

“Kusama, Kusama, Kusama (World's First Obsessional Artist)”.

During the end of the sixties the Japanese artist Yayoi Kusama trademarked herself and her career with this statement. What meaning does it carry?

She lived and worked in the art scene of New York during the 1960's and the 1970's. From the very beginning she found herself in a marginalized spot because of her gender, but also because she was an immigrant. Although working as an artist in New York at that time in history meant seducing and pleasing the men in power no matter which gender you were born with, the field of art mainly belonged to the Anglo- American male <sup>1</sup>.

Not only did Kusama declare her self as a woman with an obsessional character, but also as the first artist being obsessional. Yayoi Kusama experienced mental struggle, documented by psychiatrists in Japan before her move to the United States<sup>2</sup>, but the rivalry and stress occupying the art scene, drove her into several mental collapses and a suicide attempt during her stay in the States.

Her bitterest social critique grew out of the experiences she made while living and working in New York. She believed that an artist's gender should never be a criterion concerning whether or not a work of art were to be considered as good or bad<sup>3</sup>. It seems that her issues were related to gender-, and socio- politics. Given that particular time in Western history it seems reasonable. Still, it makes me wonder, was it that her gender determined how her persona and work were read, socially and artistically? If it were not for her being born as a woman, maybe her experiences would have been shaped differently. How then did her experiences affect her making?

In this text I would like to look closer at these questions. I will try to look for possible reasoning and explanations through parts of the work of Simone de Beauvoir's “The Other Sex”. The work is a written feministic analysis, referred to by many as the feministic Bible. It is also considered a philosophical text. It still inspires women all over the world to see themselves and their experiences in a new light. It is indeed considered one of the most influential texts because de Beauvoir has the boldness to write down her thoughts upon why women are second to men.

In general her works are discussions relating to topics concerning freedom and

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<sup>1</sup> Frank Gautherot, Yayoi Kusama. Mirrored Years, Museum Boijmans Van Beuningen, Rotterdam 2009, p. 78.

<sup>2</sup> While Yayoi Kusama was still living in Japan she tried to obtain scientific proof of her artistic talent so that she could study abroad. In the psychiatric practice in Japan at that time dissecting brains to analyze the artist's creativity, was a part of the study and search for a connection between the artist's work and her mental disorder.

Frank Gautherot, Yayoi Kusama. Mirrored Years, p. 82.

<sup>3</sup> Frank Gautherot, p.104.

responsibility. She wrote several essays<sup>4</sup> that became important contributions leading her towards realizing “The Other Sex”. De Beauvoir gave herself a project: to write an auto- biography. She wanted to investigate and discover if her gender was shaping her experiences in a certain way. “The Other Sex” is her answer to her investigation. I believe that Simone de Beauvoir’s questions concerning her own experiences as a woman can be linked to Yayoi Kusama’s works, and to her experiences in the New York art- world in the sixties and the seventies.

Even if the works I am going to describe and to a certain degree analyze were made decades ago, both of these women have inspired me and continue to do so. As an artist I am trying to look at what my work is about. I have often wondered if my practice is determined by my gender, since my works are most often translations and materializations of my experiences. Finally I will look into how my art practice is colored by the fact that I am a female. Are my experiences what they really are and do I make it what it is because of my gender? Maybe I will be able to get a step or two closer to understanding all of this better through taking a closer peak at Kusama and de Beauvoir.

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<sup>4</sup> The essays “Phyrrus et Cinèas” and “Pour une morale de l’ambiguïté” were important because they both discuss the topics of freedom and responsibility. Beauvoir de, Simone, Det annet kjønn (Le deuxième sexe 1, 2), Pax Forlag, Oslo 2000, blz. 10, Norwegian translation.

## YAYOI KUSAMA.

Yayoi Kusama was born in Matsumoto City in 1929. After a six months stay in Seattle, she arrived in New York. The year was 1958. Kusama became active among Pop and Minimalist artists during their formative years. One of the first things she did as a newcomer in the city was to climb the top of the Empire State building. Gazing out over the sky- scrapers she decided that she was going to become a star in the New York art scene. Despite the milieu and stage being dominated by the Anglo-American male, Kusama managed to develop and make her autonomous sculptural work. She had numerous exhibitions at vanguard galleries like Green Gallery and the Richard Castellane, along side other artists, including Andy Warhol, Donald Judd and Claes Oldenburg. But was paradise this close?

## KUSAMA AND THE OTHERS

-serial, air- mail stickers and desperation.

I believe that who we are as people is strongly woven together with how we view life and, not at least, how we live our lives. Therefore I think it is important to write a bit about Yayoi Kusama's social life and try to peak into her relationship with some other artists from the time.

It is the general agreement that Andy Warhol was the major contributor to U.S Pop Art. Although Warhol started to work with the power of repetition of images, specifically the soup cans, around January 1962, Kusama began introducing everyday objects in her work after having seen an exposition called New Forms- New Media, held at the Martha Jackson Gallery in June 1960. This particular exhibition was much- talked about because it showed a historical link between Dada and Neo- Dadaism<sup>5</sup>. Through experimenting with the use of mixing medias, Kusama made her first work built upon repetitive use of commonplace objects during the fall the same year. Furthermore she started to work on her collages. Kusama collected and assembled air- mail stickers, postage stamps and paper dollars. The very early ones are recorded in her inventory list from 1961. Even though she does not remember exhibiting them, the work was a part of a group show at the Stephen Radich Gallery, in September 1961<sup>6</sup>. There is indeed the possibility that Warhol saw Kusama's collages and that he was inspired. A seed was planted in him and the harvest that followed later on were his Campell's Soup Cans oil paintings.

The way Kusama used the power of repetition also inspired other artists to develop their work. Between 1961 and 1964 Kusama had a studio space in the same building

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<sup>5</sup> Frank Gautherot, Yayoi Kusama. Mirrored Years, Museum Boijmans Van Beuningen, Rotterdam 2009, p. 78.

<sup>6</sup> Frank Gautherot, Yayoi Kusama. Mirrored Years, p. 79.

as Donald Judd and Eva Hesse. In 1962 Kusama was working on her Accumulation sculptures. It is very possible that Hesse initiated her work because she observed Kusama's way of directing her compulsiveness into repetitive making and re-making of objects<sup>7</sup>. It was a similar situation concerning Donald Judd. The aesthetic changes in his work became visible after he started to take companionship with Kusama in the fall of 1961. Serial and repetition became a trademark in his work from 1964 and onwards, whilst visible in her collages since 1961<sup>8</sup>.

For Accumulation #1, an armchair, Kusama created a room for her phallus- covered sculpture. The walls in the room were covered by egg- cartoons which created organized rows of hole- reliefs. This work was bursting of psychosexual undertones. Claes Oldenburg became intrigued since he shared her interest. In June 1962 Oldenburg showed work alongside Kusama and Warhol in a group show in the Green Gallery. He got very fascinated by her sewn sculptures. At a show Oldenburg had at Green Gallery in September 1962 he showed a body of work, known as his first soft- sculptures<sup>9</sup>. These objects brought him fame within the U.S, as well as international attention. Even though at the time that Kusama showed her work, Oldenburg was developing his. He denied that there was any link between the work he created and was known for, and her work<sup>10</sup>.

