Dot dot dot…: Some Thoughts Following Yayoi Kusama’s Retrospective at Gropius Bau, Berlin

Before it arrived to the Tel Aviv Museum of Art, Yayoi Kusama's retrospective was shown at Gropius Bau in Berlin. Michal B. Ron visited the Berlin show and shares her thoughts on reflection, reconstruction, art history, and letters against apartheid.

Critique / Michal B. Ron December 9, 2021

Yayoi Kusama’s retrospective at Gropius Bau is a show long anticipated: due to Covid-19, its opening got postponed from ArtWeek Berlin in September 2020 to after-the-corona-winter of March 2021. Then, when corona wasn’t over yet, it was rescheduled to be opened for a single day, on April 23rd, before corona-regulations forced it to close again – until … Slowly but surely, a month later, the public could finally visit the show. If it is a quick enough public, that is: a public that purchases timeslots in the online sale opening every second Friday on 12 – which gets sold out in a matter of two hours.

I visit the show accompanied by my little baby, which leads me to come up with a new categorization for art exhibitions: baby-friendly shows. (During my first pregnancy I had the idea of writing a blog about “art that doesn’t make me sick” – inspired by my experience at Documenta 14, which could still bring up this ill feeling even now, from a distance of four years.) Yael Bartana’s show at the Jewish Museum, for example, is not for babies, since it is too loud and too dark. *Redemption Now* deserves a separate review, coming up.

RON.jpg



[1]Happy baby at Yayoi Kusama, A Bouquet of Love I Saw in the Universe, 2021, Gropius Bau, Berlin

My baby kicked her legs with enthusiasm (the German language even has a verb for a baby’s kicking of its legs: “strampeln”!) when she saw Kusama’s installation at the atrium, *A Bouquet of Love I Saw in the Universe* (2021), which consists of huge magenta limbs growing upwards from the floor, dotted in black – offering great contrasts for eyes that are still developing their ability to focus, or a spotted world, which young and old can enjoy. It is also the kind of show we were all waiting for, after months of social distancing and lockdown: a show one has to experience in her body, in its space. After *Down to Earth* [2] from last summer, Gropius Bau, under director Stefanie Rosenthal, who is also the curator of Kusama’s show, does it again!

We read in the press release: “Kusama used her own body in her works as a placeholder, or in other

words, as a proxy for the bodies of viewers.” Now bodies of viewers inhabit the works. In some cases, bodies of viewers are left outside of the work, while only heads are invited to enter: such is the case in the reconstruction o*f Infinity Mirror Room – Love Forever* (1966/94), designed as an octagon of mirrors with two peep-holes, which the viewer can approach via a few stairs. The viewer sees herself reflected outside of the work, but enters a psychedelic party with her eyes only, amazed by flickering lights that change colors and rhythms and are infinitely reflected from all sides. In this case, I could not really use my eyes as proxies for yours, dear reader – a notice on the floor asks not to insert cameras into the booth – their flashlight could ruin the effect of the work, I assume. And at this moment I realize one must experience the work and its contradictions with one’s own body, not via smartphones as proxies: seeing one’s reflection, which, irritatingly, one could hardly avoid photographing when trying to take a picture of the work (do I look good? Does my outfit go with the work’s aesthetics?), while not being allowed to take pictures or videos of the inner room, just like at Berghain, that mythological nightclub.

VID-20211122-WA0000.mp4 **[3]**

In the framework of Kusama’s retrospective, it is interesting to look at the relations the artist develops between inside and outside: where is the viewer positioned? And where does her reflection appear? Where is the work staged? What is viewed on the surface and what is hidden within? The early I*nfinity Mirror Room – Phalli’s Field* (1965), with its red-dotted, white phalli, swallows the viewer’s body from every angle in which it is reflected. In the above mentioned peep-show *Infinity Mirror Room – Love Forever*, a piece Kusama originally made a year later, the viewer’s body is reflected outside of the work, into which we just peep.*The Spirit of Pumpkins Descended into the Heavens* (2021) is a new piece the artist made especially for Gropius Bau: in this case a mirror-cube is centered in a room with yellow walls dotted in black, and inside we view more black-dotted yellow pumpkins, reflected *ad Infinitum*.

The reconstructions of earlier pieces raise another question about the being in the here and now of the works: was young Kusama in her iconic portrait in *Infinity Mirror Room – Phalli’s Field* a proxy for our bodies, too, some of which, were not even there yet in 1965, when she made the piece for Castellane Gallery in New York? Entering the historical pieces is almost more thrilling than enjoying the new one, thanks to this time-leap.

RON2.png **[4]**



[5]Yayoi Kusama, Infinity Mirror Room – Phalli’s Field, 1965, Installation, Mixed Media. YAYOI KUSAMA, Courtesy: Ota Fine Arts, Victoria Miro

More moments in the oeuvre of this prolific artist are worth pausing upon in a new historical reflection: Kusama’s abstract paintings from the 1960s recall, in their systematic repetition of the motif all over the canvas, similar reductive gestures framed and named within art groups typically dominated by male members. Footage from television programs introducing the artist to the German public shows her performatively brushing her hair, and the felt hat of another artist, male again, comes to mind. Her works with pasta on shoes remind me of his, he who had been “painting with eggs.” Yet – the first moment of recognition quickly changes sides: it is not that the artist’s works recall her male peers (to which I oppose giving another stage here, on her behalf), they are contemporaries, if not even predecessors, as happens to be the case with the “egg-painter!” Why is it that we always view the production of a female artist within the prism of a male-dominant canon? Dot dot dot! Kusama, in particular, got marginalized once more, not only as a woman, but due to her

mental health, for the sake of which she withdrew from the art world and retreated to Japan – a matter that is slightly dimmed in the flashy exhibition and its press publications.

This exhibition’s next stop: the Tel Aviv Museum of Art. According to the catalogue, cited in the press kit, Kusama “should still be understood as *homo politicus*”, and she is quoted with a message from April 2020, in the dawn of Covid-19: “Now is the time for people all over the world to stand up. My deep gratitude goes to all those who are already fighting. Revolutionist of the world by the Art.” Last May, a remarkable list of art people signed a “Letter against Apartheid [6]” in protest of Israel’s last operation in Gaza. Let’s hope Kusama’s show in Tel Aviv aligns with her words.

Yayoi Kusama: A Retrospective, 23. April – 15. August 2021, Gropius Bau, Berlin

Source URL: https://www.tohumagazine.com/article/dot-dot-dot%E2%80%A6-some-thoughts-following-yayoi-kusama%E2%80%99s-retrospective-gropius-bau-berlin

Links
[1] https://tohumagazine.com/sites/default/files/RON.jpg
[2] https://tohumagazine.com/article/performance-post-lockdown-tino-sehgal-et-al-down-earth-gropius-bau
[3] https://www.tohumagazine.com/file/vid-20211122-wa0000mp4
[4] https://www.tohumagazine.com/file/ron2png
[5] https://tohumagazine.com/sites/default/files/RON2.png
[6] https://www.againstapartheid.com/