

**‘THE BEAUTIFUL STARS AT NIGHT’: <sup>1</sup>  
THE GLITTERING ARTISTIC WORLD OF YAYOI KUSAMA <sup>2</sup>**

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*Even the most modest of Yayoi Kusama's works draw on complex tensions, between tradition and innovation, between a persistent and deeply personal individual vision and a correspondence with broader Japanese and internationalist trends in thinking and practice in the visual arts. Within the brilliant variety of practice and invention that has occupied her career, and perhaps despite the immense critical acclaim she has consistently provoked, Yayoi's world remains intensely personal, both to its inventor, and in the way of its engagement for each viewer.*



Yayoi Kusama, public art work, *Dots for Love and Peace*, 2009, City Gallery, Wellington. Courtesy of the artist, Yayoi Kusama Studio and Ota Fine Arts, Tokyo. Photograph by Paul McCredie.

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- 1 Yayoi Kusama: 'I was born on highlands. I remember the beautiful stars at night. They were so beautiful I thought the sky was falling in on me'. Interview with Damien Hirst, *Yayoi Kusama: Now* (cat.), Robert Miller Gallery, New York, 1998, pp. 9-14, in Laura Hoptman, Akira Tatehata, Udo Kuttermann, *Yayoi Kusama*, London and New York, Phaidon, 2000, 141.
  - 2 *Yayoi Kusama: Mirrored Years*, an exhibition organised by the Museum Boijmans van Beuningen, Rotterdam, curated by Jaap Guidemond, Franck Gautherot and Seungduk Kim, with additional participation by Judith Blackall (Sydney) and Paula Savage (NZ). City Gallery Wellington *Te Whare Toi*, 27 September 2009 to 7 February 2010.

## Experiencing Yayoi

Stepping into Yayoi's world – literally – is a disorienting and totally immersive experience. The 'infinity room' *Fireflies on the Water* (2000) is experienced from a completely enclosed position right inside the small-scale structure of the installation. Despite its tiny space the experience is not claustrophobic – the room is lined completely with mirrors, with a shallow black pool of water stretching right across the floor below. This darkened space is dimly illuminated with tiny luminous points of hundreds of small LED lights in red, yellow and blue suspended in the air around the viewer. The infinity mirrors conjure endlessly repeating sequences of reflections receding infinitely in every direction. The effect is sparkling, stimulating, one of sheer optical delight, especially when the tiniest movement incites delicate tremors on the water surface. The chaos of the apparently random arrangement of lights and reflections is moderated by the complex grid like web of the sharp edges of the mirror planes.

The effect is one of a playful disorientation in the confusion of endless vanishing points, subtle movements and the gently shimmering surface of lights reflected in the water below. The work resonates with suggestion: of catching fireflies in earlier eras in Edo or Heian-kyō Japan; of the dazzling lights and cuboid geometries of Ginza or New York at night; of the hallucinatory, acid-fuelled refractions of disco ball lighting; of standing right inside the twinkling star-sea of the Milky Way.

Despite the apparently stabilising presence of the crisp, grid-like edges of the myriad reflections, the experience is disconcerting, even other-worldly – in the words of the supporting literature 'our earth is like a little polka dot among millions of other celestial bodies'. Even a short time inside this space provokes a dazzling and intense experience generating sensual overload or saturation.



Yayoi Kusama, *Fireflies on the Water*, 2000, Collection FNAC, France. Courtesy of the artist, Yayoi Kusama Studio, Victoria Miro Gallery, London and Ota Fine Arts, Tokyo.

The most persistent motif in Yayoi's oeuvre was established very early in her life. In an untitled pencil drawing of her mother, drawn at the age of 10, she established precedents for the linear contours of the later netscapes in textural layers of pencil marks drawn over a shallow spatial arrangement. A field of tiny circles and nervously drawn shapes laid over the whole image, like a veil over the face and shoulders and entire background, was later to manifest itself in her obsessional preoccupation with the polka dot. With unsettling prescience the drawing on the verso of this one, a heavily overdrawn almost amorphic form of a geisha rising from the floor of a room crisply defined by the convergence of three sharp, straight lines, neatly predicts the infinity rooms of the peak years of Yayoi's career.

