

Polka Dot Priestess



"Dots Obsession: Infinity Mirrored Room," on exhibition at the contemporary art center Le Spot in Le Havre, France, June 2008.

Photos: Getty Images/Robert Franco, Getty Images/Andrew T. Cheng



Kusama at her "I Who Have Arrived In Heaven" exhibition at David Zwirner Gallery, New York, November, 2013.

An avant-garde celebrity in 1960's New York, **Yayoi Kusama** retreated to her native Japan and checked into a psychiatric hospital—one of many curious moves along a dotty path to international art stardom.

by JASON EDWARD KAUFMAN

In bone-chilling weather last December, hundreds of fans waited up to eight hours for a chance to experience the latest creations by Yayoi Kusama. The celebrated Japanese multimedia artist's exhibition at David Zwirner Gallery in New York became a must-see destination. "The lines are 4 to 6 hours for 'Infinity Mirrored Room,'" warned the dealer's website, referring to a walk-in cube whose reflective interior and dangling LED lights made viewers feel as if they were floating in interstellar space. Neither the advisory nor the icy temperatures deterred devotees who queued patiently for a 45-second opportunity to zone out in Kusama's mind-expanding celestial chamber.

The scene harked back to the old days in the swinging '60s when Kusama, newly arrived from her native Japan, emerged as an unlikely luminary in Manhattan's male-dominated art world. How could

the media have ignored her? Petite with long dark hair, sporting a kimono or some other eye-catching attire, the exotic beauty knew how to get attention.

She claimed to suffer from hallucinations that engulfed her in seas of dots and lacelike veils that she obsessively painted on Abstract Expressionist-sized canvases she called "Infinity Nets." She covered furniture and household objects with phallus-shaped fabric protuberances that she said expressed her fear of male anatomy, a "sex obsession" that chimed with the rising current of feminism gaining ground in the art world. It was around that time that she created her first mirror rooms with colored lights flickering in perfect synch with the psychedelic age.

In case anyone wasn't paying attention, she hired photographers to capture her posing in her exhibitions, often in spotted leotards that merged her body with the surrounding polka-dot spangled▷



An installation at the Liverpool Biennial International Festival of Contemporary Art, England, October 2008.

installations, and sometimes lying nude like a *Playboy* centerfold on phallus-covered couches and armchairs.

And despite her alleged sex phobia, she organized “Hippie Happenings” in which nude participants—generally gay men—danced in the streets body-painted with her trademark polka dots. Her Dionysian cult cavorted outside the New York Stock Exchange, in the garden of the Museum of Modern Art, in Central Park and on the Brooklyn Bridge, preaching sexual liberation, “self obliteration” and an end to the Vietnam War. There was even a sex-themed downtown paper titled *Kusama Orgy*.

To broaden her appeal, Kusama declared herself “the Polka Dot Priestess” and launched a fashion company that produced dot-decorated clothing and accessories, some designs with peep holes exposing the wearer’s breasts and buttocks. Her line was carried by hundreds of stores, including Bloomingdale’s. “Polka dots are a way to infinity,” she says.

By the late 1960s the canny self-publicist’s countercultural escapades made Kusama a tabloid star. Her media clippings rivaled those of Andy Warhol, leader of what she called a “rival gang.” But her meteoric rise was to end in flare-out. Soon after becoming a bold-faced name, the media attention waned. Important galleries refused to take her on, and she struggled financially and emotionally. After two nervous breakdowns and a suicide attempt, in the early 1970s Kusama returned to Japan, where she voluntarily entered Tokyo’s Seiwa Hospital for the Mentally Ill. In conservative Japan her art career floundered and she instead wrote novels, poetry and a self-mythologizing autobiography. Her stint as a cutting-edge figure in New York’s avant-garde was all but forgotten. ▷



Photo: Getty Images/Jeremy Sutton-Hibbert.

