Ambivalent Identity: Kusama Yayoi’s Intersectional Body Art of the 1960s

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Abstract

The article discusses how identity was negotiated by the intersectional Japanese artist Kusama Yayoi. I focus on her body-centred works of the 1960s to showcase how she addressed various aspects of identity during her time in the U.S., and how she expressed social critique by means of bodily performance. In this article I will analyse and interpret one photograph by the artist previously discussed in my master’s thesis, an image of the so-called Presidential Orgy, a series of happenings staged in Kusama’s studio in 1968. I apply the method of visual analysis and draw on a variety of sources, both literary and visual, to give insight into the historical background, since it is crucial not to look at Kusama’s artworks as isolated objects. Rather, we need to understand that rapid changes in the art world, as well as in gender relations, the rise of popular media, and major societal events like the changes in the aftermath of World War II on the one hand, and the ongoing Vietnam War on the other, were pivotal factors causing cultural upheavals that became important themes in Kusama’s art in the 1960s.

Keywords: intersectionality, identity, body art, Kusama Yayoi, 1960s
Introduction

While Kusama Yayoi, who was rated the most expensive female artist alive in 2015 (Forbes 2015), is critically acclaimed today and known worldwide for her *Infinity Mirror Room* installations as well as her recurring *Polka dots*, her formative years as an international artist in the 1960s are comparatively less researched. Her case and especially her activities during that decade are very interesting, not only for research in art history but also in Japanese studies, because her example highlights how cultural identities were shifting. Through the person and art of Kusama Yayoi, one of the first female Japanese artists who made a career in the U.S., we can observe both a clash and an intersection between Japan and the U.S., as well as between the establishment of high art institutions and the rising influence of popular media—or rather, the diminishing importance of such binaries. Kusama is an artist who defies categorisation, which is made evident not only by the vast range of artistic media, techniques, and topics she experimented with, but also by the ambivalent and elusive staging of herself as a female, Asian artist, and her unwillingness to be defined in any way. Thus, Kusama’s art cannot be seen as either commercial or anti-capitalist, Western or Eastern, high or low art, since she embraces and merges such contrasting ideas in her work.

Thesis Findings and Aim of Current Research

The goal of my master’s thesis “Kusama Yayois ambivalente Körper” (The Ambivalent Bodies of Kusama Yayoi; Braitner 2020) was to gain an understanding of how depictions of bodies and bodily objects in Kusama’s art of the 1960s changed over the course of the decade, and how these changes relate to the spatial and temporal environment the bodies are placed or performed in. I was able to show that the bodies Kusama stages in her artistic work wander from an oftentimes claustrophobic setting inside the museal sphere or indoor environments to the public outdoor sphere, becoming more free and queerer in the process. To be able to identify this shift, the method of visual analysis prevalent in the academic discipline of art history was applied as a central tool. Four photographs of Kusama’s artworks, selected for the centrality of the depicted bodies and ranging from installation art over collage to body festivals, were interpreted, discussed in their historical context, and compared to artworks by other artists of the same period.

Through this previous research, I was able to identify repetition and fragmentation as major strategies of subversion in Kusama’s artworks. Since Kusama is famous for her recurring net and dot patterns, it should come as no surprise that she deploys a similar mode of presentation in the realm of her artworks centring around the body as well. However, these repetitions seem oftentimes strange and their meaning elusive.
when it comes to the human body, especially when combined with the artist’s inclination towards fragmentation and collage.

One example of fragmentation and repetition Kusama uses to stage the body is the seemingly random combination of foodstuff with soft sculptures (made from fabric and sewn together by the artist) bearing a strong resemblance to phallic objects, creating a claustrophobic setting which evokes an atmosphere of domestic frustration and isolation. In *Macaroni Mannequin* (1964) (Fig. 1), the centre stage is occupied by the artist herself and a mannequin serving as a kind of Doppelganger, both “bodies” holding hairbrushes.¹ Whereas Kusama’s body is “fragmented” into a lower and upper half by wearing a macaroni shirt while her lower body is (un)covered by a sheer pantyhose, the doll’s surface is entirely covered by dried pasta, just like the furniture in the installation is covered by phallic objects. Thus, certain shapes and props (or parts of them) are repeated or mirrored in the scene, whereas the odd combination of bodies and objects could be interpreted as challenging the viewers’ expectations.

Another example of these strategies would be the second photograph I analysed in my master’s thesis, namely *Untitled Collage* (1966) (Fig. 2). By drawing on a wide array of contemporary material—for example, the history of the American Pin-up and its recurrence in 1960s Pop Art—I interpreted Kusama’s naked posing on a sofa covered in phallic objects, juxtaposed with a floor full of macaroni—as well as one of her *Net Paintings* being used as background—as a reference to the Pin-up girl trope (Braitner 2020: 46). This repetition of the iconography of an American low art genre—which is also deeply connected to historical changes of female agency during and after World War II—challenges the assumed superiority of high art over mass-produced images by modes of fragmentation and rearrangement. On another level, by using her own Japanese body in this work, Kusama defied the common binary of artist-artwork and, at the same time, transgressed borders of ethnicity. By comparing *Untitled Collage* to Morimura Yasumasa’s 森村泰昌 *Futago 双子* (1988) (Fig. 3), in which the Japanese artist cites Edouard Manet’s *Olympia* (1863) (Fig. 4) by using his own body as a protagonist, I was able to highlight the subversive potential of bodily depictions in the context of collage.²

A similar form of “Collage” was used by Kusama in her *Alice in Wonderland* happening (1968) in New York Central Park (Fig. 5), where she contrasted the naked bodies of live performers with the bodies of the figures of the Alice Monument, which became the background for the performance. At the same time, she juxtaposed politics (by letting the performers wear rubber masks of politicians and animals) with the

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¹ The sources of the images I cite throughout this text are given in the list of figures. They are also included in the appendix of Braitner 2020: 110–132.

² For the detailed visual comparison of Kusama’s *Untitled Collage* to Morimura’s *Futago*, see Braitner 2020: 60–63.
childlike fantasies of Lewis Carrol’s novel *Alice in Wonderland* (1865) and the psychedelic counterculture of the 1960s, which was also heavily influenced by Carrol’s novel. In this way multiple interpretations become possible, like viewing the happening as an Anti-Vietnam War protest piece, parody of politics, call for sexual liberation, or the refusal to accept societal norms and categories in toto.

