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A Single Particle Among Billions: Yayoi Kusama and the Power of the Minute

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A SINGLE PARTICLE AMONG BILLIONS:
YAYOI KUSAMA AND THE POWER OF THE MINUTE

Isabelle Martin

2017 Oswald Research and Creativity Competition

Humanities – Critical Research

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.”¹ 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”², 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

¹ Yayoi Kusama and Ralph F. McCarthy, *Infinity Net: The Autobiography of Yayoi Kusama* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2011), 87.

² *Ibid.*, 17.

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.”³ As such he used algorithms and numerical sequences in his work (fig. 1), 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.”⁴

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,”⁵ in favor of emphasizing oppressed qualities. The

³ David Raskin and Donald Judd, *Donald Judd* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2010), 41.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 24.

⁵ Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari, *Kafka: Toward a Minor Literature* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2005), 26.

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.”⁶

Kusama's 2002 installation *Obliteration Room* (fig. 2) 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

⁶ Simon O'Sullivan, “Notes Towards a Minor Art Practice,” *Drain: Journal of Contemporary Art and Culture* (2005): 4.

regularly experienced by Kusama. The 2000 installation *I'm Here, but Nothing* (fig. 3) 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.

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 (fig. 4) call to mind a sense of displacement and otherworldliness, expressing Kusama's experiences as an outsider in the Western world.

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 (fig. 5), 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.

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.”⁷ 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* (fig. 6), “familiar signifiers of gender and class are almost obliterated into abstraction”⁸ 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.

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 (fig. 7), 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 (fig. 8). If any of the oppressive white background remains, it is nearly indiscernible amidst the accumulation of dots.

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

⁷ Ibid., 5.

⁸ Basia Sliwinski, “Social Transformation Through Infinite Multiplication,” *Sculpture*, September 2012, 41.

which she has clothed herself in the polka dot (fig. 9), thus disappearing into it, Kusama comports herself as perpetually indomitable, eluding desire and defying objectification. In revealing herself completely, she vanishes.

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.”⁹ 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 (fig. 10).

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

⁹ Raskin, *Donald Judd*, 89.

projected onto others' lives, as "people, like polka dots, cannot stay alone."¹⁰ Viewers' ability to contribute to the proliferation of polka dots in *Obliteration Room* creates a sense of collectivity through interacting directly with the installation.

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,"¹¹ 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* (fig. 11). Sliwinska writes that the "insertion of subjects into sculptural environments and installations activates the political dimension of Kusama's art."¹² Even the title of the work expresses the necessity of bodies, of life.

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 (fig. 12). 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. Additionally, each interior has a unique design (fig. 13), 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

¹⁰ Jo Applin, "I'm Here, but Nothing: Yayoi Kusama's Environments" in *Yayoi Kusama* (London: Tate Publishing, 2012), 191.

¹¹ Sliwinska, "Social Transformation," 41.

¹² *Ibid.*, 38.

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. 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.

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fig. 1
Donald Judd, *Untitled (DSS 120)*, 1968
Stainless steel and amber Plexiglass
10 units, each 6 x 27 x 24 inches (15.2 x 68.6 x 61 cm)

<http://www.mnuchingallery.com/exhibitions/donald-judd>



fig. 2
Yayoi Kusama, *Obliteration Room*, 2002-
Furniture, white paint, dot stickers
Dimensions variable

<https://www.designboom.com/art/yayoi-kusama-david-zwirner-obliteration-room-new-york-05-26-2015/>



fig. 3

Yayoi Kusama, *I'm Here, but Nothing*, 2000-

Dot sheet, ultraviolet fluorescent lights, furniture, household objects

Dimensions variable

https://www.huffingtonpost.com/heidi-kim/kusama-and-cornell-an-unl_b_1580210.html



fig. 4
Yayoi Kusama, *Filled with the Brilliance of Life*, 2011-
Room with mirror, LED lights, water pool
296 x 622.4 x 622.4 cm

<https://patricia1957.wordpress.com/tag/infinity-mirrored-room-filled-with-the-brilliance-of-life/>



fig. 5

Donald Judd, *Untitled (DSS 221)*, 1970

Hot-dipped galvanized iron

15 units: each 60 x 14 in (152.4 x 122 cm); 2 units: both 60 x 41 in (152.4 x 104 cm); 1 unit: 60 x 13 in (152.4 x 33 cm)

<http://juddfoundation.org/artist/art/>



fig. 6

Yayoi Kusama, *I'm Here, but Nothing*, 2000-

Dot sheet, ultraviolet fluorescent lights, furniture, household objects

Dimensions variable

<https://www.flickr.com/photos/maxunterwegs/12484562693>



figs. 7 (before stickers) and 8
Yayoi Kusama, *Obliteration Room*, 2002-
Furniture, white paint, dot stickers
Dimensions variable

<https://www.curbed.com/2015/6/3/9953460/a-prefab-house-becomes-interactive-art-in-yayoi-kusamas-obliteration>



fig. 9
Yayoi Kusama with *Dots Obsession*, 2012

<https://www.modernamuseet.se/stockholm/en/exhibitions/yayoi-kusama/>



fig. 10
Donald Judd, *Untitled*, 1980-1984
Concrete
15 units, each 2.5 x 2.5 x 5 m

<http://magazine.art21.org/2009/12/09/deference-to-the-vernacular/#.WfNVexOPLMU>



fig. 11
Yayoi Kusama, *Filled with the Brilliance of Life*, 2011-
Room with mirror, LED lights, water pool
296 x 622.4 x 622.4 cm

<https://starlightarchitecture.wordpress.com/2014/01/09/space-is-yayoi-kusamas-infinity-mirrored-room/>



figs. 12 and 13
Donald Judd, *Untitled*, 1982-1986
Mill aluminum
100 units, each 41 x 51 x 72 in.

<http://juddfoundation.org/artist/art/>