

# ***The Relationship Between Personal Experience of the Artist and the Style of the Art***

## ***--Taking Yayoi Kusama as an Example***

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**Abstract:** Yayoi Kusama plays a significant role in contemporary art history, having navigated the Western-dominated art world and challenged the authority of the male-dominated art scene through her work. This essay will try to analyze Kusama's artwork, examining how her creations can be viewed as a form of therapy that heals her inner world, using the methodology outlined in the book *Art as Therapy*. This paper presents the personal experiences of Yayoi Kusama and tries to illustrate how her life has influenced the way she creates art, which conveys her internal energy and her way of communicating with the world. Kusama's life experiences became one of the elements of her works, with her difficult past fueling a deep yearning for love and hope. Thus, her works were constituted by her life experiences.

**Keywords:** Yayoi Kusama, personal experience, creation, art, style.

## **1. Introduction**

In modern society, with basic needs largely satisfied, the main focus is on the spiritual pursuit. In this very context, art has become a significant part of an individual to bring up thinking of the society and the healing of art is now necessary for people. So when it comes to art therapy, what is inevitable to mention is Yayoi Kusama's artworks. Yayoi Kusama uses art as her therapy to fight against her mental disease and to find out what love means to herself and the world. Kusama spends her whole life devoting herself to creating a world where she hopes everyone can find some peace. Kusama alone went into the Western-dominated world and tried to fight for a voice there. Though she initially struggled to engage with this world, her perseverance led to her eventual recognition as one of the greatest artists of her time. Kusama has created a world where she could rest her soul. This essay aims to illustrate the impact of Kusama's life experiences on her artworks and analyze how her works became therapy for herself. This paper lays a theoretical foundation for the research on the relationship between Kusama's creating style and her personal experience.

## 2. The life of Yayoi Kusama

### 2.1. Unfortunate childhood

Yayoi Kusama has lived a complicated and changeable life. Although born into a wealthy family, she experienced a strained relationship with her parents. Kusama's parents constantly fought over things, contributing to Kusama's feelings of isolation and sensitivity. Kusama's father indulged in adultery and Kusama's mother vented her dissatisfaction with her marriage on Kusama, often resorting to assault and abuse. Kusama was once forced to follow her father to meet her mother's control. After seeing with her own eyes about her father's infidelity, Kusama started seeing illusion and suffered from a comprehensive audiovisual disorder. Her spiritual world was disturbed by delusions such as hearing voices and seeing things. In an attempt to cope with these disturbing visions, she began to draw them, hoping that putting them on paper might alleviate her suffering. Kusama's mother strictly forbade her from doing her works and expected Kusama could be a "normal" female to marry a man. And her mother would tear Kusama's works and beat her for "being unrealistic". However, these did not stop Kusama from creating, rather she kept her faith in being an artist. So she stuck on painting and tried to find ways to leave her twisted family. She plucked up the courage to send letters of recommendation along with her watercolor paintings to the famous artist *Georgia Totto O'Keeffe* and expressed her wish to study art in America. Fortunately, her courage did not go to waste and she received a reply promising to recommend her work to prominent art dealers. With the encouragement of *Georgia Totto O'Keeffe*, Kusama resolutely decided to head to America and began her career as an artist.

### 2.2. Tough staying

Kusama started her art career in America. Kusama sat off to pursue her dream with determination. She ruined thousands of her paintings in Japan and broke up with her family to show her determination to be an artist. The life in America was difficult for Kusama. She struggled with the language barrier and poverty, which kept her awake at night drawing to avoid thinking about hunger and coldness. With little money, she was forced to sell her works, and sometimes she could not afford a meal, scavenging for food in dumpsters outside stores. She slept on a door panel, with the biting wind blowing through the broken window of her studio. At that point, she could only speak through her works. This ambitious Asian woman tried everything to express her thoughts and to fit into the artists' group. She created a great amount of works containing paintings, installations, performances and so on. *Zoe Dusanne* was the first female art agent who was willing to help Kusama exhibit her works, and Donald Judd was the first buyer of her work. She also started her own business by selling products related to fashion. It is undeniable that Kusama always has a good sense of art and commerce. And she is always confident about her works that she believes those works can stand out. Her ideas and confidence brought her a lot of opportunities and made her rather influential at that time. However, after three times her works were plagiarized, Kusama felt so frustrated. Moreover, the artists who copied her ideas became famous but her works did not be accepted but were constantly discussed. She felt despaired and tried to kill herself. It was extremely tough for a woman to fit into the male-dominated group, especially an Asian woman. And even her loved one *Joseph Cornell* passed in 1972. All those traumas dealt her a crushing blow and forced her to return to Japan.

