

## MINDFULNESS ART OF YAYOI KUSAMA

**E**very now and then, in published materials on the art and creativity of Yayoi Kusama, the question about the possible ties of her art to the art of other artists, philosophical or religious systems rears its head. An unambiguous resolution of this issue is becoming all that more difficult as the artist herself most frequently focuses on emphasising the “self-birth” of her own actions, which she most often sees as set outside any type of context. Despite this – and I will attempt to draw attention to this based on concrete examples in this article – we can find some verified clues in her creativity which may, at least in part, indicate some cultural references. In this article, I would like to present a non-dogmatic presence of elements appropriate, primarily to Buddhism. For Kusama they, in a unique manner, intertwine with her private life, experience, imagination as well as even her western *trans-avant-garde* experience. What is interesting, the power manifested in her art also perhaps finds its description in the works of Anaximander, a philosopher of ancient Greece. I will attempt to reflect on Kusama’s artistic creative issues such as *self-obliteration*, polka dots, infinity, and enlightenment-satori in the context of the previously mentioned systems.

### ARCHE

Dots, transformed in a multiple variety of forms and entering into an intrinsic and continuous symbiosis with newly created more or less figurative representations of a phantasmic world of imagination, became for the Japanese artist that which for Greek philosophers was the source, the origin or better known as the “root cause”.

Dots, or even a single dot – because according to a certain form of architectonic, upon which Kusama’s vision of the universe is based, singularity is already from its intrinsic concept a message of multitude – are the very fabric of life. Looking at the results of wanderings of the ionic nature philosophers on the significance of *arche*, it is not possible, in this case, to overlook the interdependence taking place between the basic, obsessive element of the artist’s fears, and the prime principle voiced by Anaximander on the infinite or the *apeiron* containing in its context “(...) all things come from single primal substance (...) it is infinity, eternal and ageless, and it encompasses all the worlds(...)”<sup>1)</sup> This infinity, in which the Greek philosopher saw the nature of things, similarly to the single dot of Kusama, is only to name the quality of *arche*, or infinity and opposed to the ancient causes indicated by other Greek philosophers such as Thales’s water, fire according to Heraclites or air by Anaximenes, nor do they single out quality as it differs from its unity. The qualitative neutrality of *arche* was also a condition for the continuous existence of a certain (just) order of the cosmic universe.

Everything is contained in infinity, everything can also emerge from it, and since it is simultaneously the beginning and the end, then it must characterise itself as an endless potential, a cyclic and inexhaustible creation of objects. The Anaximander’s universe awakened by infinite reason had to be then subject to continuous evolution. Kusama’s dots have similar properties, which in various forms are present in the majority of her work.

When, during the second half of the 1960’s, Kusama did a public happening on the streets of New York, it was the very dots which became her main weapon in a battle with a widely understood systematism and went on to embody a power able to make revolutionary social changes from their core, which included messages of love, peace and tolerance.

While Kusama held a series of “naked happenings” during the event, different colour dot designs were painted on the bodies of the participants. This act according to the artist’s intentions then became a symbolic road towards experiencing the quality of the infinite universe. By painting dots on our bodies, we are able to experience – return to – and be at one with the universe, vanish from the multitude and become a potential force in subsequent transformations.

Polka dots can’t stay alone, like communicative life of people, two and three and more polka dots become movement. Our earth is only one

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<sup>1)</sup> Russel (2006: 35).

polka dot among a million stars in the cosmos. Polka dots are a way to infinity. 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.<sup>2)</sup>

The term inseparably tied with the dot – *arche* - for Kusama is a process of *self-obliteration*. It is a type of a spiritual enlightenment leading towards a renewed connection with infinity. This process is to make it possible for us to achieve salvation by freeing ourselves from shackles tying us with humanity - shackles such as history, our ego or social roles imposed on us. In *self-obliteration*, we will find a reflection of the most significant slogans propagated by the American counter-culture at the turn of the 1960's and 70's. The rise of free love, anti-military social movements, newly created sects and religions as well as philosophical and religious thought drawn from the East may be related to the ideas of *self-obliteration*. As noted by Midori Yoshimoto Associate Professor of Art History from New Jersey City University:

In essence, Kusama's Self-Obliteration is a creative hybrid of Buddhist thought inflected with New Age spiritualism, the rhetoric of sexual liberation, and her semi-autobiographical narrative.<sup>3)</sup>

Kusama repeatedly emphasised that the *self-obliteration* concept should not be directly identified with any idea or a religious doctrine and that its foundation is anti-contextualism, which should primarily be tied with the vision of the world appearing in her imagination. Despite this, it is not unsubstantiated and at times is unavoidable to have the impression that discovering many roads towards the comprehension of the *self-obliteration* process, which in the effect of Kusama's entire project expands our perspective and the contexts being drawn. Besides, the artist herself, more times than once, during the realisation of her artistic activities, perhaps not a wholly intentional "game with the viewer"; applies many tracks of mythical (religious) or cultural thinking. In an 1994 interview, Kusama when asked about the meaning of "*self-obliteration*" replied:

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<sup>2)</sup> Kusama Y., quoted in Yalkut (1968: 9).

