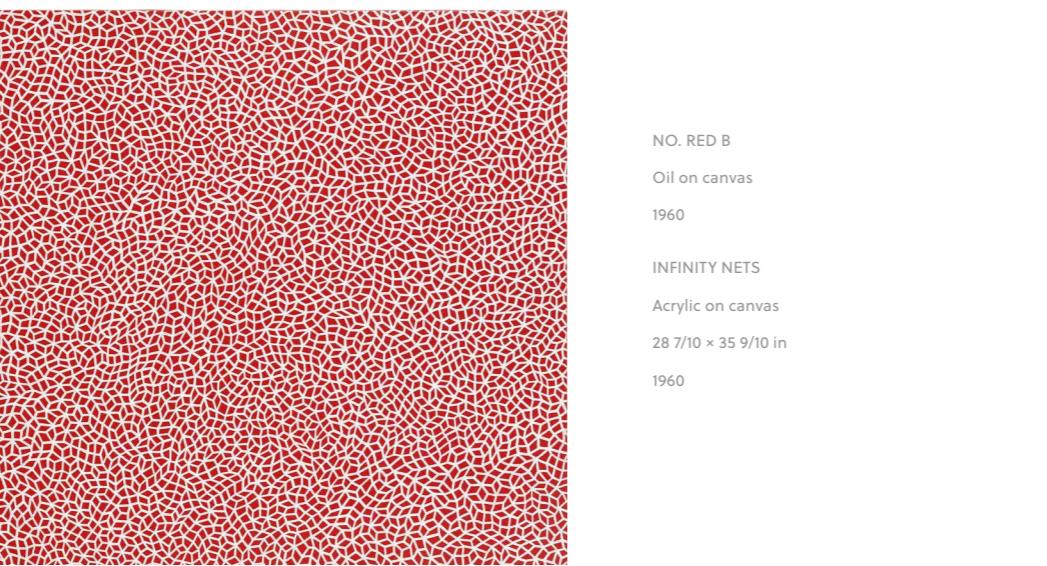
INFINITY NET PAINTING

(no longer extant)

Stephen Radich Gallery, New York

33ft long

1961



NO. RED B

Oil on canvas

1960

INFINITY NETS

Acrylic on canvas

28 7/10 × 35 9/10 in

1960

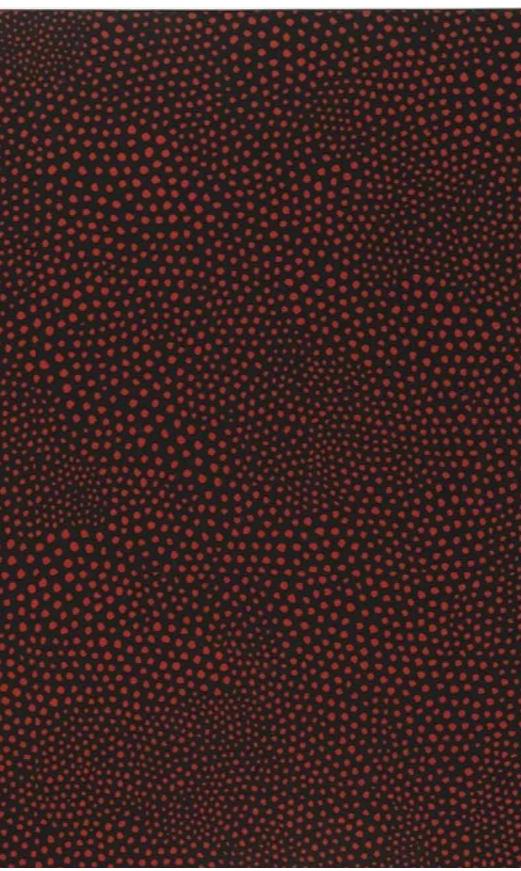


INFINITY NETS

Acrylic on canvas

73 × 91.1 cm

1960



Yayoi Kusama began painting "Infinity Nets," the artist's longest-running series, after moving to New York City in 1958. For Kusama, these abstract works covered in repeated, curved brushstrokes are an essential form of art therapy, inspired in part by her hallucinatory visions. "My nets grew beyond myself and beyond the canvases I was covering with them," she once explained. "They began to cover the walls, the ceiling, and finally the whole universe. I was always standing at the center of the obsession, over the passionate accretion and repetition inside of me." In pursuit of this infinite abyss, Kusama has even painted her "Infinity Nets" in uninterrupted sessions of 40 to 50 hours.

