

Victoria Miro Gallery

Press Release

YAYOI KUSAMA

18 November 1998 to 8 January 1999

In 1969, **Yayoi Kusama** organised a subversive performance in the sculpture garden of New York's **Museum of Modern Art**, entitled *Grand Orgy to Awaken the Dead at MoMA* which was swiftly interrupted by the museum's guards who escorted her and her models off the premises. Although she later referred to this event happily as her first one man show at **MoMA**, it was not until this year that she gained the recognition that she deserved from the New York art establishment with a retrospective of the artist's work, this time organised by the **Los Angeles County Museum of Art** in collaboration with **MoMA**. Now almost seventy and being hailed as Japan's most important living artist, her near canonisation at the opening of her **MoMA** show must have held a particular poignancy for her in terms of her previous experience with the museum. Similarly, her ambitions to show with a gallery in London were also thwarted in the 60s and although she exhibited with **MoMA Oxford** in 1989, it gives us particular pleasure to present **Kusama's** first one person exhibition at a London gallery.

After nearly twenty-five years of relative obscurity in the West until she became the first artist officially to represent Japan in a solo exhibition at the 1993 **Venice Biennale**, the work of **Yayoi Kusama** is currently being re-evaluated by the international art community for its relevance to important movements of the 50s and 60s as well as the range of its visual vocabulary which has been adopted by artists working today. **Kusama** moved to the States in 1958 and although her work from this period quickly engendered the support of important critics such as **Herbert Read** and **Donald Judd** and she was initially included in group shows at the **Carnegie International**, the **Whitney** and **MoMA**, the response to her particular brand of iconoclasm from a white male dominated American art establishment was typically solipsistic for that period and an unfortunate indictment of prevailing attitudes towards ethnicity and gender, which disallowed the validity of her oeuvre.

Nevertheless, **Kusama's** work in the 50s and 60s made an undeniable contribution to late *Modernism* and has been recognised for its affinities with a wide range of different movements, often presaged by her own distinct output. These included *Minimalism*, *Postminimalism*, *Pop*, *Op*, *Psychedelic Art*, *Eccentric Abstraction* and *Performance Art*, whilst in Europe she was aligned to the *Zero*, *Nul* and *Nouveaux Réalistes* groups, exhibiting regularly with artists such as **Manzoni** and **Yves Klein**. In fact, **Kusama** was truly *Postmodern* before the term was even invented and this was further evidenced in its pluralistic embrace by her work's early feminist stance (again, before feminism had really defined its own terms). However, she remained true throughout to her personal concerns and obsessions and as a truly original force, never adapted her work in concert with developing trends, eschewing as she did, a theoretical polemic. In an interview in the **LA Times** earlier this year, **Kusama** neatly summed up her concerns - "net obsession, phallic obsession, dot obsession, food obsession".

Her life and her work became inextricably linked in a *Gesamtkunstwerk*, which saw her appearing in photographs in her work and increasingly in the late 60's, organising performances & happenings similar to the one at **MoMA** with provocative titles such as *Homosexual Wedding* and *Nixon Orgy*. At the height of her notoriety in 1968, she was more famous than **Warhol** but like **Manzoni & Klein** in their own lifetimes, her extravagant gestures were discredited by her detractors as publicity mongering stunts and her deteriorating mental health and use of her signature dots earned her the monikers of the *Polka Dot Princess* and *Dotty*. She returned to Japan & in the 70s admitted herself to a psychiatric hospital where she continues to live and produce work to this day, as a catharsis for her illness. Currently included in the **Hayward Gallery's** *Art and Fashion* show, **Kusama's** *rediscovery* continues with forthcoming retrospective exhibitions at the **Walker Art Center**, Minneapolis and the **Museum of Contemporary Art**, Tokyo.

Victoria Miro Gallery is open Monday to Friday 10am-5.30pm, Saturdays 11am-1pm. Next show: Robin Lowe: 12 January 1999

The Victoria Miro Gallery is pleased to present three important installations in Yayoi Kusama's first one person show at a gallery in London:- *Infinity Mirrored Room Love Forever, Solitude of the Earth, and Pink Dots Let Me Rest in a Tomb of Stars*. These three works illustrate some of the essential abiding themes in Kusama's work.

