

YAYOI KUSAMA'S COSMIC NATURE: CONNECTING SCULPTURE AND SPACE
AT THE NEW YORK BOTANICAL GARDEN

by
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THESIS ABSTRACT

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Botanical gardens are a place where research is typically performed, but over time, the need for funding has pushed these institutions to exhibit art within their garden spaces. This thesis demonstrates how these exhibitions could be mutually beneficial for both artists and botanical gardens, and further, that the context of a botanical garden influences how these exhibitions are interpreted and understood. I examine these relationships through Kusama Yayoi's outdoor sculptures and installations exhibited at the New York Botanical Garden, in their 2021 special exhibition, *Kusama: Cosmic Nature*. I argue that the space was used to create a symbiotic relationship between art and nature. Through this relationship, the major themes in the artist's works (in the case of

Kusama, concepts such as reflectivity, interiority, and obliteration) are amplified, while the garden is gaining the opportunity to extend their core mission to those who are not interested in plants otherwise.

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I. INTRODUCTION

From April 10th to October 31st, 2021, the New York Botanical Garden (NYBG) held a blockbuster art exhibition, *Kusama: Cosmic Nature*. The exhibition featured ten sculptures by the artist, Kusama Yayoi 草間彌生 (b. 1929) across six areas of the gardens. In addition, other works such as drawing, painting, and soft sculpture that help contextualize her monumental outdoor pieces were exhibited in the Mertz Library Building Gallery (Figure 1).

Kusama Yayoi is one of the most internationally renowned Japanese artists today. She was born March 22nd, 1929, in Matsumoto City, Nagano prefecture, as the youngest child of Kamon and Shigeru Kusama. Kusama's family managed several seed nurseries, and Kusama grew up surrounded by plants. These years were formative for her as an artist, and she began to draw what she saw within the nurseries. Upon graduating with a degree in *nihonga* (Japanese-style painting) from Kyoto Municipal School of Arts and Crafts in 1949, Kusama began her artistic career in her hometown. However, she felt she would never be able to pursue art the way that she wanted, and so she made plans to leave Japan.¹ Kusama arrived in the United States in 1957 and debuted in New York City as an avant-garde artist two years later with her first solo show *Obsessional Monochrome* at the Brata Gallery. She lived in New York for the next 16 years, creating art and attending exhibitions in various countries. However, in 1973 Kusama made the decision to check herself into a mental hospital, due to life-long bouts with mental illness. She left

¹ Yayoi Kusama, *Infinity Net: The Autobiography of Yayoi Kusama* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2011), 93.

New York to return to Japan, where she remains to this day, continuing to create new work.

From these experiences, Kusama has developed a style that is wholly unique, and the pieces that she creates are instantly recognizable. Kusama often covers objects and canvases with polka dots, nets, and other repeating forms. This allows her to channel her obsessions into her art, and to express what she calls “self-obliteration,” which she sees as the idea of being one with the universe.² This sense of “self-obliteration” is both the source of fear and inspiration for Kusama, manifesting itself as patterns that take over her work surfaces and even her body. The connection that Kusama felt with nature continues to be an important theme in her work. The centrality of pumpkins, flowers, and other plants to Kusama’s works, as well as her reoccurring theme of connectivity with people, nature, and the universe at large, makes it fitting to have an exhibition of her works at a botanical garden.³

Using *Cosmic Nature* as a case study, this thesis examines how the gardens and Kusama’s sculpture work symbiotically to heighten viewers’ awareness of the nature that surrounds them. *Cosmic Nature* utilized an unprecedented site for Kusama’s art, but at the same time it is brilliantly appropriate, due to prevalent connection to the natural world in her work. Beginning with Kusama’s *Yellow Pumpkin* in Naoshima, Japan in 1994, her sculptures have been installed increasingly in public spaces, including parks. *Cosmic Nature*, however, was the first exhibition that Kusama collaborated with a botanical garden. I demonstrate how the exhibition strategically positioned Kusama’s seminal

² Ibid.

³ Appendix A. List of several examples of Kusama’s work displayed in an outdoor setting.

works and recent pieces around the main section of the NYBG ground to showcase not just Kusama’s life-long affinity to natural elements, but also the environmental concerns that are central to the gardens mission. First, I provide an introduction to the history of botanical gardens (chapter 1) and the incorporation of sculpture in garden space within the Euro-American context (chapter 2). Then I utilize Todor Todorov’s three classifications of spatial relationships (sculpture-object, sculpture-space, and sculpture-place) to analyze how Kusama’s sculpture intervened and interacted with the garden space. In doing so the exhibit underscores the NYBG mission and to make the physical space more visible to the visitors.⁴ I argue that the exhibition whimsically integrated Kusama’s works as part of the garden’s plant exhibition. The organic (but simultaneously artificial) quality of her sculptures became an anomaly that shocked the viewer into noticing the surrounding natural elements anew. Utilizing various reflective surfaces both within the garden and as part of Kusama’s works, *Cosmic Nature* succeed in guiding the viewer to understand, even experience, the sensation of obliteration so central to the artist’s oeuvre.⁵ For Kusama, the resulting sense of self-loss from this obliteration has a positive connotation of connectivity with the surrounding people, nature, and ultimately the universe itself. The intention is for the viewer to witness or experience one’s self-obliteration in *Cosmic Nature*—leading to their greater awareness and communion with the natural surroundings within the garden—thus, in turn fulfilled the NYBG’s mission to “advocate for the plant world.”⁶

⁴ Todor Todorov, *Elemental Sculpture: Theory and Practice*. Newcastle upon Tyne (London: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2014), 18-19.

⁵ Yayoi Kusama, *Infinity Net: The Autobiography of Yayoi Kusama* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2011), 93.

⁶ New York Botanical Garden, “Mission and Overview,” NYBG.org, New York Botanical Garden, 5/15/2022. <https://www.nybg.org/about/mission-and-overview/>.

II. CHAPTER 1 A SHORT HISTORY OF BOTANICAL GARDENS

The term “garden” means many things, encompassing everything from growing plants in one’s backyard to massive sprawling gardens controlled by corporations and governments. The two types of gardens that directly inform this thesis are botanical gardens and sculpture gardens. As a way of providing context to *Cosmic Nature*, this chapter summarizes the history of botanical gardens in the Euro-American context, leading up to the NYBG.

Birth of Botanical Gardens

Botanical gardens as defined by Michael Young in 1987, are spaces “in which the main concerns are instruction and research and where the plants are gathered together to form a scientific collection.”⁷ One of the earliest recognizable examples of botanical gardens was in China, attributed to the mythological ruler, Shennong (神農), from the twenty-eighth century B.C.E, who has been believed to be the “Father of Husbandry and Medicine.”⁸ Yet early botanical gardens also existed in regions such as ancient Egypt and Mesopotamia.

Botanical gardens in a western context evolved from their predecessor, ancient physic gardens which were used to research plants for botany and medicine. The foundational knowledge of plant classification that was essential for botanical gardens

⁷ Michael Young. *Collins Guide to the Botanical Gardens of Britain* (London: Collins, 1987), 6.

⁸ Emil Bretschneider, *Botanicon sinicum: Notes on Chinese Botany from Native and Western Sources* (London: Trubner, 1882), 26.

came out of these early physic gardens in Greece and several notable figures maintained gardens of their own.⁹ Early owners of physic gardens include: Aristotle (384-322 BCE); Pliny the Elder (23-79 CE) who discussed the medicinal plants in the garden of Antonius Castor in his book *Naturalis historia*, composed in 77 CE; and Pedanius Dioscorides (40-90 CE), who published the text *De Materia Medica*, which was considered influential on European thought through the sixteenth century.¹⁰ The evolution of botanical gardens expanded further in the ninth century under the rule of Charlemagne (747-814) at St. Gall and these gardens were the precedent for physics gardens until the sixteenth century. The eventual evolution of physic gardens into what we know as botanical gardens occurred concurrently with the separation of medicine and botany.¹¹ It was during the sixteenth century that the relationship between humans and nature begin to change as the focus on scientific advancements expanded, thus dividing the study of botany from medicine.¹²

Botanical Gardens Today

In modern times, more than half of the countries arounds the world have botanical gardens of their own, with the Botanic Gardens Conservation International (BGCI) in the United Kingdom listing over 700 members from 118 countries.¹³ Even so, botanical

⁹ Arthur W. Hill, "The History and Functions of Botanic Gardens," *Annals of the Missouri Botanical Garden* 2, no. 1/2 (1915): 185.

¹⁰ Aristotle's garden in Athens and its passing to Theophrastus (371-287 BCE), who expanded and reorganized it is well-documented. Ibid: 185.

¹¹ Michael Young. *Collins Guide to the Botanical Gardens of Britain* (London: Collins, 1987), 9-10.

¹² Claudia Lazzaro, *The Italian Renaissance Garden: From the Conventions of Planting, Design, and Ornament to the Grand Gardens of Sixteenth-century Central Italy*. (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1990), 18.

¹³ Fred Powladge, "The Evolving Role of Botanical Gardens." *BioScience* 61, no. 10 (2011): 744.

gardens struggle to secure funding for both the maintenance and research occurring on site. The funding is drying up as the botanical gardens are tasked with the responsibility to actively preserve endangered species on an unprecedented scale in the face of climate change. For this reason, botanical gardens around the world have been increasing efforts to garner attention and financial support.

Fred Powledge, in his article "The Evolving Role of Botanical Gardens" observes that this funding struggle is no longer uncommon even in major cultural centers due to dwindling government funding, forcing institutions to seek out new sources of support.¹⁴ Traditionally, botanical gardens also heavily relied on private foundations and fund-raising efforts as their primary form of income, which tend to be unstable, again leaving the gardens with a need to reach out to the public. Today, it is not uncommon for a botanical garden to have a strong marketing department. For example, in 2011, a report commissioned by the BGCI pointed out that botanical gardens were perceived as "exclusive and elite institutions," and there could be a "much-needed reconnection of the public with nature."¹⁵ The report concluded that the botanical gardens need to expand their appeal to a wider audience and to focus more on community engagement.¹⁶ For many botanical gardens, creating this connection between people and plants has been an essential but difficult mission to accomplish with many of the struggles Powledge discusses.

¹⁴ Ibid: 744.

¹⁵ Ibid. 747.

¹⁶ Ibid: 746-47.

The New York Botanical Garden

The NYBG was established in 1891 by Nathaniel Lord Britton (1857-1934) and his wife Elizabeth Britton (1858-1934) (Figure 2).¹⁷ Inspired by Great Britain's Royal Botanic Gardens at Kew, the Brittons were convinced that their vision for the NYBG could become the "American counterpart" to the gardens in Britain (Figure 3).¹⁸ Rupert C. Barneby, a botanist at the NYBG from 1959-1972 attributes the long-term success of the gardens and their educational program to Nathaniel Lord Britton's vision and management, stating in the *Brittonia* journal that "Many hands have labored to build and maintain the Garden, but no one questions that its genesis and the direction of its subsequent growth are due to the vision, perseverance, astute diplomacy, and intellectual drive of that great man whose name is perpetuated in the title of this journal."¹⁹ The NYBG now has the second largest collection of plant species in the world (7.8 million) (after Kew) and house the largest plant library in the Western Hemisphere (11 million items) which spans ten centuries.²⁰

On their website, the NYBG discusses their mission statement and provides an overview of their mission to be an "advocate for the plant world."²¹ To fulfill this mission, the garden maintains a world-class research program which also contributes to the NYBG's educational mission as a living museum. In the context of being stewards

¹⁷ New York Botanical Garden, "Mission and Overview," NYBG.org, New York Botanical Garden, 5/15/2022. <https://www.nybg.org/about/mission-and-overview/>.

¹⁸ Peter Mickulas. *Britton's Botanical Empire: The New York Botanical Garden and American Botany, 1888–1929. (Memoirs of the New York Botanical Garden, 94.)* (New York: New York Botanical Garden Press, 2007), 181.

¹⁹ Rupert C. Barneby, "Nathaniel Lord Britton (1859-1934)," *Brittonia* 36, no. 2 (1984): 95.

²⁰ New York Botanical Garden, "Mission and Overview," NYBG.org, New York Botanical Garden, 5/15/2022. <https://www.nybg.org/about/mission-and-overview/>.

²¹ *Ibid.*

over the gardens, the NYBG strives to educate what they describe as “the next generation of Earth’s caregivers.”²²

The NYBG spans 250 acres in the urban center of the Bronx, New York City, encompassing a section of the Bronx River and 50 acres of old-growth forest. Notably, the garden is the largest garden in any city in the United States (Figure 4). Sections of the garden (such as the Thain forest) were present before the founding of the gardens, and thus the existing landscape and plant life were taken into account for the overall structuring of the site (Figure 5). The garden has four entrances, including the Main Entrance, and the Mosholu, Bedford, and East gates. Walkways have also been constructed around the established trees. The garden space is divided into twenty-nine sections based on plant type, environment, native species, indoor locations with diverse biomes, and a children’s garden.

²² Ibid.

III. CHAPTER 2 SCULPTURE GARDENS IN HISTORY AND AS A METHODOLOGICAL APPROACH

The incorporation of sculpture in a garden setting—the “sculpture gardens”—has its own long history. Unlike botanical gardens, sculpture gardens had no pragmatic or scientific function, but developed purely for pleasure. However, the strategies contemporary botanical gardens employ in their integration of artworks follow what one commonly finds in a sculpture garden. For this reason, it is necessary to briefly trace the history of sculpture gardens to fully appreciate the interplay between art and plants in *Cosmic Nature*.

Brief History of Sculpture Gardens

In present garden studies, the origin of sculpture gardens is commonly attributed to Theophrastus (371-287BCE) in ancient Greece. According to Diogenes Laertius, who compiled biographies of Greek philosophers in the early part of the third century, Theophrastus created a temple with a “museum,” which was a garden adorned with sculptures.²³ These early examples of sculpture gardens in ancient Greece were rejuvenated during the Italian Renaissance in the process of redefining and reimagining the context for gardens and the relationship between art and nature (Figure 6). However, even the new ideas of the Renaissance still had roots in the older artistic traditions of ancient Greece. For example, Claudia Lazzaro points to the ancient Greeks as the inspiration for things such as the placement of mythological figures and decorative water

²³ Patrick Bowe, "Furnishing the Ancient Greek Garden." *Studies in the History of Gardens & Designed Landscapes* 37, no. 1 (2017), 77.

features into gardens. While the newer Renaissance gardens were built on more ancient principles, they were still distinct from the ancient precursors, as many of the gardens were structured around the sculpture instead of the reverse.