To sum up the findings of my previous research, the analyses yielded that the concept of identity in Kusama’s artworks is generally neither fixed nor clearly defined. On the contrary, the bodies and body fragments are staged ambivalently and thus suggest a queer and multi-faceted notion of the self. Kusama emphasises the interconnectedness of bodies with their surroundings while disrupting seemingly fixed hierarchical orders and categories, the notion of identity, and the distinction between art and lived reality. In the following part, I will condense and restructure some of the arguments of my previous research to discuss the question of how Kusama addressed the topic of identity in her protest art of the late 1960s, focusing on her status as an intersectional, female Japanese artist in New York’s art environment of this time. I will show how Kusama used bodies and bodily elements in her artworks of the 1960s to transcend common notions of “identity,” and also taking into account the extent to which the artist stages herself as “Japanese” in an U.S.-American environment.

The overall purpose of this article is to show how the notion of identity, for which, in the case of Kusama Yayoi, “*Japaneseness*” can be identified as an important marker, is deconstructed through the staging of the body and drag. To illustrate my argumentation, in the last part of this article I will analyse a photograph from 1968 documenting an indoor “Presidential orgy” conducted in Kusama’s studio at the time, focusing on the theatrical approach the artist takes and discussing how (erotic) body art and American drag are used in a way that served to both critique the violence of the Vietnam War and parody prevailing gender norms.

**Kusama Goes to New York**

Kusama Yayoi was born in rural Japan in 1929. Having lived through the war, after completing her *nihonga studies* 日本画 (traditional Japanese painting) in Kyōto, her decision to go to the United States was solidified in the mid-1950s. This became possible through an exchange of letters with the artist Georgia O’Keeffe, and Kusama arrived in the U.S. in the late 1950s barely speaking a word of English (Munroe 1989: 17). However, she soon came to influence and be influenced by other artists like Donald Judd, Mark Rothko, or Joseph Cornell (Kusama entertained a romantic—ostensibly asexual—relationship with Cornell for years).

While Kusama first gained critical success after her arrival in New York with her monumental *Infinity Net paintings*—non-figural, monochrome artworks centring on
repetition in the early 1960s—she invested herself in a vast variety of media in the years to follow, including sculpture, installation art, collage, body art, performance art and happenings, fashion, film, an underground newspaper, and literature.

Due to this wide range of Kusama’s artistic oeuvre, it becomes difficult to categorise her oeuvre. Stylistically, her works may be characterised as Pop art, Abstract Expressionism, and Minimalism, although in the latter half of the 1960s the performative aspects became more dominant. For example, Alexandra Munroe (1994: 195) identifies Kusama as a vanguard of “proto-minimalist abstraction.” Notably, both the element of repetition and the centrality of the body in Kusama’s art are constant motives from the start, made evident for example by her posing in front of her Infinity Net Paintings, a repetitive pattern that recurred throughout her artistic career in various forms. Besides using objects that take the shape of bodies or body parts and living subjects in her art, Kusama herself often poses with or inside her artwork, her body becoming an integral part of these works and thereby questioning boundaries between subject and object, as Stefan Würrer (2015: 74) recognises: “By repeatedly inserting her ‘self’ into her work, Kusama blurs the boundaries between reality and art, making herself at once the object and the subject of her art production.” This kind of physical presence became even more prominent by the artist’s turn to soft sculptures and environments in the early 1960s (Pécoil 2002: 15). These sculptures, which cover a variety of surfaces, include the aforementioned phallic objects, which appeared around 1962, handsewn by Kusama in a repetitive, laborious process.

While the bodily component of these part-objects—meaning objects that relate to the human body not in its entirety, but as isolated body pieces; in this case the phallic soft objects—is mirrored in the formal repertoire of other Western artists, such as Eva Hesse, Louise Bourgeois or Claes Oldenburg (Applin 2012: 40), the repetitive aspect relates to the works of Andy Warhol, albeit his mode of production differed greatly from Kusama’s (Pécoil 2002: 16). Warhol tried to distance himself from the concept of the artistic gesture as much as possible, relying instead on industrial methods of multiplying artworks like consumer goods, and predominantly using the technique of silk screen printing (Yamamura 2015: 106). He also made no secret of the fact that his assistants did some of his artworks. In contrast, Kusama’s repetitive work mode was far from detached—rather, it was one of bodily and psychic investment, which seems to correspond with her actual insertion of her own body into her works. Although both worked with repetition, Warhol’s art was more impersonal and the result of careful planning. However, their artistic differences did not stop Kusama and Warhol from competing as rivals:

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3 The art historian Yamamura Midori comments on this as follows: “By the fall of 1961, she [i.e. Kusama] had five solo exhibitions in the United States, and that year her works were represented at the Whitney Annual and the Carnegie International” (Yamamura 2015: 100).
[...] As of 1962, Kusama and Warhol were effectively equals and similarly ambitious. Visiting the Green Gallery exhibition in June 1962, the artist Martha Nilsson Edelheit remembers that in the gallery’s backroom, Kusama and Warhol were sitting in front of Bellamy, trying to impress him, with each proclaiming: ‘I only show with stars’. It was a category in which they most definitely did not include one another (Yamamura 2015: 108).

While Warhol gained commercial success in the 1960s, this was a time of hardship for Kusama, not only financially, but also healthwise. Her psychological struggles were the object of much speculation and led to her art being oftentimes framed as the result of mental problems. One Japanese magazine, for example, diagnosed Kusama with a father complex and hate for men (Shūkan bunshun 1969). Alexandra Munroe at one point makes the following statement about the artist: “[...] her obsessive-compulsive state was driven by a fixed image of the phallus and a need to control its threatening proliferation through the act of giving it form” (Munroe 1994: 197). I will give more examples of the tendency by the media as well as the art world to pathologise Kusama below.

The Stigma of Mental Illness and Kusama’s Personal Struggles

One lens through which Kusama is frequently viewed, both by the press and researchers, is that of madness or obsession. This is partly a result of her psychological condition, since Kusama reported having hallucinations since childhood that made her see the multitude of dots prevailing in her artworks. Additionally, the artist had mental breakdowns leading to hospitalisation during her time in New York, and she has been living in a clinic in Japan since the mid-1970s. It is not entirely clear what Kusama suffers from (although it could well be some form of depression or anxiety), but her illness led to her being viewed by some as a kind of mad genius, and the repetitive elements in her artworks—such as nets, dots, and phallic objects—as products of an “obsessive-compulsive behavioral component” (Foster 2010: 272). However, Lynn Zelevansky (1998: 14) cautions against interpreting Kusama’s condition in relation to her artworks: “It is crucial, in engaging this issue, neither to mythologize Kusama as mad, visionary artist nor to pathologize her achievement.” The artist herself, on the other hand, has made contradictory statements concerning this issue (ibid.: 14). Others, like Jo Applin, offer an alternative reading of Kusama’s phallic objects that arguably carry a strong psychosexual connotation. Rather than understanding Kusama’s “phallic field” as a symptom of her anxieties about sex, as several critics and Kusama herself have presented it, according to Applin her work might be viewed within the wider

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Yamamura gives an insight into Kusama’s personal struggles: “On September 29, 1962, eleven days after Oldenburg’s opening, Kusama was probably suffering from anxiety neurosis and, according to her calendar-diary, took Doriden (a prescription “minor tranquilizer”) to help her cope [...]. On November 24, she may have made a suicide attempt, and was admitted to St. Luke’s Hospital for her first stay in the psychiatric ward there” (Yamamura 2015: 114).
cultural and artistic milieu in which she was working, and with which her work was in dialogue at that time—from the Zero and Nul Groups in Europe that she exhibited with in the 1960s, to the work of her peers, including Hesse, and their renegotiations of the representation of the body (Applin 2012: 19).