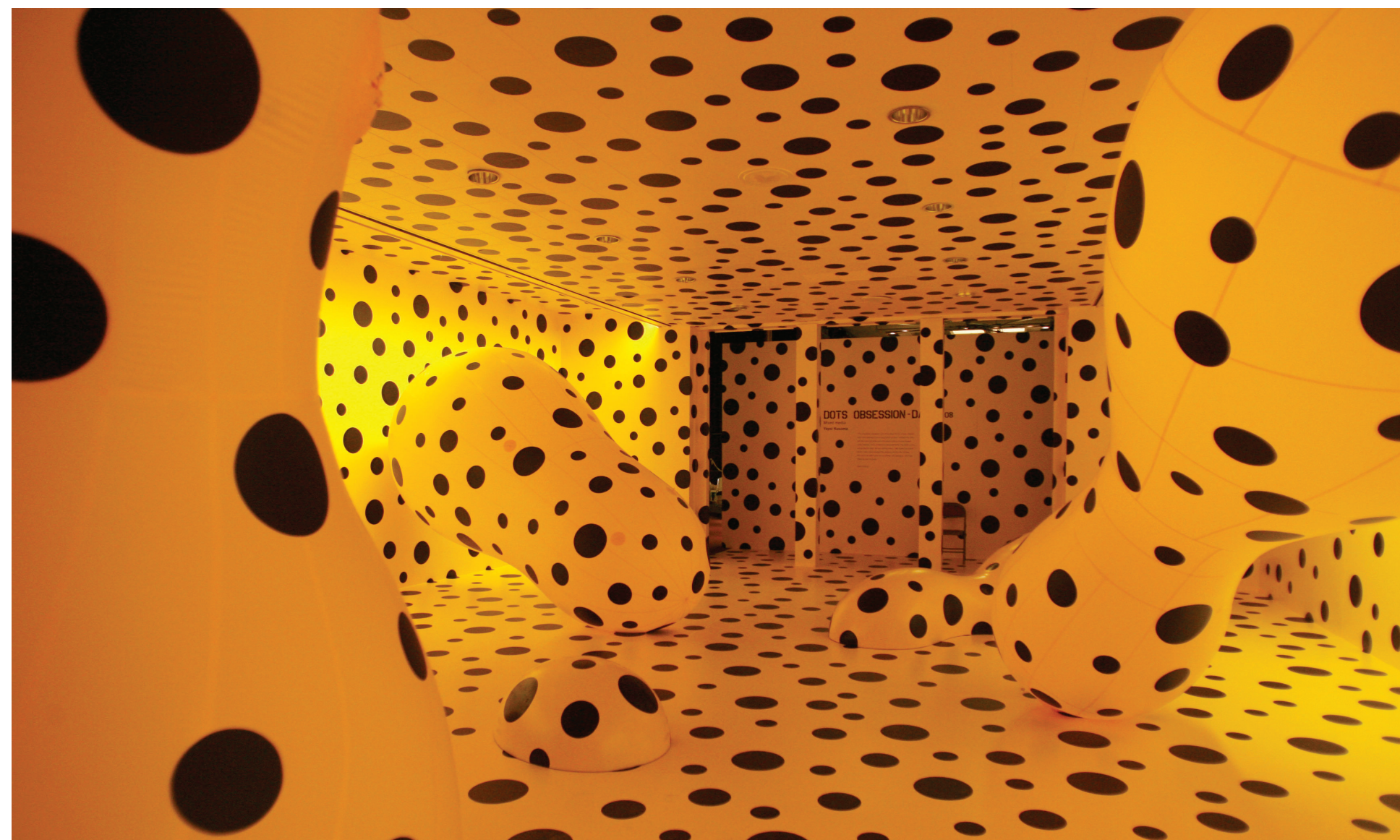
"Yayoi-chan and Ring-Ring," sculptural art installation in the Roppongi Hills arena, Tokyo, Japan, March 2012.



Top: "The Tulips of Shangri-La," permanent display, Lille, France.

Facing: "Dots Obsession-Day" exhibited at the Kennedy Center, Washington, D.C., 2008.

Photos: Getty Images/Philippe Huguen; Corbis Images/Jacquelyn Martin.



A Stunning Second Act

But that's not the end of the story. A short distance from the hospital, where she continues to live today, she established a studio where she and assistants began to produce paintings and sculptures featuring her signature polka dots. Interest in her work gradually rose, and by 1993 she was selected to represent Japan at the Venice Biennale, the only woman to have been so honored. In the late 1990s, curators from New York and European museums organized exhibitions that launched the second phase of her stardom. Now at 85, following a flurry of major shows over the last 20 years, Kusama is Japan's most famous living artist.