Graphic precedents established in these early works persist to the present day. They inform the sharply constructed black on white linear fields of the felt-tip pen drawings and screenprints of the *Love Forever* works completed between 2004 and 2007. In these works the linear layers of dots, lips, leaves or stripes conjure images of shoals of swimming eyes gliding through fields of eye-insects, stratified landscapes, shapes echoing portrait contours or dot-line centipede forms swimming through seas of floating ciliae. The patterned repetitions, figure-ground confusions and grid-like arrangements across the picture plane of these pared back compositions hover between the conventional principles of figurative and non-representational traditions.

Early on, the motifs of the early drawings were quickly revolved into thematic preoccupations. The early *Infinity Nets* drawing of 1953 constructs tight intensely wrought linear networks creating fields of tiny pale shapes in a monochromatic tonal field. In *Accumulation* (1952) the figure-ground ambiguities of the web forms generates a suggestion of Vasarely-like bulges from within the painted surface. The preoccupation with optical ambiguities and confusions resurfaces repeatedly throughout her later career.

The painterly potentials of these tiny early works were eventually to be realised in vast sprawling canvases like *Infinity Nets OQABT* (2007). Here she again explores delicate tensions between chaos and order, fugitive sensation and plastic substance. The effect is generated from the contrasting fields of the under painted complex web of soft intestinal bulges or cloud-like forms and the crisply defined over-painted random arrangement of tiny sharp black shapes – apparently painted over a single night of obsessively intensive activity. The monochrome surface of the painting is so extensive that the work cannot be viewed as a whole. Its seductive surface of soft/sharp, figure/ground confusions draws viewers towards the canvas, immersing them physically as well as optically in a completely absorptive optical-sensual experience of the work.

Given the subtle but insistent force with which Yayoi's paintings engage and involve the viewer, optically and physically, the adoption of more three-dimensional modes seems inevitable. It has been realised in the transition from the netscapes into three-dimensional forms, in forests of writhing polka dot tentacles rising from the floor, or in seas of giant soft cloud-like pillows floating in space. The structures of some of these works still conform to the flat planes of walls or floors. *The Earth in Late Summer* (2004) is a bas relief comprising 50 square boxes, each containing an amorphous plastic tactile form smoothly painted in dense black covered in intense orange dots.

The apparent chaos of the forms and dots is mediated and regulated by the formal grid formed by box frames. The changeable relation between the rearrangeable forms and the consistent grid format contributes to the realisation of a tensional dialectic between chaos and order that runs like a current through her work.

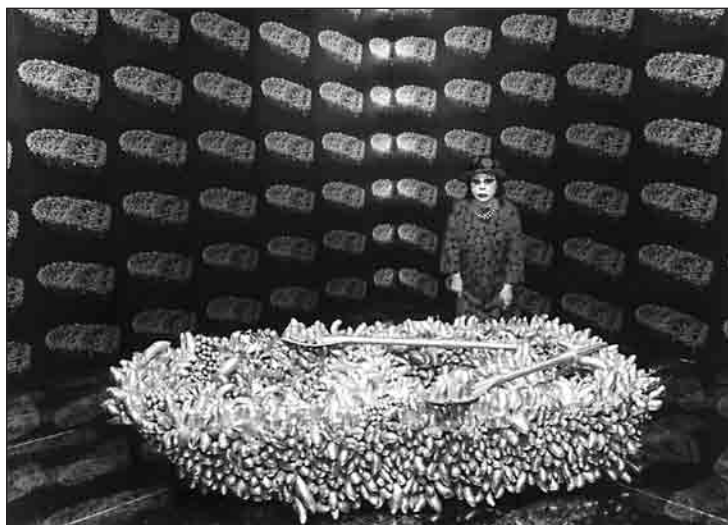
The infinity nets' implicit invitations to physical as well as optical engagement is realised more literally in the creation of spaces which viewers can enter and walk around. *Walking on the Sea of Death* (1981) comprises a small wooden dinghy overflowing with the forms of pineapples, roses, or bunches of grapes strewn amongst the repeated motif of sewn stuffed fabric drooping phallic forms, all enveloped in a shiny silver layer of paint. A spare white on black photographic image of the front of the boat becomes a phallic wallpaper motif repeated in emphatically two-dimensional geometric arrangements across the floor, up the walls and across the ceiling to create a formal counterpoint to the chaotic arrangement in the boat itself. The viewer has to enter the space to circulate around the boat form, moving into and between the complementary components of the work, engaging alternately with the flat surfaces of the spatial planes and the softly palpable three-dimensionality of the phallic construction in the centre.