While Kusama certainly drew inspiration from other artists and movements, her own art had a noticeable impact on her colleagues in New York—so much that she became afraid of her ideas being stolen, as Yamamura informs:

Judd remembered that Kusama “was irritated by Warhol,” but her shock at seeing Oldenburg’s sewn sculptures at Green Gallery was immeasurable, as she had reportedly become ‘very paranoid about the New York art situation.’ Clark remembers that she suddenly became obsessed with the thought that her ideas might be appropriated, which compelled her to close all the curtains at the windows of her loft facing Park Avenue and 19th Street (Yamamura 2015: 113).

Another way of approaching obsession, albeit not an individual one but rather a cultural condition that resulted from the collective trauma of repression by the government and the aftermath of World War II, is suggested by the curator Alexandra Munroe, who, among others, can be credited with reintroducing Kusama’s work to the academic world in the 1990s. She sees Kusama as a “Japanese obsessional artist” (Munroe 1994: 197) in the tradition of the Japanese avant-garde, who uses an obsessive mode of work as a tool of self-healing in the context of collective trauma inflicted by the war (ibid.: 195) and resistance against both the rigid expectations of Japanese society and the threat of a loss of identity following the war defeat and U.S. occupation: “Characterized by extremist action and a metaphysical mind, the special aesthetic of Japanese avant-garde culture could suggest the persistent presence of Japan’s ‘old gods’ in a post-atomic age” (ibid.: 19).

Munroe draws comparisons between Kusama and artists such as Kudō Tetsumi 工藤哲巳 and Miki Tomio 三木富雄, whose works show a strong bodily focus as well:

Because the [Japanese political] system was the product of modernism and asserted subjecting the individual will to the public good, they [Kusama, Miki, and Kudō; note by the author] sought to subvert it by liberating Japan’s suppressed premodern consciousness and by boldly transgressing the dominant social taboos on sex, madness, and death (Munroe 1994: 200).

There are also parallels in Miki’s and Kusama’s modes of repetition, since the former started a series of sculptures depicting ears in the early 1960s which he continued until his death. With Kudō we see examples of fragmentation of bodies in his

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5 Munroe points to the problematic way in which Japan’s modernism is framed as ahistorical. According to her, Art History tends to think about Japanese art in binaries of pre- and post-Meiji, ignoring the fact that some new artistic developments started already during the Edo period (1603–1868). Another issue with modernism was that Japanese artists who leaned towards Western art styles were often considered derivative, while those who did not were considered “backwards” (Munroe 1994: 20).
often-disturbing assemblages. These mutilations relate to sickness and decay in a post-atomic era. Kusama’s political engagement in the U.S., on the contrary, offers a bodily and oftentimes sexual mode of performance against man-made destruction, for example in the context of the 1968 presidential election or the protests against Wall Street or the Vietnam War (Applin 2012: 90).

Body Art as a Tool for Negotiating Marginalised Identities

Having already started in the 1950s, it was during the 1960s that a notable shift occurred, which saw New York gradually replacing Paris as a centre of cultural power, with galleries and critics focusing on Pop Art and American artists. This may have been due to the U.S. government’s interests in promoting U.S. art in Europe during the Cold War, with Pop Art as their weapon of choice (Yamamura 2015: 119–120).

Naturally, this strategy left a lot of artists at a disadvantage:

In the United States, the actions of what Ikegami called “Team Leo Castelli” in time effectively served to marginalize those in the art world operating outside dominant cultural, gender, and racial boundaries. At the next biennale, in 1966, Kusama would protest the new establishment by calling international attention to her independently entered Narcissus Garden (Yamamura 2015: 120).

*Narcissus Garden* was a performance piece that played ironically with the commercialisation of the art world in the 1960s. Kusama, who was not invited to exhibit at the Venice Biennale in 1966, nevertheless exhibited this outdoor installation of 1,500 mirrored plastic balls which she then started selling individually to passersby, much to the distain of the high art world and the delight of the press (Braitner 2020: 55).

Kusama was marginalised as a female artist and a Japanese immigrant when she was working in the United States. Even though she had reached critical acclaim by the mid-1960s, her work was not only less promoted than that of her male peers, but as a Japanese woman, Kusama was also the subject of stereotyping. Gwendolyn Foster, drawing on Nadine Lefortier, compares this treatment of Kusama to that of her famous colleague Ono Yōko 小野洋子, who was ostracised by the press, both because of her personal life and her status as a female Asian immigrant:8

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6 I will give a more detailed example when analysing the 1968 Nixon Orgy performance.
7 Leo Castelli was an art dealer originating from Europe, who saw potential in the monopolisation of American art.
8 Dissecting the relationship between Ono, her art, and the press, Julia Bryan-Wilson recounts: “Her ‘Japanese-ness’, especially, turns against her and becomes an epithet. After her marriage to John Lennon, she became the embodiment of the ‘yellow peril’ itself, a controlling Asian dragon lady, depicted in the most racist terms imaginable” (Bryan-Wilson 2003: 121).
Kusama’s seeming rejection of her own ethnic identity is perhaps quite understandable given the manner in which Asian subjects are often “Othered” as part of a mythic Orient as described in Edward Said’s famous Orientalism and Asian women in particular are, according to Gina Marchetti, passive objects of spectacle or sexualized demonic creatures in Hollywood films. Kusama, perhaps not unlike Ono, must have been keenly aware of being treated as an Asian female “Other,” especially by the mainstream press. She’s often described in diminutive terms, such as “tiny Japanese girl” […]. In a reprinted article from Coronet (1969, originally), and republished in Yayoi Kusama, an author describes her thusly, she “looks like a Geisha and talks like a Guru” […] (Foster 2010: 272, citing Lefortier).

