Journal of Research High School

Vol. 2025 (4) 271 – 279
ISSN 2688-3651 [online]

Modern Day Alice in Wonderland: Convergence of Mental Disability, Japan, and Feminism in the Works of Yayoi Kusama

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Received July 26, 2024; Revised January 11, 2025; Accepted February 5, 2025

Abstract

Yayoi Kusama, a transformative force in contemporary art, began her journey as an avant-garde artist in New York City during her early twenties. Her influence expanded globally in her sixties after she returned to Japan for hospitalized treatment of her ongoing struggle with obsessive-compulsive disorder. This paper delved into her background and some of her renowned artworks over this period, using art historical methods of formal analysis to underscore how Kusama's artworks vividly depict her tumultuous childhood and ongoing hallucinations. This assertion was bolstered by a visual analysis of three Kusama artworks: *No. Red B* (Oil on canvas, 69" x 52", 1960), *Accumulation No. 1* (Sculpture of sewn stuffed fabric, paint, and chair fringe, 37" x 39" x 43", 1962) and *Infinity Mirrored Room – The Souls of Millions of Light Years Away* (Installation made with wood, metal, glass mirrors, plastic, acrylic panel, rubber, LED lighting system, acrylic balls, and water, 113" x 163" x 163, 2013). Whereas prior research tended to focus on Kusama's life story and her artworks, typically during a specific period of her multi-phased artistic career, this paper attempted to present how these and other factors have highlighted the presence and intersectionality of feminism, disability and Japanese influences. It also offered suggestions for further research, concluding that Kusama's art, beyond its aesthetic appeal, had a profound transformative influence, fostering a deeper global awareness and understanding of feminism and mental health.

Keywords: Yayoi kusama, Japanese contemporary art, Pop art, Mental disability, OCD, Feminism

1. Introduction

> Zinnes (1998) asserted, "That the art was created at a time in the United States when women artists, especially avant-garde women artists, had difficulty even obtaining a gallery and that it was created by a Japanese so soon after her country had been an enemy - is equally remarkable. It was only when the artist returned to Japan that she was forgotten, even though while living in New York she had successfully exhibited along with her contemporaries Claes Oldenburg, Robert Morris, and Andy Warhol" (p. 191).

Japanese contemporary artist Yayoi Kusama is considered by many as the most famous living artist and the top-selling female artist in history. She is mainly known today for her inspiring Infinity Room installations and sculptures, many of which are viewed as conceptual art with a blend of influences like minimalism, surrealism, pop, and feminism.

Disability, specifically obsessive-compulsive disorder, has influenced her life since the age of ten, when she began suffering from lifelong hallucinations. Her signature artistic style visually represents her hallucinatory visions in her artworks and explores concepts of infinity, self-obliteration, and feminism. Ironically, her obsessive-compulsive disorder allowed her to achieve tremendous artistic success in her career, given the immense manual repetition required to produce them. Her works have been exhibited at prestigious museums like the National Museum of Modern Art in Tokyo, the Museum of Modern Art, Tate Modern, and Centre Pompidou. She eventually received Japan's highest artistic honor of representing Japan at the Venice Biennale in 1993.

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Kusama's artworks include the ideals of feminism and disability, differing from prior well-known artists at the time. Feminist art and disability research generally focus on each topic as an isolated and unrelated field. For example, the feminist art movement is divided into three waves. Whereas the first wave explored female identity as essential and biologically different, the second wave explored the female identity as socially constructed and propagated through media representations like advertisements. The third wave, which is still not universally defined, can be considered an opposing reaction to perceived contradictions within the second wave, placing greater emphasis on individual experiences and diverse multi-faceted identities. Similarly, disability research has generally tended to focus narrowly on medical explanations of disability, like symptoms, effects, and treatment. Disability has oftentimes been portrayed negatively as the inability to perform specific actions rather than potentially the extraordinary lens through which they view the world and express these viewpoints through art or other expressions. In the case of Kusama, her artistry, as evidenced by the three analyzed artworks of this paper, highlighted the need to understand Kusama's artworks from the intersectional perspective of these factors, along with her Japanese ethnic background and her tumultuous childhood experiences, all of which this paper attempted to present.

