ISABELLE MARTIN
'Visions of Infinity: Singularity, Proliferation, and Transcendence in Yayoi Kusama’s Infinity Mirror Rooms'
Mental Health Symposium April 21st 2018

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Carolyn Carillon
The following initials in the transcription record will identify the speakers,
IM: Isabelle Martin

[2018/04/21 15:44] Betty Jeffers: Hello and welcome to the Sojourner Auditorium at Virtual Ability Island. We are so pleased you could be here with us today.
My name is Betty Jeffers. I am a South Australian, former wheelchair tennis player.
I was told my disability is relevant so I will say I have Spina Bifida.
Today I have been given what I consider to be a real honor.
I have been asked to introduce Isabelle Martin.
Isabelle is a truly remarkable individual that has my admiration.
Isabelle is currently finishing her senior year at the University of Kentucky, majoring in Art History & Visual Studies.
Her research primarily concerns issues of racial and cultural identity in contemporary art, with special emphasis on the politics of representation and visibility.
In the fall she will attend graduate school with the hopes of eventually pursuing a PhD in Art History.

Her talk today is titled: "Visions of Infinity: Singularity, Proliferation, and Transcendence in Yayoi Kusama’s Infinity Mirror Rooms"
The subject of her talk is Japanese contemporary artist Yayoi Kusama. Kusama has long suffered from cenesthopathy, which results in hallucinations and anxiety attacks.
Her use of the polka dot is not only a way for her to visualize her hallucinations, but also an example of the physical commitment she has to her work.
Her repeated application of small motifs onto expansive surfaces is at once both therapeutic and manic.

I would ask today that you would please do me a favour. Please refrain from using local chat or voice during the presentation. Helping me today translating my Australian to English in the voice is Suln Mahogany whom I wish to thank as well. Thank you all and please welcome Isabelle Martin!


Visions of Infinity: Singularity, Proliferation, and Transcendence in Yayoi Kusama’s Infinity Mirror Rooms

SLIDE 1
Since beginning her career in New York in the 1950s, Japanese contemporary artist Yayoi Kusama has continually utilized the concept of the infinite throughout her work. Through the repeated use of infinitesimally small motifs in her work, Kusama conveys the total surrender of the individual—namely, herself—to the world as she perceives it. In doing so, she projects her own role as a Japanese female emigrant in the white, Western, male-dominated art scene in which she became established. This projection explicitly calls forth her identity as the Other and appropriates it as a major theme of her own work. Since childhood, Kusama has been afflicted with a hallucination-inducing anxiety disorder associated with a condition called depersonalization, a “phenomenon of experiencing a loss of personality.” This condition, combined with a tumultuous relationship with her mother, drove Kusama to flee to New York in 1957, in desperate pursuit of creative freedom and personal liberation. She did find success, though it cost her time, sleeplessness, and even starvation, in a city she described as “in every way a fierce and violent place”, increasing and intensifying her neurosis. The proliferation of particles expresses the surrendering act of what Kusama calls “self-obliteration,” an aesthetically welcoming visualization of her struggle with mental illness. This accumulation of minutiae signifies the overwhelming visions of neurosis that have long plagued Kusama. Though her work has long expressed her feelings of alienation and resistance, it is far from oppressive to the viewer, instead producing the opposite effect of enveloping them in her spaces, which create opportunities for personal interpretation and moments of self-reflection. During her time in New York, Kusama came to associate with a number of artists, one of whom was...
up-and-comer Donald Judd, a self-proclaimed empiricist who had been trained as an art theorist and critic and was only just beginning to create art himself. Judd, who had studied philosophy as an undergraduate at Columbia University, was interested in the concept of credible art, “that which creates possibilities from realities.” As such he used algorithms and numerical sequences in his work,

appealing almost exclusively to a learned Western audience. He was highly influenced by a long list of Western philosophers like David Hume and John Locke, and artists like Jackson Pollock, Josef Albers, and Constantin Brancusi. In his established style Judd often created works that occupy a fixed reality, with regulated structures that “retain the particularity that shapes reality and discredits nonsensical concepts.”