Pink Dots Let Me Rest in a Tomb of Stars, 1993-94. Acrylic on canvas. Sixteen panels, each 194 x 130 cms, overall 388 x 1039 cms. (153 x 409 inches). First exhibited :- Fuji Television Gallery, Tokyo, 1994. Catalogue text:- A Passage to Another World by Akira Tatehata. Ill., plate 1 and plate 7.

Most of Kusama's oeuvre can be traced back to early hallucinations she first had in her childhood of multiplying dots and nets which gradually spread to dominate her universe. These visions developed into obsessive neuroses which fuelled her paintings, sculptures and performances (during which she invariably covered her naked models with painted polka dots). For Kusama, polka dots had the form of the Sun, "signifying masculine energy, the source of life" while also echoing "the form of the moon, symbolising the feminine principle of reproduction and growth". The earliest recorded work in which she incorporated these dots was a drawing in 1939 (age 10), in which the image of a Japanese woman in a kimono, presumed to be the artist's mother, with whom she had a problematic relationship, is covered and obliterated by spots. In *A Passage to Another World* by Akira Tatehata, who curated the Japanese Pavilion which featured Kusama at the Venice Biennale, he writes "*Pink Dots Let Me Rest in a Tomb of Stars* is a huge picture constituted of sixteen canvases. Standing in front of it, as far as the eye can see, the viewer is confronted with a myriad of dots that appear to vibrate elaborately through an optical effect. The grandeur of the extensive space is quite fascinating. The dots of various sizes appear to have been proportioned at random but are potentially placed in arcs. That is how the image that seems merely to be covered all over in dots at first sight results in a complicated yet simple composition in which the viewer is left to gaze in all directions. However unemotional Kusama's repetition in perpetual action may be, she does it in response to the sound from the cosmos in an attempt to become part of it."

Solitude of the Earth, 1994. Mixed media, table, two chairs and cabinet. First exhibited:- Fuji Television Gallery, Tokyo, 1994. Catalogue text:- A Passage to Another World by Akira Tatehata. Ill., plate 3

In 1959, Kusama had her first solo exhibition in New York at the Brata Gallery, a well respected artist's co-op. She showed a series of white net paintings which were enthusiastically reviewed by Donald Judd (both Judd and Frank Stella then acquired paintings from the show). Friends recounted how Kusama, with amazing stamina and concentration would work on her intricate canvases in one complete sitting, painting obsessively for up to 50 or 60 hours until the painting was finished and she collapsed from exhaustion. In an interview with Andrew Solomon in Artforum, she describes working on one of her red net paintings: "in New York I was painting the nets and then I noticed that it spread to the floor and the curtains and to the window so I went to catch the red net and I examined it without noticing at first that my hands were also covered by the red nets and that was the turning point and I began creating sculpture so that I could put the patterns on everything". *Solitude of the Earth* (1994) is a result of this development: it comprises an installation of two white chairs, a table and a cabinet covered in objects and white netting. As a work it evokes a fetishistic response to female paraphernalia and the trappings of domesticity, while echoing the boring monotonous work of stitching sewing or knitting. Alexandra Munroe writes 'her nets, which she claims separate her from people and reality, are a kind of imposed chastity veil which keeps her from real life, the man's world.'

Infinity Mirrored Room Love Forever, 1996. Stainless steel, mirror and light bulbs, 200 x 107 x 102 cms. (79 x 42 x 40 inches). Previously exhibited:- The Arts Club of Chicago, 1997. Catalogue text:- Yayoi Kusama, The Comeback Artist by Judith Kirshner. Ill page 16.

Judith Kirshner discusses how the discourse around Kusama's "hallucinatory images of an infinite repeating pattern which spreads and multiplies until it obliterates the physical universe underscores her creative process of repetition while under a spell of obsessional compulsion" and nowhere is this more evident than in her *Infinity Mirrored Room* installations comprising of mirrors and light bulbs which create optical illusions of infinity. She further writes, "formless and spreading over surfaces, her patterns make it difficult to tell where pieces begin or end. As one peeks inside *Infinity Mirrored Room Love Forever* (1996) what seems delusional becomes kaleidoscopic and by the repeated mirroring of light bulbs, an illusion of endless dots and prisms. Drawn into virtual reality, viewers of this work are denied actual entry and participate only by looking."