

factory
international
presents

30 JUN – 28 AUG
EXHIBITION GUIDE

YAYOI KUSAMA

YOU, ME AND
THE BALLOONS

AVIVA studios

YAYOI KUSAMA

YOU, ME AND THE BALLOONS



Yayoi Kusama © YAYOI KUSAMA.
Courtesy of Ota Fine Arts,
Victoria Miro and David Zwirner

Yayoi Kusama (b. 1929) is a Japanese artist. She is celebrated both as a critical figure of twentieth century art history and as one of today's leading contemporary artists. The artist and her creative universe of polka dots, brightly coloured pumpkins and dazzling *Infinity Mirror Rooms* have become part of global culture.

In the late 1990s, Kusama started to create the spectacular large inflatable sculptures which she calls her 'balloons'. Monumental yet weightless, this new medium empowered her to work at colossal volume and scale. Appearing to defy gravity, the balloons enable the influential artist to sculpt in space.

You, Me and the Balloons has been created by Kusama especially for Factory International. It's a new way of working for the artist. Both a survey – the first time this body of work has been brought together – and her most ambitious artwork environment to date.

Kusama is an early pioneer of boundary defying artworks, known as installation art. She creates art not just to look at but to immerse yourself in so that you can experience the world with the same exhilarating awe and hallucinatory power as she does.

Kusama covers everything – her art, herself – in polka dots. She likes polka dots because they express her philosophical belief in the interconnectedness between humans, the natural world and the universe.

'Our earth is only one polka dot among a million stars in the cosmos' she explains. 'Polka dots are a way to infinity. When we obliterate nature and our bodies with polka dots, we become part of the unity of our environment'.

Polka dots are also something Kusama sometimes sees all around her. She has experienced mental ill-health since childhood, including visual hallucinations. She has explained that creating art inspired by these traumatic mental states has been a way for her to cope with them and to share them. In 1977, Kusama admitted herself to a psychiatric hospital in Tokyo where she still lives, with her studio nearby.

Art is all-consuming for Kusama, she works every day, and through her work she calls for cosmic unity.

You, Me and the Balloons is both a wondrous escape from reality and a call to action. Kusama invites us collectively to reflect upon our miraculous capacity to imagine, to create, to enjoy beauty and to love.

01 THE HOPE OF THE POLKA DOTS BURIED IN INFINITY WILL ETERNALLY COVER THE UNIVERSE

2019

Mixed media installation

Height approx 12m

The biomorphic forms of *The Hope of the Polka Dots Buried in Infinity Will Eternally Cover the Universe* suggest roots, tentacles or even neural pathways in the brain. Biomorphic means shapes or images that resemble living forms such as plants and the human body. Kusama's work often moves between the abstract and the representational, between the strange and the familiar.

Kusama grew up on a plant nursery and seed farm in provincial Japan. She describes sitting among the fields that surrounded her house with her sketchbook and 'receiving a strong revelation from nature'. The structures and cycles of the natural world have provided lifelong creative inspiration. From the cellular to the galactic, her distinctive visual language continues to be inspired by patterns in nature and their connection to the 'unseen powers' she believes give life to the universe.

The title *The Hope of the Polka Dots Buried in Infinity Will Eternally Cover the Universe* refers to important themes and motifs in Kusama's work – hope, polka dots, infinity, eternity and the universe. Titles are important to Kusama, who also writes poetry. Her titles further communicate the lyricism and philosophical ideas she channels into her artwork.

02 DOTS OBSESSION

1996/2023

Vinyl inflatables

Dimensions variable

Kusama describes her art as 'obsessional art'. From a young age, she has experienced visual and auditory hallucinations that make her feel as if she is disappearing or dissolving. She calls it 'self-obliteration' and she describes it as both a terrifying experience – of unreality – and a transcendent one – of oneness with the universe. Her art – its processes and ideas, her use of proliferation and repetition – is both a result of Kusama's mental health condition and an exploration of it.

Dots Obsession (1996) was the first balloon installation created by Kusama. At the Mattress Factory in Pittsburgh, the artist built a yellow room covered in black polka dots and filled it with three huge organic shaped yellow balloons also covered with black polka dots that physically and visually dominated the space. She continued the series with the pink and black *Dots Obsession* (1996/1998) – her first suspended installation – and the red and white *Dots Obsession* (1998), the first work in which she combined inflatables and a mirror room. These enormous artworks took Kusama's singular visual language to a monumental new scale.