Kusama and Judd, who passed away in 1994, entered the art scene at the same time and even spent several years as neighbors, developing a close, and at times intimate, relationship. The two shared their early endeavors as artists, supporting and influencing one another. Although the particular works I will address were not necessarily contemporaneous, both Kusama and Judd were consistent in their styles and objectives throughout their careers. Examining Kusama’s Infinity Room installations and Judd’s sculptural and three-dimensional work reveals a relational model outlined in philosophers Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari’s theory of the minor. First addressed in 1975, the theory of the minor expresses the idea that within a major system, there is a minor figure utilizing the same expressive elements put forth by the major. However, these elements are in a displaced or altered context without standards or regulations. The minor, according to Deleuze and Guattari, moves away from the attempt “to offer [itself] as a sort of…official language,” in favor of emphasizing oppressed qualities. The minor is identified by three foundational characteristics. First, it must deterritorialize; second, it is always political; and third, it is always collective. The fact that Kusama was on the scene during the development of movements like late Surrealism, Pop Art, and Minimalism, and subscribed to none of them, attests to the minor artist’s quality of existing simultaneously within and outside of the dominant system. In their respective styles and objectives, it is clear that Kusama was a minor artist, as an outsider Japanese female artist in the masculine Western environment of New York in the 1960s. Conversely, Judd, whose career was rooted in Western philosophy and art theory, adhered to the very standards and formulas that Kusama aimed to defy.
In doing so he represents the major, dominant system and the movement within which Kusama’s minor art practice operates. Kusama’s work expresses deterritorialization by manipulating depictions of reality in order to express visualizations of her minutiae-driven neurosis. The minor artist displaces these forms or elements by bringing them into three-dimensional space, as in performances or happenings, or, as with Kusama’s particular practice, rooms. The forms then become reconfigured or reinterpreted in a new lens put forth by the minor art practice—familiar enough to be recognizable, but manipulated in order to “[push] up against the edges of representation.”

SLIDE 5
Kusama’s 2002 installation Obliteration Room elucidates this notion of manipulating existing forms. An ostensibly average room, furnished domestically with an assortment of chairs and tables and decorated with vases and flowers, is made canvas with one simple but staggering detail: the stark whiteness of absolutely everything in the room. As viewers enter, they are able to contribute by placing colorful adhesive polka dots, which collectively amass a kind of filter through which one is able to imagine the accumulation regularly experienced by Kusama.

SLIDE 6
The 2000 installation I’m Here, but Nothing similarly expresses this realm of reality made slightly unrecognizable by the proliferation of colorful dots. The setting resembles a typical home, but Kusama’s use of light and glow-in-the-dark particles evokes a more hallucinatory and uncanny environment, causing the viewer to struggle to feel at home in an otherwise familiar place.

SLIDE 7
In Filled with the Brilliance of Life (2011), as with the rest of her Infinity Mirror Rooms, Kusama’s use of mirrors and pools of water confronts the viewer with their own immediate reflection, which is at once innately familiar and yet strangely unreal, mystically separate from the viewer themselves—here the reflection becomes the Other. The infiniteness of viewers’ reflections in the mirrored walls, ceiling, and floor call to mind a sense of displacement and otherworldliness, expressing Kusama’s experiences as an outsider in the Western world.