Kusama was an original artist and a source of inspiration to others, but she still struggled. I would like to mention as an example the "broken promise" from Richard Hu Bellamy<sup>11</sup>. He had taken an interest in Kusama and her work before he opened the gallery in 1960. However, through Kusama he was introduced to Donald Judd's work during a visit to her studio<sup>12</sup>. Bellamy changed his mind and she was extremely disappointed when he chose to exhibit Judd's art- work instead of hers. How deep did she dig the hole of desperation and how far down into it did she sink?

## ACCUMULATION

- a stab in the back, mental collapse and protuberance invasion

The artist grew increasingly paranoid during the beginning of the 1960's, obsessing her mind with thoughts about her work being appropriated by the male artists, and

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<sup>7</sup> Frank Gautherot, p. 81.

<sup>8</sup> Frank Gautherot, p. 81.

<sup>9</sup> Frank Gautherot, p. 88.

<sup>10</sup> Frank Gautherot, p. 84.

<sup>11</sup> Richard Hu Bellamy was a Chinese- American art dealer, known as somebody who knew innovative artists and their work. He had an open approach to immigrant artists since his mother was a Chinese immigrant. Bellamy was also the director of the Green Gallery.

Frank Gautherot, p. 82.

<sup>12</sup> Frank Gautherot, p. 81.

she pulled the curtains in front of her studio windows. She became unable to leave her space. The year was 1962 and the tension of rivalry drove her into an intense working- period, with an urge to complete big numbers of sewn sculptures in a short amount of time. The stress led her into her second nervous breakdown in New York<sup>13</sup>.

Kusama was diagnosed by the Japanese psychiatrist Takemoto as a woman suffering from obsessive- compulsive disorder. The disorder was part of an anxiety neurosis. His scientific opinion was that this disorder was the drive behind her creativity. He explained that her irrational thoughts would manifest themselves in obsession. This resulted in repetitive behavior, disguised as compulsions<sup>14</sup>. The element of repetitions in her work is showing Kusama's obsessions. She expressed them as fears. In her art- work her obsession manifested itself as the phallus.

The works that she made and became known for in the 1960's were large-scale sculptural work, where she communicated ideas about "infinity". As we shall learn, her sculptures were in the beginning presented as tableaux capsuling works that for instance could include a rowing boat. She covered everyday- object by hundreds of hard looking, long shaped soft- sculptures, turning the commodity into works of art that became characterized with sexual- psychotic meaning. Even though Kusama stated being the "World's First Obsessional Artist", she did not produce compulsively after the fall of 1962<sup>15</sup>. Photographs taken of her studio show many soft sculptures that she had created by then. By this time she rather focused her energy and intellect continuing her concept of "infinity" into three dimensions. Further development led her into working with the room- size. She started to use mirrored panels to create atmospheric, large- scale sculptures, allowing space and body to open up into infinity. She chose soft materials, like polka dot- printed cotton fabric, to stitch her signature sacks, referred to as phalluses. These soft sculptures were placed in clusters within the mirrored space. Their reflection spread out, back and forth, leading the viewer into a hallucinatory web of dotted objects and the mirrored reflections of him or herself.

For Kusama collecting things, like for instance stickers for her collage work, or working with a form that she would keep re-making, became an important element in her work. Just a few weeks after moving into her loft studio she started to stitch and work on her soft sculptures. She used canvas to make her first cotton- sacks. In the beginning she used matress- filling to stuff them. All of these sculptures were different from one another in size and shape. Some were long and thin while others were small and had a potato- like appearance.

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<sup>13</sup> Frank Gautherot, p. 88.

<sup>14</sup> Frank Gautherot, p. 84.

<sup>15</sup> Frank Gautherot, p. 93.

Just like the looping webs in her Infinity Nets, the semi- flaccid or erected canvas bags, started to accumulate. By the end of the fall in 1961 she had made hundreds of them. In her later works we will see that she would arrange her naïve- looking, soft-sculptures in clusters or in “fields”, but in the beginning of the play with the phallus shape, she simply started to search for “hosts” for them to overgrow. Kusama started to collect common domestic objects and soon ladders, high- heeled shoes, boats, dressers and beds were covered by the these soft objects. Later on Kusama described these environmentally installed sculptures, as “accumulations” or “aggregations”.

PHALLIS.

- the beginning: creamy paint and unease.

When Kusama started to develop and make work in the U.S, she mainly focused on large scale, normally horizontal, oil paintings on canvas. The paintings, up to 10 meters long, were called Infinity Nets. She layered the surface of the canvas with hundreds of thick dots of paint, spreading out and joining each other in creating the “net”. The earliest Infinity Nets are canvases overlaid by two shades of cream-, and white- paint, barely contrasting each other. The use of color quickly entered the paintings. These were smaller in scale and featured green, red and yellow dots or “nets”, covering backgrounds of black, white or gold. The results were floating webs that variously contrasted the underlying wash.

Her paintings had no center or no sense of composition. There was no start or end to the work. All the viewer would see were series of punctuating chubby curls of paint on far stretching cloth. These webs reached all the way to the end of the unframed canvases, underlining the idea about continuity beyond physical limits or borders<sup>16</sup>.

In October 1959 she had a solo exhibition at the Brata Gallery in New York. She showed five large white Infinity Nets. Her work was well received. She exhibited nationally as well as internationally after that. She established a contract with Stephen Radich in September 1960<sup>17</sup>. He gave her a second solo show that was very successful, which provided her with opportunities to exhibit at among others, the Carnegie International and the Whitney Annual<sup>18,19</sup>

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<sup>16</sup> Jo Applin, *Yayoi Kusama. Infinity Mirror Room- Phalli's Field*, Afterall Books, London 2012, p. 31.

<sup>17</sup> Frank Gautherot, *Yayoi Kusam. Mirrored Years*, Museum Boijmans Van Beuningen, Rotterdam 2009, p. 78.

<sup>18</sup> Frank Gautherot, *Yayoi Kusam. Mirrored Years*, p. 78

<sup>19</sup> The paintings were introduced to Europe. The Infinity Nets were included at Udo Kulterman's “Monochrome Malerei” at the Städtisches Museum in Leverkusen in 1960. There she showed alongside Yves Klein and Piero Manzoni. Klein considered his blue painted, wall- mounted monochrome panels as objects. And Manzoni was

Kusama considered the paintings as a work that spread further than just across the canvases. She described the “nets” as a having their own life. They grew over the walls and in the end they covered the whole room. She went further: the “nets” in the end grew beyond everything. She claimed that the paintings enlarged themselves and that they became part of the universe<sup>20</sup>. I think that Kusama's hallucinatory experience is a very important reason to how and why she developed further and as we shall see later, how the Infinity Nets were important precursors to her soft sculptures. These works actually allowed her to transform herself into an environmental sculptor. There are photographs taken of her, where she is posing in front of one of her “nets” in 1961. It seems that the photo shows just what it is she wanted to explain. Kusama is standing in front of her 10 meter long painting and the shot is composed in such a way that the ends of the canvas is left out of the frame of the photograph. This gives the impression that the painted surface is growing beyond and spreads out into “infinity”, with no beginning, no end and no center. In that sense, the Infinity Nets also became not only the idea, but also a thing. Her paintings were her first experimentations with the spatial parameters of a room. Additionally she was also discovering techniques for playing with expansion and contraction of the space the work inhabited

PHALLIS.