Sculpture gardens continued to change in the seventeenth century, especially in France, where the gardens at Versailles (first constructed in 1634) became the standard for the development of sculpture gardens around Europe (Figure 7). Initially, the gardens at Versailles in the seventeenth century followed the Italian Renaissance Garden tradition, inspired by the use of statues of classical Greek mythological figures.²⁴ However, the Versailles gardens were revolutionary because of their focus on water features and the inclusion of circular flower beds. Over time, the gardens at Versailles served as the primary template across Europe, until the designs of English Landscape (Picturesque) gardens began to compete with a more fluid use of sculpture (Figure 8). The English Picturesque gardens originating in the eighteenth century, have continued to be an important influence on present-day gardens.²⁵ The focus on the relationship between the landscape and the sculpture has led to a greater focus on a few pieces or even a single piece that dominates a section of a space in the garden and often there was a vast, curated landscape as part of the design.²⁶

²⁴Over time the gardens at Versailles have gone through at least five major renovations. Stéphane Pincas, *Versailles: The History of the Gardens and Their Sculpture* (New York, N.Y.: Thames and Hudson, 1996), 22.

²⁵ John Dixon Hunt, *Gardens and the Picturesque: Studies in the History of Landscape Architecture*. (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1992), 285.

²⁶ *Ibid*, 289.

Sculpture Gardens Today

In the postwar era (1945-), the privileging of sculpture within a garden came to be questioned. For example, J.E. Grant White, argued that the relationship between sculpture and a garden should be more complimentary in its layout to avoid one being a more dominating presence than the other.²⁷ Modern sculpture gardens took on new forms during this time, following the trend of greater integration. Newer sculpture gardens have successfully integrated sculpture into a large, open landscape, such as the Storm King Art Center and The Fields Sculpture Park, both in New York, and Sculpture Fields at Montague Park in Tennessee, (Figure 9,10,11). Penny Florence argues that this move into the landscape (i.e., liberation from a museum structure) is the final stage of development for sculpture gardens.²⁸ In *The Making of Place*, John Dixon Hunt and Simon McFadden explain why they believe that sculpture and garden settings are able to benefit one another and how this is accomplished. They argue that sculpture can be utilized to bring people into a space which they would not notice normally, and that the inclusion of sculpture can encourage people to engage more with the natural environments that the pieces are placed in.²⁹ Further, Hunt and McFadden suggest that there are two responses to placing sculpture into these landscaped environments. The first is that these artificial inclusions serve as a reminder of the artfulness of the natural landscape. The second is that they are able to make the “scenery appear more ‘natural’ than it is.”³⁰ Todor Todorov

²⁷ J. E. Grant White, *Garden Art and Architecture*. (London, New York: Abelard-Schuman, 1968), xxv.

²⁸ Penny Florence, *Thinking the Sculpture Garden: Art, Plant, Landscape* (Abingdon, Oxon; New York, NY: Routledge, 2020),77.

²⁹ John Dixon Hunt and Simon McFadden, *The Making of Place: Modern and Contemporary Gardens* (London, England: Reaktion Books, 2015), 191.

³⁰ *Ibid.* 193.

also discusses the urban framework present in the relationship between parks and sculpture. He focuses on the factor of human influence over the natural environment and how this reshapes the space. Further, Todorov argues that both the natural and sculptural are manipulated by people when placed in a park, and this manipulation is the key difference between nature and a curated natural space such as a garden.

Sculpture Gardens as a Methodological Approach

Despite certain differences in sculpture-nature dynamics, methodological approaches to analyzing sculpture gardens can provide a useful framework to understanding how botanical gardens have been incorporating works of art within their spaces. For the purpose of this study, I believe the most useful is the analytical framework introduced by Todor Todorov. Graduated from Bulgarian University of Fine Arts with a PhD in Contemporary Sculpture, Todorov is an internationally renowned sculptor and the author of *Elemental Sculpture: Theory and Practice*.³¹ Todorov constructs a three-part theoretical typology for examining the relationship between sculpture and its three-dimensional environment, namely: sculpture-object, sculpture-space, and sculpture-place. Sculpture-object is a work that is outlined with clear borders that separated from its surrounding space. At this stage, a sculpture's interaction with its surrounding space essentially consists only at the level of touching or connecting to the exterior. In sculpture-space, the clear borders we observed in sculpture-object begin to

³¹ Todorov, *Elemental Sculpture: Theory and Practice*. Newcastle upon Tyne (London: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2014).

crumble. The exterior surrounding space commences a dialogue with the sculpture, allowing the space to support structure. Finally, sculpture-place is characterized by the complete removal of borders that had once separated the sculptural form and the surrounding space. The works tend to be monumental in size, sometimes allowing the viewer to enter the space or at the very least see into the interior.

Todorov's idea of "elemental sculpture," first refers to the Earth art and Kinetic sculptures. In these areas of contemporary sculpture, Todorov suggest that "innovative sculptors are paving the way for the rediscovery of the natural elements by other sculptors, their use as a building material in art, as well as their becoming an integral part of the entire work."³² For Todorov, elemental sculpture is a quintessential sculpture-place, and the work is no longer separated from its surrounding environment. Instead, the natural elements serve as the "locus in which sculptural events happen, or, more precisely, that part of the background which contains a physical threat for the survival of the sculptural work."³³ Todorov further substantiates the idea of blurring of boundaries with the observation on the changing role—or disappearance—of the pedestals in elemental sculpture.

This focus on the pedestal also overlaps with the scholar Rosalind Krauss's theories on the evolution of modern sculpture. Krauss's seminal article, "Sculpture in the Expanded Field," redefined sculpture in post-modernism and constructed a theoretical

³² Ibid, 59.

³³ Ibid, 51. Jakob Due Lorentzen also comments on a similar relationality, stating: "sculpture opens up a way of experiencing the world by exposing the elemental relations between material and space that allows us to relate to the world in a new way." See Jakob Due Lorentzen, "Sculpture and the Sense of Place." *Open Philosophy* 2, no. 1 (2019): 629.

framework for land art.³⁴ Although Todorov does not cite Krauss explicitly, his tripart evolution of sculpture parallels Krauss's arguments on the changing role of the pedestal. According to Krauss, there are several phrases in which sculpture art has changed and evolved over time. The first phase for the evolution of sculpture was the creation of representative works, and in this phase, a key shift was the abandoning of traditional pedestals. One such example is Auguste Rodin's (1840-1917) *Gates of Hell*, which was intended to depart from the practice of monument sculpture, releasing the sculpture from the function of architecture, religion, ethics, and literature (Figure 12).³⁵ The second phase occurred during the Modernist period, in which sculpture entered the space of sitelessness, evidenced by the abstraction and integration of the base as part of the sculpture. We can look to Constantin Brancusi's (1876-1957) piece *Beginning of the World* as an example of this abstraction (Figure 13). Finally, in the third stage sculpture had taken a form between architecture and landscape, as exemplified by Robert Morris's (1931-2018) works (Figure 14). In this final phase the form of a sculpture was now dependent on its environment, or the form of the background. Krauss concludes that sculpture is now hard to define, and that art now crosses boundaries between Sculpture and Architecture, Sculpture and Landscape, Landscape and Architecture.³⁶ Todorov and Krauss's categorizations and insights into the changing role/form of pedestals will inform my analysis of the interactions between the Kusama's sculptures and the NYBG surrounding in *Cosmic Nature* in the next two chapters.

³⁴. Rosalind Krauss, "Sculpture in the Expanded Field." *October*, no. 8 (1979): 30-44.

³⁵ Ibid, 34.

³⁶ Ibid, 36.

Merging of Botanical and Sculpture Gardens in NYBG Special Exhibitions

Today, while the scientific focus still separates botanical gardens from other types of gardens, the distinction is becoming increasingly blurred. This is because the gardens are driven by the same mission to make their findings accessible for as many people as possible.³⁷ One highly visible (and often lucrative) method of public outreach for variety of gardens have been artist collaborations and special exhibitions.

While contemporary sculpture gardens often had discrete landscaping to complement the art, botanical gardens typically approach the relationship in a very different way. Specifically, these gardens are repurposing a space that is designed for scientific research and permanent plant exhibitions. Sculptures are tasked with making a site more alluring for the general public not already interested in plants and to encourage them to visit the site, but to do so in a way that does not disrupt the microecosystem of the garden or take the spotlight away from the plant exhibition.³⁸ When successful, these special exhibitions are win-win for the gardens, artists, and the public; and Todorov asserts the effectiveness of sculpture to help people reconnect to their surroundings:

Sculpture not only changes the landscape of the urban environment, it also opens people's eyes to the reality surrounding them. It provokes reflection on the part of the viewer, stimulates discussion and breathe voluntary or involuntary comparison with existing things to the level of *deja vu*. This puts to the test what is conventional in general terms, challenging us to rethink reality and breeding a sustained striving for a better world.³⁹

³⁷ Michael Young. *Collins Guide to the Botanical Gardens of Britain* (London: Collins, 1987), 6.

³⁸ John Dixon Hunt and Simon McFadden, *The Making of Place: Modern and Contemporary Gardens* (London, England: Reaktion Books, 2015), 192.

³⁹ Todor Todorov, *Elemental Sculpture: Theory and Practice*. Newcastle upon Tyne (London: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2014), 33.

For example, Jeff Book in his article “Art of the Open Air,” observes how ancient traditions culminated into the twenty-first-century garden structure, resulting in varying levels of interaction between art and gardens.⁴⁰

The connection between art and nature is also discussed by Fred Powledge, specifically in the context of what he sees as the evolving role that botanical gardens serve, and the increasing need to raise sufficient funds through public engagement to maintain the gardens’ operation.⁴¹ Powledge also raises the issue of “plant blindness,” originally coined by James Wandersee and Elizabeth Schussler, meaning the public’s “inability to see or notice the plants in [their] environment,” or “to recognize the importance of plants in the biosphere and in human affairs.”⁴² Juxtaposing artworks against plants and hosting other public-facing events beyond the traditional role of a botanical garden are now considered an effective way to help visitors refocus their attention on plants and the mission of the garden. As a result, these visitors contribute to the necessary revenue that the gardens need to function.

The NYBG began mounting special exhibitions in their gardens, beginning with Dale Chihuly’s (b. 1941 -) glass sculptures in 2006. The NYBG exhibited Chihuly’s works a second time eleven years later with the record-breaking blockbuster *CHIHULY* (April 22–October 29, 2017). Taking advantage of the space, the NYBG’s special exhibitions tend to feature artists who engage with nature or natural elements in their

⁴⁰ Jeff Book, "Art of the Open Air." *House Beautiful* 137, no. 12 (1995): 46.

⁴¹ In his conclusion, Powledge asserts: “Whatever botanical gardens’ future, the need for social relevance—however it is defined will not go away. Nor will the need to raise the sums of money that are required for serious research.” Fred Powledge, "The Evolving Role of Botanical Gardens." *BioScience* 61, no. 10 (2011): 748.

⁴² James H. Wandersee, and Elisabeth E. Schussler. “Preventing Plant Blindness.” *The American Biology Teacher* 61, no. 2 (1999): 82.

works. Other notable exhibitions include: *Moore in America: Monumental Sculpture at The New York Botanical Garden* (2008-2009), *Monet's Garden* (2012), *Manolo Valdes: Monumental Sculpture* (2012-2013), *Frida Kahlo: Art, Garden, Life* (2015), *Georgia O'Keeffe: Visions of Hawai'i* (2018), and *Brazilian Modern: The Living Art of Roberto Burle Marx* (2019).⁴³

Cosmic Nature is too recent to have a full report on its financial impact. However, we can gauge the magnitude these special exhibitions have on the NYBG by examining the 2017 *CHIHULY* exhibition. The NYBG reported record numbers stating that the gross revenue for fiscal year 2018 was \$33,500,000 which was a 30% increase from the previous year.⁴⁴ There were three major exhibitions: *CHIHULY*; *Holiday Train Show*; and *The Orchid Show* (Figure 15 and 16). These shows also set new records for attendance, totaling 1,300,000 visitors.⁴⁵ Much of the success was due to the *CHIHULY* exhibition.⁴⁶

⁴³ New York Botanical Garden, "Past Exhibitions," NYBG.org, New York Botanical Garden, 5/15/2022. <https://www.nybg.org/about/past-exhibitions/>. Other botanical gardens such as Wellington (New Zealand) and the Morris Arboretum (Philadelphia) also utilize Blockbuster art exhibitions to bring broader viewership to the gardens. Fred Powledge, "The Evolving Role of Botanical Gardens." *BioScience* 61, no. 10 (2011): 746. On Wellington in New Zealand for the Morris Arboretum in Philadelphia, see John Dixon Hunt and Simon McFadden, *The Making of Place: Modern and Contemporary Gardens* (London, England: Reaktion Books, 2015), 193.

⁴⁴The Fiscal year runs from July 1st-June 30th each year. The 2018 fiscal year was July 2017-June 2018. New York Botanical Garden, "Annual Report 2018," NYBG.org, New York Botanical Garden, 5/15/2022. https://www.nybg.org/content/uploads/2019/07/DV_Annual-Report-2018_web.pdf, 14.

⁴⁵ Ibid.

⁴⁶ New York Botanical Garden, "Annual Report 2019," NYBG.org, New York Botanical Garden, 5/15/2022. https://www.nybg.org/content/uploads/2020/04/DV_Annual-Report-2019_4.28_Accessible.pdf, 16.

