



“An Assault on American Prudery”

In the mid-1960s Yayoi Kusama grew weary of the limitations of the artworld and in particular the art press.

While her shows were being reviewed largely favorably—including multiple reviews authored by Donald Judd beginning in 1959—Kusama became increasingly aware of the limited reach of the art press and the narrow scope of the artworld itself.

In a country that was increasingly consumed with the Vietnam war, civil rights, free love, and an exploding youth culture, the constraints of making static artworks to be hung on the walls of a collector’s home was seen by many artists as being particularly insular.

As the populous was taking to the streets, parks and public cultural sites to protest and party, artists—including Vito Acconci, Scott Burton, James Lee Byars, Rosemary Mayer, Ben Patterson, Adrian Piper, Marjorie Strider, Hannah Weiner, and Kusama—saw the power in bringing “street works” to the masses, bypassing the filters of galleries and museums.

Individually these artists were staging solo and group events around Manhattan that bridged artistic practice with guerrilla performances that could pop up and challenge an unsuspecting public with free-form happenings.

Kusama in particular was pioneering unsanctioned mass erotic events in public spaces including the Statue of Liberty, Wall Street’s Federal Hall, Washington Square Park, Saint Patrick’s Cathedral, the Abby Aldrich Rockefeller Sculpture Garden of The Museum of Modern Art, and Central Park. These venues, well outside the boundaries of traditional art presentations, were chosen in a concerted effort to include New York City in her art rather than simply exhibiting static works in the arena of gallery spaces.

Kusama’s “naked events” happenings, and “polka dot festivals” were heralded widely in newspapers across the nation. This wider exposure in the popular press motivated her to penetrate the virgin territory of men’s magazines, recognizing that the circulation of periodicals such as Artforum reached less than 2,500 readers whereas Ace, Adam, KISS, Man to Man, Mr., Poorboy, Screw, and other such periodicals reached tens of thousands of readers. Even if only a small fraction of this audience could be converted to the status of art collector, she would have cultivated a new consumer market for her work. To that end, Kusama hired some of the best art photographers to document her happenings.

And, never content with the status quo, thinking further on how she might monetize her events, in mid-April 1969 Kusama placed an ¼ page advertisement in the Village Voice to announce the opening of the Kusama Enterprises boutique located at 664 Sixth Avenue where she offered “mod-hip styles, nude fashions, see-throughs, orgy dresses, homosexual and

lesbian dresses” a body-painting studio, and photography studio offering “nude girl models” with camera rentals available at \$25 per half hour.

Less than five years later Lynda Benglis would take a page from Kusama’s book, strike a pose, and place an advertisement in the November 1974 issue of Artforum injecting her cocksure self-portrait avec dildo into the magazine’s pages. To finance her Artforum insert, Benglis produced a run of hand-painted t-shirts memorializing her infamous ad.

While the Artforum work would become a pillar of feminist discourse, Benglis proceeded it with a string of similarly suggestive images that taken together would embolden women to follow suit in the years to come.

Decades later, Beverly Semmes launched her Feminist Responsibility Project, taking the porn industry head-on by censoring magazine pages torn from vintage issues of Hustler and Penthouse to create a series of absurd, sexy, enigmatic abstractions that simultaneously obscure and complicate. The partial concealment of the underlying image amplifies the highly constructed tableaux and conventions of the genre forcing us to look more closely, not only for the naughty bits but towards the grey space that marks ever-changing attitudes surrounding human sexuality.

Yayoi Kusama (b.1929), Lynda Benglis (b.1941), and Beverly Semmes (b.1958) represent three generations of women who have co-opted and manipulated the pornographic genre to advance their personal agendas. Whether to reach a larger public, respond to their male peers on their own terms, or shine a light on an industry and its players ripe for review, these women have reclaimed power and agency by taking control of the medium and the message. As a wise man once said, if you can’t beat ‘em join ‘em....

-David Platzker