*Narcissus Garden*, an antecedent work, and Yayoi's contribution to the 1966 Venice Biennale, crystallised the motifs of repetition and pattern, reflection and light, and the invitation to the physical, optical and reflected participation of the viewer. The viewer's own presence is graphically evident everywhere in the myriad repetitions of their own narcissistic reflections on every one of the shiny silver mirror balls. The work's 800 mirror surfaced steel spheres<sup>3</sup> are laid out – like a field of giant pachinko balls – in apparently random clusters around the perimeter of the room. In every one of the mirror balls each viewer finds their own reflection right at the centre of the reflection of the entire work, audience and space. These myriad images are combined with and interrupted by sharp staccato star-like points of blinding lights of sunshine and electric lights, and by the movement of figures through the space. The uniformly sized spherical ball shapes and the sharply reflected boundaries of the room create broken grid-like arrangements of crisp edges to temper the apparent randomness of the experience with more formally arranged and repetitive structural elements. This entire world is reflected again above the viewer in the suspended arrangement of *Soaring Spirits* (2008). Even more mirror balls, now in varying sizes, are arranged in flocculating cloud-like groups to create even more narcissistic reflections of each viewer, surrounded by a sea of twinkling reflected light-stars.

Together with the opportunities the reflective medium provides for the exploration of potentials of light, pattern, colour or structure, the narcissist theme necessarily informs all of the mirror works. In an earlier infinity room, perhaps the best known of these works, *Infinity Mirror Room – Phalli's Field (or Floor Show)* (1965) the viewer (most memorably a red-clad Yayoi herself) stands, surrounded by the field of red on white phallus forms rising out of the floor, reflected horizontally outwards in every

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3 In its original Venice presentation the work comprised 1500 mirror balls, but throughout the biennale visitors were invited to purchase their own personal 'narcissism' from those in the installation – at \$2 per narcissism.



Yayoi Kusama, *Walking on the Sea of Death*, 1981. Courtesy of the artist, Yayoi Kusama Studio, Victoria Miro Gallery, London and Ota Fine Arts, Tokyo.



Yayoi Kusama, *Narcissus Garden*, 1966, installation view, the 33rd Venice Biennale, Venice, Italy. Courtesy of the artist, Yayoi Kusama Studio, Victoria Miro Gallery, London and Ota Fine Arts, Tokyo.



direction in a kaleidoscopic confusion of images of self, edge and colour. The clinical whiteness and blood red of the phallic forms introduce an element of discomfort in their suggestion of medical or bandage-like associations.

The themes of narcissistic reflection, geometric arrangement and fluidity and change are extended again as the viewer enters the narrow corridors of *Invisible Life* (2009). Rows of convex mirrors arranged across plain white walls reflect and guide the participant through diverging pathways into the two huge complementary chambers of *Dots Obsession Day* and *Dots Obsession Night*. The day chamber envelops the participants in a seamless envelope of intense daisy yellow, in which all surfaces are covered in an appliqué field of crisp black dots. The night room envelops the viewer in its opposite, black painted surfaces with appliqué yellow dots. Within each room one moves through an amorphous, all-encompassing space, amongst huge yellow and black polka dot inflatables lolling on the floor or floating in the air. The effect is one of a playfully magical, and complete, insulation from the world outside.