III. CHAPTER 2 SCULPTURE GARDENS IN HISTORY AND AS A METHODOLOGICAL APPROACH

The next two chapters explore the ten outdoor sculptures by Kusama Yayoi in the exhibition, *Cosmic Nature*, focusing on varying strategies used to manipulate the boundaries between the artwork and surrounding plant exhibition. This includes examining how the exhibition allows the artificial and natural elements to share the spotlight, working symbiotically to heighten awareness of the viewer to both. My analysis also considers the mission and concerns of the NYBG by further examining the role that the sculpture has in fulfilling them. I demonstrate how the exhibition strategically positioned Kusama's seminal works and recent pieces around the main section of the NYBG ground to showcase not just Kusama's life-long affinity to natural elements, but also the environmental concerns that are central to the garden's mission.

The NYBG opened *Cosmic Nature* to the public on April 10, 2021, following a delay by one year due to the Covid-19 pandemic (Figure 1; the numbers in this section correspond to the location of the pieces on this map). For potential visitors, the garden had four access options to the special exhibition. The Garden and Gallery Pass (\$35) allowed access to both indoor and outdoor exhibits, while the Garden Pass (\$25) restricted to just the outdoor elements. Those interested in entering the infinity mirrored room, *Illusions Inside the Heart* (no. 10; hereafter *Illusions*), could purchase a separate add-on pass (\$10).⁴⁷ In line with the open-air setting of the garden, *Cosmic Nature* did not have a specific route. Depending on how visitors arrived, they had different introductions to the exhibition. Visitors arriving on foot were directed to enter from the

⁴⁷ The add-on to enter the mirrored room only became available in August of 2021 again due to Covid-19 related regulations.

Mosholu gate to the west side of the garden closest to the Mertz Library Building. This meant that they were first likely to encounter with the indoor exhibition and the *Ascension of Polka Dots on the Trees*, which were garden's trees along the central walkway wrapped in fabrics with Kusama's signature polka dots (no. 8; hereafter *Ascension*). If arriving by car, they were likely to enter from the main gate to the east, facing the Reflecting Pool with one of the outdoor sculptural pieces, *I Want to Fly to the Universe* (no. 6; hereafter *Fly*). I personally visited the exhibition twice, and both times I entered through the Mosholu gate, where I first saw *Ascension*, which seemed to shepherd people along the walkway into the gardens.

For those entering on foot through the Mosholu gate, they were presented with a choice, as the gate opened onto a long stretch of walkway that essentially split the special exhibition into two halves. If visitors walked to the left (north) toward the Mertz Library Building, they would begin the *Cosmic Nature* experience with the indoor exhibition that reflected on Kusama's career and the centrality of natural motifs to her works, which included a digital slide show of Kusama's early seminal work in New York, the *Walking Piece* (1966) (Figure 17). Continuing along the entry walkway, to the left side (roughly further north) were the interactive installation, *Flower Obsession* (no. 2), and *Narcissus Garden* (no. 7) that utilized the Native Plant Garden at the northern edge of the plant exhibition space, bordering the entrance to the Thain Forest. If visitors would walk to the right (southeast) of the walkway, they would be able to view the stand-alone infinity room installation, *Illusions* (located in the Home Gardening Center), the other infinity room, *Pumpkins Screaming About Love Beyond Infinity*, located in the Visitor Center Gallery (no. 1; hereafter *Pumpkins Screaming*), and four sets of sculptural works in and

around the Haupt Conservatory at the southern edge of the garden, namely the *Dancing Pumpkin* (in front of the Conservatory; no. 9), *My Soul Blooms Forever* (Palms of the World room; the first set of works visitors would encounter entering the Conservatory; no. 5a), *Starry Pumpkin* (Seasonal Exhibition Gallery; no. 5b), and *Hymn of Life- Tulips* inside the reflective pools at the Conservatory's two courtyards (no. 5c). There were two works that bookended the central walkway at the west (i.e. the side of the Mosholu gate) and northeast (closer to the main gate) sides. The former was *Ascension*, encompassing the trees along the walkway and the open space on either side, while the latter was *Fly* at the center of the Reflecting Pool that functions as the roundabout, connecting the three main walkways toward the western Mosholu gate, eastern main gate, and the northern half of the garden beyond the Thai Forest and across the river (not part of the *Cosmic Nature*).

The central focus of this chapter is the five sets of works along the central walkway and around the Conservatory. By utilizing Todorov's typology, as well as both his and Krauss's ideas of the disappearing pedestal, I analyze how Kusama's outdoor pieces blended into preexisting surroundings of the botanical garden. Further, I discuss how these pieces affected the plant exhibition within the garden in an enjoyable but real/concrete way. Finally, I argue that these sculptures temporarily forced the microecosystem of the botanical garden to adapt and accept them as a kind of new, even invasive, plant species.

Interiority and Exteriority of Pumpkins

Scholars who study Kusama's work typically focus on the impact that her mental illness has had on her work. From childhood Kusama has struggled with mental health problems ranging from obsessive compulsive behavior to hallucinations. Kusama has discussed suffering from episodes of anxiety, disassociation disorder, and extreme hallucinations that started around the time she was ten years old.⁴⁸ For Kusama, who considers artmaking as a type of therapy, these mental struggles draw her to repetition, and ideas of obliteration and self-obliteration continue to be an important aspect of her work throughout her career.

Kusama often blurs the boundary between the world in and outside the canvas, with every surface being obliterated by nets or polka dots. Kusama's concept of self-obliteration is discussed more in-depth in Chapter 4. For now, what is important is to understand that the natural elements that surround her had always been at the core of her artistic drive, including the paradoxical sense of fear and liberation that coexists in self-obliteration. Kusama has explained her connection with polka dots and the origins behind Infinity Nets stating:

One day, looking at a red flower-patterned tablecloth on the table, I turned my eyes to the ceiling and saw the same red flower pattern everywhere, even on the window glass and posts. The room, my body, the entire universe was filled with it, my self was eliminated, and I had returned and been reduced to the infinity of eternal time and absolute space. This was not an illusion, but reality/ I was astounded. If I did not get away from there, I would be wrapped up in the spell of the red flower and lose my life. I ran for the stairs without thinking of anything else. Looking down, I saw the steps fall away one by one, pulling my leg and making me trip and fall from the top of the stairs. I sprained my leg. Dissolving and

⁴⁸ Jo Applin, *Yayoi Kusama Infinity Mirror Room-- Phalli's Field* (London: Afterall Books, 2012), 4.

accumulating, proliferating and reverberations from an invisible universe...⁴⁹

Beyond this famous episode, Kusama has shared her other encounters with natural elements as youth, including plants speaking to her, which became frightening experiences or a source of fascination for her.⁵⁰

By concentrating on repetition through a variety of mediums, Kusama's art embodies the elimination of boundaries and merges her personal reality with the rest of the world. Through the use of mirrors, light, and paint she creates a new reality that is endless and obliterates the self and surroundings, leaving just her work to redefine what reality is.

Despite her description of the severity of her condition and her constant battle with her suicidal thoughts, the work she creates is almost relentlessly warm, positive, and cute. The epitome of her positivity is the pumpkin. Kusama has discussed her childhood experience of seeing pumpkin for the first time and falling in love with its whimsical form. During her time at the Kyoto Municipal School of Arts and Crafts, she frequently painted pumpkins which would eventually become a major theme in her art.⁵¹ For Kusama, pumpkins are a source of joy and connection to the environment. In her work she removes the pumpkin from its natural setting and creates her own imaginary fields for

⁴⁹ Yayoi Kusama quoted by Akira Tatehata, "Magnificent Obsession" *Japanese Pavillion (cat), XLV Venice Biennale, Yayoi Kusama*, (Japan Foundation, Tokyo. 1993).

⁵⁰ For example, as a child Kusama was once drawing in her family's seed gardens when violets began talking to her. She was terrified and ran home and hid in a cupboard. When she was a teenager, she encountered a pumpkin that also began speaking with her and she was fascinated by it. Yayoi Kusama, *Infinity Net: The Autobiography of Yayoi Kusama*. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press), 62 and 75.

⁵¹ *Ibid*, 69.

her pumpkin creation to live it. Kusama's beloved pumpkins signify her attachment to the world around her, but also the modification of this world to fit what she sees.

The pumpkins, in short, are the embodiment of everything good that Kusama feels about herself and her art. Kusama built her first large pumpkin sculpture in 1994 for the Benesse Art Site, Naoshima, Japan, and has continued to create pumpkin sculptures throughout her career since then (Figure 16). Even today, pumpkins continue to be a prevalent theme in her work across media from outdoor sculptures, soft sculptures, paintings, and infinity rooms. Often-monumental, sculptures of pumpkins have become some of Kusama's most popularly recognized and publicly visible sets of works. These sculptures are made from a variety of materials based on the environment they will be placed in or the overall theme of the works, including fabric, metal, and plastic.

Reflecting the importance to Kusama's oeuvre and their popularity, *Cosmic Nature* included three distinct pumpkin pieces: *Dancing Pumpkin*, *Starry Pumpkin* (featured as the front cover image for the exhibition catalogue), and *Pumpkins Screaming*. This section focuses on the *Dancing* and *Starry* pumpkin sculptures to demonstrate the two ways in which the exhibition blended Kusama's works into the garden setting, using Todorov as a guide. *Dancing Pumpkin* echoes the organic and artificial contours of the garden landscape as well as enlivening the space with its own exterior movement and interior space. *Starry Pumpkin*, on the other hand, pushes the garden environment to adapt and accept it as a temporary member of its plant exhibition.

Dancing Pumpkin is a new work that Kusama created for the exhibition, situated in a paved open space in front of the Haupt Conservatory (Figure 20). The whimsical

deconstructed pumpkin stands at about 16 ft tall and is about 9 ft wide. The pumpkin has brilliant yellow and black polka dots which provide a stark contrast to the solid white of the conservatory's facade. While the colors contrast with the conservatory, the rounded shape does appear to almost imitate the shape of the domed roof. Further, the individual sections of rind look as though they have come apart and become legs. These "legs" appear as if they are dancing, with some planted on the ground and others raised up in the air, and the jovial quality to the pumpkin makes it look like it is lightweight and easily moving around its space.

Dancing is an interesting example of what Todorov calls the sculpture-object relationship. For Todorov, this is categorized by the work being "monolithic, with clearly outlined and firm borders." He continues: "The contact with surrounding space, the air around it, is at the level of touch. The air/space does not take part in shaping the form, it simply borders on it."⁵² The pumpkin's monolithic stature forces it to stand out, but stands in unison with the rest of the garden space and architecture.

While *Dancing* may not be placed directly with the plants in the garden, the positioning of the statue and curation of the surroundings allow it to serve as a connection between the two aspects of the NYBG: the manmade structure (conservatory) and the curated nature that surrounds it. One way that the art and the gardens found symbiosis was the choice of flowers that were planted near some of the exhibitions. In the case of *Dancing*, Black-eyed Susans were planted alongside the curved walkway that led to the piece (Figure 21). The black spot in the center and bright yellow petals mimicked the

⁵² Todor Todorov, *Elemental Sculpture: Theory and Practice* (Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2014), 18.

pattern painted all over the pumpkin, and the flowers appeared coordinated with the work. In this way, the flowers were used to emphasize the color scheme and to connect the surrounding landscape with the sculpture. As such, *Dancing* balanced the viewers' attention between the tall, white, and geometric conservatory and the vast and richly colorful surrounding nature.

According to Todorov, what distinguishes sculpture-space from sculpture-object is the presence of interiority. While under sculpture-object, the interior is closed off and has no contact with the exterior space, for the sculpture-space the work begins open and interact with the surrounding space by loosening its borders.⁵³ The opening of the rind that distinguished *Dancing* from Kusama's earlier pumpkin sculpture leans its interaction with the garden into the sculpture-space category.

To clarify, Kusama has produced pumpkin pieces that one can enter. For instance, in Naoshima, Japan, Kusama installed a second Pumpkin sculpture (*Red Pumpkin*, 2006), which is hollow, allowing visitors to enter the space (Figure 19). *Dancing*, however, is fundamentally different from such earlier piece because people can move within its leg-like rinds, thus weaving between the interior and exterior space of the work. The rind legs are critical to the whimsical quality of *Dancing* and for how it interacts with the space. The rind makes the sculpture appear as if it is walking or dancing around the garden. Each leg is bent differently and has its own distinct shape. This allows the work to emanate a sense of movement, especially when being photographed. Every angle provides a slightly different viewpoint for the audience.

⁵³ Ibid, 19.

To interact with the sculpture and its space, viewers had to follow a loosely prescribed process, which was highly focused on picture-taking. The staff, as well as the arrows drawn on the ground, directed the visitors through the space toward the pumpkin. Viewers were instructed to line up to the side of the piece and invited to interact with the piece individually. There was a strict rule against touching the piece, which was enforced by staff that was always present. Albeit brief, the process provided each viewer the unique opportunity to have a solo interaction with the pumpkin. This solo time with a work is a common theme in the public presentation of Kusama's pieces, which tend to provide brief one-on-one experience for visitors.

Dancing presents an excellent example of the juxtaposition between the external and internal appearance and experience. Stepping underneath the pumpkin, one's understanding of the space changes. The legs dampen the outside sound and provide a space away from the sun and other elements. It is noteworthy that the inside of the pumpkin, in a sense, is truly hollow. The underside has a glossy black finish (Figure 24). Except for Kusama's signature on one corner, there are no additional pumpkins, nets or polka dots, and the smooth black finish reflects the external surroundings and the viewer who stands within. The reflective surface, reduced noise, and the exclusive framed view one can enjoy from within the pumpkin create a rare space and moment for reflection, providing a sense of interiority. This sense of self-reflection goes hand in hand with important themes in Kusama's other pieces and is expanded on further in the context of the pieces in chapter four.