Foster describes Kusama here as distancing herself from her ethnic identity. However, it is crucial to note that the artist was notoriously ambivalent in this regard as well, and even seemed to play with these stereotypes very deliberately at times, as Yamamura tells us:

Once Kusama saw herself being inexorably marginalized or typecast, she decided defiantly to emphasize the fact that she was both Japanese and a woman. At Narcissus Garden, she thus flaunted her ethnicity and gender during three performances, once wearing a knee-length girlish dress, once a red leotard, and once a golden kimono and silver sash. In this way, she foreshadowed the masquerades of the feminist art movement of the 1970s in the United States, with its quest for what Chave describes as authentically different art, marked by women’s experience (Yamamura 2015: 127).

Hannah Wilke, Adrian Piper, and Carolee Schneemann are examples of female artists who perform their bodies in a way that privileges a female experience. Thereby they deconstruct the Western logic, which is based on dichotomies such as mind (as the “male” principle) and body (the “female” principle): “[…] [F]eminist body art works produce the female artist as both body and mind, subverting the Cartesian separation of cogito and corpus that sustains the masculinist myth of male transcendence” (Jones 1998: 157). Such a “narcissistic” performance of the self, as Kusama often embodied in the context of her art, could be interpreted as a defiance against marginalisation and as a demonstration of self-confidence in the face of adversity.⁹

Like the aforementioned body artists, Kusama performs the body as both acting and posing. While posing in the fashion of an American Pin-up girl for Untitled Collage (1966), for example, she “subverted the fact that the male photographer would usually impose the postures they wanted on female models” (Yoshimoto 2005: 63). Considering the factor of ethnicity, re-enacting this Western trope with her own body also showcases a certain ambivalence between making the Asian body visible on the one hand, while integrating it into its surroundings on the other. Gwendolyn Foster groups Kusama Yayoi with Ono Yoko and Mori Mariko 森万里子, other female Japanese artists who also use their own bodies in their art performances. She argues that

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⁹ For an extensive discussion about a supposed “narcissism” in feminist body art, see Jones 1998: 178–180.
“it is their own performed body that moves through their work and effectively challenges borders of identity, borders of gender, borders of Asian-ness, and borders of reception in the art world” (Foster 2010: 268, original emphasis).

Although Kusama managed, at an unprecedented speed, to gain critical success in the mainly white- and male-dominated art milieu of 1960’s New York, as well as extensive coverage by the press, she was arguably forgotten about after her return to Japan and subsequent move into a mental health clinic in the 1970s. Only in the 1990s was her work rediscovered by a broader audience. As Jo Applin argues, this might also be due to a gender bias in the art world:

It was not until the 1990s that curators and critics began to re-evaluate Kusama’s contribution to the avant-garde scene of the 1960s. With the rise of interest in women artists whose work had been similarly sidelined, her activity as an artist and, latterly, author began to attract critical attention from art historians, critics and curators (Applin 2012: 15).

Others, like Michael Glasmeier or Vincent Pècoil, identify the broad spectrum and lack of focus in Kusama’s oeuvre as reasons for her failure to attract academical resonance for a relatively long time (Glasmeier 2002: 23–24; Pècoil 2002: 13). Perhaps not surprisingly, Kusama’s venture into socio-political issues also served to further complicate her relationship with the high art world. Additionally, while working her way up in the U.S., Kusama remained an outsider to her home country Japan, where her oftentimes explicit art was eyed with suspicion by the press. The following section is a direct translation of section 1.1 of my master’s thesis, offering examples of the way Kusama was covered by Japanese tabloid press (Braithner 2020: 7–11).

The Gaze from Afar: Kusama’s U.S. Activities through the Eyes of the Japanese Press

Although sources from the 1960s are not easy to obtain, I was able to find some few tabloid press articles from 1969 and 1970 that try to explain the person and art of Kusama to their readers. The five publications I will discuss below may not be representative of the general reception of the artist by Japanese media, but they surely provide an insight into how Kusama, who by then had been living in the U.S. for about ten years, was viewed in her native country.

It is notable that the media reports tended to centre on Kusama as a person, and when her art was the object of attention, it was mostly because of nudity, which the press deemed scandalous. Headlines such as “Why are you getting naked? – Happening talk between Endō Shūsaku and Kusama Yayoi” [Nan de, anta hadaka ni narunya – Hapuningu taidan / Endō Shūsaku; Kusama Yayoi なんで、あんた裸になるんやー ハプニング対談 / 遠藤周作; 草間弥生] (Fujin Kurabu 1970) or “Why is Kusama Yayoi getting naked in New York?” [Kusama Yayoi wa naze Nyū Yōku de nugu ka 草間弥生はなぜニューヨークで裸になるのか]
間弥生はなぜニューヨークで脱ぐか] (Shōgakukan 1969) are examples of this. The subheading of the second article, which contains an extensive interview between Kusama and journalist Nakamaru Kaoru, reads: “Art, sex, and calculation of the happening performer with a monthly income of 10,000 dollars” [Geshū ichiman doru no hapunisuto no geijutsu to sei to dasan 月収1万ドルのハプニストの芸術と性と打算] (Shōgakukan 1969).

By repeatedly referring to her income or citing fees or price lists, it is suggested by the press that Kusama’s endeavours were primarily financially motivated. When looking at the first two pages of the article published by Shōgakukan 小学館, one can observe that the artist’s income is pointed out already five times, for example by characterising her as a former impecunious artist who is “now a businesswoman with a monthly income of 10,000 dollars” [imaya gesshū ichiman doru no jigyōka 今や月収一万ドルの事業家], while the introductory subheading reads “nude art at a monthly income of 10,000 dollars” [gesshū ichi man doru ratai geijutsu 月収一万ドル裸体芸術].

Similarly, the price lists for body painting units, displayed in Kusama’s studio are mentioned (Shōgakukan 1969). A dwelling on the financial aspect of Kusama’s art can be found in another article in the Yomiuri Shimbun (1970), entitled “Flagbearer of the sexual revolution – queen of happenings, Kusama Yayoi” [Sekkusu kakumei no kishu – hapuningu no joō Kusama Yayoi セックス革命の旗手・（ハプニングの女王草間弥生）]:

Kusama is currently leading Kusama Enterprise (which has a capital of 50,000 dollars = 18,000,000 yen), earning a monthly income of 15,000 dollars (5,400,000 yen), by her own account. She has 3,000 employees. She has established a “sex stock company” as one of her departments and says that from now on she will sell all kinds of sex equipment and photographs (Yomiuri Shimbun 1970).10

The Japanese news coverage gives reason to believe that Kusama was not taken seriously as an artist, but rather characterised as a dubious businesswoman. This status was presented as objectionable or is at least eyed with suspicion.