Throughout her career Yayoi has repeatedly extended her practice to embrace performance and happening, video, poetry and song. Famously, in her 1968 New York *Love-In Festival* 'happening' the inevitable police intervention was followed by a rapid degeneration from order into chaos. Film images of Yayoi's singing juxtapose the geometries and intensities of red infinity mirror rooms with her own image and with the edgy piercing cadences of her own *a capella* performance. In the early New York performance works first Yayoi herself and subsequently whole groups of participants are drawn into intense group art experiences, part painting and collage, part surreal



Yayoi Kusama, *Dots Obsession Day*, 2009, installation view City Gallery Wellington. Courtesy of the artist, Yayoi Kusama Studio and Ota Fine Arts, Tokyo. Photograph by Justine Hall.

party, part psychedelic orgy, in the most physically and sensually intimate of artist-participant engagements. In a very real sense these events, and the dark, edgy filmed recordings of them, realise the same almost complete – if transient – experience of another world as the bright, psychedelic optical overload of *Fireflies on the Water*.

## **Explaining Yayoi**

Seen collectively, Yayoi's works traverse a huge territory. Her project has encompassed a diverse range of media in drawing and painting, theatrical New York happenings, photography and moving image, sculptures, body works and installations. Despite its diversity, this body of work is neither disparate nor incoherent. Her project is bound by continuities that run like connective threads between her varied engagements. Most constant of course is the polka dot. Its persistent presence is managed and moderated by Yayoi's obsessional preoccupation with carefully modulated monochrome surfaces or fields of pure colour – especially red, but also intensely bright yellows and oranges. These tonal or colour fields provide a skin-like surface for the application of endless repetitions of dots and webs to create fields characterised both by patterned regularity and disordered confusion. The preoccupation with medium and surface informs also her obsessions with complementary relations, of surface and illusion, reflection and light, and of recurrent tensional oppositions of order and chaos. Perhaps the greatest tension is that between the degree of detachment Yayoi contrives through these membrane-like webs of line, colour and light, and their simultaneous invitation to participant engagement in the experience of optical, tactile, and spatial sensation the works can engender. But most persistent of all is the dot, the obsessional repetitions of dots, webs, fields of endlessly reflected points of light – like the stars in the night sky.

The distance or detachment Yayoi contrives through these skin-like webs emphasises the essentially personal, private motivation for her work. In her words, '...each piece of work is the condensation of my life'.<sup>4</sup> For Yayoi, both personally and professionally, this has been a complex life, one informed by delicate contradictory tensions and an obsessional, often manic, drive.

These complexities derive from personal experiences, most pervasively those of the long-term mental illness she has experienced throughout her life. They emerge from the context of a repressive and traumatic childhood, and manifest in the experiences of hallucinations from an early age, and in the early development of a prolific and obsessive compulsive habit of art making. They were sustained through the years of living and working in New York from 1958 to 1972; from 1973 she has lived and worked in a psychiatric hospital in Tokyo. These experiences have informed the persistence of key themes in her life, the intimate relation between mental illness and the generation of her art, and the deeply personalised importance of the engagement with art media in the creation of persona and self-presentation in the public domain.

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4 Yayoi, in Hoptman et al, 2000, 136.