-from nets to environments.

Kusama installed her first environment at the Gertrude Stein Gallery in New York in December 1963<sup>21</sup>. The title of the work was Aggregation: One Thousand Boats Show. Her response to the minimalist language of repetition of form and the ordering of identical units of everyday objects and materials, shone through in the work, which was presented more as a tableau than a room. Kusama's artistic language was anthropomorphic, erotic and surreal

The work she showed in the gallery was meant to be read as a relation between the object and the surrounding. The environment was organized from a frontal point of view. She wanted the spectator to see the work head- on. The tableau started off in the beginning of a corridor and by the end of it, the object itself appeared; Kusama had painted a row- boat white and covered it by stitched fabric tubers made out of white fabric. The corridor itself, the floor, walls and ceiling were papered with 999 black-, and- white reproductions of the boat. The emphasis on the single object was

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not reluctant himself to the idea of his monochrome painting and object making becoming things, as much as ideas.

Jo Applin, Yayoi Kusama. Infinity Mirror Room- Phalli's Field, Afterall Books, London 2012, p. 32 and 34.

<sup>20</sup> Frank Gautherot, Yayoi Kusama. Mirrored Years, Museum Boijmans Van Breuningen, Rotterdam 2009, p. 90.

<sup>21</sup> Jo Applin, Yayoi Kusama. Infinity Mirror Room- Phalli's Field, Afterall Books, London 2012, p. 35.

close to her works from the previous years, as the furniture and other items in the Accumulation series. Yet her work had not taken the turn into becoming fulfilled room- installations.

Another interesting aspect of the Aggregation: One Thousand Boats Show are the photographs that Kusama made of herself posing naked, standing between the boat and the wall. Her presence emphasized the “phallic-ness” of the work. The boat was overgrown by “penises” and the shape of the oars could only add to the psychosexual intensity of the work itself<sup>22</sup>. This was offering the art milieu something to chew on, since she showed a playful and bodily aspect of form and work that differed from the industrial materials and rigid geometric structures, so common for the Minimalist artist and the gallery spaces.

AM I AN OBJECT? AM I A SUBJECT?

- mirrored rooms and a surreal wonderland

Kusama’s interaction and play with her work, was an element she continued and developed further in her Floor Shows. The first was presented at the Castellane Gallery in November 1965<sup>23</sup>. Instead of focusing so much on creating very time-consuming work that required a lot of labor, Kusama’s work took a bit of a turn. Her ideas about “infinity” translated themselves into becoming three- dimensional mirrored rooms, known as Floor Show. She has over the years created many mirrored spaces that deal with this subject, but that never the less, appear each time different from the previous one.

One of these rooms that fascinated me a lot is the Infinity Mirror Room- Phalli’s Field. It is a two and a half meter high room with a floor space that is 25 square meters. The four walls are covered with mirrors. The floor is overgrown with the stitched and stuffed, red-, and white dotted, saluting sacks of different sizes and shapes. The soft sculptures are crowded together in tight packages on- top of the rectangular sheets of the floor’s plywood. Some of them are short and stubby. Others are long and thin. The object’s fabric is also of variation. Some of the dots are large, while others are small. This creates a surprising and non- uniform repetition of the phalluses. In the middle of the room there is a narrow pathway for the viewer to stand on. This work is interesting to enter. The “I” dissolves and therefore becomes one with the environment and the self.

I experienced the work in the Boijman’s Museum in Rotterdam, The Netherlands, where the Infinity Room- Phalli’s Field is part of the museum’s permanent collection. Standing alone inside of the room, I experienced my own image being reflected endlessly. I met my own image over and over again from whatever angle I turned. And then there were all of the red and white dotted sculptures that also

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<sup>22</sup> Jo Applin, Yayoi Kusama. Infinity Mirror Room- Phalli’s Field, p. 35.

<sup>23</sup> Frank Gautherot, Yayoi Kusama. Mirrored Years, Museum Boijmans Van Breuningen, Rotterdam 2009, p. 93.



became multiplied in the hundreds and hundreds, filling the space and my mind with an impression close to being disease- inflicted.

I think that the endless recreation of my own image inside of the room, made me become just another object among all the soft sculptures. In expansion I became dotted and part of the infinite environment. As with her Infinity Net paintings, where the loss of ones self is at the very core of the work's theme, the similar thing seems to happen in Infinity Mirror Room- Phalli's Field, as the foreground and background blur together into a flat, homogenous surface.

#### FEMINISTIC ASPECTS.

- are they there?

So far I have described her work in relation to the infinite, the dissolution of the subject and the phallus as a product and result of her fear. We have looked at her artistic development in relation to her mental illness and in relationship to the social environment she was living in, but what about the feministic aspects of her work?

Kusama is no outspoken feminist. Actually she has resisted any connection with the women's movement. Also she showed no interest in being related to other women artist's and their work<sup>24</sup>. Even so, this does not mean that her work cannot function as a locomotive in asking about and questioning the female's position in a social context.

#### DOTTED: HARD LOOKING. SOFT FEELING.

- the phallus, again!

Kusama uses her trademark red dot as a symbol of femininity, reproduction and nature. The dots connect to and lead us closer to her interest in the concept of "infinity". It becomes a description of the human condition. It symbolizes togetherness and unity<sup>25</sup>.

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<sup>24</sup> Jo Applin, *Yayoi Kusama. Infinity Mirror Room- Phalli's Field*, Afterall Books, London 2012, p. 7.

<sup>25</sup> "Polka dots must always multiply to infinity. Our earth is only one polka dot among millions of others"

Jo Applin, *Yayoi Kusama. Infinity Mirror Room- Phalli's Field*, p. 8.

<sup>26</sup> Leslie Camhi, RoseLee Goldberg, Laura Hoptman, Chris Kraus,

However it was Kusama's fear of sex that manifested itself in the phallus shape<sup>26</sup>. The episodes of psychological disorder she experienced have been quite influential to her work. Being under distress she felt scattered into her surroundings. She felt as if moving into a state of dissolution. And she felt herself accumulating<sup>27</sup>. What is also interesting is the way she addresses her fear. She transforms and reduces the symbol of the phallus into a playful and harmless thing. She makes a soft field of them where she lays down, poses for the camera and eternalizes the moment. She attaches them to such common objects that have a function in the human's everyday life, like the sofa, and she makes the symbol of the man himself and everything connected to his manliness, become "funny" and kind of a joke. She makes the threatening become the unthreatening.

## EROTICS OF THE BODY.

-deflating power.

The phallic form and the use of materials to create an abstract yet bodily expression in the art works, belong to a shift in practice in the 1950's and the 1960's<sup>28</sup>. Louise Bourgeois and Eva Hesse, among others, also produced works of "fleshy" character depicting body parts. Through this aspect they renegotiated the representation of the body and placed pressure on the familiar habits of viewing and thinking about the body.

