

Yayoi Kusama Yellow Pumpkin 1994

Location: Naoshima Island, Seto Inland Sea, Japan

Scale: 2m high, 2.5m circumference.

Material: fibreglass

Patron: Benesse Corporation, Naoshima Contemporary Art Museum

Scope of work: NATURE, c) plants in 3D; beyond the Western tradition



1. Art historical terms and concepts:

Pop Art: (*defined on the Tate website as:*) Emerging in the mid 1950s in Britain and late 1950s in America, pop art reached its peak in the 1960s. It began as a revolt against the dominant approaches to art and culture and traditional views on what art should be. Young artists felt that what they were taught at art school and what they saw in museums did not have anything to do with their lives or the things they saw around them every day. Instead they turned to sources such as Hollywood movies, advertising, product packaging, pop music and comic books for their imagery. In 1957 pop artist Richard Hamilton listed the 'characteristics of pop art' in a letter as: Popular (designed for a mass audience), Transient (short-term solution), Expendable (easily forgotten), Low cost, Mass produced, Young (aimed at youth), Witty, Sexy, Gimmicky, Glamorous, Big business

Minimalism: (*Tate*) Minimalism is an extreme form of abstract art developed in the USA in the 1960s and typified by artworks composed of simple geometric shapes based on the square and the rectangle. Minimalism or minimalist art can be seen as extending the abstract idea that art should have its own reality and not be an imitation of some other thing. We usually think of art as representing an aspect of the real world (a landscape, a person, or even a tin of soup!); or reflecting an experience such as an emotion or feeling. With minimalism, no attempt is made to represent an outside reality, the artist wants the viewer to respond only to what is in front of them. The medium, (or material) from which it is made, and the form of the work is the reality.

Nihonga: are Japanese paintings from about 1900 onwards that have been made in accordance with traditional Japanese artistic conventions, techniques and materials. While based on traditions over a thousand years old, the term was coined in the Meiji period of Imperial Japan, to distinguish such works from Western-style paintings. Fenollosa defined its elements as: using outlines, a reduced colour palette, not having shadows, and not aspiring to

realism but rather emphasizing simple expression. Nihonga was viewed as a spontaneous art form, revealing the artist's mind in a particular moment, rather than creating a realistic image.

2. Cultural, social, technological and political factors:

Influences of earlier or contemporary artists: Having studied Nihonga painting at the Kyoto Municipal School of Arts and Crafts, by 1950 Kusama was depicting abstracted natural forms in watercolour, gouache, and oil, primarily on paper. She began covering large surfaces—and later, household objects, and naked assistants—with the polka dots that would become a trademark of her work. She claimed that these vast fields of polka dots, or "infinity nets", were taken directly from her hallucinations.

Kusama moved to New York in 1958. She corresponded with Georgia O'Keeffe and in 1961 shared a building with Donald Judd and Eva Hesse. During this time, Andy Warhol and Claes Oldenburg's Pop Art was at the centre of media attention and it is certainly possible to trace many of these ideas in Kusama's own oeuvre. In the 1960s, much of her work revolved around 'happenings', often protesting the US involvement with the Vietnam War which took place in significant locations such as Central Park or Brooklyn Bridge. Again this early awareness of the importance of both location and timeliness seems relevant to the study of this work on Naoshima Island. She suffered from over-work in the States, but did not enjoy great financial success, and returned to Japan in 1973 where she checked herself into the Seiwa Mental Hospital. In 1993, Kusama represented Japan at the Venice Biennale, making a room filled with pumpkin forms. Her work has found increasing acclaim in recent years, with her Infinity Mirrors installation at the Hirshhorn Museum drawing their biggest ever crowds.

Influence of social, political and technological contexts: Kusama was born in 1929 to parents who owned a nursery and seed farm. At the age of 13, she worked in a military factory sewing parachutes for the Japanese army.

Question for debate?: Whilst Kusama herself has never linked the choice of pumpkins as a motif to their political significance, it is interesting to note that the bombs dropped by the US across Japan were known as "pumpkin bombs" due to their shape. Furthermore, these bombs were yellow (a feature they shared with the nuclear bomb, nicknamed 'Fat Man' which was dropped on Nagasaki. 49 of these bombs fell on 14 targets across the country when Kusama was just 16 years old, causing huge damage, injury and loss of life to thousands.