### 2.3. Delayed recognition

Nesting in a nursing home, she was condemned for being a shame for Japan. Kusama severed her connection with the outside world, immersing herself in her work. With all the experiences she gained from America and the spirit she has, Kusama did not fall into demoralization and continued with her

works. She noted down her inspiration in the nearby studio at daytime and started creating back in the nursing home. “For this artist, the ‘kid’ she created is communicating with the world for her, she truly devoted her life to art” [1]. During this period, Kusama created lots of works. And it was until her sixty that she finally got accepted by Japanese. After that, her works became internationally famous.

### 3. Artistic style

#### 3.1. Dots

“Dots, as she believes, are one of the constituent elements of millions of stars to all things in reality .... The repetition, aggregation and decomposition of dots are used to form the individual in all things ....” [2]. The mental disease caused Kusama seeing things covered with different sized dots. The illusion constantly moved, expended and even spread to Kusama’s body, driving Kusama into fear and panic. Only when she drew them down, can she ease herself from the fear those illusions brought. Therefore, dots became the most common element forming her works. From the earliest portrait of her mother to the final collection of her works, dots always fill up the whole picture. “The dot is Kusama’s abstract expression of personal belief in art, and it is also her spiritual sustenance” [3]. Kusama believed that these dots were like cells which she thought were the signal from the universe and nature. These dots connected all things and created a space extending infinitely. And she believes that dots are “what she needed to fill up with the missing part in her heart” [4]. Kusama uses dots to fill up the picture as well as her inner part. There was so much love and character which have been missing inside her.

#### 3.2. Bright color

High saturation color is also a feature of her works. It is strange that after her tragic experiences, Kusama still stuck to bright colors. “Yayoi Kusama’s use of color to express self-awareness to the fullest” [3]. Despite that Kusama had a very dark childhood, the colors she used in her work remain vibrant and bright. She wanted her works to be vigorous and striking so that her works can be seen. She tried to express herself in a more intense way so those bright colors were chosen naturally. All the artists were trying to stand out at that time; the famous Pop-art artist *Andy Warhol* also used exaggeratedly bright colors. Those colors were used to decorate Kusama’s dark experiences to ease her suffering. Warm, passionate, aggressive colors could match her ambition which encouraged her to go to America all alone. Kusama expressed her ambition and emotion by using bright colors.

#### 3.3. Plants

Plants also played an important role in her works. A lot of her works not only represent the form of some plants but also present some abstract elements of plants. “The forms of plants are her weapons to fight against depression, yearn for love, appeal for love, ... and are also the expression of her subconscious thoughts to express art and love of life” [4]. During Kusama’s childhood, plants were the only creatures she could communicate with, leading her to spend much time in their company. Pumpkins, in particular, held significance as they were a crucial food source during the war. Kusama had a preference for pumpkins, noting, “Pumpkins always make me smile. They are the funniest vegetables.” It seems that Kusama cherished all living creatures, using her art to express her appeal for peace and her love of life. Having experienced hardships, she cherished peace, seeing plants as one of the most beautiful things capable of bringing life and hope.

## 4. The relationship between personal experience and work style

### 4.1. Hope

“It is because we cannot escape the troubles of the world that we need tools to help us maintain our optimistic disposition” [5]. Kusama could not escape the troubles her family caused, thus she would produce artworks to stay optimistic. The mental disease caused Kusama traumatized and the only hope for her was art. So she created a series of installations *Pumpkin*. *Pumpkin* was not only a source of healing for herself but also a symbol of warmth she wished to offer to the world. She tried to use this lovely image to bring comfort to people after the war. And mostly she wanted to bring hope for children by building a public space for them to play. Therefore, the unfortunate childhood made her eagerly want to create works with love and hope. Moreover, her *Pumpkin* comforted herself as Kusama claimed that she had spiritual conversation with those pumpkins, which she was told a lot stories. So she created those works and wanted others to feel the same comfort. Her works always carry her love and hope. From this perspective, she used art to comfort her childhood and those works made up all the love which Kusama did not gain at young age. All the communication with the plants, with the world, is a form that she speaks to the younger self. She tries to embrace the little Kusama in her heart and gives all her love to herself, to the whole world. Having endured a traumatic childhood, she empathizes with other children and wishes to spare them the pain of being victims of their parents’ unhappy marriages. The *Pumpkin* is the gift, the hope, for those children and for the world.