<sup>3)</sup> Yoshimoto (3).

[Self] always revives and reemerges as in *eigō kaiki* (Eternal Recurrence). That is the meaning behind Self-Obliteration.<sup>4)</sup>

Calling upon these words quoted from the artist herself, one might find interesting their reference to Friedrich Nietzsche's concept of *eternal recurrence*<sup>5)</sup>. However, this association of the *eternal recurrence* concept with the ancient immanent to nature principle propagated by the Ionic nature philosophers and in the face of the previously present relation between the *arche* construction of the world according to the Milesians and Kusama's world may lead to a more open look at the properties of the second. Kusama's acceptance of the *eternal recurrence*, in consequence, leads to the assumption that the entire universe is infinite and has no beginning and no end. In it, therefore, there must be forces, which are able to sustain its existence. Therefore, it must be self-sufficient and in its singularity there will be all forms of the phenomenal world. The straight-lined time is here replaced by a cycle of recurring returns and births.

Yet, despite the fact that the use of the *eternal recurrence* concept by Kusama connects her vision of the world directly with the accomplishments of the western philosophical idea, this, at least in one point, bypasses her in a significant manner. This is because the concept disseminated in modern times by Nietzsche speaks about its complete physical dimension. In turn from the earliest actions of Kusama emerges a vision of the universe completely penetrated by a metaphysical, spiritual characteristic, which most visibly was expressed by her precisely in the *self-obliteration* concept.

The artist states: "I want to see my life, which is but one dot. The dot – or rather, the single particle out of a million – is my life."<sup>6)</sup> This, which would seem impossible to live through experience, becomes a part of Kusama who from the earliest years of her life while struggling with a specific psychological sense of self and the surroundings, emphasised that she is a being living on the border of two worlds, the real world and the unreal. This struggle with feelings of depersonalisation was able to cross the border dividing the two worlds, and create from it the subject of her creative works.

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<sup>4)</sup> Kusama (1994: 49).

<sup>5)</sup> This idea goes as far back as the ancient Egypt, with its images of the scarab placed in tombs and on amulets to symbolise the unending cycle of rebirths.

<sup>6)</sup> Pen (2011: 52).

I fell as if I am in a place where pleated, striped curtains enclose me, and finally I am in a place where pleated, striped curtains completely enclose me, and finally my soul separates from my body. Once that happens, I can take hold of a flower in the garden, for example without being able to feel it. Walking, it is as if I am on a cloud; I have no sense of my body as something real.<sup>7)</sup>

How can then one notice a world in which there exists a differentiation between the real world and the spiritual one, as it will never fully be a reflection of the *eternal recurrence*, which considers only the physical nature of existence. Division into more than one enduring dimension may be carried out within its framework only through the assumption that each next one will exclusively be its reflection, a cyclic repetition of its same properties. From this also emerges a second significant difference, since everything is only a repetition of the subsequent run of existence in a cyclic time and the universe is composed of a finite number of beings and their transformation, which in the next cycle are only so to speak infinitely reproduced, then there could not be, as in Kusama's world, a constant and infinite transgression of matter and souls. It is precisely the unstoppable transformation of one quality into another stretched in boundless time, which constitutes the basis of its eternal existence. The dot, which is to symbolise this process, may then undergo a countless number of transformations. Kusama puts it as follows: "A polka dot has the form of the sun which is a symbol of the energy of the whole world, and also the form of the moon which is calm."<sup>8)</sup>

### FACE TO FACE WITH A PUMPKIN

In light of the contemplations presented above on the possibility of comprehending the properties of Kusama's art viewed from the Western philosophical thought perspective, one should also take a closer look at the surface of the thread on the relation between the actions of the artist and her manifestations of Eastern, native spirituality. The first chronological mention of the artist's life, which may unequivocally redirect our contemplation, are from 1948 when she commenced her studies at the Kyoto Municipal School of Arts and Crafts<sup>9)</sup>. In

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<sup>7)</sup> Kusama (2011 a: 87).

<sup>8)</sup> Kusama Y., quoted in Yalkut, (1968: 9).

<sup>9)</sup> Currently: the Kyoto City University of Arts.

a rented room<sup>10)</sup> with a great dedication bordering on madness, she painted numerous presentations of a pumpkin, which in later years would become an important and one of the most recognisable motifs of all her works. However, this process was accompanied by a specific ritual. Before dawn, Kusama would lay out her painting tools on the carpet and sheets of vellum paper, after which she would engage in her Zen meditation. This is how she recalls that specific ritual:

When the sun came up over Mount Higashiyama, I would confront the spirit of the pumpkin, forgetting everything else and concentrating my mind entirely upon the form before me. Just as Buddhidharma spent ten years facing a stone wall, I spent as much as a month facing a single pumpkin. I regretted even having to take time to sleep.<sup>11)</sup>