Their arrival marked an important turning point in Kusama's career. Today the artist's boundary-pushing role in the history of post-war art and significance as a 1960s counter-culture icon is well acknowledged. However, for decades, she was marginalised by a Western-centric, male-dominated art establishment. Kusama's reappraisal began in the

1990s. A major critical survey in the US in 1989 and her acclaimed Japanese Pavilion for the Venice Biennale in 1993 reintroduced her work to the world. As well known in America as Andy Warhol in the late 1960s but overlooked after returning to live and work in Japan in 1973, she was rightly hailed as a pioneer.

Institutional recognition and the huge popular demand for the artist's work – in particular her large-scale environments – led to an audacious playfulness in her work and a search for new materials to create ever more spectacular installations.

03 YAYOI-CHAN

2013

Mixed media

4 x 1 x 2.6 m

Kusama's work can often be both powerful and an expression of vulnerability. For most of us, inflatables and balloons are connected with our childhoods. Kusama grew up during the Pacific War. One in three soldiers from her hometown was killed. In Japan it was a time of ultranationalism and social conservatism. Her family were well off but unhappy, and her mother was abusive toward her sensitive child.

Aged 15, Kusama was recruited into the war effort and worked in a parachute factory. She was 16 when the US dropped two atomic bombs over Hiroshima and Nagasaki killing hundreds of thousands of people. These experiences contributed to mental health issues that she has lived with all her life.

The bold exuberance of the inflatable artworks has been, and continues to be, very hard won. The large *Yayoi-chan* figures, young pig-tailed girls, are a 'kawaii' vision of a happy girlhood the artist never experienced. When asked what she might say to her ten-year-old self, Kusama replied: 'There was a war when I was a child, and art has always been my hope and support since those miserable childhood days. I would say to her, whatever environment she finds herself in, to live the life as an artist in order to remember the workings and struggles of humanity.'