This research paper argued that Yayoi Kusama's life experiences and mental disability not only influenced the subject, materials, and overall meaning of her unique artworks but also her impact on the feminist art and disability movements throughout the three phases of her art career. This paper examined this influence through three Kusama artworks: *No. Red B* (Figure 1), *Accumulation No. 1* (Figure 2), and *Infinity Mirrored Room – The Souls of Millions of Light Years Away* (Figure 3). With a diverse range of media and subject matter, the first two artworks displayed Kusama's captivating avant-garde aesthetics during her early artistic career in New York City. This unique style, standing in stark contrast to the prevailing Abstract Expressionism, the first American art movement, is a significant departure that challenged the established norms of the art world. The last Kusama artwork, analyzed in this paper, from the third phase of her career, highlighted the medium of an installation, an artistic approach for which Kusama is most recognized today. This three-dimensional extension of her initial artistry compared to *No. Red B* was a testament to her artistic evolution.

2. Kusama's Early Years and Influences

Born in Matsumoto, Japan, on March 22, 1929, Yayoi Kusama was born into a wealthy family who operated successful real estate and storage businesses. Her mother was a dominant figure who controlled most of the finances and family life for Kusama and her three older siblings. Both mentally and physically abusive, her mother strongly disapproved of Kusama's interest in art. Her father played a relatively minor role in Kusama's life. He was considered "a gentle-hearted person, but having married into my mother's family and being always under my mother's financial control, he did not have a place in the home" (Turner and Kusama, 1999, p. 65). This turbulent and unsupportive family structure created anxiety and fear in Kusama's life, caused mainly by her mother. She remarked, "I was afraid of everything. I was beaten several times a day, pushed around by her… She controlled everything about me. And when I deviated from her codes, she would be furious and drag me by the hair" (Matsui, 1998).

World War II would also have a profound effect on her childhood. When Kusama was thirteen years old, she worked for the government in a military factory and often heard warplanes flying overhead. "American B29's [flew] in broad daylight. The air-raid alert went off every day so that I could barely feel my life. My adolescence was spent in the closed darkness; especially because of the war, many dreams I had rarely, if at all, saw the light of day" (Furman, 2017). She would try to escape this darkness through her ongoing passion for art and painting, albeit hidden from her mother. Given her mother's distaste for an art career, Kusama "became emotionally unstable and suffered a nervous breakdown. It was around this time, or in my later teens, that I began to receive psychiatric treatment. By translating hallucinations and fear of hallucinations into paintings, I have been trying to cure my disease" (Turner and Kusama, 1999, p. 65).

It should be noted that, in many East Asian cultures, there is a stigma attached to having a child with a disability: "Within some Asian cultures, the birth of a child with a disability is believed to signify the family's wrongdoing" (Bogart, 2022). Kusama was mistreated by her parents and siblings, in part due to what her disorder represented to her family. However, her childhood memories and experiences would help shape and guide her later artworks. In 1948,

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she studied Nihonga, the traditional Japanese art form, briefly at the Kyoto City Specialist School of Arts. However, she eventually dropped out of school to express her artistry with more freedom. In 1950, she started painting her debilitating hallucinations, often dots across an entire canvas. “My artwork is an expression of my life, particularly of my mental disease” (Turner and Kusama, 1999, p. 63).

Eventually, given her intense dislike of the male-dominated and restrictive Japanese environment and her turbulent childhood memories, Kusama moved to New York City in 1958 on the advice of Georgia O’Keeffe to progress beyond the male-dominated and traditional Japanese artistic world and achieve artistic freedom within a Western avant-garde environment. There, she began preliminary work on what would be known as the Infinity Net paintings, large-scale, monochromatic paintings patterned entirely with a net-like field of marks or dots. Although early in her career, she defied the dominant American artistic movement of Abstract Expressionism. When she first arrived in New York City, “action painting was the rage: de Kooning, Pollock and others. I wanted to be completely detached from that and start a new art movement. I painted obsessional, monochromatic paintings from morning till night. They were huge paintings with no composition, like a 33-foot white infinity net painting” (Turner and Kusama, 1999, p. 65).