SLIDE 8
Conversely, Judd’s creation of inhabitable space acknowledges, and in fact emphasizes, the existing world. In Untitled (DSS 221), 1970, a room installation seen here at the Leo Castelli Gallery in New York, Judd refrains from presenting a deliberate expression of reality. Eighteen slabs of galvanized iron are set up around three sides of the room, the material evoking the aesthetics of industrialization. Instead of the total envelopment provided in Kusama’s spaces, Judd’s work here feels more resolute, more temporal, balanced and algorithmic. Additionally, instead of manipulations of reality or a sense of displacement, Judd allows reality to be completely present in leaving the fourth side open and allowing the walls and spotlights of the gallery space to be visible.
His interest is primarily in the space that already exists, handled matter-of-factly. In providing material connections between spaces, he extends them. With scale, space, and surface as his variables, Judd creates sculptures that are seemingly immovable, defying flight and deterritorialization in favor of stagnation, weight, and resolute presence.

**SLIDE 9**
The second characteristic of the minor is that it is always political. Its politics, which are not necessarily bureaucratic, call into question the power dynamics between the dominant and the resistant and, according to art historian Simon O’Sullivan, “connect art to the wider social milieu.” Kusama’s politics in particular address power relations between the Other and the dominant society, which for her would have been the masculinist West. In I’m Here, but Nothing, “familiar signifiers of gender and class are almost obliterated into abstraction” as the pattern of stationary dots of light accumulate, forcing one’s eyes to adjust to the colors. Even the title evokes a sense of suppression to the point of invisibility.

**SLIDE 10**
The presence of colorful dots in Obliteration Room also reinforces these notions of absolute suppression through obliteration, but instead, the West—the dominant—is objectified. Again, the installation begins with the caricature of a room, where everything is completely white, a signifier of the West. Visitors filter through, adding their colored dots throughout the day, and eventually the room is awash with color. If any of the oppressive white background remains, it is nearly indiscernible amidst the accumulation of dots.

**SLIDE 11**
In continually refusing to subscribe to one artistic style, Kusama has instead committed herself to the polka dot, thus ensuring that her work refrains from being associated with and confined to a larger program or artistic intention. Though the polka dot represents the intense self-obliteration that has plagued her throughout her life, she has come to reclaim it in her favor, not only embracing it and creating spaces for it to proliferate, but also allowing it to envelop her beyond her Infinity Rooms. With this allowance of people into her world and the manner in which she has clothed herself in the polka dot, thus disappearing into it, Kusama comports herself as perpetually indomitable, eluding desire and defying objectification. In revealing herself completely, she vanishes.

**SLIDE 12**
Judd, who created works that he believed had political implications, tended to respond more to institutional politics. However, he was openly political mostly as a theorist and critic—
while his sculptural art championed local order, it refrained from coinciding completely with his political views, as he did not believe art to be a viable platform for potential social change.

He expressed that “any art that strongly advocated a political agenda risked becoming illustration,…instead of being an attitude stated directly.”

There is, therefore, a disparity between Judd’s art and politics—although both advocate for self-government and the individual, Judd’s work seems to reflect dominant power ideals of masculinity and Western philosophy in attempting to resist solidarity.

While Kusama addresses identity and body politics regarding race, sex, or class, Judd instead relies on the resistance of bureaucratic polities, government- and institution-based structures.

In using materials that evoke industry and austerity, he comes to express them in his work, as with Untitled (1984), a series of fifteen concrete monoliths on a former military base in Marfa, Texas.

SLIDE 14
The final characteristic of the minor is that it is collective.

This element of collectivity manifests itself in a shift in focus from the individual artist to the creation and collaboration of the collective.

The art Kusama creates from her own hallucinations and experiences remains highly personal, but not exclusive—her rooms in particular bring her hallucinations into fruition.

But by inciting opportunities for participation and reflection, she refrains from alienating viewers.

In exploring her own infinitesimally small life, she hopes to unearth truths that can be projected onto others’ lives, as “people, like polka dots, cannot stay alone.”

Viewers’ ability to contribute to the proliferation of polka dots in Obliteration Room creates a sense of collectivity through interacting directly with the installation.

SLIDE 15
Kusama’s use of mirrors in her Infinity Room installations proliferates ad infinitum not only minute particles, but also the viewers themselves.