Using plaster and latex the artists produced abstract works. Methods like wrapping, binding and proliferation added layers to their work. The imagination of the viewer is set free and fantasizing about the body happens. With this in mind it becomes possible to see Kusama's work in the light of the artistic environment she moved around in<sup>29</sup>. Through the strategy of repetition and doubling of the phallic form, an interesting play opens up in front of our eyes. A transformation in the perverse aspect of the work follows and the proliferation of the form is lost in the surface of the work, underscoring the power of the phallus. In the hectic atmosphere created

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Arthur Lubow, Kevin McGarry, Louise Neri, Akira Tatehata, Oliver Zahm, Yayoi Kusama, Rizolli International Publication Inc., New York 2012, p. 108.

<sup>27</sup>Jo Applin, Yayoi Kusama. Infinity Mirror Room- Phalli's Field, Afterall Books, London 2012, p. 6.

<sup>28</sup> Jo Applin, Yayoi Kusama. Infinity Mirror Room- Phalli's Field, p. 20.

<sup>29</sup> Kusama's style of work was not only in communication with works of her peers, but also of the ones of the Zero and Nul Groups in Europe.  
Jo Applin, p. 29.

by the multiplied shapes the viewer is disposed to a mobile play of the sexuality<sup>30</sup>.

## AN ATTACK.

-resisting the standardized norms

The theme of domesticity, had since the early 1960s, been an important aspect in Kusama's work. The themes of the home as a sphere of power and play returned in the 1970s with a heightened political edge. Kusama made a series of work that were installed in a chaotic and disrupted manner. These works were meant to be seen and read as domestic interiors<sup>31</sup>. The installations, called Driving Image Show, were exhibited from 1964 to 1966 in the U.S, Italy and Germany. She took use of a range of furniture that she had recently worked with and other domestic items. These things were painted with polka dots. The clusters of fabric sacks were still present in her works. The items were overgrown by them. Kusama continued to play with room- sized installations. At entering the space the participant stepped on to a macaroni- covered "carpet". A mannequin and a dresser covered by the food were placed inside of the room. At the night of the opening small dogs, coated in macaroni, were set loose. The cracking in the "carpet" when stepped on and the dogs running around women's high- heeled legs, accompanied by high- pitched, frantic-barking from the animals, set the scene.

This is the description of one of her environmental installations that can be read as a comment on the traditional role of the female subject. The work played with and turned the common female role on its head. Private became public and order became disorder. By confusing the people who entered the "home" and by inviting breakage and creating chaos, Kusama gives quite a strong social critique of the standardized norms.

How was her criticism received by the American society? There was definitely a problem existing when it came to discussing the sexuality of Kusama's work. The phalluses were ignored in the print of the press. Even though Kusama made a pursuit of self- obliteration through endless self- reflection in her work ,and it might be seen as a manifestation of her identity, the work was rather read as a part of the monochrome and was seen as a survey to the serial element of Minimalism. There is no doubt that Kusama's employment of elements of repetition, monochrome and use of found objects were in sync with what was going on in the 1960's art scene, but her work did not really fit with the Pop either, even though attempts were made by the Green Gallery exhibitions. In fact her Accumulations do contradict Pop's very essence. In Kusama's world the object- orientation of Pop and the adoption of techniques like silkscreen and airbrush which goal was to mimic the clean lines of

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<sup>30</sup> Jo Applin, p. 29.

<sup>31</sup> Jo Applin, p. 39 .

industrial and commercial art, were embodiments of a mechanization and a standardization of the environment in America at the time<sup>32</sup>.

The One Thousand Boats Show was the first publicly exhibited installation of her career. Interestingly enough this work was Kusama's strongest statement to date against the values that she saw were embodied in Pop art. With the object appearing at the end of the corridor, which walls were covered by the re- productions of the boat itself, creating an oppressive ambient, Kusama argued the superiority of the original over its reproducible copy. Her environments also give an addition to the argument against the anonymous, industrial serial- element and underline the importance of process over object and experience over consumption. Her point in honoring the original over the reproducible counterpoints the very idea of Warhol's Factory where the industrial production and the mass marketing merged with contemporary art<sup>33</sup>.

Understanding these angles in Kusama's thinking and realization about and of her work makes it easier to see her as a female artist that, sure, experienced struggle in the art milieu in New York in the 1960's because of her gender, but in no way should she or her work be diminished or made smaller because of her mental situation. We learn that Kusama's mindscape was greater than being stuck in obsessions, even though they could be the trigger of parts of her creative process, they were by no means the reasoning behind the realizations nor the motor driving her.

Her statement "Kusama, Kusama, Kusama (World's First Obsessional Artist)" must be seen as a punch line in the pursuit of the media for promotional purpose and as a underlining of the issue dealing with retaining authority over one's own production.

In the next part of the text I will try to look into Simone de Beauvoir and make connections from her perspective of thinking to Kusama's art- works.

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<sup>32</sup> Laura Hoptman, Udo Kulterman, Yayoi Kusama, Akira Tatehata, Yayoi Kusama, Phaidon Press Ltd., London 2000, p. 56.

<sup>33</sup> Laura Hoptman, Udo Kulterman, Yayoi Kusama, Akira Tatehata, Yayoi Kusama, p.59.

## SIMONE de BEAUVOIR and The Other Sex.

Simone de Beauvoir was born in Paris in 1908. She dedicated her life to writing and became one of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century most famous women. Her work has inspired both women and men. It has also been the starting point of debates, making Simone de Beauvoir one of the most influential women of the century.

### THE WRITING.

When *The Other Sex* was published in 1949 Beauvoir was criticized by anti-feministic protesters. She was accused of being an unsatisfied, cold and penis-obsessed woman. Despite the loud voices, women all over the world, in the 1950- and 1960's, recognized and related themselves to what Beauvoir communicated in her work.

*The Other Sex* represents two major thoughts: one that tells us that women are not born as women. Women become women<sup>34</sup>. Second: The way women are being raised, forces "women-ness" on to them. Beauvoir makes a point out of the idea of a woman as an individual that inhabits intuitive or inferior qualities, and how this concept is not real. By these two main ideas Beauvoir sees that the woman has been turned into more of a "nurture thing" rather than a "nature thing".

The way girls are raised make them understand themselves as "the other" in relation to men. These thoughts connect to questions about freedom, particularly freedom for women, which presuppose that Beauvoir believes that women are suppressed. It does not, however, imply that Beauvoir thinks that women are not capable of rising above their situation. In every case where the woman is suppressed, she also has a certain degree of freedom<sup>35</sup>.

### FREEDOM.

Yayoi Kusama's art- works, in greater deal, communicate notions of freedom for the individual. In particular freedom for the woman, considering the works discussed in this thesis and the time in which Kusama created them. Beauvoir claims that the society is being dominated by the man. She argues that the male- individual has become the ideal of the human race<sup>36</sup>. Simone de Beauvoir's wish was to live in a society where solidarity between men and women would secure freedom for both

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<sup>34</sup> " One are not born as a woman, one becomes one"

Simone de Beauvoir, *Det annet kjønn, ( Le deuxième sexe 1, 2)*, Pax Forlag, Oslo 2000, p. 23, Norwegian translation.

<sup>35</sup> Simone de Beauvoir, *Det annet kjønn ( Le deuxième sexe 1, 2)*, p. 15.