Comparing herself in this case to the legendary person of the first Zen Buddhism patriarch is an additional dimension in light of the entire project, which is Kusama's art. Kusama who "...lives in the space between subjectivity and objectivity"<sup>12)</sup>, between – as mentioned earlier – the real and the unreal, also lives with the feeling of having a huge mission to complete, which she placed on herself and which she accomplishes by her practical non-stop output. Taking on the role of a prophet, for a long time she has given humanity her own most important sermon about bringing love and peace into the world. One of the most expressive examples of such a vision of a utopian world are undoubtedly her happenings, such as the one in front of the main headquarters of the New York's Election Commission in November 1968. A week after stormy presidential elections in the USA, taking place in the shadow of a war, Kusama arranged a public reading of a letter to the victorious candidate of the Republican Party, Richard Nixon. In the letter titled *An Open Letter to My Hero, Richard M. Nixon*, the artist expresses her radical, pacifist convictions postulating about the immediate ending of the war in Vietnam. In return, she is prepared to give her body to the President so that he could tame his "male, battling spirit" and understand the frequently repeated "naked truth": "You

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<sup>10)</sup> At that time, Kusama lived on the slope of a mountain in a haiku poet's house together with her family.

<sup>11)</sup> Kusama (2011 a: 76).

<sup>12)</sup> Takiguchi (1984: 348).

can't eradicate violence by using more violence."<sup>13)</sup> Spinning her own vision of a world free of hatred, Kusama calls:

Our earth is like one little polka dot, among millions of other celestial bodies, one orb full of hatred and strife amid the peaceful, silent spheres. Let's you and I change all of the peaceful, silent spheres. Let's you and I change all of that and make this world a new Garden of Eden.<sup>14)</sup>

This prophetic role of the "World Savior", which Kusama took upon herself, is also as equally well visible, when in a spacious, rented loft on Walker Avenue in SoHo she opened her own church called the "Church of Self-Obliteration" and appointed herself "The High Priestess of Polka Dots". She however does not dogmatize a new religion and the only commands she implements are those connected with spreading the idea of love and reconciliation throughout the world. Giving her followers the first sacrament – baptism, she paints dots all over their naked bodies.

This magical ritual is to lead to a "return to the root of their eternal soul".<sup>15)</sup> "It is the moment of joy and of inheriting the vitality of infinity".<sup>16)</sup> In November of 1968, the artist carried out another "happening" – a *Homosexual Wedding*. The information on the invitations and press announcement reads that Kusama, "The High Priestess of Polka Dots" will conduct a marriage ceremony for a homosexual male couple. During the ceremony, the two grooms wore, designed by Kusama especially for the occasion, a one-piece *orgy gown*. It was one of many completed avant garde fashion design projects being a part of an entire collection, which was to be created soon after under a brand called "The Kusama Fashion Company"<sup>17)</sup>.

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<sup>13)</sup> In order to once more mention the property of Anaximander's *arche*, it's worth reminding the said first principle could not have a defined polarization as it would draw others, at the same time engaging with them continuous battle. As Russel points out "(...) the primal substance could not be water, or any others known element. If one of these were primal, it would conquer the others.(...) The primal substance, therefore, must be neutral in this cosmic strife, Russel (2006: 36).

<sup>14)</sup> Kusama 1968.

<sup>15)</sup> Kusama 1999.

<sup>16)</sup> Kusama 1968.

<sup>17)</sup> As a young girl she wore clothes she designed herself and later, when in New York, she started her own company which produced her designs of two types, some of which can be considered as *haute couture*, such as an evening dress for \$1,200.00 with open cuts on the breasts, buttocks and vagina as well as cheaper clothes sold for even as little as \$15.00 or "The Homo Dress" also with material cut out in the area of the buttocks. Designs from the "See-Through"

Establishing her own “religious group” was not only another attempt to embed and preach the idea of free love and tolerance. Though grotesque in form, Kusama also asks a question about the role of the institution of the church in when fighting social inequality and hatred ensuing from acts of violence against people different from the majority in terms of their skin colour, religion, or even sexual orientation. The *Homosexual Wedding* is here a prescription for the oppressive, in the feeling of the priestess, heteronormative discourse, of which the greatest believer is the Church. The artist becomes, in this case, an anti-priestess of the Church, all the closer to her own vision of a saviour, wanting to rescue everyone, even those who were excluded. As “The High Priestess of Polka Dots” says:

The purpose of this marriage is to bring out into the open what has hitherto been concealed... Love can now be free, but to make it completely free, it must be liberated from all sexual frustrations imposed by society. Homosexuality is a normal physical and psychological reaction, neither to be extolled nor decried. It is abnormal reaction of many people to homosexuality that makes homosexuality abnormal<sup>18)</sup>

## INFINITY NETS

In 1958, Kusama continuously creates a series of works, the source of which come from hallucinatory experiences conditioning the artist’s thinking and feeling of infinity:

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or “Way Out” brands were popular among the rich *Jet Set* clientele, for whom Kusama opened a luxury boutique on Fifth Avenue. As she would say: “The best way of looking human is to go around completely nude, but if you must wear clothing and still want to look individual, wear hand-made things” Her own first experience with sewing, Kusama had when she was still a teenager during World War II. She was delegated to work on the production of parachutes in a textile factory Kuraha in Matsumoto. (Kusama 1969).