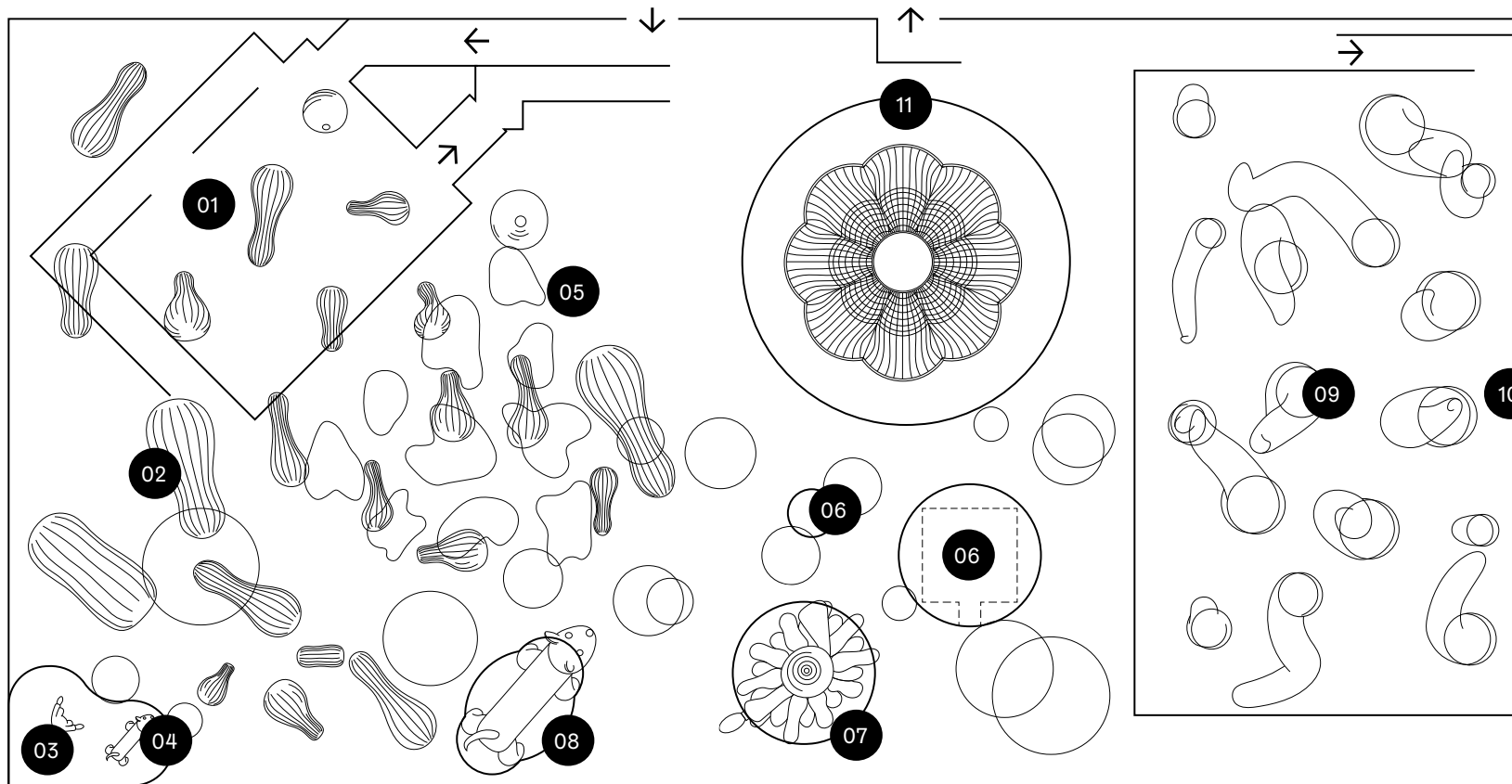
04 TOKO-TON

2013

Mixed media

2.4 x 3.2 x 1.3 m

The cartoonish inflatable dog sculpture *Toko-Ton* is a reminder that as much as Kusama's visual language is inspired by the natural world it is more importantly an expression of her fertile imagination. *Toko-Ton* is part of the artist's elaborate, personal universe of visual motifs and symbols. Her vivid colours and dreamlike forms are articulations of her personal subjectivity – how her mind connects with the external world. *Toko-Ton* is a reminder that the world around us can be reimagined: 'Representative art? – no, life is art – it must be constantly created and re-created', Kusama has written. 'Take part in making and creating it with your bodies and feelings; life isn't what you have – it's what you do; real life has to be constantly reinvented'.



LIST OF WORKS:

- | | |
|--|---|
| 01 The Hope of the Polka Dots Buried in Infinity Will Eternally Cover the Universe , 2019 | 07 Yayoi-chan , 2012/2023 |
| 02 Dots Obsession , 1996/2023 | 08 Ring-Ring , 2012/2023 |
| 03 Yayoi-chan , 2013 | 09 A Bouquet of Love I Saw in the Universe , 2021 |
| 04 Toko-Ton , 2013 | 10 Song of a Manhattan Suicide Addict , 2007 |
| 05 Clouds* , 2023 | 11 Life of the Pumpkin Recites, All About the Biggest Love for the People , 2019 |
| 06 Dots Obsession , 2013 | |



The artworks are fragile and can easily tear. Please do not touch the artworks. Please be mindful of your surroundings when taking photos.

*** Clouds** has been made especially for the exhibition. **You are invited by the artist to sit on the artwork. The inflatables are fragile.** We kindly ask that you please remove shoes and any sharp objects from pockets before going on the artwork.

Please do not jump or allow children to jump on the artworks. They are for sitting and lying on.

05 CLOUDS

2023

Vinyl inflatables
Dimensions variable

Kusama has made several versions of her *Clouds*. They have been realised as constellations of beautifully reflective sculptural forms and as puffy inflatables. Kusama's *Clouds* are not suspended above but rather are placed on the floor – an example of the subversive humour, as well as the fantasy, in Kusama's work. This new version of *Clouds* has been made especially for this exhibition and it is the first time that they have been designed so that audiences can sit on them. They are fragile and can tear or rip, so please take off your shoes and make sure you don't have anything sharp like keys in your pocket. Then relax and enjoy your time sitting above the clouds.

06 DOTS OBSESSION

2013

White Dots on Red inflatables, includes large *Balloon Dome with Mirror Room* and *Peephole Dome*
Mixed media installation
Dimensions variable

Kusama's art often uses dazzling optic effects to explore consciousness and perception – how we see ourselves and the world. The artist's *Infinity Mirror Rooms* can be interpreted as a visualisation of being one with the universe, as one's self is reflected endlessly within the artist's cosmic surroundings. The *Peephole Dome* provides a similar experience, however is looked into through a single eyehole.