<sup>36</sup> Simone de Beauvoir, p. 16.

genders. She dreamed of a relationship between comrades, a unity, where both genders would be considered as equal representatives for the humanity. In such a world the segregation of the woman would not happen.

When Simone de Beauvoir argues that women are not free, she wants to deal with the subject on two levels. First of all women are asked to give up their existential freedom by accepting themselves as “the other”. The second condition speaks more about the social situation of women in France around 1949. The female did not have access to the society’s cultural, political and economical sphere in the same manner that the men did. Beauvoir does not, however, believe that women have less existential freedom than men, but the reader is given an opportunity to learn how females are, in the greatest sense, ripped off. As free subjects, their existential freedom is crept and they are reduced to becoming “the absolute other”.

An important part of the trouble that grows out of the overpowering of the woman is that there can never be an equal relation between the genders. If women are not free, then the men are not free either. Official equal rights, like the women’s right to vote, economical independence and access to the fields of education and work, basically treating the woman as a citizen, giving her the right to exist as an individual in the society, does not alone equalize her to the man. These rights do not directly change the woman’s relationship to the social order and the culture. Beauvoir’s thinking concerning the woman being encouraged to identify herself as “the other” sheds light on why women are suppressed, even though they, officially, have equal rights. The goal in the male dominated world is to generate women that would never dream of utilizing the freedom that they formally hold. The ideas about how a woman *should* be and act form the women’s understanding and opinions of their possibilities and wishes.

In this text I have chosen to look closer into the part of *The Other Sex* which deals with childhood and lived experience. I also found an interesting part that speaks about the woman’s narcissistic position. I think that by mainly looking into these two parts, it might become clearer how the woman has become secondary to the man and why she is a suppressed subject. I believe that this also could contribute to a clearer vision on why Yayoi Kusama is expressing her ideas about freedom the way she is. I might also be able to understand why she is using the phallus as generating form in her art- works and why her works might be read as feminist. I shall also look into how Beauvoir describes the use of the mirror as a tool to reach insight into the understanding of the self. Maybe I will come across something that could be a connection to Kusama’s use of mirrors in her work?

## CHILDHOOD.

“No biological, psychical or economical destiny define the figure the female infer in the society; it is the civilization in its entirety that shapes this product situated between the man and the castrate and that is called feminine”<sup>37</sup>. With this quote Beauvoir begins her chapter in *The Other Sex* that talks about development and childhood. The description of the female as a product that belongs somewhere “between the man and the castrate” is a delicate one. The word “castrate” is quite strong. It suggests being sterile, abandoned and somehow without life. How does the woman become such an alien subject? How can we understand Beauvoir’s message?

- the very beginning: castration and disgust.

Inherent sensing dominates the baby’s life. The infant brings these with him or her to the outside from the womb. With time the baby learns to separate him or herself from objects and they are seen as something different from the baby’s own self. What is unfolding is the tragedy in every individual’s life: the relationship to the other and the anxiety of being left<sup>38</sup>.

A wish to flee from our freedom and from our subjectivity kicks in. A feeling and a need to disappear into the universe arise. Out of this grows the longing to forget, the concept of ecstasy and death. Cosmic dreams unravel. We never achieve to restore the drama of the experience of our selves as something that is apart. But through becoming an object in somebody else’s eyes, we at least manage to see our selves as a being. The behavior of the small child should be read in this light. They are trying to compensate for an experience of being lost in a strange world by alienate their existence in an image where others make what is real and what are the values<sup>39</sup>.

Parallel with the detachment from the breast, the baby starts to understand its identity. The mirror plays an important role in achieving this. By looking into the mirrored surface, the infant’s self melts together with the image met. The result is crucial: the child’s self can only come into being through the alienation.

By the time of six months of living another layer of the estrangement occurs in the infant’s life. It can now understand the parents’ facial expressions. The infant sees how the parent reacts in relation to him, - or herself. Therefore they start to realize that they are objects. They do perceive themselves as independent subjects in the world, but as subjects that are embodied in an alien person.

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<sup>37</sup> Simone de Beauvoir, p. 329.

<sup>38</sup> Simone de Beauvoir, p. 330.

<sup>39</sup> Simone de Beauvoir, p. 330.

As we grow older the separation and distinction between the girl's subjectivity becomes somewhat clearer. The girl sees her body as a whole, but she is situated in the world in another manner than the boys. Multiple factors can make the differences of the gender's experiences turn into oppression. Some happenings in the child's life can make the girl differentiate herself from the boy. These encounters might shape her to such an extent that the perception of her own self may be forever inflicted. The suppression that this leads to can come to dominate her world.

At a point both genders become aware of their sexual organs, and according to Simone de Beauvoir, the young girl comes to live under a "castration-complex". She is mostly not aware of the penis as an anatomically important difference between the genders. To her the penis is a piece of flesh hanging between the legs. It takes part in the boy's peculiarities, just as his clothes or hair also do. The girl might even look at the organ as something abnormal. The penis is something that can not be determined. It sticks out of his body. It protrudes. In association the penis becomes something alike nipples and knots. They are abscesses and might even awaken repugnance in her<sup>40 41</sup>.

## THE PISSING.

- the triumphant toy

Children in general are passionately interested in the bodily functions. Peeing is an action that women do sitting. The men take a leak standing. Believe it or not, but this difference makes, according to Beauvoir a huge impact on the child.

She has to squat and place her body on a lower level when she pees. Involuntary she is hiding. It becomes a shameful and uncomfortable liberty, which takes its turn towards censorship and silencing of the girl. For the boy, pissing becomes almost like a game. He can stand up- right, he grabs his penis and he can aim his liquids here and there. He establishes a relation to the surrounding things in this way. What he is doing is in fact challenging the force of gravity; in a way the boy learns to rule over it and in a sense he has won a small victory over the laws of nature<sup>42</sup>. In her world the boy's accomplishment becomes one to envy. He gets to show himself, while there is little sensitivity given to the girl regarding her sexual organ. He can grab his penis. He is allowed to touch it. For the girl there is a different story. As

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<sup>40</sup> Simone de Beauvoir p. 334.

<sup>41</sup> On the other hand, the awareness and the interest in the penis can in fact translate itself into the idea where it becomes a thing that the girl would like to have or own, in a superficial way. This is not to be regarded as sexual jealousy or to be interpreted as a feeling of being affected by the lack of one.

Simone de Beauvoir, p. 334.

<sup>42</sup> Simone de Beauvoir, p. 335.



parts of the vagina is hidden on the inside of the body and she experiences that caregivers do not encourage her to pay attention towards what is a part of her body, she is pushed into oppression. The suppressed feelings emerge because she is treated as if she does not have an organ<sup>43</sup>. The vagina becomes a taboo.

A child's mentality is not rational. To the girl his anatomy becomes such a specific shape that she literally no longer sees her own body. Because of the parents' and other nearby people's acknowledgment of the boy's talent of peeing standing, his manhood becomes realized through the penis. It becomes an influential shape in her world. Just as the kid who draws puts down on the paper what he is fixated on, as if he is spellbound by the particular form or idea, she gets fixated on the phallic shape. It replaces her image. She feels frustrated. The consequence is that the own self becomes non-existing.