3. Developments in materials, techniques and processes:

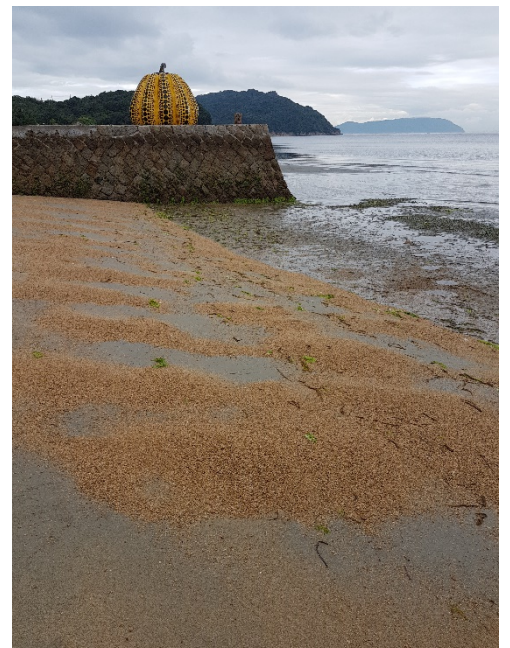
Kusama has been famous for her minimal paintings and three-dimensional objects with endlessly proliferating dot and net patterns since her return to Japan from New York in the 1950s. She calls this method of obsessive repetition of pattern, 'accumulation' or, sometimes, self-obliteration'. She began drawing pumpkins as a child.

This work is her largest scale single piece. It develops an idea that she has explored many times and in many media. Here, it is made in fibreglass to withstand the outdoor exposure whilst remaining vividly coloured.

4. Ways in which art has been used and interpreted by past and present societies:

Commission

Significance of location and display: Pumpkin on Naoshima is a semi-permanent installation that serves as a landmark to the entrance to Naoshima Cultural Village. It is set outdoors on an old wharf extending into the ocean in the middle of a long sandy beach. This offers a contrast to the temporary locations of much of Kusama's work in



Biennials and other temporary exhibitions. Here, the work stands as a symbol for both humans and nature, proudly silhouetted against the horizon and defiant again the tides. It is interesting to compare with Rembrandt's 1648 work 'The Mill' which he painted at the time that the Dutch Republic gained full independence from Spain in the Treaty of Munster. In this way, it is interesting to think about art's ability to both symbolise change and stand as a marker of permanence. On Naoshima, this work also marks the determination of the commissioning family to both regenerate this rural island and to make it a focus of worldwide recognition – for both natural beauty and human's ability to cherish the creative and the good in a world too often dominated by the average and the evil.



Kusama's Pumpkin offers a skilful and thought-provoking installation that has wide appeal, is individual and yet also part of a series and created by a community or team responding to an individual catalyst.

Akimoto *"Fixing art in a location is a way for its contrasting qualities (abstractness and concreteness, universality and location, invisibility and visibility) to co-exist."*

Key questions to ask:

1. Think carefully about how you analyse Kusama's work and contribution to contemporary art. Many female artists are viewed in terms related to their personal, biographical life experiences in a way that their male counterparts are not. Similarly, those using a psychological lens to examine Kusama's oeuvre may focus more on her experience of creating from a psychiatric unit than the work itself, and use her own words to frame her achievements in relation to her hallucinations and obsessions. A cultural historian might instead explore the unspoken implications of her experiences of sewing in a military factory and growing up as a teenager when the Americans were dropping pumpkin bombs on the nearby villages causing hideous injury and death. If Kusama had been a male artist, do you think this political interpretation might have been explored sooner? Then again, a Western trained art-historian might search for the influences of Pop Art and Minimalism in her work, while a Japanese art-historian might prioritise the Nihonga aspects. Which of these reading(s) do you think are valid? Make sure you can justify your opinion with detailed evidence.
2. This work combines elements that are characteristic of Pop Art, Minimalism and Nihonga. Discuss and explore the significance of each to Kusama's creation here?
3. Like many of the world's greatest artists, Kusama has dedicated a significant portion of her career to the development of one idea. You might compare her experimentations with pumpkins to Cezanne's work on **Mont Saint Victoire** or Monet's on **Waterlilies**. Is it important that these epic series are fundamentally explorations of the interface between art and nature? In many ways, you might think that Kusama's work is more varied in form and material than either Cezanne or Monet – but how far do you think that she is a product of her times in this freedom? Similarly, you might think about how all three artists sought refuge in a place away from the hurly burly of city life to gain the required calm and peace to concentrate and create. Where are those spaces today in our global world where no desk or den is safe from the intrusion of the mobile phone or news update. Perhaps, Kusama's place at the Seiwa Hospital for the Mentally Ill is a way to escape the pressures and expectations of being a woman, a human and an artist in the 20th/21st century?
4. How significant is location to the meaning and interpretation of this work and other pumpkin works by Kusama? How important is the experience and attitude of the viewer?
5. How important are scale and permanence (or lack of) in terms of the materials used here? How might the semi-permanent nature of this installation actually make it carry more meaning rather than less?
6. How far do you think this work is useful in the ongoing dialogue between our place in nature and our role to conserve or destroy the natural elements around us?
7. Must art be serious? Can meaningful art be playful or witty? Think about the links to Comedy in literature here. How might humour be constructive in breaking down barriers, opening the mind to new ideas or unexpected meanings?