Designs, the effect of which were a single-piece clothing worn at the same time but two or even several people, or designs with cutouts in the material in the areas of gender organ areas which were in Kusama’s intentions to facilitate much freer sexual relations without the need for removing clothes, were another image of the same revolutionary speech about freeing mankind from the binding of social limitations and geared at uniting it into a single, common whole.

<sup>18)</sup> Kusama 1968 a.



Everything – I, others, the entire universe – would be obliterated by white nets of nothingness connecting astronomical accumulations of dots. White nets are enveloping the black dots of silent death against a pitch-dark background of nothingness.<sup>19)</sup>

These works inspired by the horizon of the Pacific Ocean as viewed from an airplane<sup>20)</sup>, are actually an unending unique string of dots and nets formed from them, which due to their enormous size can actually mark the far horizon. The impression of continuous repetition and division as well as unstoppable movement was achieved thanks to a visible brush stroke and numerous irregularities within the limit of the dense circles. The oppressive monotony of the strain of creation is clearly visible when the gesture and the creative process itself is seemingly more important than the final effect. Kusama describes her brush strokes as “repeated exactly in monotone, like the gear of a machine.”<sup>21)</sup> Even today, the artist, visible in many video-recorded images, is immersed in an enormous concentration while creating, often reminiscent of a state of meditation. In later works of 2005, one can notice the same motif, which is the *Infinity Nets*. The artist also uses similar size canvases adequate to that past, heroic period of the first *Infinity Nets*<sup>22)</sup>.

A single dot thus constitutes for Kusama a unique basis for her imagined world revealed to her. It is also a non-subjective method of seeing, a cleansing of the mind from figures and objects. We find a similar imagining of (non)thinking in the zazen practice. The experience of Kusama reveals itself as a reversal of the whole built from the multitude philosophy of Democritus, into a state of continuous scattering, continuous movement of matter, unfinished number of nets and dots impossible to grasp. Her creativity is an unceasing gesture of

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<sup>19)</sup> Kusama (2011 a: 23).

<sup>20)</sup> This form of anti-record may be treated as yet another method of uprooting her art, depriving it of a context and the possibility of a single unequivocal meaning; non-meaning element of nature.

<sup>21)</sup> Quote: Neri, Goto (2012: 62).

<sup>22)</sup> The newest unveiling of *Infinity Nets* is not so much, however a simple repetition of its version from half a century ago, but rather a non-semantic marking of the properties of Kusama's private world, that is the continuous repetition of some elementary particles, which in a magical manner affects reality. A reminder then of perception passed through the artist's personality is being carried out in updated colours and details of elements. Not giving in to the end to be embraced by human imagination – the vastness or expanse and division of matter, Kusama encloses in an autonomic, finished with precision form. It's as if we received, possible to view, a fragment of a defined dimension of an obviously not divisible universe.

repetition, a gesture, which as if includes in this fog of points her *ego* (in thought with the western *ratio*). A body covered with dots no longer has individual or personal qualities; it is no longer a “*self*” in the understanding of Descartes’ philosophy. Therefore, it does not succumb to the experience of a single unit, and therefore it does not succumb to the repression of the government - “*self*” vanishes.

During the performative actions of Kusama mentioned earlier where dots are painted on a naked body, “obliteration (vanishing, dissolution) of a given person and its return to the universe” takes place. We can then state, that a dot acts as an empty symbol, unmarked. The dot is a signature which Derrida claimed to have a trait of *self*, or a signature is a signature when it live its own life<sup>23</sup>). In Eastern thought, vanishing is seen as something positive. In order to obtain *ku*<sup>24</sup>) - emptiness – a place deprived of history we must enter into it in a form of *not-self*, that is we must forget about our hitherto “*self*”. There is still something else, and that is obliteration property, as a never-ending process. Kusama continues to paint and the atomic details leave the body, connect and scatter simultaneously. For the artist this is a metaphor for the radiating of the universe, in which another meets with another, *not-self* with *not-self*, a specific communion of bodies torn from the thinking *ego*, a certain stage of meditation. Roland Barthes accurately characterised the position of the one meditating as that one who simply sits. In our case this would then be classified as being for the sake of being.

Thus, in Kusama’s actions we find a specific type of spirituality based on freeing oneself from the shackles of determinism limiting the individual and personal *ego*, appearing in a form of hallucination intensified by experience. Dots – as if a million of stars may then serve as an artistic, post modernistic

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<sup>23</sup>) According to Jacques Derrida “By definition, a written signature implies the actual or empirical nonpresence of the signer”, “in order to function, that is, to be readable, a signature must have a repeatable, utterable, imitable form; it must be able to be detached from the present and singular intention of its production.” And perhaps the most interesting trait of a signature, in the context of Kusama’s creativity – “the trait of self”, thanks to which the scattering of the artist’s identity was possible, in separated from any and all intentions dots. Derrida (2002: 402).