In what lecturer Basia Sliwinska refers to as “relational participatory spaces,” viewers’ own reflections of themselves proliferate and evoke the experience of a community.

Viewer presence and participation is, in fact, essential to the rooms, as with Filled with the Brilliance of Life.

Sliwinska writes that the “insertion of subjects into sculptural environments and installations activates the political dimension of Kusama’s art.”

Even the title of the work expresses the necessity of bodies, of life.

SLIDE 16
However, Judd’s work provides a contrast to the collective in that it is external. His work is mainly comprised of solid, massive Minimalist structures that are stationary and reflect masculine or dominant ideas.

Judd’s 1982-1986 untitled permanent installation presents a series of 100 aluminum units in former artillery sheds at Marfa.

Each unit’s reflective aluminum exterior and dimensions are identical.
Though they evoke a sense of proliferation, their resoluteness and reflectivity create feelings of exclusion and control.

**SLIDE 17**

Additionally, each interior has a unique design, further reinforcing the controlled exteriority of Judd’s emphasis.

The persistent square calls to mind industrial and military austerity, inherently oppressive and intolerant of transcendence.

Judd’s sculptural structures, based on singular forms, exude a silent strength, a power in their stateliness.

Though many of them have semi-reflective surfaces, these only seem to further increase the sense of isolation.

His art primarily concerns relationships of forms to space, and not relationships between himself and viewers.

Far from attempting to establish solidarity between minor groups, Judd was politically interested in decentralization and localized self-government.

While his writing emphasizes a disdain for authority structures in favor of individual power, his work expresses a standardized impersonality that evokes this very sense of structure.

**SLIDE 18**

Whereas Judd’s art is, from the start, adamantly distant, Kusama’s work provides insight into her own experiences.

Her representations and manipulations of reality, using proliferations of dots, parallel her encounters with emigration, transcendence, and oppression by both the major Western environment and her own hallucinations.

By constructing her work around the polka dot as a way of both fixating on and overcoming these hallucinations, Kusama continues to examine the endless possibilities that stretch between the infinite and the infinitesimally small, along the way inviting viewers to become the minutiae she proliferates.

Her Infinity Rooms explore the politics of her own identity as a non-Western female, a minority, and a minor artist,

channeling her feelings of alienation and obliteration into intimate spaces that create moments of singular reflection and opportunities for collective experience.

Circumventing the various art movements that have developed during her career, Kusama retains a prominent place within major history while still remaining on the outside, a single particle among billions.


[2018/04/21 16:10] Gentle Heron: Thanks Isabelle. It's important to look at mental illness from perspectives other than medical. It's great that you were here to show us Kusama’s work today. What fun!


[2018/04/21 16:10] Carolyn Carillon: IM: thank you all

[2018/04/21 16:10] Mook Wheeler: QUESTION: Did Kusama have any favourite colours in this journey of depicting her "total surrender" to the world?

[2018/04/21 16:11] Carolyn Carillon: IM: I'm not sure she had favourite colours
In addition to the rooms, she created paintings.  
She was actually inspired by the sea she saw flying to NY.  
It marked a transition for her.  
That soft blue appeared in one of her first infinity nets and started this whole series.

There are no painted lines, for example.  
[2018/04/21 16:11] iSkye Silverweb: Gloriejoy I believe that was a painting technique.  
so the whole picture  
It's associated with figural representation but painted in the style with dots.  
There are no representations of people.  
In her art you can see dots.  
But she paints lines that create negative space or nets.  
Negative space is really the absence of paint or a material.  
Painting or drawing with lines that create spaces that accumulate to create a net.  

[2018/04/21 16:13] James Heartsong (peacefuljames): Thank you! As a relatively 'non-visual' person, I have never really understood much of 'art'. You are an excellent teacher! For the first time, I seem to have actually gained a bit of understanding of the art you have shared with us today. (Now, if only I can remember it!) *sighs*  
That's a kind comment.  