The pumpkin opening is also significant in the context of Kusama, who sees her pumpkin sculptures as an embodiment of herself, and more specifically her mind. This was the first time that Kusama physically opened a pumpkin sculpture, though she has explored this idea first in painting, with *Pumpkin* (1990) (Figure 25). One could make a correlation between the opening of the pumpkin's rind and opening, or quieting, of Kusama's own mind. Unlike the majority of her works where Kusama reaches out to engage with the viewer by sharing how the world appears to her, the black hollowness of the pumpkin's interior allows the viewer to notice the surrounding anew, but not through Kusama's gaze. In other words, instead of being sucked into Kusama's mind by stepping inside *Dancing*, Kusama has quieted her mind to fill it with the viewers' own thoughts and experiences. Realization of this shift in Kusama's engagement may have had a more poignant impact on her fans in the midst of the Covid-19 pandemic than Kusama had initially anticipated when she created this piece in the pre-pandemic time.

Starry Pumpkin (no. 5b), on the other hand, is antithetical to the way that *Dancing Pumpkin* interacts with its space. *Starry* is gold with red polka dots and a red stem, measuring roughly 5 ft tall and 5 ft wide (Figure 26). The exterior surface is covered in mosaic of small reflective ceramic tiles. The signature red polka dots are also done in ceramic tiles, creating a double obliteration effect. Although it is much larger than a typical pumpkin, the streamlined shape and smooth contour seem to point to the organic qualities of a pumpkin, while the use of reflective tiles and polka dots unmistakably gives *Starry* Kusama's signature style. Regarding placement, *Starry* was housed within the Seasonal Exhibition Gallery of the Haupt Conservatory. The piece sat on a small section of pavement inside a ring of stones and a meticulously curated assortment of plants. This

small slice of visible pavement served as a flattened pedestal for the pumpkin to sit amongst the plant exhibition while remaining isolated.

Kusama describes her first encounter with a pumpkin as a child and why it was a transformative experience for her identity as an artist: “I parted a row of zinnias and reached in to pluck the pumpkin from its vine. It immediately began speaking to me in a most animated manner. It was still moist with dew, indescribably appealing and tender to the touch.”⁵⁴ In homage to her memory of this first encounter, the NYBG created a meadow-like plant installation for the piece, placing *Starry* in the center of a recreated willow grove surrounded by several native Japanese plants such as: hydrangea macrophylla, Siebold Hosta, and Japanese Chrysanthemums.⁵⁵ When approaching the Seasonal Exhibition Gallery, *Starry* could be seen almost peeking out from behind the plants from across the corridor leading to the entrance into this wing of the conservatory (Figure 27). As one walked closer to the sculpture, it slowly came into view, mimicking Kusama’s first interaction with pumpkins as a child. This “meadow” surrounding *Starry* made the pumpkin appear as if it was growing within the garden space.

Similar to *Dancing*, *Starry* seems to straddle the gap between the sculpture-object and sculpture-space. Unlike *Dancing*, however, *Starry* has a solid form with no interior the viewer could directly engage with. This leaves the surface of the sculpture the sole site of spatial interaction. In this respect the sculpture-to-space relationship that is seen in the NYBG display of *Starry* is not sculpture-space in the truest sense of Todorov’s

⁵⁴ Object label for *Starry Pumpkin*, Spring/Summer/Fall 2021 by Yayoi Kusama and the New York Botanical Garden, In exhibition "Kusama: *Cosmic Nature*" at the New York Botanical Garden, New York, NY. Seen on: June 23, 2021, and August 14, 2021.

⁵⁵ Ibid.

meaning. Furthermore, the flat cement “pedestal” that separates the sculpture from the surrounding plant exhibition also puts *Starry* within sculpture-object in Todorov’s categorization, where space and the piece work in tandem to structure a type of form-shaping. However, at least from afar, the strategic choice of species in the ring of plant exhibition around the sculpture gives the illusion of a more synchronic sculpture-space relationship where the pumpkin is *growing* among the surrounding vegetation. The plant exhibition and sculpture are each holding its own, while complementing each other to create (or re-create) Kusama’s memory scape.

Reimagining the Pedestal

In the previous section, I examined both *Dancing* and *Starry Pumpkins* with a discussion of Todorov’s categories of a sculpture’s relationship to the surrounding space. This section further considers the role of the pedestal in orchestrating the relationship between sculptures and space, touched upon briefly in the discussion of *Starry* above. It features three sets of works exhibited in (or rather above) a body of water inside and out of the Conservatory: *Fly*, *Hymn to Life – Tulips* (no. 5c, hereafter *Hymn*), and *My Soul Blooms Forever* (no.5a, hereafter *My Soul*). Adapting Todorov and Krauss’s analyses of disappearing pedestals in the contemporary sculpture, I argue that in the case of the above three works, the support for the sculpture was carefully manipulated to imbue the pieces with a sense of organic and enlivened presence.

Alongside *Dancing*, *Fly* was one of the two sculptural pieces that debuted at the NYBG (Figure 28, no. 6). When entering through the main gate, a visitor would walk

down a path that leads directly to the reflecting pool. Except during a special exhibition or an event, the Reflecting Pool is usually an unassuming water feature with minimum embellishment. For *Cosmic Nature*, viewers could see a large, abstracted flower-like sculpture installed at the center of the Reflecting Pool near the main entrance to the gardens. *Fly* has nine petals facing forward and have contrasting coloring on the front and back. The petals on the front side are colored in red and white polka dots. At the center, one finds a sun-like face that is reminiscent of a mask, with an expression of shock or surprise. The face is sunken into the petals and lined with a zigzagging border. The different features are delineated in relief: the eyes are bulging out like buttons; the nose has a pink stripe along the ridge; and the mouth is in an ‘O’ shape with a ring of blue for highlight (Figure 29). The back, on the other hand, is painted blue with red polka dots. There are five additional petals extending out in different direction (Figure 26). Except for the face, the sculpture is completely smooth.

While the front of the sculpture seems to loosely mimic a flower, with the petals going around the face and turned forward, the back petals are more tentacular in their seemingly random placement and directional positioning. This recto-verso contrast provides the viewer a very different experience of the statue as they walk around the reflective pool from the front to the back (Figure 30). From the front, the perturbances appear to be the arms and legs of the anthropomorphic flower- or sun-like entity, while from the back, it appears to be an abstracted tentacular star shape that is floating, or “flying,” on the water surface. Like the *Dancing Pumpkin*, this piece appears to have a gestural quality that is further strengthened by the reflective quality of the setting. The still surface of water creates a perfect replica of the sculpture in its reflection making it

appear larger and more life-like. The movement and clarity of the water gives the illusion of movement for the sculpture and amplifies the appearance that it is dancing on the surface of the water.

Fly is supported by small metal bases under three of the petals that are hidden below the surface of the water. This piece raises the question of pedestal in an interesting fashion. Rather than disappearing, as argued by both Todorov and Krauss, the support for *Fly* seems to remind us of the role of a pedestal in both a classical and contemporary sense. First, in a classical sense, *Fly* mimics a traditional sculptural modes by being placed centrally in an artificial pool of water. Just as we see in Triton Fountain in the Piazza Barberini, in a classical setup a sculpture was often placed on a pedestal at the center of a contained body of water (in this case a fountain) (Figure 31).

However, unlike the traditional setup where the pedestal anchored the sculpture to the pool, the emotive and active qualities of *Fly* and submerged base conversely liberate the statue, accentuating the airiness as the petals dance just above the surface of the water. This push and pull between the classical fountain/reflecting pool setup and contemporary mode of disappearing pedestal provides a starting point to consider the following two sets of works in the conservatory, which were not produced for this exhibition.

The opposing influence of both contemporary and classical structures are seen in the other two works that are placed in pools around the Conservatory, *Hymn* and *My Soul*. *Hymn* is placed in one of the two large reflecting pools in the courtyard only reachable by going through the conservatory. *Hymn* consists of three large sculptures in Kusama-esque tulips which are covered in a colorful polka dot pattern, and these are

scattered around the central part of the pool with about four to five feet between each flower (Figure 32). The first of the three flowers I will introduce is the tulip with a combination of yellow, blue, green with black polka dots and grid patterning, placed furthest from the central dome of the conservatory, and then proceeding clockwise (Figure 33). In this sculpture, the flower petals covered in polka dots appear closed and pointing upward and near the base are two leaves that jut out of each side. The rows of dots create an almost psychedelic illusionistic effect as if the lines are swaying as one stares at the surface of the flower. Although the sculpture is dramatically abstracted, the color scheme does echo the colors that one might find in nature. The second and third flowers are similar to each other, but distinctly different from the first flower. Both flowers open horizontally, allowing the viewer to see inside the petals. The flower directly across the pond from the first has purple petals, lined with white edges, and covered in white polka dots (Figure 34). The patterns are repeated in the third flower with a different color theme (Figure 35).

Each of the giant tulips is supported by a base akin to what was used for *Fly*. Unlike *Fly*, however, the tulips in the *Hymn* are placed among the water lilies and lily pads, allowing the support structure to disappear underneath. As such, the flowers look as if they have burst from the water and are intermingling with the living plants. The presence of Kusama's tulips shifts the viewers' perception of the surrounding plants. For instance, the lily pads spread throughout the water now appear like natural polka dots juxtaposed with Kusama's sculptures. The sculptures stand out due not just to their size, brilliant colors, and polka dots, but the fact that they are tulips and not water lilies. Yet, they also integrate with their surroundings due to the backdrop of the stark white building

of the Conservatory. The obvious inorganic presence of the conservatory building—with the glass windows, perfectly straight post, and symmetrical domed roof—makes Kusama’s giant tulips appear more organic than they actually are. The whiteness of the conservatory also brings focus to the variety of colors in both the sculpture and the surrounds plants.

Finally, *My Soul* is placed in a reflecting pool inside the conservatory within the central dome structure amid the Palms of the World permanent plant installation. Unlike *Starry* and *Hymn*, which required navigating through the permanent plant installation in the conservatory to reach, the Palms of the World is the very first plant exhibit one would see when entering the conservatory from the main entrance. Similar to *Hymn*, the series of five flower sculptures have Kusama’s signature vane-like pattern on the stems while the leaves and petals are covered in polka dots. The overall composition of the petals and leaves differ from *Hymn* because there are stylized with jagged pointy edges and others that are smooth and appear edgeless. While the stems of the sculptures almost blend in with the surrounding trees, the flowers seem to burst forth from the many shades of green in the space.

Unlike *Hymn*, there are no water plants that *My Soul* can directly interact with (Figure 36). The base holding each of the flowers in place was wrapped in landscape edging and filled with stones, making it appear as if the flowers are growing out of small flower beds. This change transforms the base into something akin to a pedestal in the classical sense that clearly separates the sculpture from its surrounding. As opposed to *Hymn* and *Fly* which orchestrated the illusion that Kusama’s pieces are *alive* within real-life plants, the pedestals within the floating patches of flower bed accentuate the

artificiality of *My Soul*. They forcefully remind us that the reflecting pool is not a pond in the jungle, and that the impressive palms that surround it are planted and kept alive in the artificial glass bubble of the conservatory. The five flowers in *My Soul*, in short, are subtly shifting the meaning of “garden” in the botanical gardens from a microcosm of nature to something more akin to a backyard bed of flowers.

What is the purpose of shifting the relationship between the sculpture, plants, and viewer? The answer to this question might be in the title of the piece; *My Soul Blooms Forever*, which seems to impart a deeper meaning for the piece and Kusama. As part of her idea of self-obliteration, Kusama is concerned with leaving her mark on the world and being remembered. It is through her work, which she sees as a part of her, that Kusama has had the opportunity to interact with the rest of the world. This fear of being forgotten is closely tied into her fear of death. Kusama, who openly discusses her struggles with suicidal thoughts, reminds us that death is something close to her, while making art is the only thing that tethers her to life. In her own words: “I shall never stop striving to create works that will shine on after my death. There are nights when I cannot sleep simply because my heart is bursting with the aspiration to make art that will last forever.”⁵⁶

Among the outdoor sculptures selected for *Cosmic Nature*, *My Soul* is the only piece that equates Kusama herself with plants. If we take her title literally, then five flowers are the avatars of her soul that defied death and live on forever. The invisible base used for *Hymn* successfully gave life to the tulip sculptures by blending them into

⁵⁶ Yayoi Kusama, *Infinity Net: The Autobiography of Yayoi Kusama*. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2011), 230.

living water lilies. To imbue a sculpture with life in such way, however, is also to connect it to the natural course of life that inevitably ends in death. The blatant artificiality of the pedestals in *My Soul* seem to sacrifice that sort of illusion of the real to insulate Kusama's soul from the cycle of life, so that it can *bloom forever*.

This idea of eternity is further amplified by the choice of the location for this installation, the Palms of the World room includes the exhibit of Cycads. Sometimes called the "living fossil," Cycads have existed for over 200 million years, and their age means this species has survived through the birth and extinction of the dinosaurs, as well as the ice ages.⁵⁷ The placement of *My Soul* among the Palms (including the Cycads), which have existed as a species for such a long-time, echoes Kusama's own hopes for herself and her work, strengthening the idea of eternity that is key to Kusama's identity as an artist.

The sculpture interacts with the surrounding space in visual and symbolic way. Visually, the color scheme of *My Soul* blends in perfectly with the jungle-like setting among the impressively tall palm trees. Walking around the reflective pool, the viewer can see the sculpture from all angles, but at places while peeping through the vegetation, as if to spot an exotic flower on an expedition deep in the forest. Symbolically, the sculpture points to the idea of preservation of life, which is a key mission of a botanical garden, including NYBG. The placement of *My Soul* in the space with the exhibition of one of the oldest surviving plant species visualized the connection between Kusama's

⁵⁷ Steven Swanson, "Living Fossils: A Scientist's Fascination with Cycads," NYBG.org, New York Botanical Garden, 3/9/2016. <https://www.nybg.org/blogs/science-talk/2016/03/living-fossils-a-scientists-fascination-with-cycads/>.

hope to be remembered for eternity and the wish for preservation of plant life in an accessible way.

Rather than completely blending in, each installation within the conservatory, including *Hymn* and *My Soul*, is carefully orchestrated. The viewer's encounter with Kusama's sculpture becomes an event and an opportunity to connect with Kusama directly. The viewer is invited to experience the sensation of discovery by seeing the sculpture through or amidst plants. This sort of playful and thoughtful exploration was achieved through an intimate understanding of different plant zones within the conservatory, and a close-knit dialog between the sculpture and plants, and as such, it is deserving of sculpture-space categorization, rather than a mere sculpture-object cohabitation.