In Kusama's work the "nets" were the start of everything. The pattern of the infinity "nets" bled off the canvas and ran over to her sculptures and ultimately transformed into the stuffed tentacle appearing sacks. These works can be seen as a psycho-sexual answer to her first Infinity Nets.

The phalluses are humorous and sexual. In the Accumulation series and in the Driving Image Show they overrun the symbols of the feminine domesticities. What this offers is a comment on the world that is suffocated by male domination. Her work is playful, but without a doubt is it also a channel for Kusama's own personal frustrations as she struggled in a chauvinistic and limiting art community. In Beauvoir's theory Kusama demonstrates through her work a result of the female frustration and agony. She gives us upfront her reaction and a response to what girls had to deal with since the childhood. She is responding to the penis being some kind of thing growing out of his body. In her work these shapes dominate. And they seem to appear endlessly, suggesting to the viewer that there is an infinite authority practiced by men in the society. But by dotting them she offers us two ways out. Either that the idea of ownership is sick, as these dots might remind us of illness. At the same time, to Kusama the dot represented the female, more specifically, the vagina and the depersonalized "I"<sup>44</sup>. This contrasts the growing phalli that cover everything in her world. The phallus is the symbol of control over others and of pleasure at any cost. The polka dots then become the liberating richness and the symbol of the freedom that gives us access to the world.

#### THE ALTER EGO.

- phallus and the girl's lost subjectivity.

The boy is in the situation where the incarnation of his bodily enigmas and threats can be directed into his penis. The boy's alter ego is one that he can recognize him

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<sup>43</sup> Simone de Beauvoir, p. 333.

<sup>44</sup> Laura Hoptman, Udo Kulterman, Yayoi Kusama, Akira Tatehata, Yayoi Kusama, Phaidon Press Ltd., London 2000, p. 154.

self in and therefore he has a chance to understand his own subjectivity. The penis becomes the object that he can channel his unknown emotions into and, at the same time, it becomes a symbol of independence and power. He transcends through it and has an important life- experience. When he is still small, it is common for the boy to measure the length of the penis and to compare his urine- squirts with the one of his friend's. Later on in life the erect penis and the ejaculation become sources of satisfaction<sup>45</sup> and maybe to some extent, symbols over some kind of victory.

From the beginning of the life of the female she is characterized with a certain passiveness. For the girl, the understanding of her subjectivity becomes rather problematic, as she does not have such an alter ego where she can direct her unfamiliar feelings towards. From the start there is a conflict between her independent existence and the situation of her as "the other".

The boy, as the girl, wonders about his own being. Both genders experience conflicting situations with the surroundings, but he is in the position to act freely. Through his many ways he makes and creates his own individuality. The girl is fostered to alienate herself in her entire persona, body and image. She has been reduced to "the other".

#### STAGED PRESENCE

- posing of the phallus, responding to the male dominance

Sometimes Kusama used her works as a stage. The Infinity Net became such a forum for her. Kusama also staged her presence in the Infinity Mirror Room- Phalli's Field. Photograph shots show her different ways of using the space. The photos also tell us what she intended to communicate, as her body was nestled in the field of soft sculptures

In one shot Kusama is wearing a red bodysuit, blending into the dotted field she is lying in. Her arms are stretched out over her head, which are touching one of the mirrored walls, creating a doubling of her image. This action suggests an encounter with "infinity" that goes beyond any physical limitation or border.

In another photograph the artist is standing in the field with her feet firmly planted between all the soft phalluses. Her arms are folded behind her head. This posture shows an attitude that is part authoritative, part sexual. She is wearing the same red costume, which merges into the environment she is participating in. The year before the Floor Show was realized fully, Kusama staged another photograph. It was taken in her studio. Her outfit was a black all- in- one and fishnet tights. Again she is lying down, her face pressed into the field of phalluses. Her hand is reaching forward, grasping one of the spotted, soft objects. She is looking into the camera with a coquettish glance. Kusama proposes two things. On one hand the phallus is displayed to the viewer as an infant- like toy. Just as the small boy grasps his penis

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<sup>45</sup> Simone de Beauvoir, *Det annet kjønn (Le deuxième sexe 1,2)*, Pax Forlag, Oslo 2000, p. 339.

as if it were a toy- like thing, Kusama demonstrates the similar. Just as the little girl might view the penis as a strange lump growing out of the boy's body, Kusama suggests to us that the penis is abstracted as a body part. In a fun way, and we might even consider her way ironic too, the artist highlights the conceptual and bodily signs that the form suggest<sup>46</sup>.

## DOLL- IDOL.

- regarding the female passivity.

Most children play with toys<sup>47</sup>. The doll the girl is given, becomes a representative for her body. According to Beauvoir the girl learns to grasp her self through the dead object; as a passive thing, an object. To understand her self as only that, feeds her with a need of being admired<sup>48</sup>. I think that it even gives her the feeling and an idea of that she exists for others. She has learnt that she should not only behave well, but she should also exert her self to please others. In extension this means that she must put aside her own subjectivity. The transfiguration of her self to a mere object is almost inevitable. She her self has become the doll and, to no surprise, the outcome is that she becomes less independent.

She still has the existential freedom to do whatever and be whoever. It is just that there is quite a big chance that she has become powerless and therefore does not act and explore the world around her. I believe that the expectations from the family and the environment that she already knows, limit her freedom to progress as she desires. These circumstances reduce her resources. In Beauvoir's opinion the concern then becomes that she will not dare to confirm her self as a subject<sup>49</sup>. This matter should not be underestimated as an issue when it comes to equality between the sexes. I believe that when a human being is no longer free to be independent, there is an implication of authority and guardianship somewhere in the relationship with others. It becomes challenging to genuinely perceive the other

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<sup>46</sup> Jo Applin, Yayoi Kusama. Infinity Mirror Room- Phalli's Field, Afterall Books, London 2012, p. 14.

<sup>47</sup> Children who play with objects, like soft toys, learn how to understand and form relationship to the world. Through the encountering of the material world the child forms a sense of self and other. The continuous use of play and imagination allow for the infant to open up towards an understanding of terms like reality and fantasy. Jo Applin, Yayoi Kusama. Infinity Mirror Room- Phalli's Field, p. 30.

<sup>48</sup> Simone de Beauvoir, Det annet kjønn (Le deuxième sexe 1, 2), Pax Forlag, Oslo 2000 p. 340.

<sup>49</sup> Simone de Beauvoir, Det annet kjønn (Le deuxième sexe 1, 2), p. 341.

one as an equal that holds the same existential freedom as the one that one self holds<sup>50</sup>.

So, in point there is no anatomic destiny or essential female instinct and mystery that dictate the woman's placement in the world. The penis is in a way a privilege, but the interest in it reduces as the child gets socialized. Whatever fascination that there is left has to do with the penis being placed on a pedestal in a social context and, in such a way, carrying with it an elevated status.

Even so I think that the parts I have discussed of *The Other Sex* in this thesis still to some point are valid. I relate the book to the now because the subject matter of the text is still important. Simone de Beauvoir explains why women are suppressed and I believe that women still are today. Maybe not in the sense that females are locked to the spheres of the home and the kitchen, but still in a way where we get differentiated because of our gender. Women are sometimes treated as individuals with a misunderstood and even underestimated potential, leading the woman's worth to be misplaced.