One article published in the magazine Shūkan bunshun 週刊文春 is entitled “When the naked queen goes psychoanalysis – Kusama Yayoi truly suffers from misandry (father complex)” [Hadaka no joō o seijinbunseki shitara – Kusama Yayoi wa jitsu wa dansei ken’o (Fāsā konpurekkusu) ハダカの女王を精神分析したら- 草間弥生は実は男性嫌悪 (ファーザー・コンプレックス)]. In this article, however, Kusama’s art is praised, made evident by citing the art critic Uemura Takachiyo: “While there

10 現在、草間エンタープライズ(資本金五万ドル＝一千八百万円)の社長であり、月収は自称一万五千ドル(五百四十万円)、使っている社員は三千人。その一部門に「セックス株式会社」を新設、これからセックス器具一切や写真などをジャンジャン売りまくるという.
are differing perspectives on art, her works are not mere imitations, but original. Furthermore, the level of originality is exceptionally high. If that was not the case, she could not sell [her art] just by means of scandal” (Shūkan bunshun 1969).11 In other articles, however, Kusama’s efforts are reduced to psychological issues: “However, according to psychoanalysis she has vehement misandry” (ibid.).12 Kusama’s alleged “hate for men” is explained here by traumatising events in her childhood, when she was instructed by her mother to regularly spy on her father and his love affairs. In this article, Narabayashi Yasushi, who is portrayed as an advisor of Kusama, argues that these events led to the artist strongly abhorring her father and despising her mother, which made her grow up emotionally orphaned: “Apart from the family register (koseki), looking at her mental constitution, Kusama was raised as an orphan” (ibid.).13 Narabayashi also explains a recurring dream of the artist featuring a snake in the following way: “She obviously has a massive father complex, that is to say a penis complex” (ibid.).14

The tendency of the media to pathologise and debase Kusama also surfaces in an interview between the artist and the author Endō Shūsaku, when the latter proclaimed: “I want to marry you [Kusama]. Hahaha. Then I would transform you into a normal woman, since I am a feudalistic husband.”15 He also asked Kusama directly: “Are you frigid?” (Fujin kurabu 1970).16 These examples show both the way Kusama was characterised as abnormal and the frequently sexist underbelly of the news coverage featuring her.

In the article from the Yomiuri Shimbun 読売新聞 that details the accounts of Kusama being arrested in the context of a happening in Tsukiji 築地 (a Tōkyō district), it is suggested that she actually intended to be caught by the police: “There are some who think ‘isn’t it curious? The Tsukiji district guardhouse is only a stone’s throw away from Shukubashi park. Wouldn’t it be clear from the outset that one would be arrested?’” (Yomiuri Shimbun 1970).17 The article closes with speculations on Kusama’s age: “By the way, how old is Kusama? She is said to be thirty or thirty-one. This is, of course, bitter, as a flagbearer of the sexual revolution ought to be young”

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11 芸術観のちがいは別として、彼女の作品はイミテーションではなく、オリジナルティがある。そして、そのレベルも非常に高い。それがなければ、スキャンダルだけでは売れるものではありません。
12 しかし、精神分析によると、彼女はモーレツな男嫌い。
13 だから戸籍上はともかく精神生活上は孤児としてそだったことになります。
14 あきらかに、強烈なファザー・コンプレックスだし、ペニス・コンプレックスなんですね。
15 ボクは草間クンと結婚したいです。ヘッヘッヘッ。そうしたら、ボクは封建的亭主だから、キミをふつうの女に変えてやろう。
16 あなた不感症ですか？
17 しかし「へんじゃないか」とみる向きもある。「築地署と祝橋公園は目と鼻の先。つかまるのは初めから計算ずみんなじゃないか」というのだ。
This statement concerning the artist’s age shows the sexism she was confronted with, while speculations about her planning to be arrested show distrust towards Kusama as an artist.

To sum up, there was a tendency in the Japanese media coverage of Kusama to attract attention, more often than not by dubious means. Scandalising but misleading headlines were frequent. For example, the article “The method of sleeping and selling; the tactic of sleeping one’s way up to the top” (Shūkan bunshun 1969) wrongly suggests that Kusama engaged in sex work. “The hard work of sleeping with a lot of blondes” (Shūkan gendai 1970), again, dwells on the sexual adventures of her interview partner Rocky Aoki, which only becomes clear in the text itself. Kusama’s own point of view can hardly be extracted from these articles—and when stated, it varies depending on the situation. While she took a critical stance in the Fujin kurabu 婦人倶楽部 piece, by asking “Why do Japanese men keep on putting women down?”, she took an overtly affirmative approach regarding the detailed accounts of Japanese restaurant owner and wrestler Rocky Aoki’s promiscuous sex life, at the expense of her own art hardly being discussed at all in the article (ibid.).

There is, however, one paragraph from the Shūkan gendai 週刊現代 article that helps us understand the expectations of the press in regard to Kusama. Here, the artist vented her frustration about the fact that she had intended to do several naked happenings in Japan but encountered troubles in recruiting women for this purpose. According to her, Japanese women were out of the question due to them not being able to marry after stripping nude in public. Therefore, she had planned to fly in a group of hippies, but they were denied coming to Japan on account of marihuana offenses. When returning to the U.S., Kusama was criticised harshly by the Japanese media for not delivering the happenings she had promised. The author of the article in question points to the fact that Kusama did not follow up on her plans to have an orgy with the prime minister of Japan in the parliament. Although she came to Japan and stayed until the end of April, the naked happenings she did end up having performed in the Tōkyō districts of Shinjuku 新宿, Ginza 銀座, and Shibuya 渋谷 were, according to the author, “merely done as a token effort” (Shūkan gendai 1970). And he airs his grievances about this: “This is surely a disappointment” (ibid.).

These examples demonstrate how Kusama Yayoi was treated with curiosity, but also disrespect by the Japanese tabloid press in 1969 and 1970. She was characterised as both mentally ill and business-minded, but, most of all, a misfit. It needs to be
remarked that despite all speculation by the media, the intersectional artist, being marginalised by her identity both as a woman and an Asian, was never commercially successful while in the U.S. On the contrary, navigating the New York Art scene, she had only limited financial resources. It would take decades until the academic interest in the art of Kusama resurfaced in the 1990s. Now one of the most expensive living female artists worldwide, Kusama has been living in a mental health clinic since her return to Japan in the 1970s, continuing to paint and write.

**Kusama’s Politics of Identity: Protest Art and “National Drag”**

By the mid-1960s, Kusama began to turn her back on the art establishment and increasingly pushed into the public outdoor sphere, relying on publicity for her performances and happenings as she counted on the appetite of the press for scandal. She also carried out such events in the semi-public sphere of her studio. At the same time, living bodies became the centre of her art. Kusama also began to choose contemporary issues as subject matter for her performances and happenings, like the commercialisation and hierarchical structures of the art world, sexual repression, capitalism, or the Vietnam War (Braitner 2020: 65).