Yayoi's early years were spent in Japan. She was born in 1929. She experienced a harshly repressive childhood through the depression and war years. The privations of these years, and the oppressive presence of a strictly disciplinary mother, underpin the rapid escalation of acute anxieties into mental illness, manifest in obsessive compulsive behaviours, hysteria, narcissism, hallucinations, and a morbid fear of sex:

In the house of my youth, my parents practised strict discipline. In particular I grew up hearing repeated lectures about the dangers of making friends with the impure opposite sex. Thus, even when I reached the stage of puberty when most girls are interested in the opposite sex, I could not rid myself of an obsession with sex. My phobia of men and my obsessive fear of men became increasingly severe, resulting in an extreme fear of anything phallic. It reached the point where I was assaulted by countless phallic visions.<sup>5</sup>

Yayoi's compulsive nature is clearly evident in even the earliest of her drawings. The obsessive repetitions of tiny circular dots, nervously drawn shapes and marks effectively obliterate the mother image in her 1939 portrait. The enveloping veils of dots and linear webs in the early drawings reproduce hallucinations in which the dots and nets covered her and her surroundings. The dots and nets separated her from the rest of the world at precisely the time that her depersonalised syndrome was diagnosed.

In 1957 Yayoi moved to New York. Here she continued to develop the early *Infinity Net* paintings through a radical increase in scale, covering the entire painted canvas in interdependent and ambiguous fields of dots floating above nets, and nets defining the spaces around the dots. She describes the immediate and direct appeal of engagement with the physical medium of paint on the flat pictorial surface in a working method in which

...the endlessly repetitive rhythm (of brush strokes) and the monochromatic surface presents a new pictorial experiment with different 'light' which cannot be defined by regular pictorial construction and methods.<sup>6</sup>

The intensity of this engagement is especially evident in the sustained preoccupation with the characteristics of the medium in carefully crafted surfaces, or contrasts of sharp delineation and soft modulations of surface, and was to inform also the immaculate constructions of reflective, painted or appliquéd surfaces in the later constructions. This obsessive fixation with the definition and engagement with the medium was consistent with the preoccupations with qualities of medium, surface flatness and grid constructs emerging within the broader New York school modernist context. Indeed, through this period Yayoi was to exhibit alongside non-objective artists like Mark Rothko and Donald Judd.

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5 Yayoi, in Midori Yoshimoto, *Performing the Self: Yayoi Kusama and Her Ever-Expanding Universe*, in Yoshimoto, *Into Performance: Japanese Women Artists in New York*, New Brunswick, New Jersey and London: Rutgers University Press, 2005, 47.

6 Yayoi, in Yoshimoto, 54.



The development of the sculptural works began in 1961, when Yayoi started making stuffed fabric protrusions and covering domestic objects and furniture with them. The emergence of these works was not coincidental. It was a logical development from the implicitly tactile character of her painted surfaces. It also drew on skills she had developed as a parachute maker during war, and now capitalised on the fact that there was a fabric shop in her studio building. At the time she shared this studio space in close association with Donald Judd who helped stuff the works as she obsessively sewed the huge numbers of forms required for each of the composite works she was constructing at the time. These works were exhibited alongside those of other New York artists like Claes Oldenberg, George Segal and Andy Warhol who also drew on similar territories of domestic objects, the recycled, or the banal. Yayoi's feminist-subversive constructions employed sewing skills from traditionally female-ascribed domestic contexts to cover ordinary objects like high-heeled shoes, frying pans, chairs or dresses with densely packed coverings of the hand-sewn fabric objects. This thick layering reflects her obsession with repetitions of forms, dotted surfaces or repeated photographs. She called the works 'aggregation sculpture'. The recurrent, almost constant, motif was the 'soft toy' form of the phallic extrusions that recur again throughout her work. Later Yayoi developed this covering mode into food works like the macaroni-covered mannequins, gluing on macaroni pieces in the same obsessive-repetitive way as she used the polka dot. These covered objects led to installations in interiors covered in phallic forms, filled with macaroni-covered mannequins, and macaroni-covered floors in overwhelming amalgams of forms, colours, patterns and sounds. Later works employed multiple lights, lights as dots, as stars, as shop decoration, as fields and rows and patterns. These works form the background context for Yayoi's experiments in live performance, and integration of a performative component or her own presence into the installation works. The extension of Yayoi's media engagements into this immersive engagement in performative, musical, photographic and filmic modes is quite consistent with the edgy, innovative, risk-taking of her own persona and practice, as it is also typical of the psychedelic, theatrical, and in hindsight perhaps also naive, character of the ethos of this era. This very topicality however, together with her preference for the museum or gallery setting as a site for aesthetic engagement, seems to explain Yayoi's subsequent return to painted, sculptural and installation modes for her work.<sup>7</sup>