She would become a primary figure in the avant-garde movement alongside famous painters like Andy Warhol, Donald Judd, and Claes Oldenburg. During her initial stay in New York City, she was as “well-known as Andy Warhol among admirers of pop art. Acknowledged as a progenitor of minimalism, Kusama made headlines for street performances in which she painted polka dots on nude men and women” (Turner and Kusama, 1999, p. 63). Her artworks explored the concept of self-obliteration of both herself and her art, which became intertwined. Creating art helped her lose herself, mitigating her anxiety and hallucinations. She said, “I fight pain, anxiety, and fear every day, and the only method I have found that relieves my illness is to keep creating art… I wanted to start a revolution, using art to build the sort of society I myself envisioned” (Swanson, 2012).

3. Feminist Art and Disability Movements

The feminist movement initially started with a focus on equal voting rights. It leveraged the Civil Rights Movement in the 1950s and 1960s, culminating in the passage of the Civil Rights Act of 1964 and specifically Title VII, which prohibited discrimination of employment based on sex. Betty Friedan’s The Feminine Mystique (1963) and the National Organization for Women (NOW) were pivotal catalysts. Although women artists have produced artworks during early American history, relegated to textile and ceramic crafts, which were not considered fine art, feminist art materially gained momentum in the 1970s with formalized art programs and the promotion of feminist ideals. The first wave of feminist art in the 1970s sought to reclaim women’s rights as artists, challenge stereotypical representations of women in art, and recover women’s history from a female perspective. Artists like Judy Chicago are emblematic of this first wave by creating the first feminist art programs at California State University at Fresno and California Institute of the Arts. These artworks generally focused on the female identity, expressed through the deprecated or domesticated female role in society as the primary subject matter and message. In contrast, the second wave, which started in the mid-1980s, explored the female identity as socially constructed and prescribed through media representation in advertisements and entertainment. An example is the billboards produced by the Guerrilla Girls, which highlighted that “Less than 3% of the artists in the Modern Art sections are women, but 83% of the nudes are female” (Hessel, 2024). In the early 1990s, the third wave, often referred to as the Post-Feminist Art movement, furthered female identity by embracing individualism in women and the diverse redefinition of a feminist, broadening the definition of feminist art to include other factors like race, class, and sexual orientation. An example of post-feminist artwork would be Catherine Opie’s anti-portrait photographs depicting women’s non-idealized image and identity.

Disability is a long-standing and persistent yet misunderstood topic that started at the beginning of U.S. history when the first British explorers landed on the eastern shores of the North American continent. Questions arose on who was sufficiently able-bodied and capable of exploring these new lands in pursuit of economic riches and expansion. This concept would continue after permanent settlements, necessitating a more significant agricultural labor force as the settlers expanded westward. However, the qualifications of immigration naturally turned to the ability to perform

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labor efficiently and productively, marginalizing those who were deemed unfit in preference for workers who were non-disabled and able-minded from a labor perspective. The medical model would attempt to justify, often through scientific yet opinionated research, the segregation of those disabled from society as they were perceived as an obstacle to fulfilling the development of an American civilized society that pursued economic and political influence in the world. Consequently, disability as a social construct began making the societal distinction between normal and abnormal or able and disabled. (Lewiecki-Wilson, 2008, p. 315). This construct could then be broadened to include other undesirable people women who did not conform to normalized viewpoints of their limited role in society. Ironically, disability came to the forefront during American warfare. The Revolutionary War and Civil War resulted in large-scale disability from combat, both physically and mentally. The government could no longer dismiss those who were disabled and needed to determine solutions or societal mitigations. However, although the returning soldiers became disabled through valiance and defending their country, many suffered similar marginalization as they could not fulfill the then societal currency of labor performance given physical disabilities. Subsequent World Wars and the Civil Rights Movements would necessitate legislation like the Rehabilitation Act of 1973 and the Americans with Disabilities Act (1990), which would serve as the landmark policy under which all people with disabilities would be protected from discrimination, at least legally.

With the context of these two movements, this paper analyzed three Kusama artworks that illustrate the influence of ideals of feminism and disability. One example of such artwork is *No. Red B*, which highlights her unique, minimalistic style and the concept of self-obliterating Infinity Nets.