Kusama described her Infinity Nets as paintings "without beginning, end, or center. The entire canvas would be occupied by [a] monochromatic net. This endless repetition caused a kind of dizzy, empty, hypnotic feeling." These "nets" are an accumulation of connected, though individually applied, crescent-shaped brush strokes of thick paint. Generally, these marks curve in the same direction while gradually shifting up, down, left, or right. They compose themselves into congregations that swell and ebb across the painting. These groups of unique gestures are organized around points of tension and release. The closest comparison to their structure may be found in nature, where visible matter clusters around invisible points of gravity. The result is a design that is neither random nor systematic.

This diffusion of opulent monochrome paint across the painting is systematically interrupted by small openings in the net, organic variations of circles and ovals through which the underlying canvas is manifested. The crux of the Infinity Nets is the literal and perceptual exchange between the materiality of the painted net and the pictorial space behind or caught within the net.



"My art originates from hallucinations only I can see. I translate the hallucinations and obsessional images that plague me into sculptures and paintings. All my works in pastels are the products of obsessional neurosis and are therefore inextricably connected to my disease."

INFINITY-NETS [XSHTQ]

Acrylic on canvas

130.5 x 194.0 cm

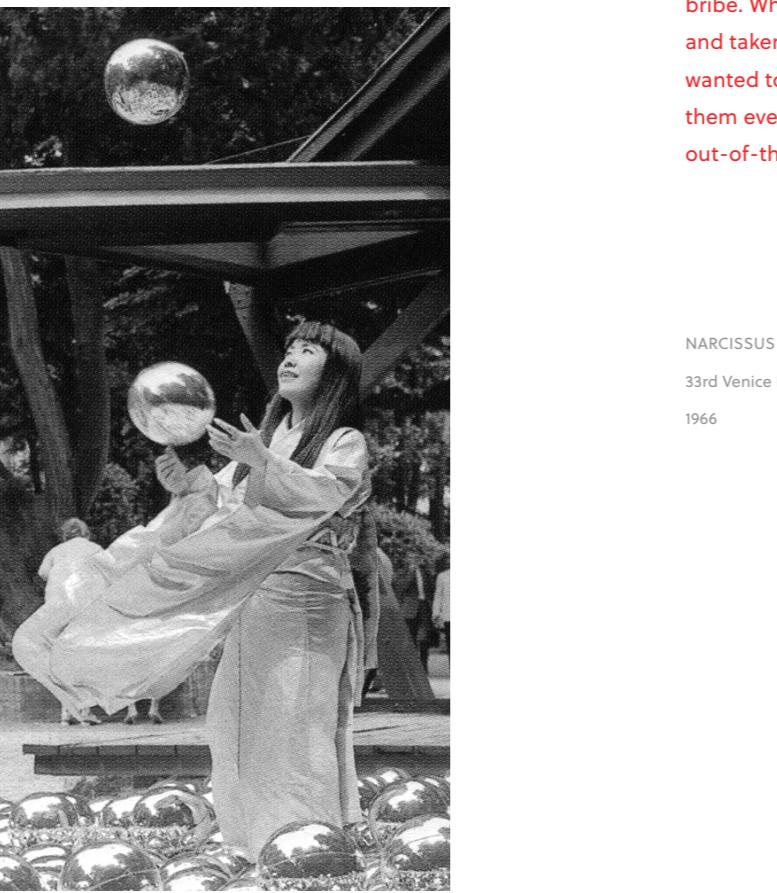
2017



PREFORMING THE BODY

CONVERSATION WITH GRADY T. TURNER (JANUARY 1, 1999)

An interview conducted by fax while separated by language, culture, and a couple of generations.



NARCISSUS GARDEN
33rd Venice Biennale
1966

GT: You staged dozens of Happenings—what you called “Body Festivals”—in your studio and in public spaces around New York. Some were sites of authority, such as MoMA or Wall Street. Other sites, such as Tompkins Square Park and Washington Square Park, were associated with New York’s psychedelic hippie culture. What was your role in these?

YK: I played the role of high priestess and painted the nude bodies of models on the stage with polka dots in five colors. When a Happening was staged at Times Square under my direction, a huge crowd flocked to it. I was never nude, publicly or privately. At the homosexual orgies I directed, I always stayed at a safe place with a manager in the studio to avoid being arrested by police. The studio would have been thrown into utter confusion if I were arrested. The police were primarily after a bribe. When I was arrested while directing a Happening in Wall Street and taken into police custody, they demanded that I pay them if I wanted to be set free. Bribes ranged from \$400 to \$1,000. Since I paid them every time I was arrested, my Happenings ended up as a good out-of-the-way place for them to make money.