IV. CHAPTER 3 KUSAMA *COSMIC NATURE*: SPATIAL RELATIONSHIPS

Continuing the theme of interiority and reflectivity introduced in the previous chapter, this chapter considers Kusama's idea of self-obliteration in *Narcissus Garden* and *Pumpkins Screaming*. I argue that Kusama's use of reflection is meant to be both a physical and internal experience for viewers. Additionally, I argue that pieces in this chapter specifically lend themselves to a commentary on conservation that is essential to the NYBG and is further supported through the inclusion of pieces such as *Flower Obsession* and *Accession of Polka Dots on the Trees*.

Kusama's Concept of Self-Obliteration

To fully assess the remaining pieces in *Cosmic Nature*, it is important to understand Kusama's life-long struggle with mental illness, and how it has affected her work. In present scholarship, Kusama's works are often framed in terms of the fear she feels of her hallucinations and how she channels that into her art. For example, Kusama terms the obsessive replication of a motif "self-obliteration," where one's physical body and mind are decimated, lost, and dispersed among the infinitely reproduced and self-reproducing dots, nets, and flowers. It is this idea of self-obliteration that forms the core of Kusama's art. For Kusama, the physical act of artmaking is a form of therapy.⁵⁸ Kusama's idea of self-obliteration has been extensively studied by scholars such as Mikami Mariko and Jo Applin. For example, Mikami discusses self-obliteration

⁵⁸ Yayoi Kusama, *Infinity Net: The Autobiography of Yayoi Kusama*. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2011), 62.

specifically in her obsessive use of polka dots and net patterns comparing Kusama's work to that of contemporary pop artists and minimalist.⁵⁹ Applin on the other hand discusses the obsessional qualities in Kusama's work through an examination of her Infinity Mirror Room *Phalli Field*, drawing from a discussion of the psychological aspects of Kusama's work and creation process.⁶⁰ Further, Applin suggests that the theme of losing oneself frequently appears in Kusama's art.

Hasegawa Yuko and Pamela Miki expand on Applin's observations, discussing Kusama's use of the term "self-obliteration" as referring to "her efforts to stave off her own obliteration and does so by stamping her mark on every moment of life, facing her fears of being engulfed by the world around her."⁶¹ Hasegawa and Miki suggest that "Kusama transformed the experience and reality of her own illness into a universal form."⁶² By concentrating on repetition through a variety of mediums, Kusama eliminates boundaries and merges her world with the external reality. Further, through the use of mirrors, light, and paint she creates immersive installations that transport the audience to a new environment. As Eva Respini notes, Kusama uses physical materials to allow others into what she perceives in her mind. Respini writes: "It's truly an amazing feat for an artist to create, from ordinary materials, a work that utterly transports the viewer to somewhere else, [It takes the viewer] to another world, another reality -- perhaps even another consciousness."⁶³

⁵⁹ Mikami Mariko, "Yayoi Kusama's art and illness: Polka dots and 'self-obliteration,'" *Bigaku* 49, no. 3 (1998): 62.

⁶⁰ Jo Applin, *Yayoi Kusama Infinity Mirror Room-- Phalli's Field* (London: Afterall Books, 2012), 3.

⁶¹ Yuko Hasegawa and Pamela Miki, "The Spell to Re-integrate the Self: The Significance of the Work of Yayoi Kusama in the New Era," *Afterall: A Journal of Art, Context and Enquiry* 13, no. 13 (2006): 50.

⁶² *Ibid*, 53.

⁶³ Iris M. Lewis, "In 'Love is Calling,' Mirrors Reflect the Instagram Era." *UWIRE Text*, 2019,1.

Kusama often utilizes her art to connect with viewers and the outside world. This can be observed through her work and her digital presence and public persona growing with the advancement of technology and the new selfie culture. Respini states, "What's interesting to me is that the repeated sharing of photos online echoes the deeper themes of Kusama's work, ... about repetition, human connectivity, life, love, death."⁶⁴ Kusama's strategies to connect and conquer have spurred her rise to fame, with polka dots populating the internet. The permeation of her works within art venues, mass media, and public squares, also blurs the boundary between reality and virtual reality. As Greg Allen suggests: "Kusama's enormous popularity stems not just from the transformative experience of her photogenic art or its digital reach, but from her compelling personal narrative as well," describing her as "Pop art's eccentric auntie."⁶⁵

Reflective Sculpture and Gardens

One of Kusama's most frequently exhibited (and among most famous) works is *Narcissus Garden*. First shown in 1966, the original iteration of this installation consisted of approximately 1500 silver spheres that were laid out on the lawn at the grounds of the 33rd Venice Biennale (Figure 37). Martin Sullivan discusses reflectivity and movement in his article "Reflective Acts and Mirrored Images: Yayoi Kusama's Narcissus Garden," making the observation that the site determined the boundaries of the piece, but that it was the viewer who most impacted the overall composition of the piece.

⁶⁴ Ibid: 1.

⁶⁵ Greg Allen, "THE KUSAMA INDUSTRIAL COMPLEX," *ARTnews* 119, no. 2 (2020): 64.

In Kusama's *Narcissus Garden*, reflection involves self-reflection. This connotation is already made clear in the title of the piece, and the interactive nature of the original 1966 installation. At the Biennale, Kusama encouraged the viewer to pick up a sphere and directly interact with it to consider the distorted image of themselves reflected on it. The original iteration focused on critiquing the narcissistic tendencies of oneself (and by extension society at large).⁶⁶

Though the original work from 1966 and the new iteration displayed at the NYBC carry the same name, the new context widened the interpretive potential. In *Cosmic Nature*, when one first approaches *Narcissus Garden*, installed in the Native Plant Garden, the information placard clearly indicates that there is a piece ahead. However, the installation is located at a distance, and it is difficult to see the spheres from where the placard is. To view the spheres, one must follow a wooden walkway around a series of three artificial ponds, which are staggered into different levels that flow into each other through shallow waterfalls. *Narcissus Garden* is installed within the uppermost pond, and from below only the slight reflection of the spheres on to the water surface is visible. At a casual glance, they appear as if they are tiny lights scattered across the surface of the water. The version of *Narcissus Garden* that was exhibited at the NYBG consisted of 1400 of the stainless-steel spheres (Figure 38). The interactions of the silver spheres with

⁶⁶ In the original 1966 installation, Kusama put up a sign by her installation that said, "Your Narcissism for Sale," and sold the reflective spheres for two dollars each in protest of the elitist art world and art's connection with the wealthy. According to Sullivan, an antidote from the Venetian newspaper *Il Gazzettino*, reporting on *Narcissus Garden* during the 33rd biennale, commented that the surface of the spheres are turning milky color, due to the damage from the sun. Consequently, Kusama requested that the spheres were turned throughout the day to preserve their reflectivity. Marin R. Sullivan, "Reflective Acts and Mirrored Images: Yayoi Kusama's Narcissus Garden," *History of Photography* 39, no. 4 (2015): 410-411. Also see Joanna L. Groarke and Mika Yoshitake, *Kusama: Cosmic Nature* (New York: Rizzoli Electa, in Association with The New York Botanical Garden, 2021), 113-116.

their overall space change drastically from ones that are statically spread across a lawn, In the NYBG exhibit, the spheres constantly move with the ebb and flow of the water and shift when the wind pushes them around. A quote by Kusama included in the same text panel stated that "the ceaseless movement of the water push the globes together and pull them apart with gentle clicks and squeaks, constantly transforming the shape of the work. It was a startling but dazzling sight: a mysterious sort of entity reproducing endlessly at the water's edge."⁶⁷

Kusama's own words offer a preliminary insight into how *Narcissus Garden* differs from the initial 1966 installation and serve as an excellent point of connection to Todorov's theories on elemental sculpture. Todorov argues that in elemental sculpture nature does not serve as just a background but becomes an essential aspect of the piece. The environment is redefined to accommodate the new relationship with the sculpture, blurring the borders that had previously existed between the sculpture and the space.⁶⁸ This concept of elemental sculpture helps to clarify how *Cosmic Nature* interacts with the surrounding garden setting.

As the title makes clear, Narcissus's obsession with his own reflection was always a central inspiration for the piece. The shift from land to water created a closer connection to the original myth in Ovid's *The Metamorphoses*, where in, Narcissus found a spring of water and was mesmerized by his own reflection.⁶⁹ The literal presence of

⁶⁷ Object label for *Narcissus Garden*, Spring/Summer/Fall 2021 by Yayoi Kusama and the New York Botanical Garden, In exhibition "Kusama: *Cosmic Nature*" at the New York Botanical Garden, New York, NY, Seen on: June 23, 2021 and August, 14 2021.

⁶⁸ Todor Todorov, *Elemental Sculpture: Theory and Practice*. Newcastle upon Tyne (London: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2014), 51.

⁶⁹ "The very selfsame thing/ That doth bewitch and blind his eyes increaseth all his sting./ Thou fondling, thou, why dost thou raught the fickle image so?/ The thing thou seekest is not there. And if aside thou go,/"

water in the NYBG version emphasized the idea of self-reflection, while transforming the artificial waterway at the garden into Narcissus's spring, the Native Plant Garden into the forest of mythology. By extension, each viewer who enters this space is transformed into Narcissus, who is about to be enchanted by one's own reflection.

The move from land to water among the lushly growing plants and surrounding trees, in short, transformed *Narcissus Garden* from something that was originally much closer in spectrum of sculpture-object (though instead of a pedestal, it came with a price tag) to what Todorov coined the elemental sculptural. The spheres become part of their environment and thus made their surroundings a crucial aspect of the overall work. In this version of *Narcissus Garden* the spheres and water worked together to amplify the meaning behind the installation and prompted contemplation on the part of the viewer.⁷⁰

Redefining Interiority and Expanding on Reflectivity

Next, I consider the installations from *Cosmic Nature* that were more independent from the garden space, but nevertheless directed the viewer's gaze to the surroundings. I discuss *Pumpkins Screaming* (no. 1) and *Illusions* (no. 10), which were examples of Kusama's "infinity rooms" that masterfully utilize mirrors to create a kind of virtual space that evokes an infinitely expanding sensation.

In *Cosmic Nature*, *Pumpkins Screaming* was displayed independently inside of a small, windowless building adjacent to the giftshop near the main entrance to the gardens

The thing thou lovest straight is gone. It is none other matter/ That thou dost see than of thyself the shadow in the water."

Ovid, *The Metamorphoses*, ed. Madeleine Forey, trans. Arthur Golding, (London: Penguin 2002), lines 541–46.

⁷⁰ Appendix b. List of other examples of previous iterations of *Narcissus Garden*

(Figure 39). The installation consists of a large cube shaped box at about 7 ft tall, 5 ft wide, and 5 ft in depth. The outward-facing walls are made of solid sheets of glass with a minimal seam at the corners, allowing for a relatively uninterrupted view into the box. If one were close enough to the glass, they could feel the slight warmth being produced from the multitude of lights trapped within the outer casing. The lights periodically turned on and off, and were set to cycle through, slowly illuminating a few pumpkins at a time, until the entire patch was glowing. Underneath the pumpkins is a large mirror that covers the entire base of the enclosed box and mirrors also line the back walls and the ceiling. The two mirrors on the ceiling have small lines between them, which create a grid-like pattern when looking up.

Over the course of her career, Kusama has created multiple mirror rooms. In many, such as *Infinity Mirror Room Phalli's Field* (1965), *Filled with the Brilliance of Life* (2011/2017), and *All the Eternal Love I Have for the Pumpkins* (2016) (Figures 40-42), the audience is allowed into the room to experience the ever expanding and multiplying reflections of oneself. In *Pumpkins Screaming*, the audience is separated from the piece itself, rather than invited to interact with her pumpkins. Relating this to Todorov's theory, creating a space in which the viewer is on the exterior but has visual access to the interior is what he considers the start of the sculpture-place relationship. *Pumpkins Screaming* at the NYBG had a double nested interior: the space of the pumpkins inside the cube; and the space outside of the cube but still inside the building reserved for viewers. Once the viewer enters the dark room, they are physically sharing the space with the cube, but still confined to the position of a voyeur looking into the quiet world of the illuminating pumpkins. The relationship is essentially akin to the

visitors and fish in an aquarium, where all of the creatures of interest are protected inside the glass tanks. Protected by the glass cube, Kusama's pumpkins are transformed into exotic species in a controlled environment that can be observed, but never touched.⁷¹

To follow Todorov's definition of sculpture-place more closely, the sculpture must have an interior space, where the viewer can physically enter to isolate themselves from the exterior.⁷² Among the installations included in *Cosmic Nature*, the one that fulfilled this criterion was *Illusions* (2020), which—like *Fly* and *Dancing Pumpkin*—was shown for the first time at the NYBG. The piece was located in the middle of the Home Gardening Section, which is beyond the plant test garden, where the NYBG typically experiments with how different plants handle the soil and climate of New York. *Illusions* is a glass cube of about 10 ft by 10 ft and the exterior of the cube is covered in four large mirror panels on each side, as well as having edges lined with mirrors. On the exterior mirror walls there are four to five small circular holes in various sizes on each side that are fitted with different colors of glass for the viewer to peep inside.

Behind *Illusions* was The Ross Conifer Arboretum, and the numerous trees were reflected off the exterior of the work (Figure 44). When one walked up to *Illusions* through the test garden, the installation came fully in view, but the exterior mirror walls worked to blend the cube into the surrounding scenery. The space around *Illusions* was surrounded by handrails except for three; evenly-spaced entrance walkways (Figure 45).

⁷¹ Other iterations of *Pumpkin Screaming* have approached the intractability of the piece in a different way, while still keeping the viewer separate from the piece. For example, when the piece was displayed at the Kusama museum in Tokyo, Japan, the piece was placed in a small room in the corner, sealed from floor to ceiling. In this room, the viewer became a voyeur, peeping through the glass wall as the lights turned on to see what was inside instead of being immersed in the space (Figure 43).