The achievements of the New York years establish the context for the development of the recurring characteristics through which the distinctive pictorial character of her work became crystallised. Her stylistic modes have been defined consistently by obsessive repetitions of dots, nets and grids, shapes, objects, patterns of stripes, wave patterns, pumpkin forms, phallic forms or spheres. They demonstrate a preference for intense colour, bright, flat, and sometimes glossy or metallic. The shininess of mirrors and mirroring metal surfaces, mirror balls, or metallic paint are used to create multiple repetitions of shapes, forms, colours, patterns. Mirrors placed around installations create tensions between expanded perceptions of space and dense reflected surfaces of repeating shapes and colours that make walls of pattern that seem to enclose, making

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7 'I prefer my art in museum collections, as nobody would ruin or steal them...' Yayoi, in conversation with Damien Hirst, 1998, *op. cit.*

claustrophobic interior spaces. This theme of tensional opposition is evident also in the taut relations between the three-dimensionality of forms and the implicit flatness of patterned surfaces of enveloping, wrapping skin and in the diversity of increasingly complex combinations of heterogeneous components in the 'aggregate' works.

Contextually, Yayoi's oeuvre fits within, and is consistent with other practices in, contemporary modernist tendencies to non-figuration. This is evident in her early fascination with shallow space constructions and the relational effects of mark-making, line, tone and colour on the flat surface of the painting. Her early awareness of the pictorial potentials of the interrelated existence of dots and grids is consistent with the adoption of the grid as an organisational principal in modernist abstraction in projects as disparate as Donald Judd's minimalist geometrical volumes and formal spatial constructs and Andy Warhol's pop art adoptions of repetitive formats, machine made objects and commonplace subjects. For Yayoi though, the flat skin-like surfaces of her paintings later developed into wrapping around solid forms, as polka dot skins were smothered around phallic forms to obliterate their sexual explicitness.

Visually however, the most persistent motif in her life and the one that defines her artistic *modus operandi* is repetition: obsessive/compulsive repetition. As an artistic mode, repetition is a useful device. It informs the decorative, visually engaging opticality from which her works derive much of their popular appeal. It also underpins a certain playfulness in the adoption of doodle-like repetition as a means to invention through the apparently aimless generation of patterns and sense out of chaotic mark making. This explains the recurrent juxtapositions of formal and informal, and the tensional relations between order and disorder in Yayoi's work – 'I like both mess and order in my life'.<sup>8</sup> The repetitions also have a deeper, more personal source. The patterns evident in the drawings and compulsive and hallucinatory experiences from an early age quickly manifested in neurotic, fixational, self-obsessive behaviour beyond any effective conscious control. In her art, uncontainable repetitions in behaviour and in drawings developed into a therapeutic experience of endlessly repeating simple mechanical processes in what she thought of as a 'self-therapy' for her obsessional neurosis: 'painting pictures has become a therapy for me to overcome the illness'.<sup>9</sup> Repetition or obsessively repeated actions became a means to isolate herself from the world.

Inevitably perhaps, the visual character of Yayoi's work finds sources also in broader cultural contexts. Repetition is a visual theme in Japanese art. The decorative potentials of repetitive and geometric arrangement inform Momoyama wave patterns, Rimpa-style screen painting and the *ukiyo-e* fascination with surfaces of repeating geometric pattern. The seductive surfaces of woodblock print compositions are a celebration of colour and pattern, and contemporary patterns and fashions in textile designs favoured the geometric

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8 *Ibid.*, 137. Yayoi makes this understanding of a close functional link between her art and her illness explicit also elsewhere in the interview with Hirst: 'I am certain I will die a "death while doing art" in this hospital.' (139 – Yayoi turns 80 in 2009, the year of this exhibition which included a number of works completed specifically for this event, including the creation of a Yayoi painting enveloping the entire City Gallery building).