GT: Why were the performers nude?

YK: Painting bodies with the patterns of Kusama’s hallucinations obliterated their individual selves and returned them to the infinite universe. This is magic.

GT: Nudity was central to your work in those years: in addition to the Happenings, you opened a fashion boutique offering clothes you designed that were “nude, see-through, and mod.”

The shop had private studios and nude models available for body painting or photographing. You also opened the Church of Self-Obliteration in a SoHo loft, appointing yourself the “High Priestess of Polka Dots” so you could officiate at a wedding of two gay men in 1968. You designed a large bridal gown that both men wore. How did you see your art in relation to the

sexual revolution?

YK: I have been tossed by the

waves between rejection or a fu-

sion with my own sex. I suppose

everyone has. To get baptized at

the

Church

of Self-Obliteration, people first have their bodies

painted all over with polka dots

by

Kusama,

then return to the

root

of

their

eternal

soul.

It is the

moment of joy and of inheriting the vitality of an infinity.

GT:

In 1968, you began to refer

to your Happenings as

“Anatomic Explosions.”

They were your most overtly political works. You appeared in public sites with four nude men and women covered in polka dots. At the New York Board of Elections, they posed with oversized masks of that year’s candidates for president Richard Nixon, Hubert Humphrey, and George Wallace with a crumpled flag on

the ground. What caused you to become concerned with politics?

YK: I have been interested in politics since my childhood, probably because my grandfather was a politician.

When I read a newspaper today,

I first read its political column

ahead of its cultural column.

GT: It is a surprise, as your other art and writings seem apolitical indeed, they are often intensely private.

YK: I can only write about myself, but having searched the world around me, I have found that nothing is more intriguing than politics.

GT: Have you done Happenings since returning to Japan?

YK: I have staged performances on the premises of temples in Tokyo. At one of the temples where there was a graveyard,



‘KUSAMA’S PEEP SHOW’ EXHIBITION
Castellane Gallery, New York,
1966

I wrapped the surface of hard gravestones alternately with rolls of flimsy toilet paper. At another temple I threaded a vinyl pink cord around dozens of cherry trees in full bloom in a net fashion.

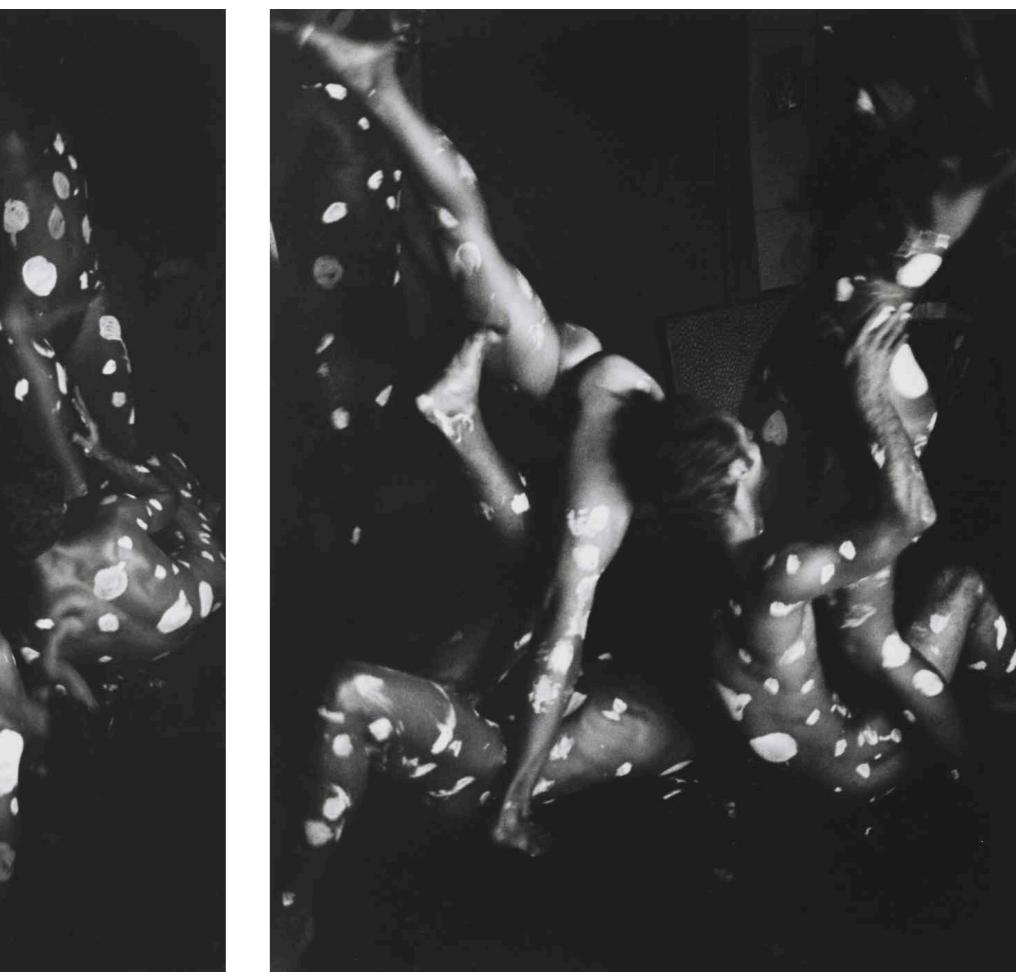
Mirror Performance was an ecstatic gathering of costumed, painted, and nude bodies within one of Kusama's mirrored chambers. It was also documented by photographers Harry Shunk and János Kender. Kusama appeals directly to the public, as well as shocking audiences into reassessing their own notions of art and its relation to culture.