A small opening reveals a kaleidoscopic space that appears to stretch to infinity.

In the exhibition catalogue for *You, Me and the Balloons*, the neuroscientist Professor Anil Seth talks about how Kusama's art reveals the everyday miracle of how we experience the world and, significantly, reminds us of how we see things differently and how our own way of encountering the world is not the only way. 'To immerse yourself in Kusama's world is to come to the implicit recognition that the way we encounter the world is just one way among many possible ways, and that we're constructing it from something – and that the self is part of the construction too.' This is something, Seth explains, that becomes urgent at our present time of social fragmentation. 'If you want to bring people together the first thing to do is encourage a recognition of how we all differ in the first place, to cultivate a kind of humility about each of our distinctive ways of seeing and believing.'

07 YAYOI-CHAN

2012/2023

Mixed media
12 × 5.3 × 7 m

In 1968, Kusama and her nude dancers staged a performance in front of the *Alice in Wonderland* sculpture in Central Park, New York. She called herself 'the modern Alice in Wonderland' and invited people to join her 'world of fantasy and freedom... and adventurous dance of life'.

As in Lewis Carroll's fictitious Wonderland, you experience dizzying shifts in perspective and scale in *You, Me and the Balloons*, from the single eyehole

of the *Peephole Dome* to the gargantuan *Yayoi-chan* dolls and over-sized suspended balloons.

'Who are you?' Alice is asked in the famous story. Alice replies, 'I – I hardly know, sir, just at present – at least I know who I was when I got up this morning, but I think I must have been changed several times since then.' Like Alice's adventure, Kusama's artistic enquiry is to understand who she is and her place in a sometimes puzzling world.

08 RING-RING

2012/2023

Mixed media
4.8 × 5.8 × 2.2 m

Kusama has spoken about how as a child she began hearing dogs, pumpkins and flowers talking to her. These early hallucinatory experiences continue to inspire her. Her obsessive artistic enquiry, however, is not just about her experiences. She also draws connections between her struggles and problems in wider society: 'In the gap between people and the strange jungle of civilised society lies many psychosomatic problems.' She explained in 1964, 'my artistic expressions grow from the aggregation of these. I am always deeply interested in the background of problems involved in the relationship of people and society.'

Kusama grew up in an unhappy family during wartime Japan. From a young age she found art as a therapeutic way to cope with what was happening at home and in the world. Her mother didn't understand her daughter's mental illnesses or approve of her wanting to be an artist.

The disjunction she felt between herself, her traditional family and wider society as a woman in the art world contributed to her fierce sense of being an outsider.

Early in her career, Kusama signed her work 'Avant-garde artist Yayoi Kusama' – avant-garde meaning someone whose art and ideas are forward-looking. Her radical ideas and approach to art making have meant she was often ahead of her time.

09 A BOUQUET OF LOVE I SAW IN THE UNIVERSE

2021

Mixed media
Dimensions variable

Kusama was born in 1929, the same year that Edwin Hubble, the astronomer known as the 'pioneer of the distant stars', published his evidence of the existence of galaxies other than the Milky Way. The work of Hubble and his peers completely reimagined our place in the universe.

When thinking about her planet-like balloons, her constellations of polka dots and the importance of the universe and infinity to her work, it seems significant to consider that Kusama grew up at a revolutionary time of scientific and astronomical discovery. The balloon – that inflates and expands – is one of the most common analogies used to describe the Big Bang.

Throughout the early twentieth century, scientific discoveries meant people could see the complex systems inside plants, in our bodies and out into an expanding

universe. These discoveries informed Kusama's visual imagery and philosophy – a belief in the interconnectedness between humans, the natural world and the cosmos.

10 SONG OF A MANHATTAN SUICIDE ADDICT

2007

Video projection

Mixed media

This video shows the artist singing a song about her experience dealing with depression. She has filmed herself performing the song and exhibited it within installations at different stages throughout her career.