<sup>24</sup>) “*Ku* (emptiness) is not emptiness in a negative understanding of the word, where there is nothing (*mu* – nothingness), it is not static emptiness, unchanging and clotty. This is a positive emptiness, dynamic, filled with unmeasurable energy. Emptiness is complete power (...). The state of *ku* is a perfect and complete preparedness”. Durix (1991: 213).

presentation of one of the stages on the road to the zen concept of *satori* of the *mu-ga* stage, in which “one must achieve unawareness of oneself, reject oneself, not even remember that we once had an *ego*.”<sup>25)</sup>

## GORILLA LADY

The most literal relations between Kusama’s art and Buddhism we can find in her literary output. Such directly and frequently formulated references can be found among others, in a never realised play entitled “The Gorilla Lady Meets the Demons of Change: A Genei/Zen Farce”. The subtitle, “Zen Farce”, already suggests that the text will be full of references to Buddhist philosophical thought. It is not clear, however, how many sources of these Buddhism references we can find in the initial idea of Kusama over the shape of the play or to what extent it is a result of her writing the screenplay together with friend and art critic, Gordon Brown<sup>26)</sup>. The screenplay was submitted to a Broadway theatre company but was rejected because “(it) did not excite (them) enough to go further with it.”<sup>27)</sup> “The Gorilla Lady Meets the Demons of Change” was to be a play in three acts. Its plot takes place in Tokyo in 1947. The next undisputed reference to Buddhism is found in the character of the Zen Master and the names of the three demons of change appearing in the play: Karma, Dharma and Kannon. They are presented as evil entities manipulating a 3-meter, vinyl snake which: “winds and squirms down the aisle; he tickles the audience and plays tricks with them.” Kusama, who was also to appear in the play, is presented as “sexual virgin sacrifice to the Snake” or as the title “Gorilla Lady”. In the last act, Kusama is eaten by the marionette-snake.

ZEN MASTER (to Kusama): Your only escape from the sordid desires of this world lies in self-obliteration...endless nothingness...and infinite emptiness.

<sup>25)</sup> Durix (1991: 79).

<sup>26)</sup> Kusama met Brown in 1963 during an interview. From that moment on, he became her close co-worker and assisted her in editing declarations as well as texts, which she prepared for the needs of the press and exhibits in which she participated. (See more in Yamamura (2009: 68).

<sup>27)</sup> A letter to Kusama c/o Kusama Productions from Kenneth Waissman of Waissman & Fox Inc., October 12, 1972.

Kusama gives up the struggle and the snake swallows her. The Warrior rushes in and cuts the Snake in half. The two halves of the Snake separate and Kusama is reborn as a child dressed in white, the colour of innocence and purity. The two halves of the Snake chase each other around the stage and finally exit in different directions.<sup>28)</sup>

This scene may indicate that the Buddhist path towards enlightenment directly corresponds with the *self-obliteration* process constituting the basis of Kusama's play. It seems that Kusama expresses herself through the character of the Zen Master proclaiming that the only way to exit this world – enlightenment – is precisely through *self-obliteration*. In order to see the Zen elements of her thought process it is sufficient to recall the artist's proclamations during the "naked happenings", during which she painted the bodies of its participants with dots while enticing the watching crowds to join in that mystical ritual.

Forget yourself and become one with Nature. Lose yourself in the ever-advancing stream of eternity. Self-obliteration is the only way out. Kusama will cover your body with polka dots.<sup>29)</sup>

As much as *self-obliteration* in the happenings had a primarily symbolic, dimension and could happen after painting dots on the body, in the screenplay the road to Nirvana is to constitute actual destruction – annihilation of the body and "surrendering to the state of nothingness and void."<sup>30)</sup> We meet with a similar description of the destruction of the earthly existence in Kusama's book of 1984 entitled *Hustlers Grotto of Christopher Street*.<sup>31)</sup> The writer, Ryū Murakami, in speaking about the literary talent of the artist compared them to the talent of Jean Genet saying, "...both make filth shine."<sup>32)</sup> And so the main character in "Hustlers Grotto" – Henry, is a downright caricatural character, a black-skinned, drug addicted male prostitute. Just as a typical character from Kusama's literary world, he is a reject of society, not accepting the surrounding reality, for whom

<sup>28)</sup> Scene Two of Act III from Yayoi Kusama with Gordon Brown, "The Gorilla Lady Meets the Demons of Change: A Genei/ Zen Farce," unpublished typescript, 1972.

<sup>29)</sup> Manifesto from: *The Anatomic Explosion*, Happening staged in front of the statue of George Washington across from the New York Stock Exchange, 1968,

<sup>30)</sup> Yoshimoto (3).

<sup>31)</sup> In 1983, *The Hustlers Grotto on Christopher Street* won Japan's prestigious Literary Award for New Writers given by the monthly magazine "Yasei Jidai".

<sup>32)</sup> Munroe 1996.

the only way out – salvation is the very physical *self-obliteration* ending with the main character's transmutation into a new being. In the final scene of this book, Henry suddenly vanishes:

But the black figure of Henry is no longer there where it's supposed to be, in the corner of the void... His body has vanished from the space... In the milk-coloured, mist a black spot. Falling. The spot grows smaller and smaller, until it's just a dark speck dissolving into the mist.<sup>33)</sup>

While discussing the play: "Gorilla Lady" one should once again remember the role accepted by Kusama – that of the saviour. As she is eaten by a snake, she is reborn "as a child dressed in white". Self-sacrifice is then a way of winning over the dark, mythical force.