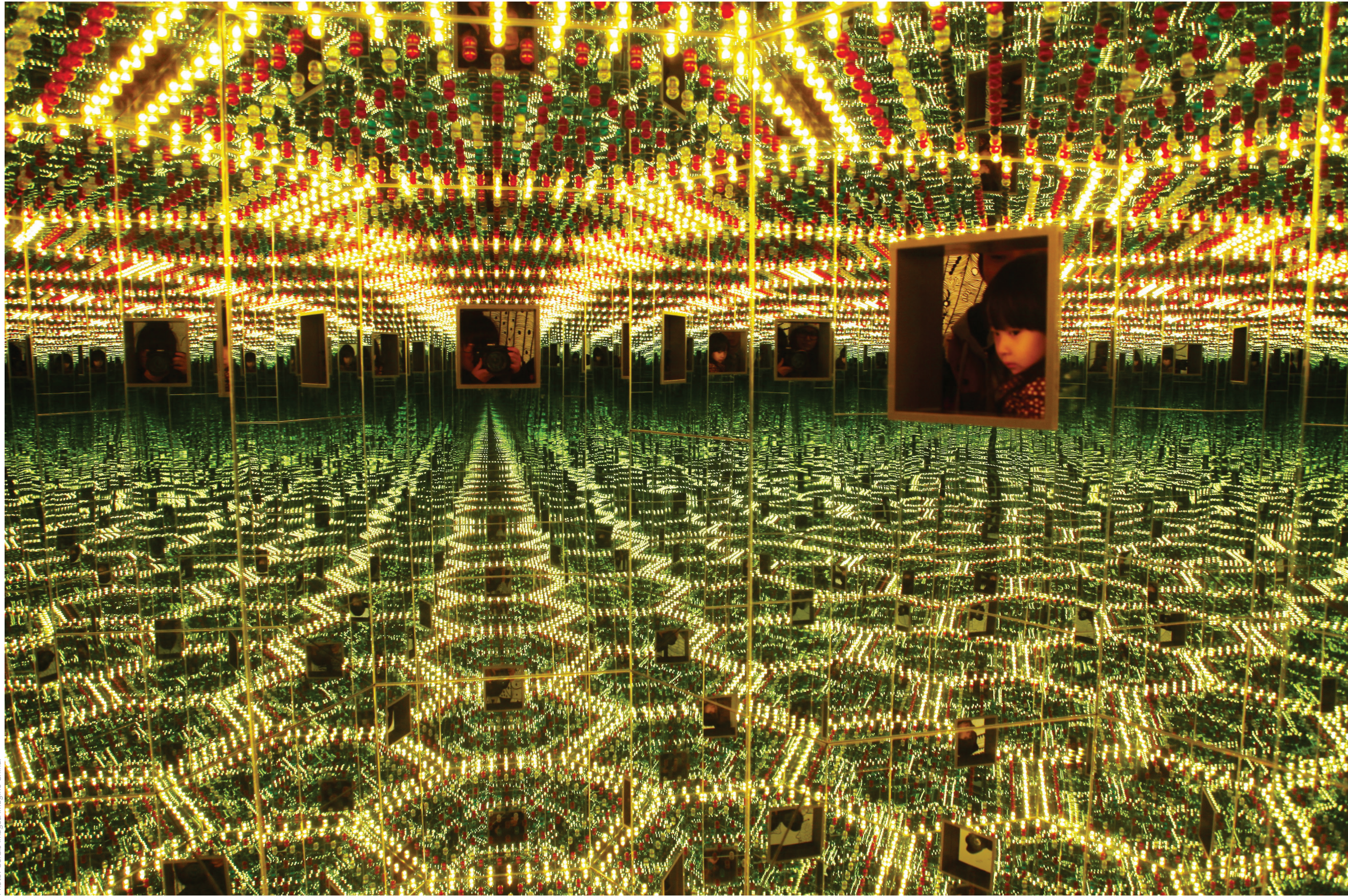
Her works are in MoMA in New York, the

Pompidou in Paris, Tate Modern in London, the National Museum of Modern Art in Tokyo and dozens of other art showcases around the world. Retrospective exhibitions in 1998 at MoMA and the Los Angeles County Museum consolidated her reputation, and a survey in 2011-2012 toured Europe and New York. In 2006, she received the Praemium Imperiale, a Nobel-styled award conferred by a Japanese foundation, another career-spanning show has broken attendance records at museums in Japan and more exhibitions are now introducing Kusama to audiences throughout Asia and Central and South America, cementing her worldwide reputation as an art world superstar. >

Prestigious galleries, including Victoria Miro in London, Larry Gagosian in New York, Ota Fine Arts in Tokyo and, since last year, David Zwirner have vied to represent her. Last year's Zwirner show, "I Who Have Arrived In Heaven," sparked even greater popularity among a new generation of fans whose "Infinity Mirrored Room" selfies flooded the social media. And collectors are ratcheting up her prices. A 6-foot by 9-foot "Infinity Net" painting from 1959 sold at Christie's New York in 2008 for \$5.8 million, then the highest auction price for a female living artist. The piece had belonged to artist Donald Judd, who bought it from her first solo show in New York before he became the leader of the Minimalist movement.