⁷² Todor Todorov, *Elemental Sculpture: Theory and Practice*. Newcastle upon Tyne (London: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2014), 20.

This setup allowed visitors to experience the piece from every angle, and even from a distance. By lining the exterior with mirrors, Kusama created an entity that gave the illusion of being part of the space. The illusion of immersion into the garden surroundings is only interrupted by the reflections of the visitor approaching close to the cube to peep inside.

Unlike *Pumpkins Screaming*, *Illusions* invited the audience to step inside of the cube from the back mirror panel, facing the Conifer Arboretum, that opened like a door. Upon entering, staff would close the door so that the viewer is entirely immersed within the interior space of the piece, but now physically removed from the garden surrounding. The inside of the cube was also covered with mirrors and was lit from the outside with natural light that was filtered through colored glass. As the light reflected off the mirrors, it made the space appear larger and enlivened.

Illusions is an excellent example of Todorov's sculpture-place categorization, where the exterior is fully engaged with the surrounding space and the interior has created its own private world. Like her other infinity rooms, the reflective interior of *Illusions* offers the viewer a space for reflection. Albeit short (about a minute), the viewers were given the opportunity to contemplate the meaning of the infinitely expanding space. The interior of *Illusions* also covers a visitor in polka dots of reflected lights, serving as a metaphor for how Kusama experiences the world (Figure 46). Seeing this from outside, if watching one entering a glass cube that camouflages itself into the surrounding, it is as if that person has temporarily disappeared (or been obliterated) from reality.

Utilizing various reflective surfaces both within the garden and as part of Kusama's works, *Cosmic Nature* succeeds in guiding the viewer to understand, and even experience, the sensation of obliteration and multiplication so central to the artist's oeuvre. For Kusama, the resulting sense of self-obliteration has a positive connotation of connectivity with the surrounding people, nature, and ultimately the universe itself.

Kusama's Obliteration as Invasion and Protection of Nature

Ascension of Polka Dots on the Trees (Figure 47, no. 8) at first glance appears disconnected from other pieces in the exhibition.⁷³ Situated generally along the central pathway and in the same area as *Flower Obsession*, *Ascension* consisted of several of the mature maple trees in the garden which had been wrapped in a red fabric with white polka dots. The wrapping on the trees covered the trunks and the bottoms of all the larger limbs, and appear as if they are being consumed by the fabric. In this way, viewers were forced to make the shift from natural element into an installation within *Cosmic Nature*.

The trees served a practical role by drawing the visitors in through the Mosholu gate and gently guiding them on the exhibition path. Similar to a vista wall in a museum, the wrapped trees line sections of the pathways that lead to different parts of the exhibitions. But on a more symbolic level, they also marked the liminal space between the garden and Kusama's world. It is these wrapped trees that best represent the idea of Kusama taking over the natural space at NYBG and recreating her own idea of nature,

⁷³ Appendix c. Examples of other iterations of *Ascension of Polka Dots on the Trees* being exhibited.

which is, of course, covered in polka dots. The piece also has a distinctly environmental message of human impact, as the trees used for *Ascension* are essentially smothered in fabric and cut off from their standard existence in the garden, becoming a spectacle for visitors. There is a clear push and pull between Kusama's influence on the space and the natural elements that are always part of the site. Instead of Kusama's piece working in tandem with the garden, the trees that become part of *Ascension* lose part of their previous identity and are manipulated into having a new identity.

Lastly, the concept of obliteration and nature is explored in a yet another way in *Flower Obsession*, which was the only temporary structure prepared for the *Cosmic Nature*, the structure consisted of a greenhouse made from wood that had been painted white, and glass that wrapped the top half of the structure. The installation stood out from the rest of the garden space, situated in the grass and almost centered between all the other outdoor pieces in the exhibition. ⁷⁴

What makes *Flower Obsession* unique is that it was the most interactive of the works in the exhibition. Upon entering the exhibition, all visitors were given a vinyl sticker by an attendant, which depicted a red flower. As each person moved through the installation, they were encouraged to place their sticker somewhere within, and that the sticker cannot be taken with them after they leave. At the start of the exhibition, the inside of the green house was filled as if it were both a functional gardening space as well as a dining space (Figure 49). The interior was set up with artificial plants, tables, shelves, tools, planters, and a variety of other items. These objects came in a variety of

⁷⁴ The previous iteration, exhibited in 2017 at the National Gallery of Victoria Triennial (Melbourne, Australia), was an artificial apartment that the audience could walk through (Figure 48).

shapes and colors: the green of the plants; brown of the wooden structures; the framework of the building painted in white; etc. Notably, the dining table was lined with a tablecloth with yellow polka dots and reddish-pink flowers, akin to the flower sticker one receives at the entrance.

Over time, as people visited the exhibition the greenhouse began to fill with red flowers, until all furnishings, walls, and even the vent (which the garden specifically instructed the visitors to keep off), were solidly taken over by the red flowers, consuming all the other colors and shapes (Figure 50 and 51). As such, the passage of time plays a key role in experiencing and appreciating this installation. In one sense, *Flower Obsession* is an exploration of temporality of infinity, as opposed to spatial expansion, as it is often the case in her infinity rooms. *Flower Obsession* immediately reminds one of Kusama's traumatic childhood experience in which she recalled the multiplying flowers on the tablecloth. Kusama allows visitors to become a part of this trauma, and in *Flower Obsession* visitors take part in the multiplication and eventual obliteration of the greenhouse with flowers.

In regard to the stated mission of the NYBG, although it is the most independent installation of *Cosmic Nature*, *Flower Obsession* still connects to the garden and its mission to research and protect nature at a deeper level. The installation showcases the impact that each person can have on the environment through a seemingly innocuous act of placing a single flower. The compounding results is the destruction of the internal space of the greenhouse, which was slowly consumed by each interaction with the viewer. In this case, the viewer becomes a participant in creating and destroying the piece.

There is something undeniably eerie when witnessing the mass of overlapping flower stickers, which rendered the original contour of the furnishing completely invisible. As one of Kusama's works, *Flower Obsession* can be understood as a simulation of the artist's hallucinations and the feelings of obliteration. Just as with her other works, Kusama counters the feeling of disconnect from the rest of the world by covering it in what her world is made up of, i.e. flowers, polka dots, and endless repetitions. Yet in this installation, she reconnects with the world in a bodily and tactile way by inviting the viewer to physically recreate her hallucination.

In the context of the NYBG, *Flower Obsession* is not just an allegory for Kusama's experience with the world and managing her own mental illness. Much like other pieces at the exhibit, *Flower Obsession* takes the viewer away from the outside world for a brief moment, and provides a space for quiet (and mostly solitary) contemplation about their self, Kusama, and nature in general, then delivers the viewer back out into the natural world that the NYBG provides. The renewed awareness toward the surrounding natural world that Kusama's pieces bestowed onto the viewer aligns perfectly with the NYBG's research interest in the environment, and its mission to protect and oversee the plant world. In *Flower Obsession*, the final product of the collective "obsession" is a profound commentary on both the effect humans have on their environment, and as an example of nature reclaiming inhabited space.

VI. CONCLUSION

As mentioned at the outset, *Cosmic Nature* had a pragmatic mission. By utilizing work by Kusama, who often encourages the viewers to take selfies with her art, the botanical garden was able to capitalize on press and online exposure through the exhibition. Further, the exhibition generated revenue needed to further the research, and reinvigorated public interest and awareness toward the garden. In this way, the NYBG achieved its mission. By utilizing art, the garden was able to better orient visitors with the natural elements that are essential to its existence.

This thesis analyzed the sculpture that was part of *Cosmic Nature* to explore a deeper and more symbolic connections between Kusama's works and its botanical garden setting. I argued that the sculpture and the garden space had a symbiotic relationship, and that this relationship manifested through both a careful positioning of the sculpture to match the existing plant exhibitions and thoughtful alteration of the plant exhibitions to welcome the sculptures as new species. Just like the tulips in *Hymn* transformed into a kind of imaginary species of water plant by being placed into the reflective pool along with water lilies, the collaboration of Kusama's pieces and the plants in *Cosmic Nature* subtly affected the reality of her sculpture and the garden. Kusama's pieces were still undeniably Kusama, but with richer and more profound stories. In a sense, the garden setting drew out the full potential of her sculpture in the kind of reflections and dialogs they can bring to the viewers beyond the artist's own concerns for her real circumstances and private mental world. Kusama's sculpture, on the other hand, helped to make the garden and the plants visible, more *real*, to the viewers' eyes again.

For Kusama, “self-obliteration” always has a duality. It describes Kusama’s own connection to nature as it questions one’s own attachment to their sense of self. Kusama fears death and obliteration of self, while dreams of connectivity with others and the universe at a molecular level (literal dots). The centrality of “self-obliteration” means that in the grand scheme of things, Kusama’s notion of “cosmic nature” has always been, is, and will always be, anthropocentric. In her worldview, at the heart of cosmos, there is always Kusama, and Kusama is the universal consciousness. Yet, if her ideal world is the universal connection at the molecular level, then ultimately her idea of “cosmic nature” could also be used to decenter or completely reconceptualize the conventional anthropocentric discourse on environment or protection of environment. In *Flower Obsession*, the visitors were invited to be complicit in the obliteration of an inhabitable space as a human vandal and a part of metaphorical return to nature.

This interpretation of a duality of the exhibition is especially interesting in the context of a botanical garden, where the preservation and conservation of plants is deeply affected by the damage that people cause. This thesis demonstrated that the outdoor sculptural pieces and installation works in *Cosmic Nature* retain this sense of duality, making their presence complex and almost unstable. On a symbolic level, the ways in which the plant exhibitions at certain sites (e.g., around *Dancing* and *Starry pumpkins*) were coordinated to match the “cosmic” worldview of Kusama was arguably akin to an invading species of plant dominating and reconfiguring the local micro ecosystem. On the other hand, the jovial “dancing” movement of *Dancing Pumpkin* (which comes across most clearly when one reviews the piece in a collection of snapshots) directs the visitors

gaze to itself then outward, to focus anew on the beauty of the surrounding (actual) nature.

This idea of cosmic nature takes on further meaning for the botanical garden, structuring a focus on the importance of the nature in the space, the fragility of the ecosystems that support these plants, and the importance of focusing on preservation and conservation. This focus, for the botanical garden, needs to be “cosmic,” essentially serving as a vast and unending concern. Thus, the title *Cosmic Nature*, similar to how the sculpture interacted with the gardens, synthesizes Kusama and the garden. Although Kusama never seemed to have had a positive experience conversing with plants, she also never stopped listening. Ultimately, this sense of curiosity, wonder, and her tireless effort to reach out and connect with the universe and all its inhabitants, beautifully encapsulates the NYBG’s research incentive and educational message.

APPENDICES

Select past outdoor installations of Kusama’s sculpture

Appendix a provides Kusama’s representative works displayed in outdoor settings to place *Kusama: Cosmic Nature* in context. Appendices b and c list the other key iterations of *Narcissus Garden* (no. 7; Appendix b) and *Ascension of Polka Dots* (no. 8; Appendix c), which have both been displayed several times in other locations.

A. EXAMPLES OF SOME OF KUSAMA’S PIECE PREVIOUSLY INSTALLED IN EXTERIOR PUBLIC SPACES:

Year	Location	Title
2019	Kistefos Museum, Jevnaker, Norway	<i>Shine of Life</i>
2018	Victoria Miro, London	<i>Flowers that speak all about my heart given to the sky</i>
2018	Liverpool St station on London's Elizabeth line	<i>Infinite Accumulation</i>
2016	Hirshhorn Museum and Sculpture Garden	<i>Pumpkin</i>
2016	Philip Johnson’s Glass House, New Canaan, Connecticut	<i>Dots Obsession – Alive, Seeking for Eternal Hope</i>
2016	ArkDes and Moderna Museet, Stockholm	Ascension of Polka Dots on the Trees
2015	National Taiwan Museum of Fine Arts	<i>Footprints of Life, A Dream I Dreamed</i>
2015	Louisiana Museum of Modern Art, Denmark	<i>In Infinity</i>
2014	Ala Moana Center, Honolulu, Hawaii	<i>Pumpkin (M)</i>
2013	Victoria Miro, London	<i>Pumpkin (M)</i>
2012	14th Street, New York, NY	<i>Yellow Trees</i>
2010	Towada Art Center (Aomori Prefecture)	<i>Love Forever, Singing in Towada</i>
2009	Hayward Gallery and the South Bank, London	<i>Walking in my Mind</i>
2009	City Gallery Wellington, New Zealand	<i>Dots for Love and Peace</i>
2006	Naoshima, Japan	<i>Red Pumpkin</i>
2006	Singapore Biennale	<i>Ascension of Polka Dots on the Trees</i>
2003	Echigo-Tsumari Art Triennale, Japan	<i>Tsumari in Bloom</i>

B. EXAMPLES OF SOME OF THE ITERATIONS OF *NARCISSUS GARDEN* (NO. 7) INSTALLED OUTSIDE:

Year	Location
2021	Museum of Sydney, Vaucluse House, and Elizabeth Bay House, Australia
2020	The Momentary, Bentonville, AR
2018	Hayward Gallery, London
2018	Rockaway, Gateway National Recreation Area at Fort Tilden, New York
2017	National Gallery, Singapore
2010	Park Inhotim, Brumadinho, Minas Gerais, Brazil
2004	Whitney Biennial, Central Park, New York City
2001	Triennale of Contemporary Art, Yokohama, Japan

C. OTHER EXAMPLES OF *ASCENSION OF POLKA DOTS* (NO. 8)

Year	Location
2009	Hayward Gallery, London, England
2016	Moderna Museet/ArkDes, Stockholm
2016	Esplanadi Park, Helsinki

NYBG

KUSAMA: COSMIC NATURE MEDIA PREVIEW



- KUSAMA Garden & Gallery Pass**
Includes access to all outdoor and indoor installations (1–9), Haupt Conservatory, Everett Children's Adventure Garden, Tram Tour, and Garden grounds.
- 1 Pumpkins Screaming About Love Beyond Infinity
 - 2 Flower Obsession
 - 3 Mertz Library Building Gallery
- Paintings, collages, early sketches, other works
 - 4 Walking Piece
 - 5 Haupt Conservatory Galleries
- Horticultural displays, tropical and desert collections
- *Starry Pumpkin*
- *Hymn of Life—Tulips*
- *My Soul Blooms Forever*
- Tram Tour featuring Garden highlights departs from Main Tram Stop, weather permitting. Runs approximately 25 min. Last tram departs at 5:30 p.m.
-
- KUSAMA Garden Pass**
Includes access to all outdoor installations (6–9), Everett Children's Adventure Garden, and Garden grounds.
- 6 *I Want to Fly to the Universe*
 - 7 Narcissus Garden
 - 8 *Ascension of Polka Dots on the Trees*
 - 9 *Dancing Pumpkin*
-
- 10 *Infinity Mirrored Room—Illusion Inside the Heart*
Exterior now on view to all ticket holders; interior access planned to begin this summer; separate timed-entry ticket required for interior access; more information at nybg.org/kusama

Figure 1a: Map of the *Kusama Cosmic Nature* exhibiton with images of each piece included.