The words translated from Japanese into English are:

Swallow antidepressants and it will
be gone
Tear down the gate of hallucinations
Amidst the agony of flowers, the present
never ends
At the stairs to heaven, my heart expires
in their tenderness
Calling from the sky, doubtless,
transparent in its shade of blue
Embraced with the shadow of illusion
Cumulonimbi arise
Sounds of tears, shed upon eating
the colour of cotton rose
I become a stone
Not in time eternal
But in the present that transpires

Manhattan Suicide Addict is also the title of Kusama's debut novel published in 1978. A fictionalised memoir of her time in New York, it was written after she

had voluntarily moved into a psychiatric hospital in Tokyo. She continues to live in the hospital, working at a studio nearby. 'In my work I'm giving a system to my life', she has said. 'I'm providing meaning stage by stage, step by step... I feel I'm lucky, fortunate to have this sickness and all its ideas. You know, there are two things you can do about an obsessive-compulsive illness. One is to overcome it by giving up the compulsions, but the other is to embrace and accept their demands. Fortunately, mine can be satisfied with this artistic production'.

11 LIFE OF THE PUMPKIN RECITES, ALL ABOUT THE BIGGEST LOVE FOR THE PEOPLE

2019

Mixed media

10m × 10m × 10m

Kusama has said 'The first time I ever saw a pumpkin I was at elementary school and went with my grandfather to visit a big seed-harvesting ground... there it was: a pumpkin the size of a man's head... it immediately began to speak to me in the most animated manner... pumpkins do not inspire much respect but I was enchanted by their charming and winsome form. What appealed to me most was the pumpkin's generous unpretentiousness. And its solid spiritual balance.'

Kusama has continued to identify with pumpkins throughout her life and the pumpkin has long been one of the artist's visual motifs. It was her show-stopping *Mirror Room (Pumpkin)* (1991) presented at the Venice Biennale in 1993 that propelled her back into the spotlight.

Since then, she has become as known for her pumpkins as her polka dots.

For Kusama, the pumpkin is a self-representation, an evolving self-portrait. They are also a 'spirit'.

Kusama is not religious, but she has a personal spirituality and believes her artistic mission is to make visible the 'special beauty' and mystery of the 'invisible force' that supports our 'momentary life'. For Kusama, creating art continues to be a personal necessity. She also believes in the collective healing power of art, a force that can unite people. 'Beauty', she explains, 'is the prototype of love'.

YAYOI KUSAMA YOU, ME AND THE BALLOONS 30 JUN - 28 AUGUST 2023

Commissioned by Factory International and produced with Yayoi Kusama for Manchester International Festival.

All artworks ©YAYOI KUSAMA

All artworks courtesy YAYOI KUSAMA and:

01. Courtesy Ota Fine Arts
06. Courtesy Ota Fine Arts
- Loaned courtesy Sharjah Art Foundation Collection
09. Courtesy Ota Fine Arts
10. Courtesy Ota Fine Arts and Victoria Miro
11. Courtesy Ota Fine Arts, David Zwirner, Victoria Miro and YAYOI KUSAMA FOUNDATION. Art produced with the support of CSIG.

Cover image: Yayoi Kusama *The Hope of the Polka Dots Buried in Infinity Will Eternally Cover the Universe*, 2019.

Installation view at Fosun Foundation Shanghai, China, 2019. © YAYOI KUSAMA. Courtesy of Ota Fine Arts, David Zwirner and Victoria Miro.

Photography

Photography is allowed for personal, non-commercial use only unless otherwise indicated. Please do not use flash, camera supports or selfie sticks.

Catalogue

This exhibition is accompanied by a new catalogue from Factory International Publishing with new contributions from Yayoi Kusama, Akira Tatehata, Philippa Perry, Professor Anil Seth, Franck Gautherot and Seungduk Kim.

Kusama places her inflatable sculptures within an 'environment' to create an immersive, physical experience.

This exhibition reflects her intentions while being sensitive to conservation requirements.

SIGN UP FOR OUR NEWSLETTER

Sign up and be the first to hear about upcoming shows and events, ticket offers and opportunities to get involved. Visit factoryinternational.org/signup



For more information about the exhibition and to book for future events, visit factoryinternational.org.

FOLLOW US

Why not follow us on our sparkling new Factory International social accounts? We'll be sharing all the action from behind the scenes, exclusive artists interviews, plus loads more!

Facebook	factoryinternational
YouTube	factoryinternational
Tiktok	factoryinternational
Instagram	factory_international
Twitter	factoryintl
Linkedin	factoryintl