[2018/04/21 16:13] iSkye Silverweb: funny thing to me is that Judd's art seems devoid of emotion, very mathematical, logical; Kusama's is emotional.  
That does seem to be very present in the contrast between their work.  
I think Judd tried to refrain from applying his own ideas to how his viewers received his work.  
That's why his work is untitled.  
Whereas Kusama is welcoming people into hers.  
[2018/04/21 16:14] Orange Planer: I see both of them as emotional.
Judd's work is more of the "control others" requirement.

[2018/04/21 16:17] Carolyn Carillon: IM: One of the ways Judd's work is interesting is that it's open to all kinds of different interpretations. It can seem oppressive and controlling. I wouldn't say he has a hands-off approach to his art.

[2018/04/21 16:17] Orange Planer: Either that, or Judd is mailing it in.


[2018/04/21 16:13] Mook Wheeler: OBSERVATION: To me, Kusama's polka-dots not only suggest fragmentation and disintegration, but also reminds me of blood splatters and spotting -- such as that which you might get at violent crime scenes... (especially in the Obliteration and Infinity Rooms)

[2018/04/21 16:15] Carolyn Carillon: IM [responding to Mook]: I'm just going to go back to one of the obliteration rooms. That's an interesting observation.

[2018/04/21 16:15] bellehooks: thank you mook@

[2018/04/21 16:15] Carolyn Carillon: IM: thank you, Mook. There's definitely a feeling of discomfort and sometimes even violence in Kusama's earlier work. Like when she first arrived in NY. Where it was difficult for her to get settled.


[2018/04/21 16:16] Carolyn Carillon: IM: a lot of her early works deal with the shock she felt coming to this western environment that was so different from what she was used to. Yes, iSkye there was a lot of culture shock.


[2018/04/21 16:16] Carolyn Carillon: IM: [responding to iSkye]: that's an interesting observation. I might actually agree that she never adjusted. She actually lives in Japan now in a mental institution that's close to her home.

[2018/04/21 16:17] Orange Planer: I think perhaps it's more the splattering of ideas against the background of her experience.


[2018/04/21 16:19] Gentle Heron: QUESTION- This morning we asked the audience to think about how various poets portrayed their identity as persons with mental illness in their writing. Can we ask the audience the same question about this artist? How does she tell us about her identity as a person with a mental illness through her chosen style of artwork?


iSkye Silverweb: with her "I Am Here, But Nothing" she really speaks volumes to me. I think she expresses that fragmentation, loss of self amidst crowds and multitudes.

Suellen Heartsong (suln.mahogany): I think she is letting people into her own world by allowing them to "create" with the dots they add. Giving a bit of their own lives into hers without actually letting them in altogether.

James Heartsong (peacefuljames): I wonder if she may be using her feeling of powerlessness, by making much of her art dependent on the others who participate?

Gentle Heron: But what I wondered about was her invitation to the audience to place dots. What does that say about her identify as a person with mental illness?

Mook Wheeler: this slide just says "being overwhelmed" to me, or sensory overload, or too much, too much choice to do anything with it.

Bevan Whitfield: yes I agree with Mook's

Carolyn Carillon: IM: I think that comment that Mook posted is interesting when you remember this slide, the obliteration Room, is blank and then people add their own stickers. It says something about what it is to push your opinions. How chaotic it is.

Gentle Heron: [16:22] SunTzu (joey.aboma): Do the colors they selected have a meaning?

Carolyn Carillon: IM: I think she really just likes many colours. I don't know if the colour in this installation have any meaning. Other than being bright.

Gentle Heron: [16:22] iSkye Silverweb: notice where the dots are most concentrated too. Why iSkye?

Bevan Whitfield: yes @iSkye

MatildaMoontree: eye level

Carolyn Carillon: IM: Uh huh

They seem to be concentrated at standing adult level.

iSkye Silverweb: because it seems the natural tendency for people is to put things on a wall.