8. Kusama was friends with many of the highly acclaimed artists of this era, from Georgia O’Keeffe who first helped her when she arrived in the United States, to Joseph Cornell, Donald Judd and Andy Warhol. She first made her reputation with her provocative soft sculptures where she covered everyday objects with sewn phallic appendages on a large scale. She has gone on to become one of Japan’s most famous artists and to work with global fashion designers such as Marc Jacobs for Louis Vuitton. How far do you think she has exploited or been exploited by the media? And what have been the key prompts for this late attention?
9. Compare Kusama’s work with that of Claes Oldenburg, a Swedish born American artist born the same year as Kusama. Both worked in New York in the late 1950s, both work in public, outdoor sites and both experiment with large scale, but essentially simple compositions which are both soft and hard in material. Both also explore the possibilities of performance as well as three dimensional sculpture. They were friends who had their New York studios in the same building.



*Claes Oldenburg and Coosje van Bruggen **Spoonbridge and Cherry**, Minneapolis Sculpture Garden 1991*

Other works you might like to explore:

The **Benesse House Museum** has four works by Richard Long a specified sculptor on the Pearson History of Art A Level, as well as a Light Tunnel by James Turrell and four of Monet’s **Waterlilies**. This means you could complete a significant proportion of your Nature Thematic work with examples from this and other extraordinary sites in Japan.

1. Landscape or seascape in 2D: Sesshu **Splashed Ink Landscape/Hokusai The Great Wave**
2. Animals in 2D or 3D: Karel Appel **Frog and Cat**
3. Plants in 2D or 3D: Yayoi Kusama’s **Yellow Pumpkin**
4. The elements in 2D or 3D: Richard Long **River Avon Mud Circles by the Inland Sea**
5. Relationship between wo/man and nature in 2D or 3D: Jennifer Bartlett **Yellow and Black Boats** or Yukinori Yanagi **The World Flag Ant Farm 1990**
6. Architectural works influenced by nature: Tadao Ando **Benesse House Naoshima Contemporary Art Museum**. The design reflects the influences from nature: light and air, the sea and the woods. The original development concept was a “symbiosis of nature, art and architecture.” The gallery is dug into the ground and is surrounded by a covering of plants. Alternatively, the design of the **Minamiddera** by Tadao Ando on the site of the South temple and constructed from charred cedar is a fascinating case study which houses James Turrell’s **Aperture**. A striking change from Ando’s frequent use of concrete, here the boards are stacked on top of each other in an interlocking pattern, that adds emphasis to the eaves. Using the traditional Japanese measurements of ‘ken’ and ‘shaku’ (approximately 2m and 30cm respectively) and traditional Japanese carpentry skills, Ando reinterprets Japanese architecture from a contemporary perspective.



7. Specified sculptor: **Richard Long: Full Moon Circle; Inland Sea Driftwood Circle; River Avon Mud Circles by the Inland Sea and River Avon Mud Fingerprint Circles.** Long visited Naoshima in 1997 during which he made these four works with natural materials. He speaks of his desire to evoke the relationship between place and form and the personal connection with nature.