4. No. Red B (1960)

In 1960, within three years of arriving in New York City, Kusama finished one of her earliest infinity net paintings. At a scale of 69 inches tall by 52 inches wide, her oil on canvas painting *No. Red B* depicts an uncountable number of muted black circular dots on a red-saturated background, resulting in a textured canvas resembling a reptile's skin. Upon closer investigation, these thousands of black dots have various shapes, none of which are geometric or the same as one other. Some dots are darker than others, creating a sense of shape, yet no discernable object in many areas of the artwork. The rich, saturated red backdrop, perhaps a reference to her Japanese background, evokes a sense of both danger and vibrancy with female influences, given the artwork's meticulous textile-like pattern repetition.

The painting is not just a visual representation, but a profound abstraction characterized by the repetitiveness of a single manual gesture or brush stroke. This repetition, in the form of miniature arc-shaped objects across a vast canvas, collectively defines the infinity of space. It is a unique example of Kusama's imagery, a window into her hallucinations, delivered through a unique approach of obsessiveness and manual–yet artistic–repetition. It also ties into the concept of self-obliteration, which implies that one needs to relieve themselves of their sense of selfhood to enter the comforts of an "infinite" universe. The effect is a reflection of Kusama's experiences during her hallucinations, which she would attempt to recreate in real life, inspiring the painting of *No. Red B*:

> Kusama commented, "One day, after gazing at a pattern of red flowers on the tablecloth, I looked up to see that the ceiling, the windows, and the columns seemed to be plastered with the same red floral pattern. I saw the entire room, my entire body, and the entire universe covered with red flowers, and in that instant my soul was obliterated and I was restored, returned to infinity, to eternal time and absolute space. This was not an illusion but reality itself. I was shocked to see to the depths of my soul" (p. 23).

Kusama's fear-driven hallucinations in childhood helped her create an alternative environment in which she could maintain a

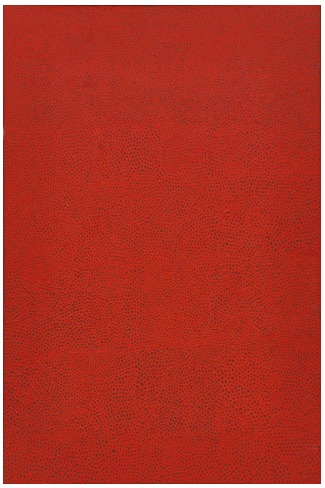

Figure 1. Yayoi Kusama. *No. Red B*, 1960, oil on canvas, 69" x 52", https://www.sothebys.com/en/articles/hypnotic-and-alluring-yayoi-kusamas-infinity-nets.

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psychological relationship through the use of polka dots and infinity nets. Collectively, the figurative infinite black or negative dots represent nothingness and self-obliteration and serve as a metaphor for "overpopulation, contamination and illness" (Hasegawa and Miki, 2006, p. 48). While the painting *No. Red B* represents Kusama's infinity nets, her sculpture *Accumulation No. 1* represents ideals of feminism and confronting her childhood fears of sex and male genitalia while still highlighting the concepts of infinity, uncontrollable proliferation and self-obliteration in three-dimensional physical form.

5. Accumulation No. 1 (1962)

Inspired by her infinity net paintings and created in New York City in 1962, *Accumulation No. 1* is one of Kusama's earliest and most well-known sculptures and was exhibited alongside the artworks of famous pop artists like Andy Warhol, George Segal, and Claes Oldenburg. At a scale of 37 inches wide by 39 inches deep by 43 inches tall, this sculpture is an ordinary domestic armchair covered entirely with hundreds of attached white-colored fabric phalluses. Each off-white-colored phallus object protrudes from the chair organically and in all directions. The artwork expresses symbolically an exaggerated representation of our male-dominated world, highlighting the gender disparity in our society, which at the time and still today is true both in the United States and Japan. By using sewn fabric as the medium, Kusama appears to be paying homage to prior female artists who were at the time limited to arts and crafts, which were not considered fine art, for artistic expression.

Kusama's early family experiences played a role in this artwork. Kusama's mother would have her daughter spy on her father when he was having sexual relationships with other women. This would begin Kusama's dislike, fear, and anxiety of male genitalia and sexual relations, which would present themselves in her hallucinations. These early experiences would later influence her social relationships with men and her artworks. Kusama used art not only to heal her hallucinations but also to confront her anxiety and fear regarding sex.

