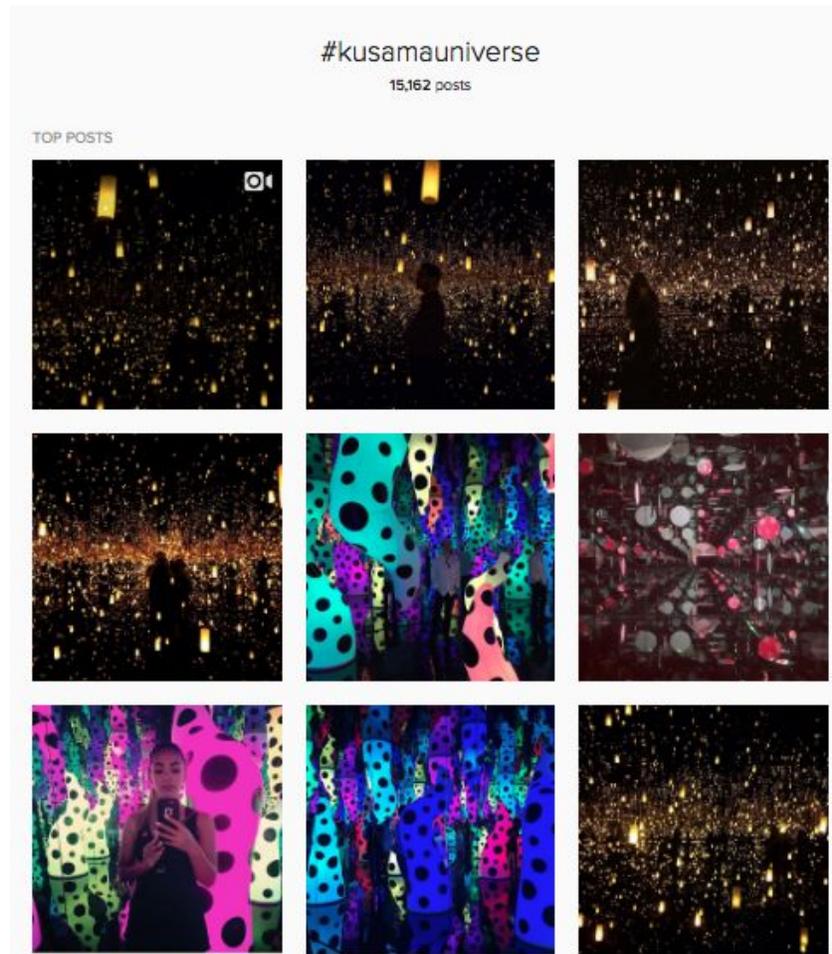


The Ultimate Tombstone—*Kusama: At the End of the Universe*

Yayoi Kusama (b. 1929, Japan) bestowed MFAH visitors with two highly anticipated works from her *Infinity Mirror Room* series this summer. These installations subsume participants in infinitely repetitive environments, using mirrored walls and ceilings to reflect visitors' likenesses amongst a field of wacky polka-dotted objects and cosmic lights. Enticing the selfie-obsessed, *Kusama: At the End of the Universe* coasts on free social media momentum, capturing mass ticket sales from hoards of new and regular museum-goers.



Press and social media posts exclaim the exhibition as the perfect summer fun activity, which it certainly can be. Meanwhile the exhibition also offers viewers the destabilizing experience of installation art as a life-sized portal into the artist's mind, in this case, with thoughts of mortality at the forefront. The disarming directness of Kusama's ruminations on her own death, in addition to the distractions and burdens of documenting the rushed experience, underline the heavy content Kusama relates through her crafted universes.

The *Infinity Mirror Room* brings dimension to the artist's signature motif of painting infinite "nets" of circles and dots upon various surfaces, including her own body and clothing at times. These motifs more fully realize the artist's vision caused by a neurological disorder, as Kusama sees distinctive colorful spots in her everyday reality.