Figure 1b: Close-up of the Map of the *Kusama Cosmic Nature* exhibiton with images of each piece included.



Figure 2: The New York Botanical Garden aerial view of the Haupt Conservatory, New York Botanical Garden.
<https://www.nybg.org/about/press-room/image-listing/general-nybg-images/>



Figure 3: Great Britain's Royal Botanic Gardens, Kew, United Kingdom.
<https://www.rhuncovered.co.uk/unprecedented-access-to-the-royal-botanic-gardens-kew-for-a-new-four-art-tv-series-on-channel-5/>.



Figure 4: New York Botanical Garden map, New York Botanical Garden.



Figure 5: Aerial View of Part of the New York Botanical Garden and the Conservatory. New York. <https://www.nybg.org/about/press-room/image-listing/general-nybg-images/>.



Figure 6: Villa Lante, Italy. <http://www.travelingintuscany.com/gardens/italianrenaissancegarden.htm>.



Figure 7: Versailles Palace and Gardens, France. Photograph by Herb Bendicks. <https://www.nationalgeographic.com/travel/world->



Figure 8: Harewood House, United Kingdom. <https://www.gardenersworld.com/2-for-1-gardens/northern-england/harewood-house-2-for-1-entry/>.



Figure 9: Lilit Marcus, Storm King Art Center, New York, 2015.
<https://www.cntraveler.com/stories/2015-06-01/day-trip-nyc-storm-king-art-center-playground-of-giants>.



Figure 10: The Fields Sculpture Park, New York, 2017.
<http://alloveralbany.com/archive/2017/05/25/fields-sculpture-park-at-omi-2017>.



Figure 11: Sculpture Fields at Montague Park in Tennessee.
<https://www.sculpturefields.org/sculpture-park-featured-sculptures>.



Figure 12: Auguste Rodin (1840-1917) *Gates of Hell*, modeled 1880–1917, cast 1926–28, Bronze, Plaster.
<https://www.associationforpublicart.org/artwork/the-gates-of-hell/>.



Figure 13: Constantin Brancusi (1876 - 1957), *The Beginning of the World*, 1924, Bronze. <https://krollermuller.nl/en/constantin-brancusi-the-beginning-of-the-world-1>.



Figure 14: Robert Morris (1931-2018), *Hanging Soft and Standing Hard*, First built in 1965, plywood. <https://ocula.com/art-galleries/spruth-magers/exhibitions/hanging-soft-and-standing-hard/>.



Figure 15: Dale Chihuly, *Red Reeds on Logs*, New York Botanical Garden, 2017. <https://www.nybg.org/about/press-room/image-listing/exhibitions/chihuly/>.

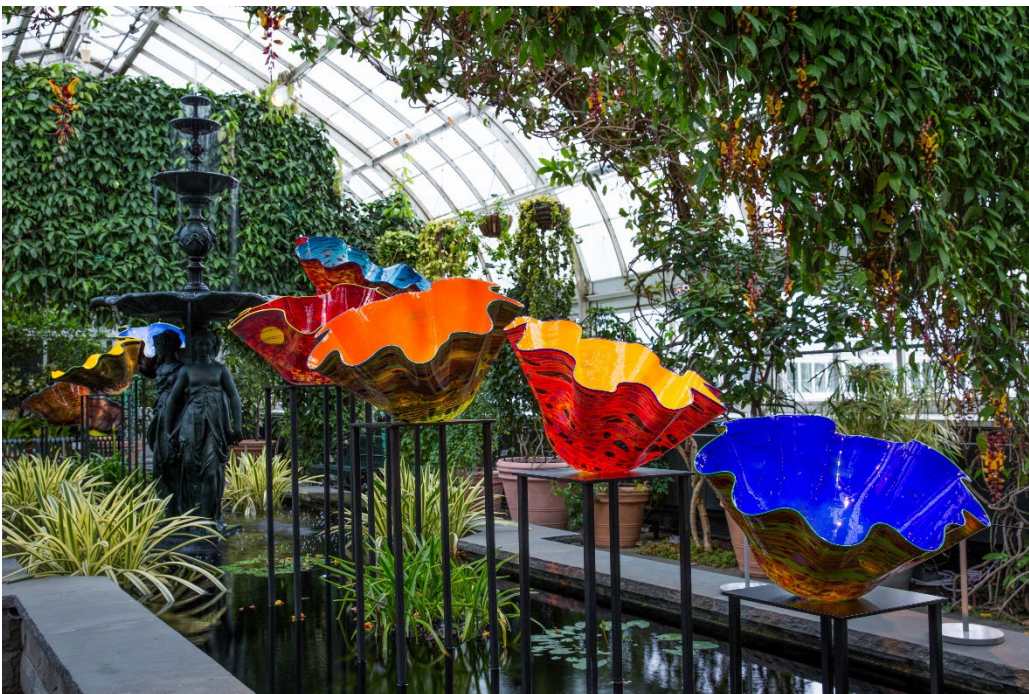


Figure 16: Dale Chihuly, *Macchia Forest*, New York Botanical Garden, 2017. <https://www.nybg.org/about/press-room/image-listing/exhibitions/chihuly/>.

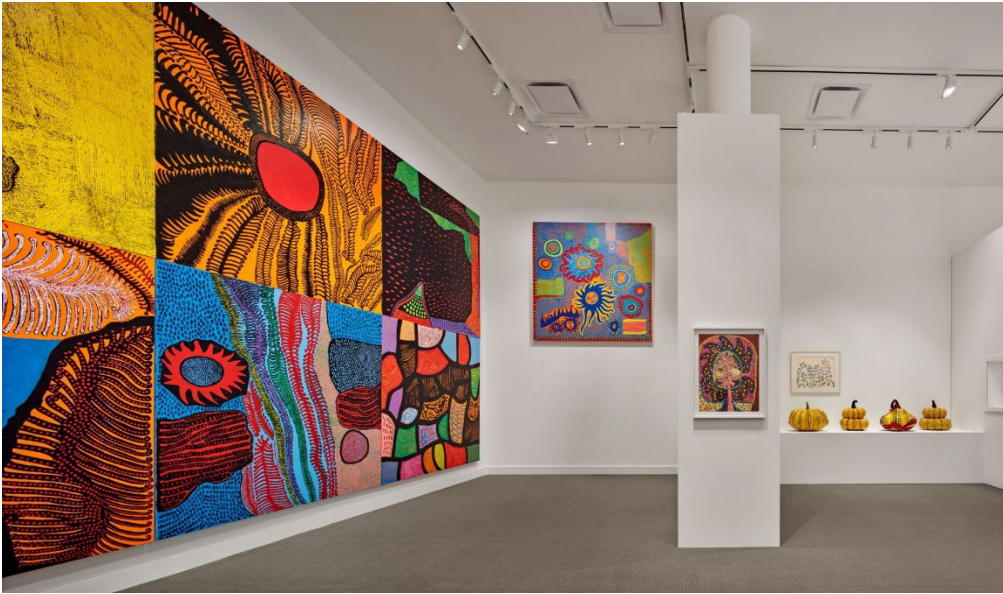


Figure 17: *Kusama: Cosmic Nature* exhibiton view, New York Botanical Garden, 2021. Photographed by Robert Benson.
<https://www.nybg.org/about/press-room/image-listing/exhibitions/kusama-cosmic-nature-image-gallery/>.



Figure 18: *Kusama and A Pumpkin*.
Want to know all about Yayoi Kusama Discover Japan Magazine. Ei Shuppansha: Japan, 2012, 62.



Figure 19: Yayoi Kusama (1929-), *Pumpkin*, 1994, Benesse Art Site, Naoshima, Japan. <https://artreview.com/watch-yayoi-kusama-yellow-pumpkin-on-naoshima-washed-away-by-typhoon/>.



Figure 20: Yayoi Kusama (1929-), *Dancing Pumpkin*, 2020, Urethane paint on bronze, 2021 *Kusama: Cosmic Nature* exhibiton view, New York Botanical Garden. Photograph by author.



Figure 21: Yayoi Kusama (1929-), *Dancing Pumpkin*, 2020, Urethane paint on bronze and view of the Black-eyed Susans. Photograph by author.



Figure 22: Yayoi Kusama (1929-), *Red Pumpkin*, 2006, Naoshima, Japan.
<http://www.artandarchitecture-sf.com/pumpkins-on-naoshima.html>.



Figure 23: Inside view. Yayoi Kusama (1929-), *Red Pumpkin*, 2006, Naoshima, Japan. <http://www.artandarchitecture-sf.com/pumpkins-on-naoshima.html>.



Figure 24: Yayoi Kusama (1929-), *Dancing Pumpkin*, 2020, Urethane paint on bronze, view of the inside of the piece, 2021 *Kusama: Cosmic Nature* exhibiton view, New York Botanical Garden. Photograph by author.



Figure 25: Yayoi Kusama (1929-), *Pumpkin*, 1990. Shuppansha, Ei. Want to know all about Yayoi Kusama Discover Japan Magazine. Ei Shuppansha: Japan, 2012, 62.



Figure 26: Yayoi Kusama (1929-), *Starry Pumpkin*, 2015, Fiberglass-reinforced plastic, tiles, and resin. 2021 *Kusama: Cosmic Nature* exhibiton view, New York Botanical Garden. Photograph by author.



Figure 27: Yayoi Kusama (1929-), *Starry Pumpkin*, 2015, Fiberglass-reinforced plastic, tiles, and resin, view from the room entrance. 2021 *Kusama: Cosmic Nature* exhibiton view, New York Botanical Garden. Photograph by author.



Figure 28: Yayoi Kusama (1929-), *I Want to Fly to the Universe*, 2020, 2021 *Kusama: Cosmic Nature* view, New York Botanical Garden. Photograph by author.



Figure 29: Close-up Yayoi Kusama (1929-), *I Want to Fly to the Universe*, 2020, 2021 *Kusama: Cosmic Nature* exhibiton view, New York Botanical Garden. Photograph by author.



Figure 30: Yayoi Kusama (1929-), *I Want to Fly to the Universe*, 2020, 2021
Kusama: Cosmic Nature exhibiton view, New York Botanical Garden.
Photograph by author.



Figure 31: Gian Lorenzo Bernini (1598-1680), Triton Fountain in the Piazza
Barberini, Rome. <https://wanderingcarol.com/rome-attractions-bernini->



Figure 32: Yayoi Kusama (1929-), *Hymn of Life- Tulips*, 2021 *Kusama: Cosmic Nature* exhibiton view, New York Botanical Garden. Photograph by author.



Figure 33: Close-up Yayoi Kusama (1929-), *Hymn of Life- Tulips*, 2021 *Kusama: Cosmic Nature* exhibiton view, New York Botanical Garden. Photograph by author.



Figure 34: Close-up Yayoi Kusama (1929-), *Hymn of Life- Tulips*, 2021
Kusama: Cosmic Nature exhibiton view, New York Botanical Garden.
Photograph by author.



Figure 35: Close-up Yayoi Kusama (1929-), *Hymn of Life- Tulips*, 2021
Kusama: Cosmic Nature exhibiton view, New York Botanical Garden.
Photograph by author.



Figure 36: Yayoi Kusama (1929-), *My Soul Blooms Forever*, Kusama: *Cosmic Nature* exhibition view, New York Botanical Garden. Photograph by author.



Figure 37: Yayoi Kusama (1929-), *Narcissus Garden*, 1966, 1500 mirrored plastic balls, Venice Biennale. <https://publicdelivery.org/yayoi-kusama-narcissus/>.



Figure 38: Yayoi Kusama (1929-), *Narcissus Garden*, 1966, 2021 *Kusama: Cosmic Nature* exhibiton view, New York Botanical Garden. Photograph by author.

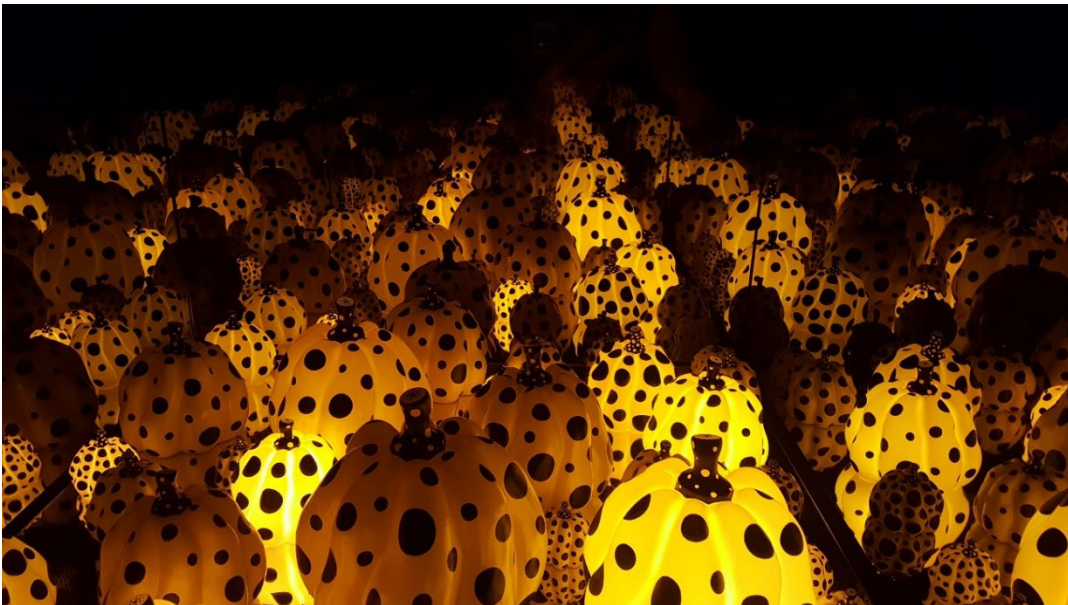


Figure 39: Yayoi Kusama (1929-), *Pumpkins Screaming About Love Beyond Infinity*, 2017, mixed-media. (Kusama museum installation, pictures were not allowed at the NYBG of this work.) Photograph by author.