Kusama used the mirror to expand her pervasive themes of repetition, obsession, and immersion; it was the ideal medium for her countercultural protest.

Photographers Harry Shunk and János Kender worked together under the name Shunk-Kender from the late 1950s to the early 1970s, based first in Paris and then in New York. They photographed artworks, events, landmark exhibitions, portraits of artists and participated in collaborative projects of the vibrant art scene of the time.



MIRROR PERFORMANCE
Gelatin silver print
1968





INFINITY & MORE

Kusama works in her three-story studio from 9 to 6 every day, sitting in her wheelchair — she can walk, but is frail — painting on canvases laid on tables or propped on the floor.

The studio is packed with new paintings, vibrant works full of tiny dots. They're all about what Kusama calls "self-obliteration" — the endless repetition — silencing the noise in her head.

"She is a pioneer first and foremost, as a female and Asian artist in the 1960s, transgressing painting, sculpture and performance," said Mika Yoshitake, associate curator at the Hirshhorn. "These mirror rooms are works that reflect her ability to transgress the genres."

One, a re-creation of the mirror room called "Phalli's Field" from 1965, features hundreds of white-and-red-spotted stuffed fabric penis creations. In another, the "Obliteration Room," visitors will be invited to stick multicolored polka dots all over a white living room.



YELLOW PUMPKIN

Naoshima, Japan

1994

"These rooms reflect all of her elements: her obsessions, her accumulations, her infinite repetitions. It's all very bodily and immersive," Yoshitake said. Her polka dots cover everything from Louis Vuitton dresses to buses in her home town. Her artworks regularly fetch a million dollars, and can be found from New York and Minneapolis to London and Amsterdam. Her exhibitions are so popular that they need crowd control.

Four years later, Kusama was selected to represent her country at the Venice Biennale. No longer a gatecrasher at the art world's most prestigious international event, she turned Japan's pavilion into a mirrored

polka-dot environment reflecting infinitely expanding images of yellow pumpkin sculptures. Venice cemented her reputation as an artist of historical value and contemporary urgency. Even after everything, Yayoi Kusama had triumphed.

She is the undiscovered genius whose late fame is justly deserved. She is the self-identified psychotic whose difference we champion. She is also the creator of bright, immersive and spectacular art that is uncannily suited to Instagram, the neural network of contemporary influence.