Fear and obsession would drive the creation of *Accumulation No. 1.* "As an obsessional artist, I fear everything I see… The armchair thickly covered in phalluses was my psychosomatic work, done when I had a fear of sexual vision" (Turner and Kusama, 1999, p. 66). In some sense, this sculpture can be viewed as Kusama's infinity nets covering a physical object–an armchair–with the hope of obliterating her fears and herself into nothingness. By producing and layering so many phalluses in one artwork, Kusama is critiquing satirically the phallus as a singular object, which gets lost in their physical proliferation like the ideals of self-obliteration (Nixon, 2000, p. 114).

Figure 2. Yayoi Kusama. *Accumulation No. 1*, 1962, Sewn stuffed fabric, paint, and chair fringe, 37" x 39" x 43", https://www.moma.org/explore/inside_out/2012/10/09/yayoi-kusamas-return-to-moma/.

It should be noted that she was highly criticized for this artwork both in the United States and Japan, but this would not dissuade Kusama. "When she first exhibited this work in New York, critics were, perhaps not surprisingly, shocked by the sexualized transformation of an ordinary domestic object by a female artist" (Hoptman, 1998, p. 8). While this sculpture represents some of her earlier artworks, 54 years later, *Infinite Mirrored Room – The Souls of Millions of Light Years Away* represents what many consider her most famous installation after she returned to Japan and relaunched her art career. Although different in the medium used and themes, *No. Red B*, *Accumulation No. 1* and *Infinite Mirrored Room – The Souls of Millions of Light Years Away* share concepts of obliteration through seemingly infinite repetition, defying practical volume and boundaries with increasing immersive and experiential artistry.

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6. Infinite Mirrored Room – The Souls of Millions of Light Years Away (2013)

Following her initial success in New York, Kusama's mental health declined, and she returned to Japan in 1973. Throughout the 70s and 80s, she continued to produce art and worked to re-establish her career while living in a mental hospital, where she continues to reside today. This would be challenging because she was forgotten in the United States and Japan. However, this would change when her retrospectives started emerging in 1989, and Japan selected Kusama to represent the country at the 1993 Venice Biennale (Pound, 2018). She exhibited a mirrored room filled with pumpkins at the Biennial to critical acclaim. The concept of infinite mirrored rooms, a hallmark of Kusama's artistic expression, was born during her earlier years. She reflects, "those paintings, two or three thousand in total, were rapidly sublimated within myself and developed into sculptures. In other words, underlying the mirror room were my early paintings. To create an endless mirror room had been my long-cherished dream" (Turner and Kusama, 1999, p. 66). Though Kusama first pioneered the concept of mirrored rooms in 1965 with Infinity Mirror Room – Phalli's Field, she did not return to the form until 1993 when she exhibited a mirrored room filled with pumpkins to critical acclaim. Since then, her Infinity Mirror Rooms have become essential to her work. After a nearly 30-year hiatus from her mirrored room concept, revisiting it in 1993 marked a significant artistic comeback. Like the transition from repetitive oil paintings to proliferated physical objects, Kusama continued the ideals of repetitiveness and its sense of infinite self-obliteration. However, the medium transitions from two to three dimensions to an immersive world where viewers are surrounded by Kusama's art, often with mirrors and repetitive patterns, creating a sense of infinite space. This transition symbolized not only her growth as an artist but also her desire for viewers to more intimately and directly experience her hallucinations.

Today, some consider *The Souls of Millions of Light Years Away* as Kusama's most extraordinary installation, perhaps given that the installation can be currently seen at The Broad in downtown Los Angeles. With one or a few entrants allowed in at a time, the relatively small room has mirrors from floor to ceiling. There are different-sized lights, but the reflections caused by the repeated multiplying of reflections cause the lights to become more visually dense with prominent colors of green and white. The reflection back and forth from opposite mirrors creates the illusion of infinite space, repeated over and over, similar in concept to her infinity net paintings and sculptures. The room absorbs the viewer's feeling, both minuscule and vast, isolated and empowered as if surrounded by stars, floating in the middle of the universe, which does not have a discernible beginning or end. To Kusama, this Infinity Room represents an "eternal unlimited universe, love for humanity, and longing for peace in the world—these concepts become increasingly serious through the development of my philosophy of life and art" ("Exclusive Interview"). Since its inception, this installation has attracted over 300,000 visitors, a testament to the enduring global appeal of Kusama's work.