The photographs that Kusama had taken of her performing in her work can be read as self portraits. These photographic images suggest references to both little girls and to pin-ups. Consequently this is an affective way to toy with the clichés of femininity. On the one hand Kusama is satirizing them. On the other hand she used the images to promote herself and her work.

“MIRROR, MIRROR”.

- frustration and narcissism.

By now we have reckoned the situation of the woman. Her sexuality remains unsatisfied and the “male activities” are forbidden to her<sup>51</sup>. Her lack of an alter ego spins her existence towards a search for recognition and admiration given to her by others. In a sense she is nobody. Her daily life is dedicated to dealing with domestic and senseless stuff. She has plenty of space in her mind for day-dreaming, but there is little action. A person that is not free has less projects and goals than a person that is “out there” doing activities, participating and therefore being considered a citizen of the society in a much higher degree. The woman has less opportunity than the man to fulfill her self. This means something when it comes to the confrontations and the meetings with one self that active human beings experience. Logically her situation gives her fewer chances to get to know her self and, for that reason, a limited knowledge of who she is. On the other hand nothing is a dead end. Her inaction and restricted living join her together with an exaggeration of her identity. In fact she is apprehending her self through her own immanent qualities; the woman's recognition of her self is tied up to her remaining what she is according

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<sup>50</sup> Simone de Beauvoir, p. 17.

<sup>51</sup> Simone de Beauvoir, p.729.

to her existence, which I believe is not necessarily what so ever connected to her potentials or to her consciousness<sup>52</sup>.

As we have learnt, the upbringing of the girl can potentially push her into alienating her self into her own body. Yet, when she is still small she might interpret her self and her experiences as unique and original. As a grown woman, her situation nourishes her endless presence and repetition of what she is doing and what she is experiencing. She has become dry. She is eaten by her general everyday. Nothing separates her from the other millions of women that are wearing the same shoes as she is.

The woman comes to, not only realize, that she is an object of desire for the man. The objectifying from childhood on taught her that she is a desirable object to her self also<sup>53</sup>. Through satisfaction the female experiences fractioning of herself. She becomes divided in two, one female object and one male subject. The problem, though, is that it is impossible to be someone else to oneself. To perceive oneself as an object and to be conscious about it is rather difficult. So this division is one that is unreal, dreamt even.

Through the doll, on the other hand, the child materializes the division. The toy is for the child a thing more recognizable than her own body because there is a physical division between the two. Basically what this is showing us is that in a split human being there is a need to be in a dialog between oneself and oneself<sup>54</sup>. To the grown- up woman the mirror serves as a tool in the effort to abandon her self, but also in the return to herself. As she perceives her self as an object of desire, and because the mirror catches the eye, she believes that by looking into the mirror she can see her self and meet her own twin. The mirroring is passive, though. It is a thing alike her self. But she sees herself as an object. She admires what her eye meets in the mirror. She has a passion for her own body and image.

Sure, the confrontation in the mirror has a pleasing and ecstatic effect. Actually, it goes further. She feels perdition in her own image, which feeds the tendency of narcissism. She is alone. She is grander. She has all the rights before the men and over her future. She might even misinterpret her self to the degree where she

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<sup>52</sup> of immanent-ism: "a philosophical direction in Germany that in the 1890's tried to conduct a positivistic and anti- metaphysical program which, according to, all acknowledgement is limited to possible experience, and where "to be existent" does not exceed (transcendence) "to be conscious". In Sartre's thinking (and also partly in Heidegger's), the human can transcendence, through freedom, by going beyond "the given" and by relating to "the possible".

Arne Grøn, Jørgen Husted, Stig Alstrup Rasmussen, Poul Lübcke, Peter Sandøe, Niels Christian Stefansen, *Filosofileksikon*, Zafari Forlag, Oslo 1996, p. 268 and 269, Norwegian translation.

<sup>53</sup> Simone de Beauvoir, *Det annet kjønn (Le deuxième sexe 1, 2)*, Pax Forlag, Oslo 2000, p.730.

<sup>54</sup> Simone de Beauvoir, *Det annet kjønn (Le deuxième sexe 1, 2)*, p.730.

believes that her part with the “bigger thing” (Cosmos, heaven and earth, the Space) is infinite. The female has almost become immortal. Through the mirrored instrument she has become a God that views her self<sup>55</sup>.

The use of mirror in Kusama’s work is a metaphor of an infinite space, an expansion of reality and mass, in real time. In one way she attempts to make a likeness to a psychic experience, creating an overwhelming sense of infinity in which the “threatening” elements of self proliferation is dangerously present. If we think about the meeting with our own cosmic twin or alter ego by looking into the mirror, as Beauvoir let’s us in on, we can understand Kusama’s Mirrored Room as an inviting process where we can merge into space and re unite with our own lost selves.

The multiplication of the phallus shape is interesting in more than one way. If we view the dot as Kusama’s expression of the alter ego and as a symbol of the feminine, my experience in The Boijman’s Museum was quite big. Standing inside of the Phalli’s Field I was multiplied with the shapes into hundreds, lifted up to such a “psychic” experience, where I myself became dotted in a grasp towards the unknown. The depersonalization in Kusama’s work is triggered as an experience by the mirror and the dots spreading out as an infectious carpet.

The dotted Phalli’s Field can also be seen as a simulation of multiple vanishing points connected to thinking of molecular and atomic visions. Particular theories dealing with these themes are influenced by the models of Spatialism and the Nuclear Movement, telling us that reality is made up by an invisible quantum<sup>56</sup>. I think this connects quite well to Beauvoir’s writings upon the narcissistic woman. Through the dematerialization brought by the mirror she becomes so big and inflated, that she “travels” through it as if it were to be a black hole in the universe leading her towards the meeting with her own cosmic twin. In that sense the woman reunites with her own subjectivity with the use of an object that in the greatest sense also objectifies her.

Where does all of this leave us? I now want to look for a union between Kusama’s conceptualizations. Beauvoir’s thinking and my own work. Ultimately I will try to make a short conclusion, summing up what I have studied in this text.

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<sup>55</sup> Simone de Beauvoir, p. 732.

<sup>56</sup> Leslie Camhi, RoseLee Goldberg, Laura Hoptman, Chris Kraus, Arthur Lubow, Kevin McGarry, Louise Neri, Akira Tatehata, Oliver Zahm, Yayoi Kusama, Rizolli International Publication Inc., New York 2012, p 186.

The return to the self  
- the smell of Ocean and stormy Nights at Sea.

After having looked into Kusama's world and the works of Beauvoir, how do I see my own work? I will now describe and discuss parts of the work I am going to graduate with. I will use what I have discussed previously as a vehicle into the understanding of my own work. Also, I think it interesting to talk about this particular work of mine in the sense of describing an experience that is a narrative of my identity, and taking the liberty to express it in an art- work, as Kusama's work can be understood in this light too. Towards the end of these pages I will give a small conclusion about what I gained out of studying these three fascinating women, myself included.

I started to work on self- portraits nearly a year ago now. The portraits are one meter in height. They are drawn with a thin, black ink pen on a roll of paper that measures 10 meters in length. On the paper one self- portrait follows the next one. Like that all the versions of me are lined up on a 10 meters long piece of paper, giving a sense of endlessness to the work.