The early work remains the most coveted. A 1960 "Infinity Net" sold for \$3.3 million at Christie's New York in 2010, and sculptures including a phallus-studded armchair have sold for around \$1 million. Her later work also is in vogue. A huge four-panel "Infinity Net" from 2005 sold for \$1.4 million at Sotheby's last year, and paintings from the 1990s also have topped \$1 million. And she is often called upon to make public sculptures of brightly colored cartoonish flowers, pumpkins and polka dot-covered rounded forms that critic Phoebe Hoban describes as "a herd of hippos bred with ladybugs." A 6-foot-tall fiberglass-reinforced plastic pumpkin sold for \$605,000 at Sotheby's last year. And her newest paintings, vibrantly colored carpets of folk-cultural flowers, faces and figures routinely sell in the mid six figures. ▷

Photo: Corbis Images/Imagine China.



Work shown at "A Dream I Dreamed" solo exhibition in Shanghai, China, December 2013.



Kusama, who's trying to bring her version of Oriental culture to Fun City (New York), prances through a crowd of kindred spirits near Bethesda Fountain in Central Park. The occasion, billed as a “Bust-in,” is the launching of Louis Abolafia’s campaign for mayor. The bearded “painter” was to jump into the fountain sans clothes, but he had to do it covered up because of the large number of police who decided to take in the scene.

From Rural Japan to Manhattan

Kusama’s heady late career is a long way from her upbringing in the mountainous Nagano region west of Tokyo, where she was born in 1929, the youngest of four children to affluent parents who owned a wholesale seedling nursery. She says her philandering father and abusive mother planned to arrange a marriage for their daughter, but from an early age Kusama was determined to become an artist, not a housewife. She tirelessly made drawings and watercolors, precocious Surrealistic phantasmagorias and biomorphic abstractions that related to work then being made in the West.