According to Alexandra Munroe, there must have been at least seventy-five of these events between 1967 and 1970, mostly in New York but also in Europe, Japan, and on the U.S. east coast (Munroe 1989: 29). The art historian Mignon Nixon emphasises the analogy between Kusama’s “orgies,” a series of events showcasing sex and nudity, and modern warfare as “an orgy of violence” (Nixon 2012: 18):

Burlesque tableaux of war camp, the orgies featured Kusama Dancers enacting ob-scene rites—celebrated offstage from the press Happenings—to dramatize the degradation into which successive administrations had dragged the country (ibid.).

In her orgies, the artist took a nuanced approach towards her own ethnicity, meaning that she actively played with stereotypes and/or chose to de-emphasise her own “Japaneseness” in order to reach a wider audience and spread her protest messages. There are quite a few examples of Kusama performing “Japaneseness” prominently as documented by means of photography. In 1966, the same year Kusama gained public attention for *Narcissus Garden*, she conducted a happening called *Walking Piece*, which consisted of her taking a walk through New York, wearing a Kimono, and fashioning an umbrella adorned with flowers (Braitner 2020: 6). On another occasion, in one of the *Presidential Orgies* (1968), Kusama is seen wearing an outfit that looks like a Kimono paired with fishnet tights (Braitner 2020: 73). In the *Alice in Wonderland happening* (1968), she wears a piece of clothing resembling a kimono that she herself produced. This outfit, merging Japanese traditional clothing with 1960s hippie fashion, would actually be an affront to traditional Japanese Kimono, as noted by
Gautherot (2002: 40). While I can see his point, one could argue that Kusama intended this happening for a Western audience that would not know the difference. However, Kusama presenting herself as Japanese by wearing a faux-traditional Kimono could also be interpreted as her showing her ambivalences towards her own identity as both a Japanese and international artist. Additionally, this display of constructed Japaneseness could serve as a parody, showcasing stereotypical ideas about an “exotic” Japan and Japanese women (Braitner 2020: 85). Lynn Zelevansky has argued that while Kusama may well have criticised cultural and sexual stereotypes by performing an “Asian identity,” the artist also capitalised on current trends: “[…] [B]y emphasizing her own Japaneseness she could share the cachet enjoyed by Zen Buddhism and other forms of Eastern thought in intellectual circles in the United States during the fifties and sixties” (Zelevansky 1998: 23). It is also interesting to note that Kusama did not explicitly stage herself as Japanese, but can be read as Asian in a broader sense, considering that for many Westerners the difference between Asian ethnicities was hard to tell. However, most of the time, Kusama chose not to focus on her ethnic identity or background. The era of the Vietnam War particularly was a time in which highlighting herself as Asian could have raised suspicion in the U.S.:

Cutting a youthful and glamorous figure, and proclaiming herself a high priestess of love, she zealously promoted the sexual revolution, summoning Eros, not Thanatos, in the name of peace. Art history detects vanity in this self-fashioning, but that misses the feint. For what Kusama was concealing with her extravagant self-exposure was her own history as a survivor of war. By protesting the war in Vietnam as a youthful denizen of New York’s bohemia, she adopted a political position inside, not outside, the culture responsible for the war. Her spirited protests shunned the role of war victim, and so avoided arousing the guilt and distrust that any evocation of atomic attacks on Japan might still have summoned (Nixon 2012: 14).

As Nixon pointed out, it is important to note that while Kusama did not encounter first-hand the horrors of the war in Vietnam, she is indeed a survivor of World War II, who had to work in a factory for the Japanese war effort at a young age. Living through times of violent political confrontations surely left a mark on the artist and may, to a certain degree, explain her vehement anti-war stance. A colleague of Kusama who also covered themes of violence through bodily performance is Ono Yōko. Her performance Cut Piece (Fig. 6), which was first shown in Kyōto in 1964, encouraged an audience to cut the clothes of the artist, who is sitting very still, with scissors. While different interpretations of Cut Piece have been offered, for example being a “[…] striptease, a protest against violence and against war (specifically the Vietnam War), and most recently (and most frequently) as a feminist work” (Concannon 2008: 83), I want to focus on the anti-war component here to compare Ono’s mode of bodily investment to Kusama’s, and to discuss the factor of the artist’s ethnic identity. As Bryan-Wilson (2003: 121) points out, “Cut Piece speaks many things, and one of them is an emphasis on the tension between the body and the nation […]”
Performed in the 1960s, *Cut Piece* “with its implications of vulnerability and danger” ostensibly spoke of contemporary issues concerning the Vietnam War, but considering Ono’s Japanese heritage, it also evoked the horrors of World War II and its aftermath (ibid.: 103). The image of a Japanese body covered in torn shreds of fabric related to the experiences of the nuclear bomb victims of Hiroshima and Nagasaki. Even if the performance was not originally intended as a protest piece, these connections should not be dismissed, considering there is another example of Ono drawing from the visual repertoire of war and atomic destruction; namely, Ono’s 1966 performance *Shadow Piece*, which consisted of the artist tracing the outlines of people, transports a meaning that is tied to the Japanese war experience specifically: “Like naked bodies and shreds of clothing, the shadow is another key motif in post-bomb photographs, as the brightness and intensity of the impact left imprints of victims’ shadows like blackened smudges on stone paths and streets” (ibid.: 112).

In the context of the Vietnam war, the question of Ono’s ethnic identity becomes as important as it is difficult. Like Kusama, Ono characterises herself ambivalently, as Japanese, American, and international artist. While the visibility of her body leaves room for various interpretations, one of them being a protest against American imperialism, “[…] *Cut Piece* has been recontextualized and read not only as an assault on the individual body, but as a potent metaphor for the generalized, submissive, besieged Asian body” (Bryan-Wilson 2003: 116). This, of course, is problematic in itself, considering her Japanese body can be viewed as a stand-in for Vietnam, or, as Bryan-Wilson (ibid.) puts it, “Ono’s body is more than a tool of political resistance: her Japanese body actually substitutes for Vietnam in a troubling elision of Asian difference […].”

While Kusama has staged her Japanese ethnicity by means of Japanese *drag* in some instances, the artist in general tended to avoid the question of her own ethnicity, especially in the context of artworks that could be interpreted as a political protest. Ono, whose Japanese body became increasingly visible during the *Cut Piece* performance, represents a kind of “passive presence”24 or victim, which stands in contrast to the active part Kusama—whose protest does not depend on her own body being visible, as I will show below—plays as orchestrator of her happenings and performances (Braitner 2020: 81). The “orgies” in Kusama’s studio, for example, were not spontaneous events, but very carefully choreographed by the artist. We can see this in one photograph (Fig. 7) where Kusama arranges the pose of a participant while already looking elsewhere, seemingly invested into another aspect of the scene already (ibid.: 66).