She tracks record-breaking attendance to her museum shows and follows every tick of



MY

HEART

IS

DANCING

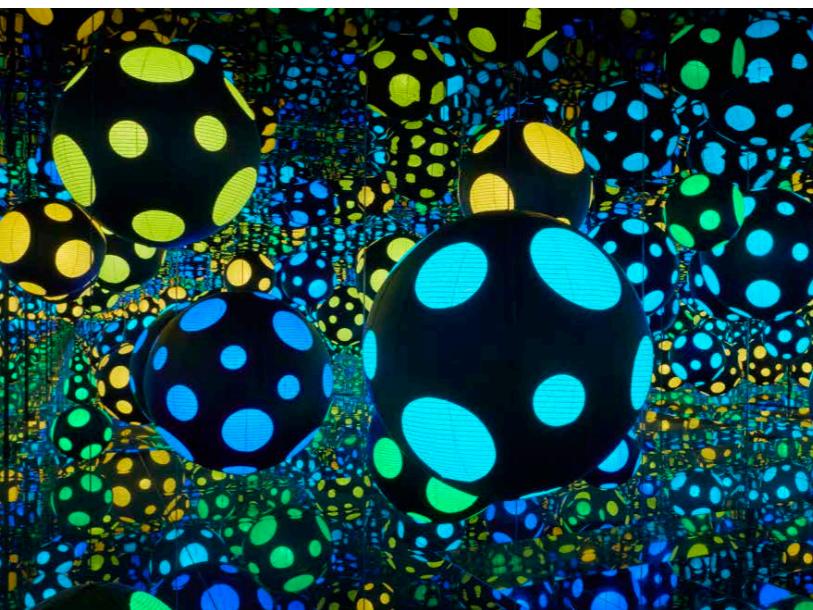
INTO

THE

UNIVERSE

Crystal Bridges

2018



LOVE IS CALLING

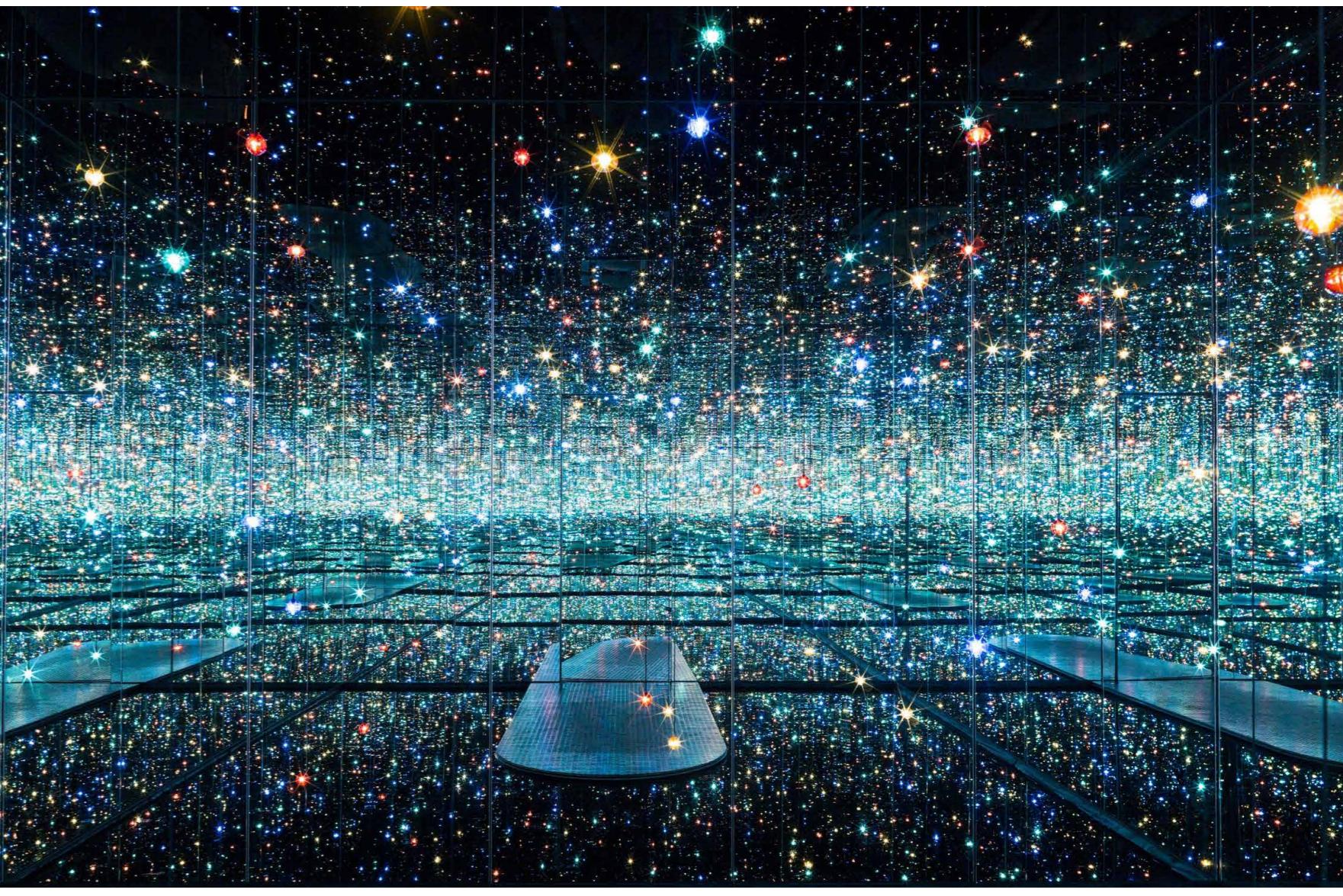
2013

AFTERMATH OF OBLITERATION OF ETERNITY

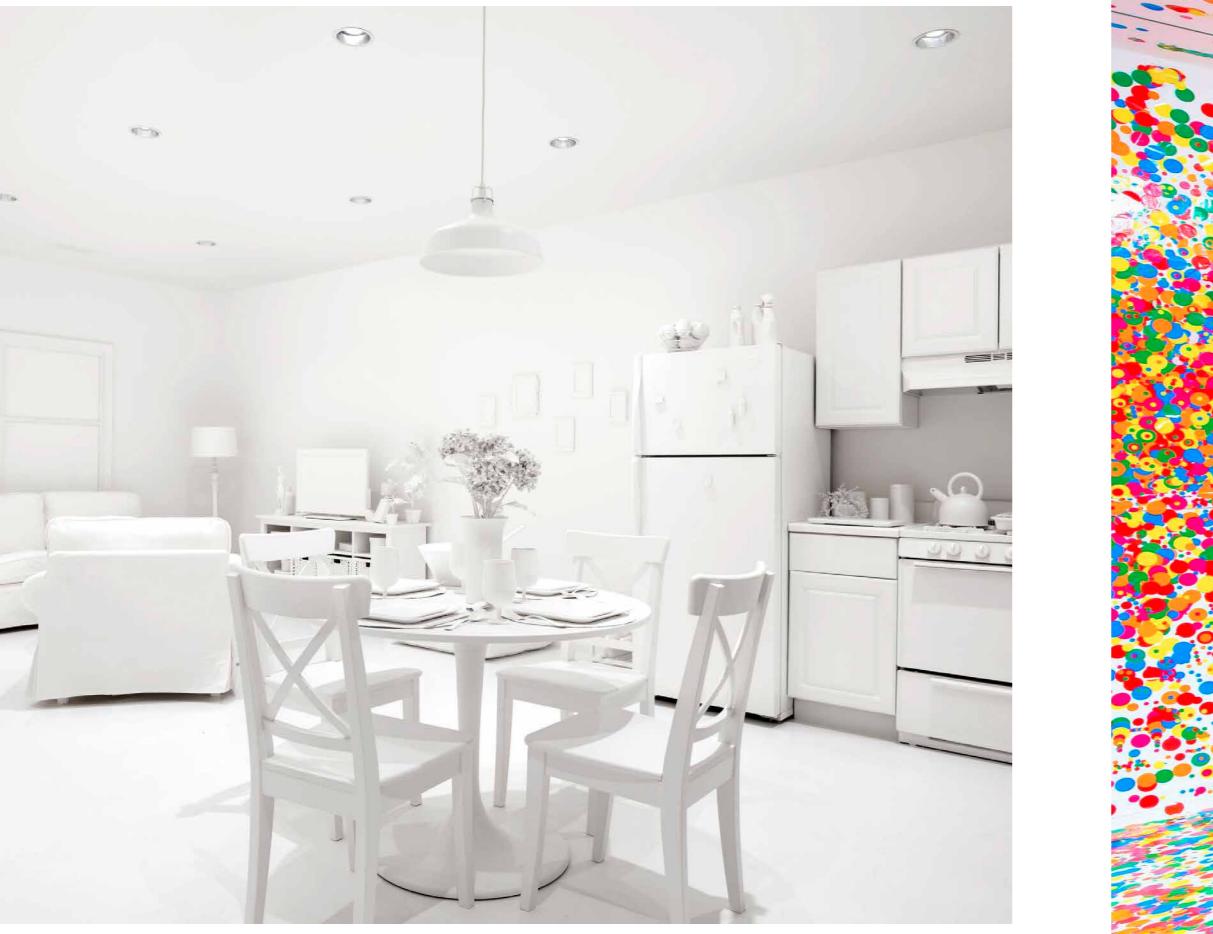


2009

THE SOULS OF MILLIONS OF LIGHT YEARS AWAY



2013



23



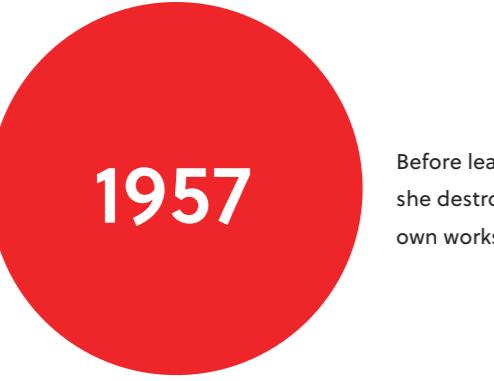
the auction bids. Some still criticize Kusama, the celebrity, for what the Village Voice once called her "lust for publicity." But in fact, her ambition has always been linked to her very real and intense drive to be and feel both alive and worthy. Making art and being Kusama are inseparable destinies

In the catalog for her 1989 show, I quoted Susan Sontag. "It's well known," the essayist wrote of modern artists, "that when people venture into the far reaches of consciousness, they do so at the peril of their sanity, that is, of their humanity."