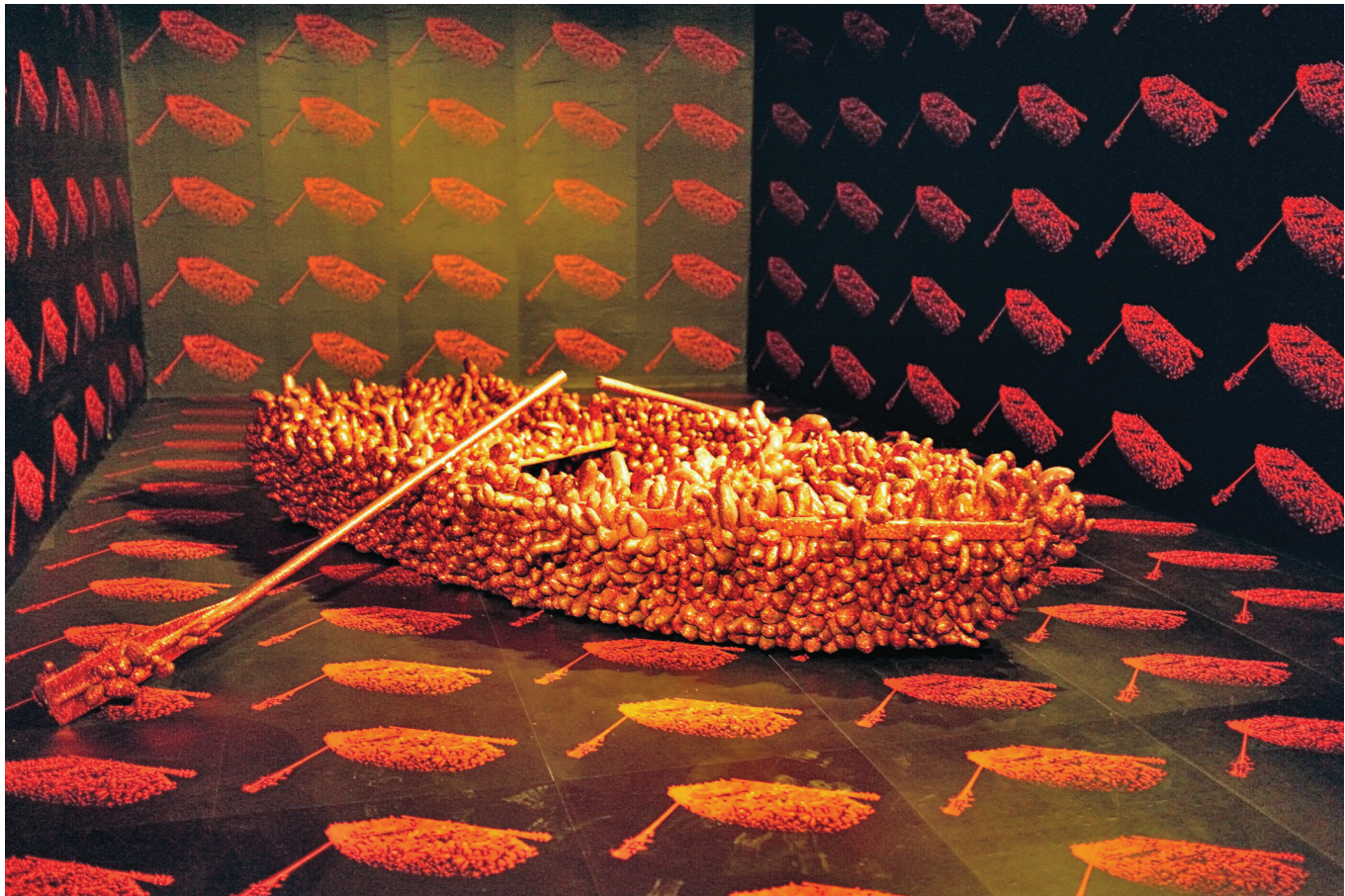
After exhibiting locally, her parents recognized her talent and let her take Japanese watercolor classes in Kyoto, but she knew that an art career was not possible in rural Japan, especially for a woman. She taught herself to paint in oils, ceremonially destroyed most of her immature works, and after

writing to Georgia O’Keeffe, who advised her that life as a female artist in the U.S. would not be easy, Kusama set her sights on New York and moved there in 1958, intent on becoming a star.

Living in dingy downtown lofts, she manically produced her “Infinity Net” paintings—enormous canvases up to 33 feet wide covered hypnotically with thousands of tiny interconnected brushstrokes. Within a year-and-a-half she had a gallery show, artists Donald Judd and Frank Stella purchased works, and Judd wrote a glowing review in *ArtNews* magazine stating that the essence of her work is “obsessive repetition.” By 1961 Kusama was in the Whitney Annual and the Carnegie International, two of the most important launch pads for an art career.

The “Infinity Nets” had the scale and overall composition of Jackson Pollock’s drip paintings, and their monochrome white-on-dark compositions ▷

Photos: Getty Images/New York Daily News Archive; Imagine China/Corbis (facing, top); Getty Images/J. Countess (facing, below).



Exhibition at the Museum of Contemporary Art, Shanghai, China, December 2013.



Retrospective exhibition at the Whitney Museum of American Art, New York, July 2012.



Photos: Kin Cheung/AP/Corbis; Getty Images/J. Countess (facing).



foreshadowed the Minimalist tendency that her friends Judd and Stella would pursue. She showed in Europe with the similarly reductive Zero and Nul artists. But Kusama said she was not interested in formal theories. "I am concerned with my own interior imagination," she says.

To make the labor-intensive nets, Kusama reportedly worked days on end, foregoing sleep and proper meals. The regimen affected her health. She suffered a nervous breakdown and began seeing a psychiatrist, who diagnosed obsessive-compulsive disorder. Possibly as a result of her psychological sessions, she began making sculptures covered with phallus-shaped protuberances made of stuffed fabric. "Accumulations," she called them, admitting

that they reflected her fear of the male sex organ. Her sculptures of high heels, handbags, chairs and tables covered with phalluses read as a blunt critique of a society dominated by men.