### 4.2. Sorrow

However, the sorrow from Kusama’s life experiences picked a sad tone for her works. “Among the many uses of art, one surprisingly important function is to teach us to endure suffering in a more successful way” [6]. Kusama’s unbearable childhood and subsequent defeats could have easily led to her demoralization. However, art became her tool for coping with these sufferings. As she noted, “If it wasn’t for art, I would have killed myself a long time ago.” All those twisted memories and experiences could take anyone down. Fortunately, Kusama produces art. She had struggled with all the suffering and had no one she could turn to for help, even the loved one *Joseph Gornell* passed. Art eventually carried her out of her slump. The series work *Infinity Mirror Room* is like a storage of Kusama’s experiences. The mirror room creates a space where Kusama can confront and ease her insecurities. Through this work, she deconstructs everything with dots in her life and obtains redemption in the process of self-obliteration. She merges herself, the world, and her pain, with her artworks helping her endure suffering through self-obliteration.

### 4.3. Balance

“Art allows us to get in touch with the character we lack, the temperament we have lost, and thereby restore a measure of balance to our skewed inner selves.” (AT, 32)[7] Kusama’s tragic childhood left her struggling to understand love. With most of the time isolated, the only one she could communicate with was art. Through art, Kusama found a way to communicate with herself, achieving a balance reflected in her inclusive works. And the inclusiveness in her works is the reflection of Kusama the creator’s inner balance. And she could find the temperament she had lost. One of the most common elements in her works is the mirror, which she used for getting in touch with her inner selves. Through the mirror, Kusama can understand what has been missing. All the love she did not get from her family, all the sentiments she did not realize how she should deal with. Having disconnected from the world, she also felt disconnected from herself. Thus, she needed a medium to re-connect with the world, with herself. And that medium is art. Her early series *Infinity Net* illustrates her inner struggle. She notes, “I have a desire to gather the units of the net, the opposites of the points, .... Exploring it,

I can see my own life. My life, a point, a point in a trillion particles.” Kusama wants to see through the net. All the points are the formation of the whole world and only through those points can Kusama see what has been missing in her life. And the opposite of the points makes up Kusama’s missing part by filling up the net. This net expands the capacity of itself and contains everything in the world. This net connects her to the world and to herself, restoring a measure of balance to her fractured self.

## 5. Conclusion

This essay analyzed Yayoi Kusama’s works using the methodology presented in the book *Art as Therapy*, exploring how her works serve as a form of therapy for herself and provide energy to others.

In conclusion, Yayoi Kusama’s art is deeply intertwined with her tragic life experiences, which have been a significant source of inspiration. From her life experiences, it is clear that her family had a severely negative impact on her and caused her mental disease which made her see illusions. Art became the only tool Kusama could use to express her thoughts and communicate with the world. She nerved herself to break up with her family and set off for America to start her career as an artist. However, her works were neither recognized by those artists nor by Japanese society. After returning to Japan, she started to create her works in a nursing home. And finally, she was accepted by the whole world in her sixties.

Her miserable childhood made Kusama constantly see illusions, which made all her surroundings covered with dots in her eyes. Thus, Kusama tried to draw those dots down to dispel her fear of the illusion. Since no one would ever communicate with her, the only creature she could talk to was those plants. She incorporated elements from these accessible objects into her work. Those beautiful plants and the bright colors became the elements Kusama used frequently. Her disappointing experiences in New York caused her to want to stand out for herself. Thus, she would use those bright colors to express herself. Kusama’s works reflect her lifelong desires and serve to bring hope to herself and others in need. And her works are one of the ways to make her endure the suffering of her mental diseases. Moreover, the way she balanced her life was through her works.

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