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24 Ono’s passivity may also be viewed in an Asian, Buddhist context of her gifting herself to the audience. The artist herself has offered this interpretation (see Concannon 2008: 88).
Differences in modes of execution notwithstanding, Kusama’s art does show similarities to Ono’s concerning the centrality of bodies and references to nuclear annihilation. This became evident in a press release (Fig. 8) for the *Naked Demonstration at Wall Street* event that took place on October 15, 1968, entitled “THE ANATOMIC EXPLOSION.” Kusama adopted an activist approach when she wrote: “The money made with this stock is enabling the war to continue. We protest this cruel, greedy instrument of the war establishment” (N. N. 2002: 145). In the same text, however, she used poetic language to transport utopic visions: “Wall Street men must become farmers and fishermen [...] OBLITERATE WALL STREET MEN WITH POLKA DOTS ON THEIR NAKED BODIES [...]” (ibid.). The organic vulnerability of human bodies is referenced through nudity: “BE IN … BE NAKED, NAKED, NAKED” and juxtaposed with violent phrases like “STOCK IS FOR BURNING. STOCK IS FOR BURNING. STOCK MUST BE BURNED!” (ibid.). Kusama’s repetition of the word “burning,” as well as the title of the press release, “THE ANATOMIC EXPLOSION,” evokes comparisons to explosives and Napalm used in the ongoing Vietnam War, without mentioning “Vietnam” at all.

At a time when footage of and U.S. propaganda about the Vietnam War was transported into the homes of U.S. Americans via mass media, by making references to Wall Street and brokers, Kusama chose an unusual imagery referring to a world within the United States that was still detached from the general American population. In this way she broke down borders between “here” and “there,” by focusing on Wall Street as a capitalist institution, and thereby attacking those who profit from the war instead of, for example, American soldiers, who might have been more difficult to criticise since they were seen by many as war heroes. To underline the importance of this approach, I am resorting to Philip Metres, who writes about visionary anti-war poetry and states that it amounts to a cultural service, which is in fact “[…] to render through poetic language the essentially inescapable relationship between the nation’s war and the physical and psychic distance of the civilian at the homefront” (Metres 2007: 114).

As expected, Kusama was not the only artist trying to narrow the distance between U.S. citizens and the victims of the Vietnam War. In the 1960s, American artist Martha Rosler began her series of Collages called *House Beautiful: Bringing the War Home* (1967–1972) in which she visually juxtaposed the violence and horrors of the war with the comfortable homes of the U.S. middle class. Snippets taken out of newspapers such as *Life Magazine* and interior decorating magazines like *House Beautiful* are the basis for works such as *Cleaning the Drapes* (1967–1972) (fig. 10), in which a young woman is seen cleaning the curtains of a home, revealing a barren landscape with soldiers in the background (Museum of Modern Art 2020). While *Cleaning the Drapes* served to critique the Vietnam War by pointing to the political apathy of the U.S. citizens at home and emphasised the duality of “here/there” by contrasting the soldiers outside with a housewife in her living room—thereby commenting on prevailing gender roles—it must be noted that since Rosler’s source material was taken
from publicly available magazines, it was already pre-filtered (Braitner 2020: 75). Kusama, on the other hand, actively generated imagery of the war in the course of her happenings and performances, which she also used to distribute in her own magazine (Gimenez 2018: 52–53). Her artworks do not portrays war as an isolated problem, but as a result of broader societal and cultural issues:

The degraded masculinity cultivated in the “atrocity-producing situation” of Vietnam was not restricted to the arena of war, Kusama suggested, or to those who participated directly in the ‘criminal orgy’ the war had become. In these burlesques of war camp, a promiscuous intermingling of obscenity and violence points to a more extensive cultural de-repression (Nixon 2019: 343).

Shock and parody are recurring tools in Kusama’s performances and happenings (specifically her Presidential Orgies) that served to highlight the dehumanising effects of war on society as a whole (Braitner 2020: 74). One of the more overt references specifically to the Vietnam War can be found in a scene from a Presidential Orgy (1968), where a rubber mask of Lyndon B. Johnson, President Nixon’s predecessor, is placed on an American flag. It is adorned with a cigarette in its mouth (Fig. 10), “reprising the grisly practice of stuffing the mouth of a trophy head with a cigarette” (Nixon 2019: 343). This imagery was not merely a parody of the former president, but, as Mignon Nixon argues, a specific example of war iconography; for not only was it common practice for soldiers fighting in Vietnam to pose with mutilated or dressed up corpses of enemies for photographs, but the severed head, eyes wide open, and a burning cigarette stuffed in its mouth, was a prominent feature in these depictions (ibid.; Braitner 2020: 74).

The use of a mask, again, shows Kusama’s reliance on bodily elements to communicate her messages. She also incorporated elements like the “American flag” as a kind of national drag, to redirect the attention of the viewer to their own, American sphere. Her protest art also carries a gendered component that links masculinity to violence. One example of this was an open letter to President Nixon (November 11, 1968), in which Kusama used bodily imagery and erotic parody: “[...] You can’t eradicate violence by using more violence. This truth is written in spheres with which I will lovingly, soothingly, adorn your hard masculine body. Gently! Gently! Dear Richard. Calm your manly fighting spirit!” (N. N. 2021). Kusama’s evoking of the president’s “hard masculine body” refers to a notion of apparent dominance that stands in contrast to the underlying message of the letter, which exposes war to be the product of libidinous urges and consequently accuses the president of being controlled by emotions rather than reason (Braitner 2020: 73). Mignon Nixon also identifies a gendered component in this letter that comments on both masculinity and warfare: “The implication of Kusama’s mystical appeal to ‘my hero, Richard Nixon’ was that war masculinity had itself succumbed to a hallucinatory unreality” (Nixon 2019: 343).
In the following I am going to analyse a photograph taken in 1968 at one of Kusama’s “presidential orgies.” This performance discusses the violence of war in the context of masculinity, again by means of shock, humour, and eroticism.

Figure 11: Untitled studio photography [Nixon Orgy], 1968. Kusama Yayoi. Photographer and repository unknown.

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25 Kusama’s “presidential orgies,” which were a series of events including many people posing and mingling in various states of nudity or drag conducted in her studio in Lower Manhattan, aimed at criticising U.S. politics by means of bodily performance (Munroe 1989: 29).

26 For my original, more extensive analysis of this example see chapter five of my master’s thesis (Braitner 2020: 65–69).
In the 1968 black and white photography (Fig. 11), taken during the Nixon Orgy in Kusama’s New York studio, Kusama herself is not visible. We can see three people posing together on a rug. The background consists of a grid with many small holes. A partly disrobed young man lies on the floor. He stretches his arms upwards to look up the legs of a nude woman standing over him, whose thighs he touches. The woman points a rifle at him, and both look in each other’s direction. Next to them stands another woman, who is also holding a rifle that nonchalantly points towards her female co-performer. She looks directly into the camera and pokes her tongue out (it could also be a gum bubble).