Career-wise, her fear was well founded. Art historians have noted that soon after she exhibited these fabric pieces, Claes Oldenberg began making his own "soft sculptures," the work that would make him famous. Judd, her close friend at the time, who helped her make some of the sculptures, recalled her anxiety when Oldenberg apparently copied her technique. She next exhibited a rowboat overflowing with phallic forms and a single pair of ladies' shoes. She papered the surrounding room with 999 black-and-white posters depicting the sculpture, and soon

found Andy Warhol wallpapering a gallery with repeating images of cows. Within a year of her first "Infinity Room," Lucas Samaras exhibited a mirrored room of his own.

Paranoid about others stealing her ideas, Kusama suffered her second nervous breakdown, apparently attempted suicide and was hospitalized. Tranquilizers limited her productivity, but she continued to combine phallus-covered objects in immersive environments, forerunners of installation art, and orchestrated the nude "Happenings." "Since people in New York were so conservative, so narrow-minded about sex, I wanted to overturn the conventions," she says, though Kusama herself generally remained clothed at these events, and

may even have remained celibate in private. She says that her decade-long affair with the eccentric artist Joseph Cornell was never consummated, owing to his impotence and her dislike of sex.

After 15 years in Manhattan, Kusama was out of money and psychologically unwell. When she retreated to Japan in 1973, she could not get a gallery show for two years. Two years later, she suffered another breakdown, and in 1977 she voluntarily entered the Tokyo psychiatric hospital, where she continues to live today in a sparsely furnished bedroom. She comes and goes as she pleases, but finds it calming to be in the company of others, and to have her meals and cleaning services provided for her. ▸

Mental Illness and Marketing

Kusama's reputation is closely wound up with her professed mental illness. She claims to have had recurring hallucinations since childhood, and curators, critics and dealers routinely refer to these episodes as an explanation for her obsessive work, which she describes as "self-therapy." But art historian Midori Yamamura, an expert on the artist, believes Kusama may suffer from normal levels of anxiety in stressful situations. She notes that the artist did not mention hallucinations until her mid 30s, and that a statement she composed in 1966, with the help of two art critics, has nonetheless been accepted as the definitive account of her mental condition:

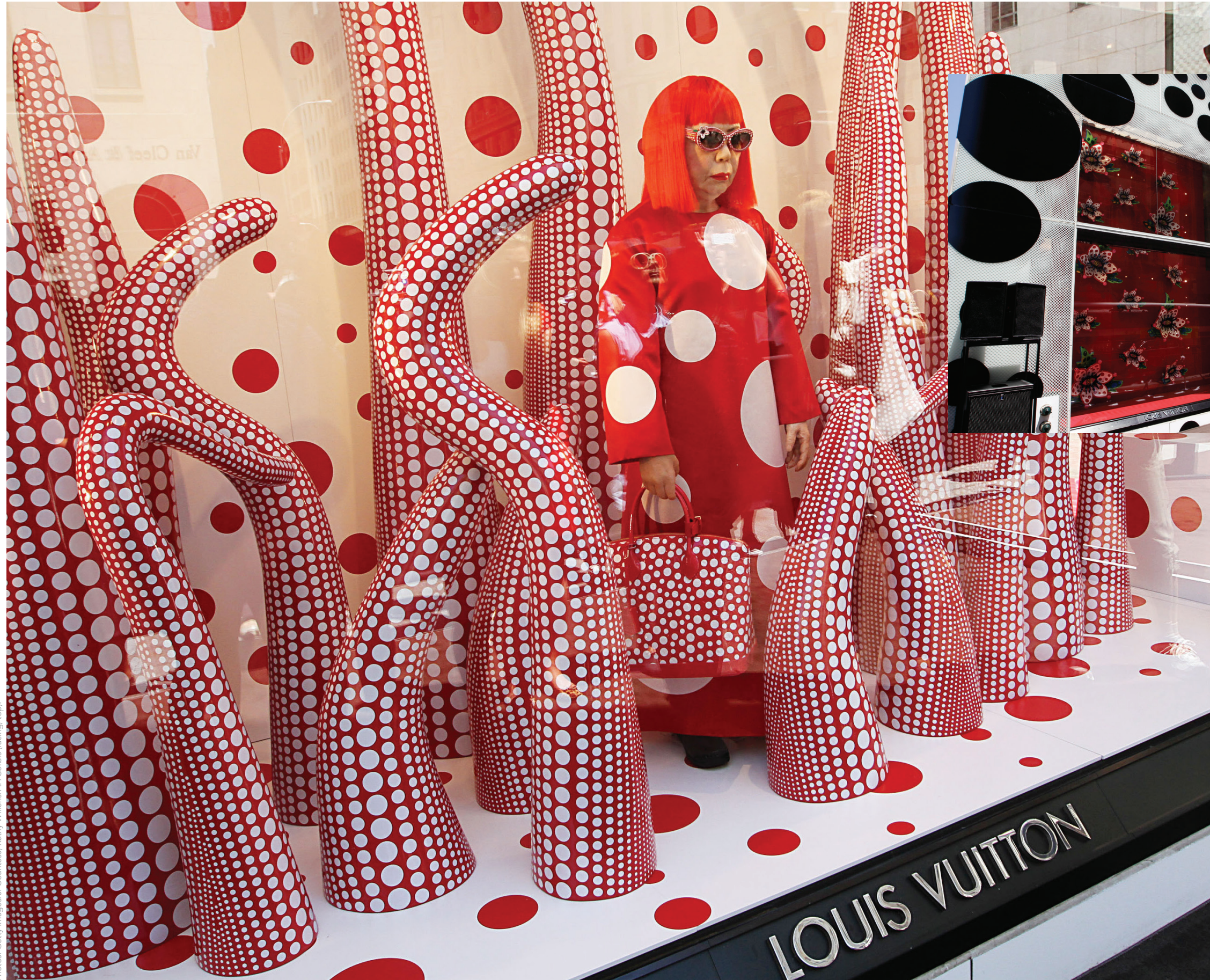
"One day I experienced a great shock. I decided I would look out of the window. But what did I see? Nothing but my own net paintings spread out over the entire windowpane. Looking about the room, I found that my nets covered the walls, ceilings, furniture and floor. This hallucination gave me an idea which I developed in many of my later works." Kusama included this account in her 1975 autobiography, but the childhood vision may well be fabricated to provide a mythic source for her motifs.