9 *Ibid.*, 136.

repetitions and vertical parallel line patterns of *iki* sensibility. Yayoi's preoccupation with tensions between 'mess and order' finds Japanese precedent in calligraphy and *sumi-e* ink painting in orthodox categories of *shin*, *gyō*, and *sō* (formal, semi-formal and informal). The playful inventive engagement that has persisted throughout her career finds its origins in Japanese notions of *asobi*, or play, as both an artistic and a cultural habit. This sense of play that informs the theatricality of so many of Yayoi's works finds obvious form in the Edo period development of kabuki theatre, and in the extravagant and often deliberately provocative lack of care for conventionality defined in the term *kabuku* – 'eccentric', 'different' – an Edo virtue sustained today in some aspects of modern downtown Tokyo life. In many ways Yayoi's art not as distant from that of her traditional Japanese antecedents or *Nihonga* modern exponents of traditional Japanese painting as her internationalist contexts might suggest.

Repetition also finds a central place in Buddhist practice, as prayer, chant and meditation and the repeating of mantras as a means of entry into the Western Paradise. In meditative practice ritual repetition is a means to achieving a state of *mugen* – 'no-mind', or mindlessness and detachment. Learning (and learning in art and calligraphy especially) in monastic practice is founded on the notion of learning by repetition over a long term till one's actions become completely automatic, unconscious, in order to free the mind for inventive action. The apparently paradoxical puzzles or riddles in Zen practice are reflected also in Yayoi's works in the ambiguous and disorienting dichotomies between real and reflected, and real space and illusory.

Yayoi also draws on repetition as a theme in daily life in the reiterative habits, tasks, and actions that saturate every day of our lives, in the standardisations in life and daily rituals of eating, sleeping, washing, shaving, coffees and teatimes or timetables and schedules. With Yayoi these themes are realised in the ordinariness of domestic objects, of clothing, shoes, kitchen utensils or furniture. Through her inclusion of aggregates of these objects she explores tensions between female worlds (clothing, shoes, domestic objects, traditional domestic activities), and male domains (phallic forms). The graphic presence of repetition in the domestic environment, in wallpapers, fabrics and textiles, finds expression beyond the confines of the picture frame in Yayoi's decorative pictorial and geometric exploitation of the planar surfaces of walls, floors and ceilings in the walk-in works. Together, in their explorations of domesticity and female identity (infected inevitably by the disjunctive examples of her own childhood experience) these domestic-themed works embody Yayoi's rejection of the mundanity of domestic life. This theme is playfully explored in the 2009 work *Everything Obliterated by Polka Dots*. In the darkened space of an otherwise conventional New Zealand living room UV black light illuminates the neon-coloured dots applied to the surface of every plane and every object, even the fruits and flowers on the dining room table. The effect is a hallucinogenic transformation of physical surfaces and forms into a purely optical delight, but moving through the space and amongst the furniture and objects inside the otherwise darkened space quickly becomes confusing and disorienting.

Most poignant perhaps is the close link between this fixation with repetition and the persistent sexual obsessions that have infected Yayoi's life and her work. The profound fear of male and female generated by parental admonitions so early, but so forcibly, in

her life manifested in a persistent fear of sexuality or sexual imagery. The apparently sexually provocative character of the nude performance pieces or the explicitly phallic sculptural forms convey a tension between fear and control, the obsessively repetitive manufacture of phallus forms a means of gaining control. Repeating and covering the phallic forms with flat dotted skins and sewn fabrics have become a means of controlling the phobia. When Akira Tatehata asks her whether this practice exercises 'Your will to cover the space of your life with phalluses? Yayoi answers 'Yes, because I'm afraid of them. It's a 'sex obsession'.<sup>10</sup>