Figure 3. Yayoi Kusama, *Infinity Mirrored Room – The Souls of Millions of Light Years Away*, 2013, wood, metal, glass mirrors, plastic, acrylic panel, rubber, LED lighting system, acrylic balls, and water, 113" x 163" x 163", https://www.thebroad.org/art/yayoi-kusama/infinity-mirrored-room-souls-millions-light-years-away.

7. Conclusion

Yayoi Kusama's earlier years and mental disability materially influenced the subject matter, materials, and philosophical meanings of her artworks, which in turn helped advance feminist themes and reflected coping mechanisms for fears and anxiety that humans experience. While some may argue that her impact was a result purely of her unique artistic vision and not her disability, Kusama's vision was driven by her hallucinations and childhood memories, as evidenced in three of her artworks. Furthermore, her obsessive-compulsive disorder facilitated the

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countless hours required to produce a large body of artwork so meticulously.

While this paper acknowledged the limitations of analyzing a smaller subset of Kusama's artworks and not providing a more in-depth comparative study with other feminist artists, these areas could be explored in future research. Kusama's influence on the art world and society, however, appears to transcend the aesthetics of her artwork. She would influence many other artists and art movements like feminism, spanning generations, given her long life. "Her work inspired Pop artists like Andy Warhol, Feminist artists like Carolee Shneemann, artists like Yoko Ono, and contemporary artists like Damien Hirst" (Kusama, 2011, p. 58). Influenced but at the same time defying the then-current art movements, her works are somewhat undefinable. They are an exploration of her struggles with mental illness as well as a healing process for coping with disability. Her artworks, like her Infinity Room installations, are a global sensation in the most prestigious museums and have had a profound impact on a global scale. They have fostered a broader societal awareness and appreciation of mental disorders, reframing them as inspirational capabilities rather than disabilities. Equally significant is her role as a celebrated Asian female artist, using her art to unite people and break down preconceived stereotypes of Asian women as unoriginal and uninspiring, as seen in her work *Accumulation No. 1*.

Her openness regarding mental illness and disability is significant, as people with disabilities are the largest minority group in the world. In 2023, the World Health Organization (WHO) estimated that roughly 1.3 billion people are living with a disability–almost 16% of the world's population. In Japan, there are approximately 9.6 million people with disabilities, representing 7.6% of the total Japanese population based on a 2018 Annual Health report produced by the Japanese Ministry of Health, Labour and Welfare. In Japan, people with disabilities are considered abnormal, and their care is typically relegated to families despite the availability of public assistance. (Kayama, 2010, p. 118). This private responsibility places people with disabilities, along with their families, in a precarious situation where the existence of disability is often hidden to avoid social stigma and shame.

Her artworks provide a counterpoint to the misconception that equates disability with shame, incapability, or worthlessness and suggest that one's frailties, albeit debilitating, can also be of value to society. Kusama shows the world that disability can be the driver of creativity and artistic expression for both personal and societal benefit. Art not only allows Kusama to confront her own anxieties and fears but also provides a means for others to understand and empathize with her experiences with mental illness and disability. In this way, Kusama's artworks are a powerful tool, challenging societal norms and the traditional medical model of disability. They engage us in a thought-provoking journey, prompting viewers to rethink the human condition through expressive and original artworks. Kusama's art encourages us to reflect on how we make sense of this world and the potential of all humans beyond self-imposed societal constraints and constructs.

Kusama's artworks and life path defied all rationale. During a time when female artists had difficulty gaining recognition like that of their male counterparts, Kusama paved a new trail within a few years of immigrating to the United States from Japan after enduring years of family strife. Since her resurgence in the 1990s, her reputation has soared, and her artwork can be found in the permanent collections of major art museums worldwide. Ultimately, Kusama created artworks for the purpose of therapy for her mental disorder. Today, her popularity and message as an artist extends beyond art connoisseurs. Her mirrored rooms, polka dot paintings, and sculptures are contemporary, fun, and uplifting. However, beyond this aesthetics, she also sheds light on disability and mental health challenges, which are so pervasive in today's world within the context of its intersectionality with gender and Asian, specifically Japanese, cultural influences. Ultimately, will Kusama's artworks minimize ongoing acts of discrimination and marginalization like ableism? Only time will tell.

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