Figure 40: Yayoi Kusama (1929-), *Infinity Mirror Room Phalli's Field*, 1965. <https://www.phaidon.com/agenda/art/articles/2017/october/19/when-yayoi-kusama-created-her-first-ever-infinity-room/>.

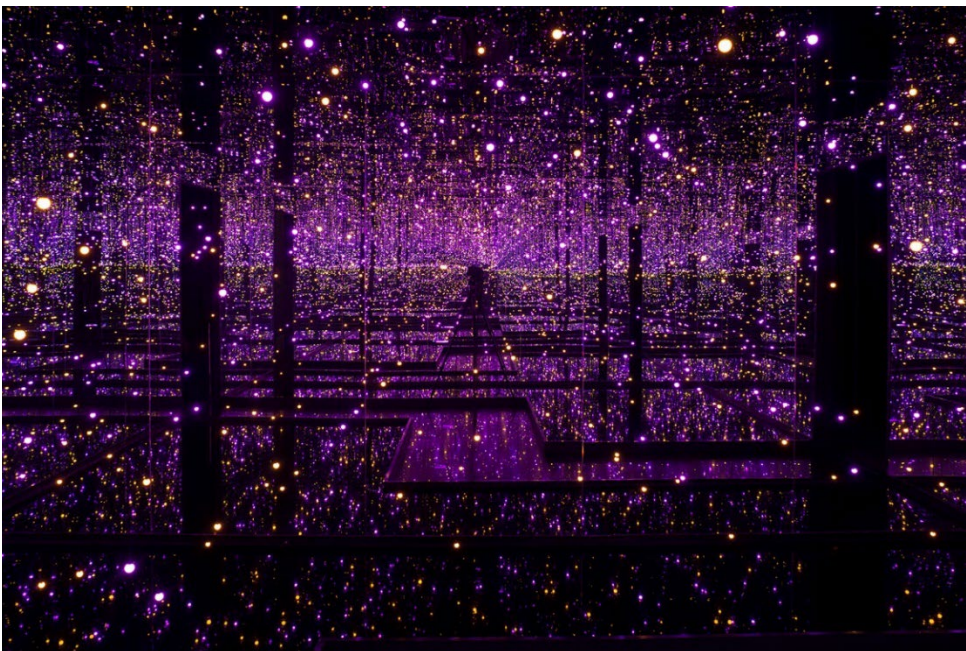


Figure 41: Yayoi Kusama (1929-), *Filled with the Brilliance of Life*, 2011/2017. <https://www.victoria-miro.com/artists/31-yayoi-kusama/works/artworks19443/>.

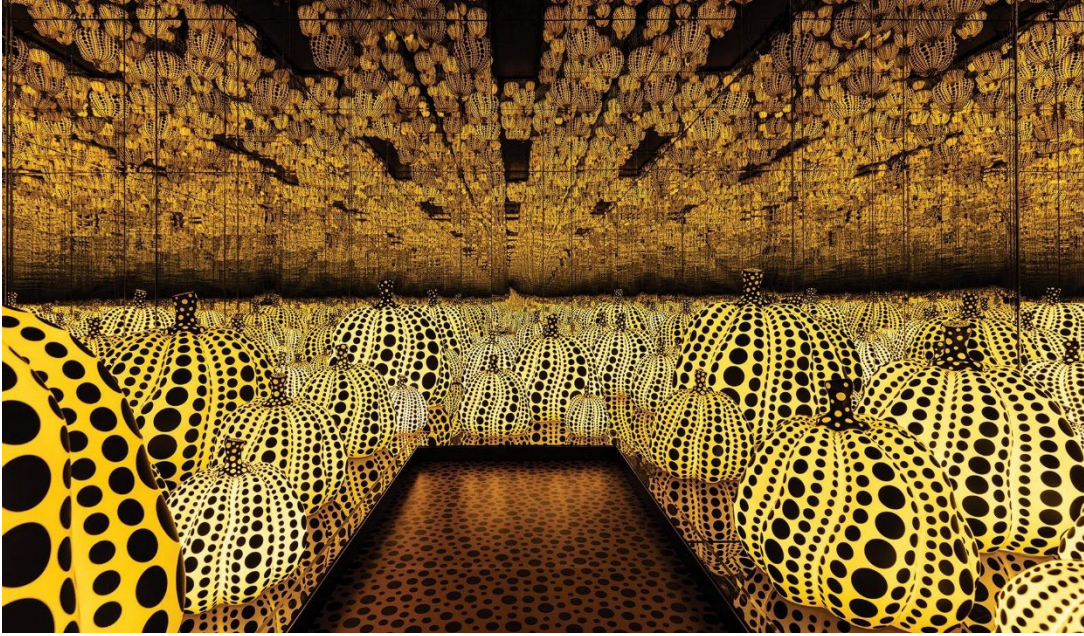


Figure 42: Yayoi Kusama (1929-), *All the Eternal Love I Have for the Pumpkins*, 2016. <https://www.miamidesigndistrict.net/event/1873/yayoi-kusama-all-the-eternal-love-i-have-for-the-pumpkins/>.



Figure 43: Yayoi Kusama (1929-), *Pumpkins Screaming About Love Beyond Infinity*, 2017, mixed-media. (Kusama museum installation, pictures were not allowed at the NYBG of this work.) Photograph by author.



Figure 44: Yayoi Kusama (1929-), *Illusions Inside the Heart*, 2021 *Kusama: Cosmic Nature* exhibiton view, New York Botanical Garden, external image. Photograph by author.



Figure 45: View of the staff allowing visitors timed entrance into the piece. Yayoi Kusama (1929-), *Illusions Inside the Heart*, 2021 *Kusama: Cosmic Nature* exhibiton view, New York Botanical Garden, external image. Photograph by author.

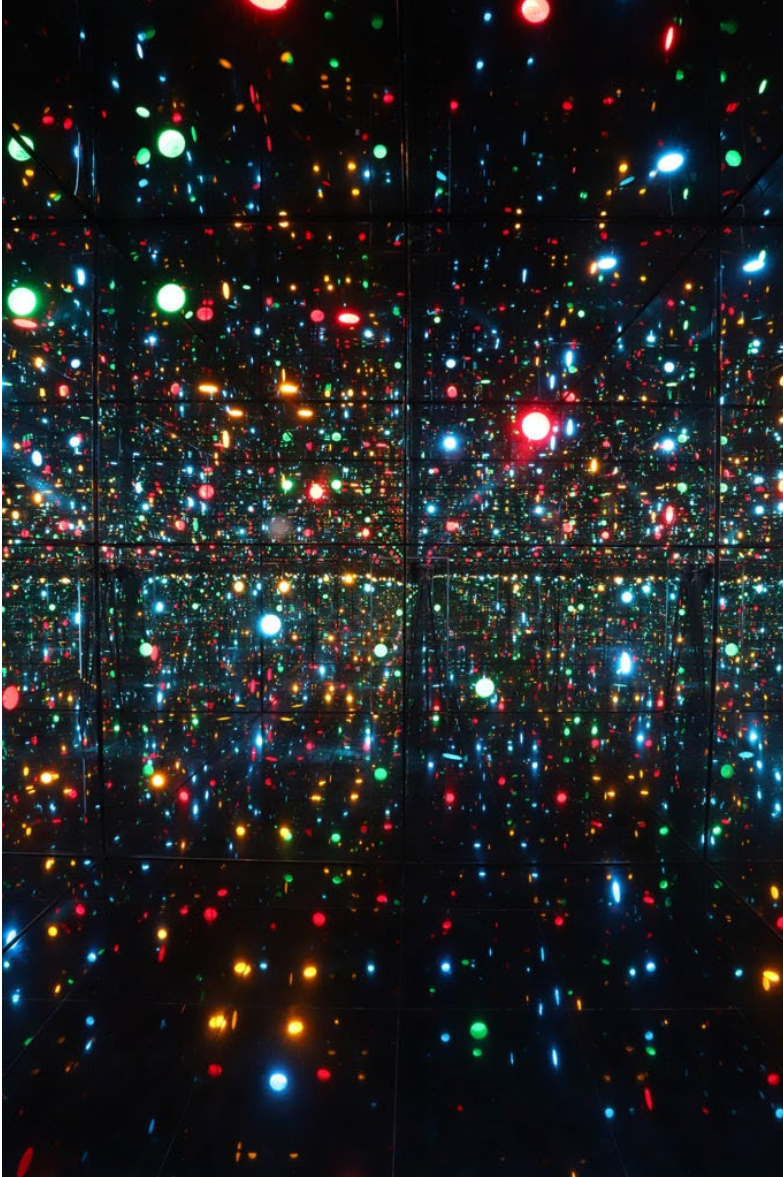


Figure 46: Yayoi Kusama (1929-), *Illusions Inside the Heart*, 2021 *Kusama: Cosmic Nature* exhibiton view, New York Botanical Garden, internal image. <https://news.artnet.com/art-world/yayoi-kusama-new-york-botanical-garden-2-1754403>.



Figure 47: Yayoi Kusama (1929-), *Ascension of Polka Dots on the Trees*, 2021 *Kusama: Cosmic Nature* exhibiton view, New York Botanical Garden. Photograph by author.



Figure 48: Yayoi Kusama (1929-), Exhibition image of *Flower Obsession*, 2017, National Gallery of Victoria Triennial, Melbourne, Australia. <https://www.thisiscolossal.com/2018/04/yayoi-kusamas-flower-obsession/>.



Figure 49: April 2021 Yayoi Kusama (1929-), *Flower Obsession*, 2017/2021, 2021 *Kusama: Cosmic Nature* exhibiton view, New York Botanical Garden. <https://www.nytimes.com/2021/04/09/arts/design/yayoi-kusama-botanical-garden-review.html>



Figure 50: August 2021. Yayoi Kusama (1929-), *Flower Obsession*, 2017/2021, 2021 *Kusama: Cosmic Nature* exhibiton view, New York Botanical Garden. Photograph by author

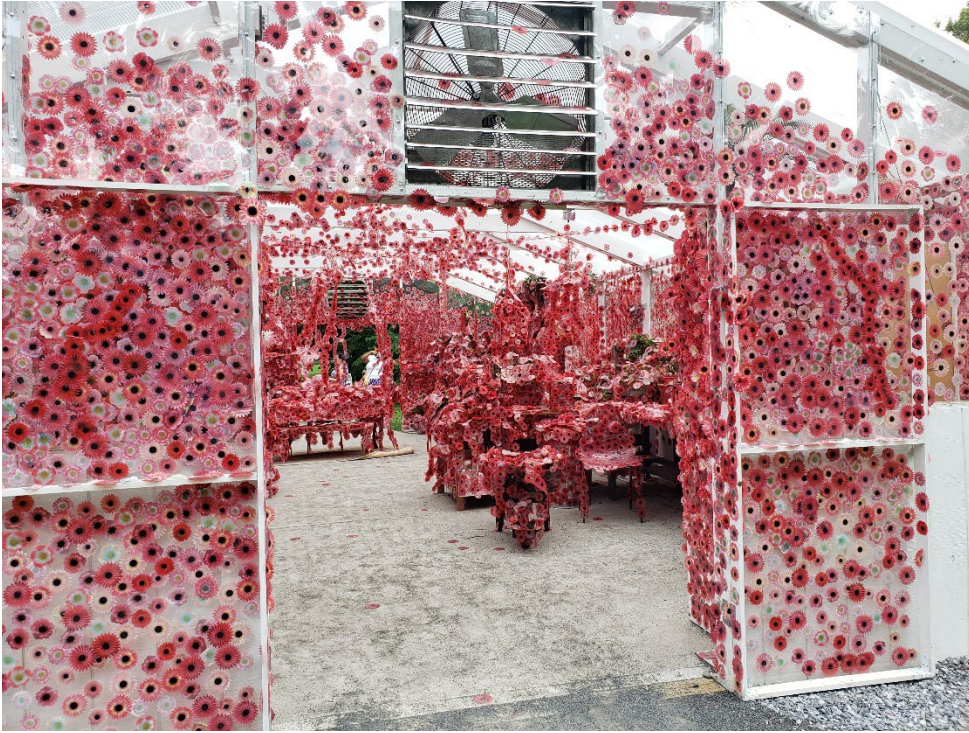


Figure 51: Yayoi Kusama (1929-), *Flower Obsession*, 2017/2021, 2021
Kusama: Cosmic Nature exhibition view, New York Botanical Garden.
Photograph by author.

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Object label for *Narcissus Garden*. Spring/Summer/Fall 2021 by Yayoi Kusama and the New York Botanical Garden. In exhibition "Kusama: Cosmic Nature" at the New York Botanical Garden, New York, NY. Seen on: June 23, 2021 and August, 14 2021.

Object label for *Starry Pumpkin*. Spring/Summer/Fall 2021 by Yayoi Kusama and the New York Botanical Garden. In exhibition "Kusama: Cosmic Nature" at the New York Botanical Garden, New York, NY. Seen on: June 23, 2021 and August, 14 2021.

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