Here, as in the Buddhist contexts, the central theme is repetition as detachment. Yayoi's personal emotional detachment from the real world becomes synonymous with the degree of aesthetic detachment that can be achieved through obsessive compulsive repetition. This detachment is consistent with broader patterns of alienation or isolation experienced by Yayoi and many of her contemporaries as they ventured outside the comfort zone of their own aesthetic traditions. For Yayoi the experience was compounded by the sense of alienation, the outsider experience of the expatriate, as she moved from her Tokyo environment into the New York one. For Homi Bhabha this experience seems to fuel the innovative drive that informs the achievements of artists like Yayoi. He describes an impetus amongst 'disenfranchised minorities' or peripheral outsider participants towards new intercultural, polycultural or international projects as a central characteristic of contemporary internationalist aesthetic engagements:

The demography of the new internationalism is the history of post-colonial migration, the narratives of cultural and political diaspora, the major social displacement of peasantry and aboriginal communities, the poetics of exile, the grim pose of political and economic refugees.<sup>11</sup>

Bhabha's construct is certainly consistent with the alienation Yayoi has experienced through her mental illness, her expatriate status, and within the relatively cloistered world of the psychiatric hospital, and her works quickly found a secure place within internationalist art world contexts he describes. As an explanation for the art works themselves, however, this account is problematic. While it may describe a context for the incidence of the development of her work, it does little to explain the actual and highly distinctive character of her work. It fails to embrace the compound of other less apparent and more subtly pervasive personal and artistic conditioning factors that inform the rich complexities of Yayoi's project. It doesn't acknowledge the central role of the engagement with the artists' means, the persistent investigation into the constraints and affordances of the medium that underpin innovation in the recombination of existing and new materials, processes and motifs in new combinations. In the case of Yayoi this was realised through an obsessively inventive engagement in the medium to produce new and often apparently paradoxical, artistic outcomes. Bhabha's thesis does acknowledge

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10 Interview with Akira Tatehata, Hoptman et al., 2000, 16.

11 Homi K. Bhabha, 'Beyond the Pale: Art in the Age of Multicultural Translation', in Ulac, James; Munroe, Alexandra; Masami Teraoka; Hess, Lynda, *Paintings by Masami Teraoka*, Washington DC, Arthur M. Sackler Gallery, Smithsonian Institution, with Weatherhill, 1996, p. 43.

the persistence of themes of identity and membership of cultural contexts, but underlying this for Yayoi lies the more pervasive issue of individual or personal identity – her obsessive/compulsive neurosis; the persistent presence of self in the multiple narcissistic reflections; the tensional force generated between the will to defend or protect, and the invitation to viewer participation. For a Japanese artist, this preoccupation breaks new ground. The notion of identity is itself a relatively novel one in Japan, where even today conformity is seen as a social virtue. As Judy Annear has explained:

Before the Meiji Restoration (1868-1912) and the opening of Japan to the West, there existed no words in the verb-based Japanese language for 'identity' or for 'art' in the sense that then West understands these terms'.<sup>12</sup>

However pervasive the conditioning factors of the sociocultural contexts within which she worked, the clear and powerful force of her own distinctive artistic projects seems most fundamentally driven by the compulsive force of the inventive disposition of an individual mind. Within the rich psycho-sensual experiences Yayoi's works provoke lies the deepest tensional dichotomy. The works themselves perform the function of medium between artist and viewer. Their potential to draw the viewer in, optically, sensually, and physically, and the promise this offers of the most intimate of engagements with the artist's mind is always tempered by the constraining or protective forces of the fields of dots, the web-nets, the mirror grids and even the lights and stars. Together they conspire to devise the same distance between artist and viewer as they do to mediate the artist's relation with the viewer's own world.

### **Acknowledgements**

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12 Judy Annear, *Zones of Love: Contemporary Art from Japan*, Sydney: Contemporary Museum of Art, 1991, p. 13.