While Kusama has always infused her body and experience in her work, she now siphons her remaining vitality into these final pieces. Claire Bishop's *Installation Art* (2005) describes this type of installation as

“mimetic engulfment,” or “a desire for fusion between animate and inanimate” that drives subject (artist, viewer) and object (artwork) into a singular entity, if momentarily.

As such, Kusama’s work at the MFAH becomes a walk-in *memento mori*—containing and reminding us of her mortality all at once.



Contained by 13x13x9’ rectangular white boxes, the installation exteriors recall austere simulation machines, minimalist fun houses, or modernist tombs—functions that each become realized once inside. Balancing the artist’s dual personas, *Love is Calling* (2013) boasts the endearingly kooky, playful Kusama, while *Aftermath of Obliteration of Eternity* (2009) manifests the philosophical, ethereal Kusama. Both works provide phenomenological simulations of death in preemptive self-memorials.

A dark, cavernous space, *Love is Calling* is lit by wavy stalactite- and stalagmite-like objects emerging from the floor and ceiling. Softly pulsating through a range of neon rainbow hues, these formations are embellished with large black polka dots: signs of the crossed threshold into Kusama’s animated consciousness.



Through embedded speakers, Kusama recites a poem she authored in Japanese: “Residing in a Castle of Shed Tears,” in which she admits she is unexpectedly scared of death as her final days approach. Yet, remaining blissfully determined, she uses “art as a weapon” to ward off her anxieties, embracing the ultimate unknown.

The absorbing effect of this installation, and primer to the exhibition’s death-related themes, may be interrupted by timed-viewing limits and distractions from groups of rowdy, selfie stick-wielding visitors. Still, as the viewer gazes at infinite reflections of herself among Kusama’s cartoonish feelers, her sense as singular, whole self is disrupted in a moment of pleasurable disintegration, yielding to the infinite absurdity of the moment.



The installations overshadows a set of wildly colored paintings from a new series entitled *My Eternal Soul* (2009-), featuring faces, flora, and fish among Kusama's trademark infinity nets and dots. Labels announce Kusama aims to produce 1,000 of these paintings before she dies, likely to be the bulk of her final production. No one seems to notice these rather tender, emotionally charged images that look like psychedelic cave drawings or primordial quilt squares.

The main attraction is *Aftermath of Obliteration of Eternity*, created in Kusama's 80th year and purchased by the Museum for their permanent collection in 2016. Ideal for viewing alone, one enters a narrow, padded pathway precariously surrounded by water. A mass of small golden lanterns reflects on the dark watery floor and mirrored walls—flickering like slowly expiring synapses or stars, finally dimming to a moment of total darkness.

In an alarming, but satisfying moment of what Kusama names "self-obliteration," the viewer experiences a momentary loss of ego and enters into an erotic, boundary-less oneness with the space's sensorial infiniteness. This minute-long experience in *Aftermath* is overwhelmingly and unexpectedly funerary—a safe simulation of self-dissolution. Kusama suggests the effortlessness with which one can succumb to this obliterating infiniteness is more desirable than remaining fixed in a physical body.



Unlike the serenity of losing oneself in a Kusama infinity net painting—an eternity that is neatly confined by canvas—there is a vivid terror and ecstasy of being at the end of the universe inside Kusama’s installations. While the exhibition design plays toward Kusama’s penchant for spectacle, engineering this exhibit for maximum social output overshadows the subtle existential details. For a less touristy, more considered viewing experience, museum staff might have established a no-photos, solo-entry, or silence-encouraged participation.

Reading like the announcement of a Kusama farewell tour, *At the End of the Universe* capitalizes on Kusama’s last years of productivity, like the forthcoming traveling blockbuster retrospectives in Stockholm and Washington DC. When Kusama finally transitions on, she leaves brilliantly layered self-tributes behind, which may then necessitate a more appropriately ceremonial display. The thrill of these installations remains in Kusama’s ability to distill and abstract herself so fully into her work, to establish a space that exclusively and unequivocally stands for *her* even after she’s gone: the ultimate tombstone.