The issue is complicated by her Tokyo dealer Hidenori Ota's revelation that Kusama added dots and nets to early works, and to meet market demand, in the 1980s she backdated new works to the 1960s. It appears that Kusama attempted to create a false history of her own development.

Expanding Legacy

In any case, Kusama is enjoying a late-career apotheosis. Wherever she goes, the octogenarian causes a media frenzy, appearing in a polka dot-covered wheelchair, meticulously attired in red polka-dot outfits with matching red wig and lipstick. In 2012 she returned to New York in full force, with simultaneous exhibits at the Whitney Museum and Gagosian Gallery, a collaboration with Louis Vuitton on polka dot clothing, bags and jewelry, and multiple outdoor sculpture installations—a veritable Kusamarama that revived her fame, boosted her market and shone a light on the early work that made her a noteworthy figure in the avant-garde. ▶

Photos: Getty Images/J. Countess; Kathy Willens/AP/Corbis (facing, top).



Top: Black polka dots decorate the 57th Street side of Louis Vuitton's flagship Fifth Avenue store in New York, after the unveiling of display windows and a collection collaboratively designed by Kusama and Vuitton Creative Director Marc Jacobs, July 2012.

Left: Wax figure of Kusama in the Louis Vuitton window display.



Exhibition view of “I Who Have Arrived in Heaven,” at David Zwirner Gallery, New York, November 2013.

Now 85, her darker impulses have yielded to the joy of Pop spectacle. Perhaps taking a cue from Jeff Koons and her compatriot Takashi Murakami, she makes large-scale sculptures of flowers and pumpkins covered with her signature dots—about as forbidding as playground equipment—for sites from Singapore to Sydney, Lille to London, and Miami to Beverly Hills. Her new paintings, most over six feet square, feature floral and figurative decorative motifs in an electrically charged palette. A recent mirrored infinity room, “Love Is Calling,” was filled with a congeries of illuminated inflatable tentacles

covered with polka dots that changed colors as a soundtrack played Kusama reciting a love poem in Japanese. Kusama’s work has been associated with Surrealism, Pop Art, Op Art, monochrome painting and Minimalism, feminist art and installation. She says she belongs to none of these movements, and went her own way. Her late-career focus on child-friendly polka dots may lack the gravity of her early work, but as her work is reinserted into the canon of late 20th-century art, her influence is finally receiving its due. ♦

Photo: Getty Images/Andrew Toth.

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