Suellen Heartsong (suln.mahogany): in a corner too.

Mook Wheeler: one or two seven-footers walked into that room.... ;)

iSkye Silverweb: there are a few outliers putting them into furniture, lamps even a ceiling but the vast majority go to the back wall.

MatildaMoontree: those are the Aquarians that put them on the ceiling (kidding).

Orange Planer: Because people are more likely to paint a wall than paint furniture.

Eme Capalini: I know nothing of art but this seems child like and maybe she was frustrated as a child and wanted to share.

Carolyn Carillon: IM [responding to Eme]: that's a great thing to point out because she did have a difficult childhood.
She started her art during childhood. [2018/04/21 16:24] bellehooks: nihonga
[2018/04/21 16:24] Carolyn Carillon: IM: there's an art style called nihonga that she was trained in
But she never felt it allowed her freedom of expression
But she was having hallucinations from her childhood
[2018/04/21 16:25] Carolyn Carillon: GH: Do you want to say more about that BET?
I can't do it

[2018/04/21 16:26] Carolyn Carillon: GH: Isabelle, do you have questions for us?
[2018/04/21 16:27] Carolyn Carillon: IM: I was curious if anyone has seen either of these artist's work in magazines or in person?
[2018/04/21 16:27] Gentle Heron: I have never heard of her
[2018/04/21 16:27] Suellen Heartsong (suln.mahogany): no, had never heard of her either
[2018/04/21 16:27] Betty Jeffers: First for me
[2018/04/21 16:27] Gentle Heron: So this was all new to me
[2018/04/21 16:27] Nimue Galatea: No, I have not
[2018/04/21 16:27] Gentle Heron: Yes I've heard of Judd
[2018/04/21 16:27] Carolyn Carillon: GH: Looks like most say no
But a few say "Judd"

[2018/04/21 16:28] Gentle Heron: Our art gallery on Cape Able features only works by artists with disabilities. Maybe we should add her!
http://maps.secondlife.com/secondlife/Cape%20Able/118/120/23
[2018/04/21 16:28] Carolyn Carillon: GH: We should see if we could get Kusama to exhibit there
[2018/04/21 16:29] iSkye Silverweb: imagine her coming up with a 3D version of one of her art installations, all the possibilities...
[2018/04/21 16:29] millay Freschi: These would be excellent for the SL environment. So glad to have been introduced to this work!
[2018/04/21 16:29] iSkye Silverweb: "looks at Treasure..." might run out of prims
[2018/04/21 16:29] LV (lorivonne.lustre): I was just thinking that iSkye... imagine the NPIRL possibilities

[2018/04/21 16:29] Gentle Heron: Other questions for Isabelle?
[2018/04/21 16:29] Carolyn Carillon: IM: I have not
I've never seen one of her works in person but I imagine it would be overwhelming because those rooms are quite small.
You can walk into them.
But the lines are long at museums.
You only get a short amount of time in the room because it's so small.


[2018/04/21 16:30] James Heartsong (peacefuljames): The only Japanese I am familiar with, is my brother in law. He had the misfortune to be confined in one of the American prison camps during WW 2. His art is pottery, and I am blessed to have a couple of his pieces, which I use often.
Japanese Artist, that is.


[2018/04/21 16:31] millay Freschi: thank you!
[2018/04/21 16:31] LV (lorivonne.lustre): Thank you Isabelle
[2018/04/21 16:31] Orange Planer: Another way of saying "We're ignorant!" :D Hehehehe
[2018/04/21 16:31] Carolyn Carillon: Not a single person here has heard of your topic!

[2018/04/21 16:31] iSkye Silverweb: I love how this presentation ties in so well with the theme for the conference
[2018/04/21 16:31] Carolyn Carillon: IM: Thank you for having me
[2018/04/21 16:31] JJ Drinkwater certainly has a lot to learn!
[2018/04/21 16:31] Gentle Heron: We all have a lot to learn