In 1967, Kusama produced, directed as well played the main role in an experimental movie entitled *Kusama's Self-Obliteration*. The movie won many awards<sup>34)</sup> both in the United States as well as abroad, which gave her international recognition and the name "Polka-Dot Princess" Kusama. Scenes outside the studio were filmed on the grounds of a hippy commune in Woodstock by a visual artist Jude Yalkut (1938-2013). The movie begins with a scene in which the artist paints dots, either as stick-ons or by painting them on elements of the landscape (horse, meadow, the surface of the pond). In this shot, what is interesting is the expansion of the definition of *self-obliteration* - it seems that the artist adds to nature itself in this process, and nature becomes both a tool and the object of the action itself. In several scenes, the artist stops placing dots as she covers the naked body of a reclining man and a cat with maple leaves. In the next scene, she first places white dots on her body and later she also covers a tree with them, which gives the impression that she is to become one with it. The symbolic process of annihilation and destruction of earthly superficiality is expanded therefore to the entire surface surrounding the artist. We also see this in subsequent scenes, in which the dots succumb to a continuous, and relentless multiplication process, covering buildings, cities, people, multiplying so fast that at the end they cover nearly everything and everyone.<sup>35)</sup> Implications

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<sup>33)</sup> Kusama (1997: 64-65).

<sup>34)</sup> The movie won awards at the 1968 Fourth International Short Film Festival in Belgium, the Second Ann Arbor Film Festival, and the Second Maryland Film Festival.

<sup>35)</sup> During the movie, in short shots one can see many of the earlier works of the artist as well as her favourite motifs, which makes the movie a small retrospective of her creativity.

of Buddhism can also be heard in the sound track of the movie. The music is generated by a self-playing music machine created by an avant garde musician, Joe Jones, associated with the group Fluxus. The music sounds like a “chorus of almost 30 amplified frogs.”<sup>36)</sup> These mysterious sounds were completed with mantras reminiscent of the singing of Buddhist monks and were composed by the group Image. Participation in the happening which appears in the second part of the movie, is encouraged by an especially prepared notice in the press: “Extermination, Emptiness, Nothingness, Infinity, [and] Endless.”<sup>37)</sup> Midori Yoshimoto writes “These catchy words were used in the advertisement to attract the hippie generation who were drawn to eastern philosophies and mysticism.”<sup>38)</sup>

## MINDFULNESS

In coming to an end I would like to take a look at an attempt made to incorporate Kusama’s creativity into a psychiatric discourse while simultaneously tying her to a Buddhist Zen. This was made possible thanks to the opening in Kagoshima in Kirishima’s Open-Air Museum and in the Sapporo Art Museum of an exhibit called “Takahashi Collection: Mindfulness!”. Takahashi Ryūtarō is a Japanese psychiatrist and a leading collector of modern art in Japan. He owns over 2000 works of art created by artists of Japan, mainly young artist whom he tries to promote domestically and internationally. “Mindfulness” is the second - after “Neoteny Japan” - exhibit of Takahashi’s collection. It is composed of approximately 100 works by 40 artists, however the main point of the exhibit are 14 works created by Yayoi Kusama, from watercolours and drawings from the 1950’s to giant sculptures such as, for example, *Hi, Kon-nichiwa Yayoi-chan*.<sup>39)</sup> It is noteworthy to mention here that in 1997, when Takahashi was beginning to build his collection, the first works he purchased were the artwork of Makato Aida and Yayoi Kusama. As he recalls: “In 1997 I saw an exhibition of new work by Kusama. At about the same time, a show of new work by Makoto Aida was being held at Mizuma Art Gallery. So, in

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<sup>36)</sup> Yalkut (1968: 9).

<sup>37)</sup> Kusama- press release for “Self-Obliteration” held at The Gate Theater, New York, June 16-17, 1967.

<sup>38)</sup> Yoshimoto (7).

<sup>39)</sup> Uchida (2013: 12).

a short time I saw work by someone I thought was a star and also an important up- and-coming artist. That lit the spark within me.”<sup>40)</sup> What is more, when talking about his first few contacts with Kusama’s art still back in the 1960’s, he reminisces about the great impression made on him by her works, adding at the same time that for him and the artistic environment swallowed by the spirit of the counter-culture and focused on the latest news about revolutionary happenings of a “singularly battling in New York woman”, Kusama was “someone of a muse of those times.”<sup>41)</sup>

The Mindfulness concept, translated in the Pali language from which comes *sati* (in Japanese – *nen*) refers to the Buddhist meditation practice and constitutes one of the vital Seven Factors of Enlightenment. Thus Mindfulness is not, as it might have at first appeared, any type of method for conversation, for becoming acquainted. It is a method of seeing things as they really are, seeing them without the participation of the thinking Cartesian *ego*. In order to be able to do this, similarly to *self-obliteration* the thinking *I* must be turned off to enable for the new expanded consciousness. This is how this concept is explained by Muho Noelke, the abbot of Antaiji:

...we have to forget things like “I should be mindful of this or that”. If you are mindful, you are already creating a separation (“I - am - mindful - of - ...”). Don’t be mindful, please! When you walk, just walk. Let the walk, walk. Let the talk, talk (Dogen Zenji said: “When we open our mouth, it is filled with Dharma”). Let the eating eat, the sitting sit, the work, work. Let sleep sleep.<sup>42)</sup>

Behind the words corresponds the same message about the exhibit expressed by Takahashi, encouraging an attempt to perceive the art as it is, to notice things here and now, without any and all assessments, contexts or convictions, in which we have been entangled while succumbing to social and cultural processes.<sup>43)</sup> “Perhaps then, things which until now we acknowledged as art will be

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<sup>40)</sup> Takahashi R., quoted in Edan Corkill “Collector steps into the void: With museums gone AWOL, Ryutaro Takahashi snapped up amazing artworks”, May 22, 2009, Retrieved from <http://www.japantimes.co.jp/culture/2009/05/22/culture/collector-steps-into-the-void/>

<sup>41)</sup> Takahashi (2013: 133).

<sup>42)</sup> Noelke

<sup>43)</sup> Takahashi (2013 b: 7).

perceived by us completely differently. Or perhaps things which we perceived until now as art<sup>44)</sup> will become art.”<sup>45)</sup>

According to Takahashi, an art exhibit should be a place of an as yet unfulfilled meeting of various generations of artists, both the young, still unknown to a wider public as well as the “veterans”, whose names appear in the programmes of the most important galleries and museums in the world. “That is why all the more I would like to see their (the artists’) joint works in a freed state of mindfulness.”<sup>46)</sup>

The meditation technique, which is Mindfulness, was used in the Third Wave of Cognitive Behavioral Therapies, and that’s how Mindfulness Based Stress Reduction was created by John Kabata-Zinna, professor of the Medical Department at the University of Massachusetts and the founder of the Center for Mindfulness in Medicine, Health Care, and Society. The goal of the therapy is to free oneself of automatically returning thoughts, feeling and reactions, which cause stress, bouts of depression or bad habits. Looking at one’s ailments from the “outside” is to be a method for overcoming our mind’s function pattern and in effect getting rid of sickness and unwanted conditions.<sup>47)</sup> When Takahashi contemplated creating his own modern art collection, one of his plans then was to give the purchased works of art a further therapeutic dimension.

By placing the artwork in medical centres<sup>48)</sup> and making them available for patients to enjoy, they were to be included in the treatment process.<sup>49)</sup> This vision of treatment through art is part of the “Mindfulness” exhibit and, com-

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<sup>44)</sup> It seems that this meeting of art with viewing (included in the definition of mindfulness) unburdened by history and context already was expressed in the art history of the west as well as Japan. Introducing in the XX century by Marcel Duchamp ‘ready-made’ type objects, such as the urinal and calling them a work of art or using in the XVI century by Sen no Rikyū a chamber pot as a flower vase during a Japanese traditional tea ceremony, in both cases was a revolutionary act and precisely expressed in the ability of viewing somewhat from the outside the surrounding reality and finding in it a new way of seeing.

<sup>45)</sup> Takahashi (2013: 7).

<sup>46)</sup> Takahashi (2013: 7).

<sup>47)</sup> Kabat-Zinn (2012).

<sup>48)</sup> This is not the first case of a psychiatrist’s fascination with Kusama’s art and an attempt to include her works into psychiatric discourse. In 1952, Shihō Nishimaru (1910-2002), one of the first professors of Psychiatry at the Shinshu University presented her works during the Kantō Society of Psychiatry and Neurology, in a presentation entitled: “The Genius of a Schizoid Female Patient”. (Shibutami (2013: 154-155).

<sup>49)</sup> Takahashi (2013 a: 133).



bined with the Buddhism concept about freed consciousness, is to become a type of a remedy for modern man.<sup>50)</sup>

It seems that this kind of perception of art is also close to Kusama herself who, with her own frequently repeated slogans about the need to nurture love and peace with a concurrent necessity to free ourselves from the shackles imprisoning people and surrendering to *self-obliteration*, may be treated as someone developing the mindfulness concept in art. Kusama writes:

Today, many people take the path of gluttony, or lust, or greed, flailing and floundering as they vie for worldly fame. In such a society, seekers of truth find that their burden is great and the road steep and hard. But that is all the more reason for us to seek a rosier future for the soul.<sup>51)</sup>

#### *Self-Obliteration = Enlightenment (?)*

But my paintings had nothing to do with Impressionism or with Zen Buddhism.<sup>52)</sup>

In saying these words in relation to her *Infinity Nets*, Kusama unequivocally contradicts these works' links with Buddhism. Despite this, it is a fact that during her many artistic undertakings she used more or less conscious references, which could point out these possible relations. In the above text, I have attempted to point out, based on concrete examples, some relations existing between Kusama's creativity, the Buddhist enlightenment concept, mindfulness and also Western philosophical thought.

Undoubtedly, it is not possible to place an 'equal' sign between the individual components of this equation; however, the wealth of the ever evolving and growing world of Kusama with roads to a multitude of entrances and exits, and also the subsequent perceptions, allow for such an expanded observation. In her daily toil, the artist never stands down from her mission to save and cover mankind with dots through art.