When I draw I place the paper roll on the floor. In front of it, leaning against a wall or a steady piece of furniture, I place a mirror. The size of the mirror is big enough to catch my entire body in one image. When I work I sit on the floor in front of the paper. Before I start to draw I make a posture that I would like to try to transfer to the paper. The posture I choose to draw depends on several things. I think that the most important aspect in making the decision is the intrigue. If I get fascinated by my own looks I find it is worth spending the time drawing. It is most definitely a moment of confrontation. And it is a moment that feels kind of awkward. To sit by myself on the floor, searching for the one expression where I know I see something in myself that maybe scares me a bit, or make me aware of something "new". It is fun and serious at the same time.

When I make a drawing I always start at the top of the paper, working on the upper part of my body first: the head and facial expression. Then I work my way down. The line flows and it needs to go like that so that I do not lose my concentration and focus. I believe a loss would change the feeling to the line and make it stiff and unnatural. I do not plan what the drawing should look like (otherwise than how my body is postured) or how or where the line should go. Sometimes I make a "mistake", meaning that one line crosses the other one so that the line is inside of my self- portrait's body. I do not pay attention to that. I do not decide that the line is "wrong" or that the drawing is a "failure". I simply continue and pay no attention to the crossing of the lines. It is like this to me because what I find the most interesting is to see how my hand translates what the eye sees in the mirror. Every time I have finished one drawing I stand up and I take a few steps back. I am amazed of how ambivalent I most often feel. In one way I do recognize myself. On the other hand I do not. These drawings document the changes and transformation of my body and of my expression during a longer period of time.

For the end exam I have the idea that I would like to cover the four walls of the exhibition space of the drawings. I think that by hanging them opposite of each other I turn them into “mirrors” where they reflect back at each other.

With this work I am trying to study the changes in my body and expression during a stage in my life.

I believe that the biggest transformative event in the human’s life is the move from the inside to the outside: the birth. When the newly born baby is lying on the mother’s belly, they are still connected through the umbilical cord. At one point the cord is cut. This cut represents a revolution when it comes to the making of or the transformation into an object.

The cord is the object that is cut off in both ends. The cord was the connection between two parts, between the I and myself. The cord made those two parts become one. We belonged together, but the world-shattering cut made a separation between my alter ego and my own self. I changed and I was given an object to myself, in my own eyes, in an estranged world filled by objects.

To me it is a story that speaks about alienation and loss, but through the mirror I can find myself again. I can reunite. Or at least I am in the search for a reunion with my own self. The mirror is a pair of eyes that reflect on myself, giving myself back to myself, only this time I am filled with a Cosmic depth. It can be like this because the mirror has the function of a door or an opening in to the Universe.

To me the cut signifies a motion that is not comparable to anything else in life. That is why I want to realize a materialization of the umbilical cord. Out of a straight glass- tube, utilizing a warm flame that will heat up the cold glass, I can shape it. What I visualize in my mind is a shape that is organic and that has a bend on it, so that it looks kind of like a slack U- shape. The fragile glass umbilical cord will be mirrored on the inside. Looking at the tube, the cut off object that in the end represents myself as an object in the world of objects, I can be able to recognize myself in the mirrored surface, and hence I have an opening into the reunion with myself through the objectified self.

Simone de Beauvoir writes about the perdition in own image through the mirror. Parts of Kusama’s work, like the photographic images, represent a mirror. Kusama is being split into an (lust) object and she becomes passive like a thing, like the doll, Beauvoir would say. In my mirror- portraits there is a meeting of sheer alienation. This meeting adds to my identity. I look into my own eyes. I study my own expression, face and body. But because of this contact I establish with my own I, I also objectify myself. Beauvoir argues that in this identity- destined meeting we understand the other. The mirror has the function of an eye and the person gets confronted with the anxiety of being left, just like when the baby understands he is an object in the eye of the other. This fear makes the human flee. Ultimately she flies from her own freedom and subjectivity.

So it also means that it is all a trick. The woman never gets to be free. We meet our own self in the mirror. The woman gets to manifest her own alter ego through the mirror. But is it already too late? She travels, as if the mirror was a wormhole, and



meets her Cosmic twin. The travel in itself might be a product out of her unproductivity, triggering her daydreams. In her boredom she turns to the admiring mirror. In the meeting she grows big, her ego gets inflated and she might *feel* big. Ultimately the meeting triggers fear. Through the recognition, the woman gets startled and wishes to get away from what she encountered. She might have found a way to reunite her ego with her missing part. As a grown- up she might have found a way to transcendence. The man had the opportunity to experience this as a boy, transcending through his penis- object. He is light years ahead of the female. Where does this leave her? It puts her in the position of being stuck and quite frankly I do not know if she then is capable of rising above and liberating herself.

Yayoi Kusama's work is showing how conflicting relationships of the individual with its own ego and, in wider scale/ representation, with others are generated. Standing in her Infinity Mirror Room- Phalli's field stimulates a push towards a sense of ones own self being fractured and multiplied in expanded space. The experimental environment of the room produces, on the other hand, a pull towards possible unity, liberation and play through an explosion of the individual's own image. No political agenda or feministic framework was behind her work, even though Kusama was very interested in the relationships between people, society and nature. She thus tried to somehow make sense of it all and her work grew out of the accumulated frictions that supposedly exist between these instances<sup>57</sup>. But the way she accepts the form of the phallus in her accumulations and the way she actively uses the idea about "infinity" and domesticity, makes it very possible to interpret or read many of her works in directions that deal with gender related issues and societal struggles. Her work becomes a productive response when we can read it as an encounter between her psychological distressed mind and the political, public world, both of them captured in her Infinity Nets, her Aggregations and staged or non- staged environments.

My struggle and my life- search reaches towards becoming free. I do not know by far how to do that or where to go in the search, but to me manifesting my creative language is a step on the path towards becoming. To work as an artist and to express my transformations is a leap towards freedom.

The work that I chose to describe in this text is a kind of documentation. It is a slot that shows and attempts to talk about an event in my life. In my mind I think that transformation often is part of a growing process, which is part of letting go of myself into change. This time the letting go was a turn towards the use of mirror in the event of returning to myself. The mirror's function was as a tool or a key opening up the hallway leading me to an encounter with my own image.

I realize that a big part of the reason for why my work is what it is, stems from my gender. I do not think it is possible to separate making from the artist's persona and life experience, which is gender related too. Every human gets affected by their

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<sup>57</sup> Jo Applin, Yayoi Kusama, Infinity Mirror Room- Phalli's Field, Afterall Books, London 2012, p. 81.

situation(s). I think every life is shaped through experiencing and experiencing is shaped by living. To me creating is such a sensible and expressing act that it is inseparable from myself. My work is in fact often materializations of my experiences. These experiences are events that I would like to process or say something about.

The thinking of Simone de Beauvoir regards freedom for every individual. To the woman the struggle towards freedom and equality is one that is there already from childhood on, but gender is no prison. The ways of suppression and a life in the shades are many, but the woman is not a victim. She can rise above her situation and see her gender as a possibility instead of as a limitation. I viewed my situation as a creator as an opportunity. Just as I see my choice of being an artist as a great chance of becoming and as a move towards freedom.