Yayoi Kusama has moved far and deep. Her risks compel our love.

THE OBLITERATION ROOM
Queensland Art Gallery
2002

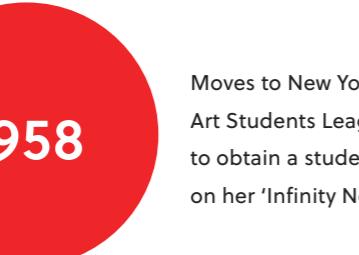
24

**1957**

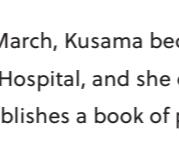
Before leaving for the United States, she destroys several thousand of her own works.

**1929**

Born on 22 March, in Matsumoto City, Nagano prefecture, Japan; she is the fourth child in a prosperous and conservative family.

**1958**

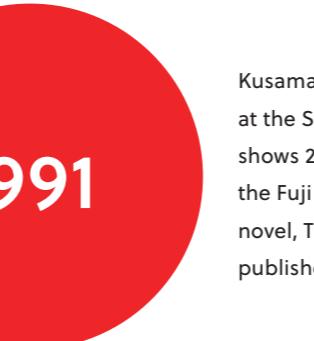
Moves to New York in June, enrolling in the Art Students League of New York in order to obtain a student visa and begins working on her 'Infinity Net' paintings.

**1977**

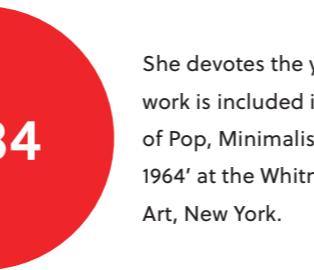
From March, Kusama becomes a permanent resident at Seiwa Hospital, and she opens a studio nearby. In June, she publishes a book of poems and paintings entitled *7*.

**1971**

Kusama stages a series of street happenings and fashion shows throughout Europe.

**1991**

Kusama conducts a Self-Obliteration event at the Sony Building in Ginza, in Tokyo. She shows 23 new paintings and sculptures at the Fuji Television Gallery, while her ninth novel, *The Foxgloves of Central Park*, is published in April.

**1984**

She devotes the year to writing, and her work is included in 'Blam! The Explosion of Pop, Minimalism and Performance 1958–1964' at the Whitney Museum of American Art, New York.

**2011**

The retrospective 'Yayoi Kusama' opens at the Museo Reina Sofia in Madrid, travelling to the Centre Pompidou in Paris, the Tate Modern in London, and the Whitney Museum of American Art in New York. 'Yayoi Kusama: Look Now, See Forever' opens at the Gallery of Modern Art in Brisbane in November.



Book designer Audrey Nguyen
Type faces Poppins, Soleil
SAIC December 2020

*"My life is a dot lost among thousands
of other dots."*



Book designer Audrey Nguyen
Type faces Poppins, Soleil
SAIC December 2020

*"My life is a dot lost among thousands
of other dots."*