I continue to fight with every fiber of my being. This is my own peculiar karma and destiny in the world.<sup>53)</sup>

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<sup>50)</sup> Takahashi (2013 b: 6-7).

<sup>51)</sup> Kusama (2011 a: 211).

<sup>52)</sup> Kusama (2011: 103).

<sup>53)</sup> Kusama (2011 a: 212).

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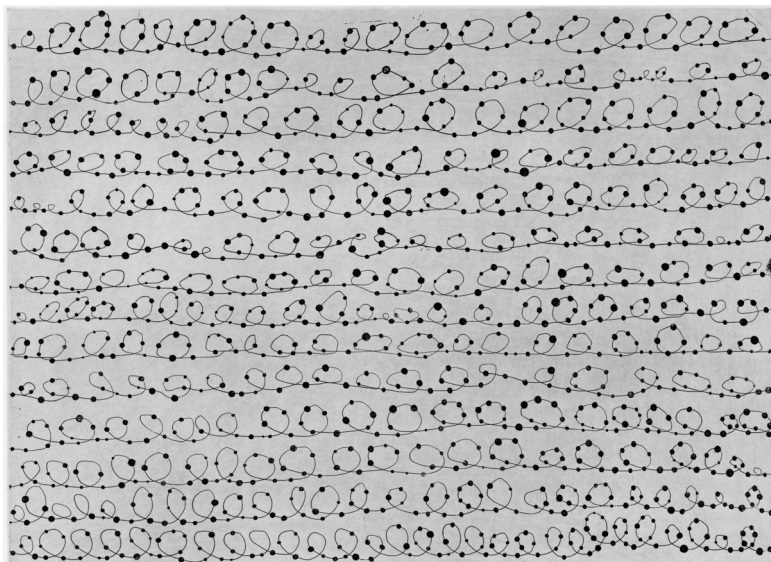


Fig. 1. Endless エンドレス etching, 1995



Fig. 2. Anatomic Explosion Happening, Alice in Wonderland sculpture, Central Park, New York, 1968

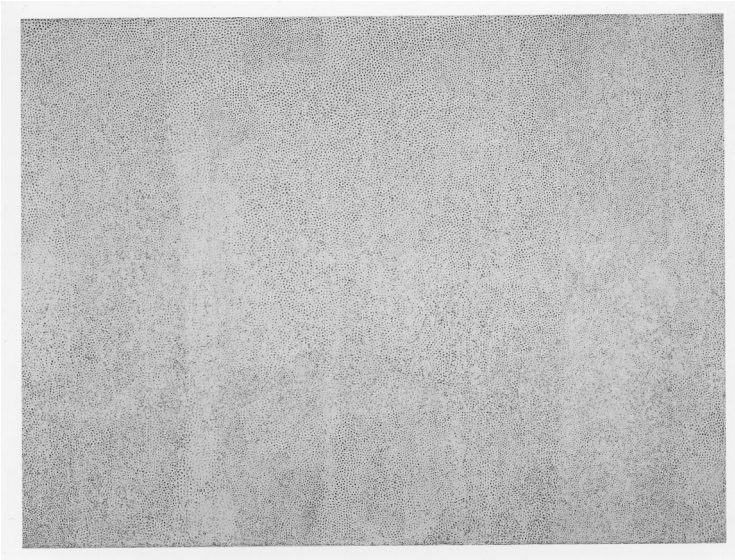


Fig. 3. Nets Accumulation, oil on canvas, 1958



Fig. 4. Accumulation of the Corpses (Prisoner Surrounded by Curtains of Depersonalization), 1950

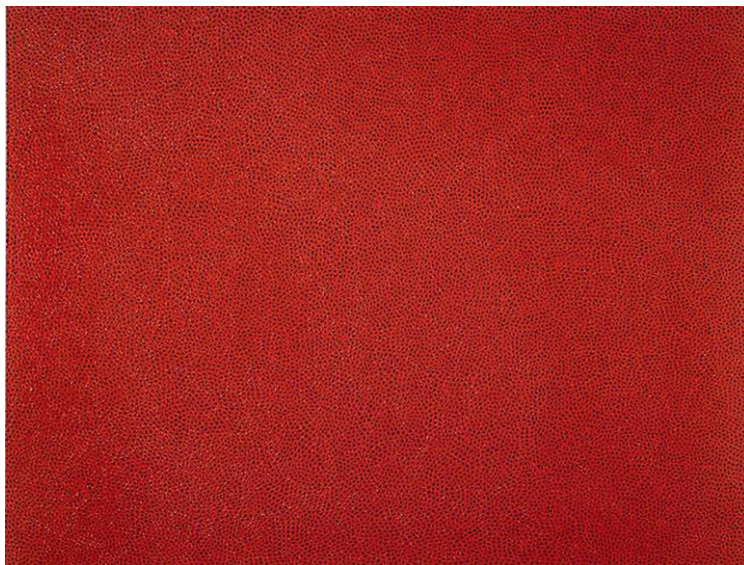


Fig. 5. Infinity Nets, acrylic on canvas, 2008