If we look at the posing bodies, we can see that they are in various states of undress. The woman who points her weapon at the man below her wears nothing but a straw hat with tassels and ornaments, which looks like either a Mexican sombrero or may also reference headgears worn in conservative southern states like Texas. Her colleague is donning a hat resembling a cowboy hat and uses a crinkled American flag as a kind of scarf that covers her right shoulder and her front torso while the rest of her body is naked. The man on the floor is partly hidden by the fabric of another (American) flag, the stars covering his upper body and throat and the striped parts his knees and thighs. His head lies on something dark, probably a cushion, while his lower body is partly exposed. His limp penis is placed on the edge of a round plate, at the centre of which a number of ball-shaped, light-coloured soft objects with dark spots have been arranged. Some more of these globular objects can be discovered in a cooking pan near his left foot. Behind the woman with the cowboy hat there is another object, an abstract sculpture that is about waist-high and resembles a four-legged topiary animal. Its body could be made from straw, or, judging from the quality of its surface, pieces of metal.

There is an ambivalent kind of humour to be found in the bodily-erotic gestures of the performance. The theme of voyeurism, inherent in the act of looking, surfaces in more than one way. The man on the floor looks up the legs of the naked woman towering above him and even spreads them, thus enabling him to catch a glimpse of her privates; at the same time, however, he is being held at gunpoint by her. Also, he himself is being subjected to the gaze of the woman he is looking at. Crucially, the voyeuristic gaze of the man is mirrored by the gaze of the audience looking at this scene. This gazing of the audience is exposed by the second woman looking provocatively into the camera and confronting us. She is naked save for the cowboy hat, but we cannot see her vulva or breasts because the American flag blocks our view. Her confident pose resembles that of a cowboy as well. She sticks out her tongue as if in defiance, as if she has caught the viewers in the act of looking and losing themselves in this spectacle of eroticism and violence.

I would argue that in this context the emphasis on voyeurism and control (or loss thereof), in combination with the props Kusama uses (like the weapons, hats, and
flags), can be framed as a critique of American mass media, which capitalised on the spectacle of war. Concerning the mode of presentation of the performance, there is a feeling of playful anarchy that stems from the merging of violence and sex, horror and humour, in a theatrical way. This impression of theatricality is reinforced by props like the flags or hats that cover the bodies while concurrently expose nudity. I further argue that through the way these objects are used, they can be viewed as costumes or drag rather than clothing, framing nationality, and, subsequently, identity, as something to be changed at will, or quite literally, at the drop of a hat. This has both small-scale (in the playful way roles can be tried on during an orgy), and large-scale implications (the possibility of assuming the role of a soldier in the face of international violent confrontations) (Braitner 2020: 67–69).

Like in Kusama’s letter to Richard Nixon, here we can see a framing of violence that is gendered and related to human bodies and eroticism, while the national drag locates violence in the U.S. context as opposed to the distant Vietnam. Kusama thus draws on an iconography of American masculinity that transports the notion of dominance via drag and props, like American flags, weapons, and the cowboy hat. In a reversal of roles, however, in the Nixon orgy scene it is the women who wield these symbols of power while it is a man who is shown to be subdued. By exposing his genitals and arranging them in a way that links them to foodstuff, he is both ridiculed and characterised as vulnerable. One could interpret his posture as a reference to the burials of American soldiers whose coffins are also covered with a flag, or as the symbolic “burial” of a specific form of dominant masculinity, which relates to the “queering” and transfer of power in this scene (Braitner 2020: 68–69). This framing ties into societal changes in gender relations and the fear of a loss of masculine dominance in the U.S., prevalent already in the 1950s.

Conclusion

While Kusama Yayoi herself refuses categorisation, the artist used—oftentimes theatrical—body art for activist reasons, in order to, for example, protest against the Vietnam War. At the same time, the performing bodies in her happenings and performances posed questions about identity, since gender and ethnicity are presented as roles to be assumed at will. This queering of seemingly fixed modes of identity can

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27 A cowboy hat is also shown in Kusama’s 1967 movie Self-Obliteration, a gesture to which Jennifer Brody ascribes intentionality: “In the latter half of the film, Kusama sports a white-dotted cowboy hat as a form of U.S. masculinist drag, almost as if she is winking at America’s ‘gift’ to world cinema—the innovation known as the western” (Brody 2008: 43).

28 For examples of the way this shift was negotiated, both in popular media as well as through artists like the cowboy-like persona of action painter Jackson Pollock or the heroic masochism of Chris Burden, see section 5.1 on masculinity and performance in Braitner 2020: 69–73.
be said to be an integral part of Kusama’s artworks. In them, she breaks down the borders between subjects and objects, bodies and surroundings, self and other, Asia and the West, through strategies of repetition and fragmentation as well as the use of queer materiality, meaning an odd or unusual juxtaposition of materials, like obliterating furniture with soft, bodily objects or use of foodstuffs as material for covering up surfaces in *Kusama with Maccaroni Mannequin*.

Like her artworks, Kusama’s own presence in many of them can be seen as being the object of fragmentation and repetition. By embodying identities like the “Pin-up girl,” “housewife,” “Japanese woman,” or “ceremonial priestess,” Kusama played on stereotypes surrounding these tropes while she subverted them through her own interpretations. Visual fragmentations can be identified in *Kusama with Maccaroni Mannequin*, where the artist herself is presented as divided in the middle and contrasted with the mannequin and her surroundings. Kusama assumes and transforms other roles as well, such as the “American Pin-up.” She creates dissonance by not only casting it with her own Japanese body, but also posing amid an abstract and disturbing artistic environment. Such ambivalence was also transported in the *Alice in Wonderland* happening, where she was wearing a piece of clothing that could be equally viewed as a Kimono or a fantasy outfit, being contrasted by the surrounding naked white bodies wearing animal or politicians’ masks.

Even Kusama’s absence from some other works of her art can be viewed as an artistic strategy of commenting on the topic of “identity,” as discussed in the context of Vietnam War activism and the visual analysis of a “Nixon orgy” scene, where national drag is used to make a point about violence and gender dynamics, without visually referencing Vietnam or Kusama’s own Japanese identity at all. It can therefore be concluded that Kusama’s body art of the 1960s shows a profound understanding of identity as multifaceted and ambivalent, and her “queering” of stereotypes—both in terms of gender norms and ethnicity—can be said to be an act of defiance against marginalisation and oppression.

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