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Final Thesis

**When Asexuality  
Becomes a Method**

Asexual Resonances in Kusama Yayoi

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“Ciò che il mio cuore cerca adesso è lo svelamento furtivo  
di tutto ciò che è soffocato e nascosto in questo mondo, la  
liberazione della seducente radianza delle cose che giace  
sepolta nell’ombra.”

“My mind now searches for all attractive splendours which  
unfolds from the shadow of the obscure world.”

Kusama Yayoi, *Ivan the Fool*, 1955

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## 要旨

本研究の目的は、アセクシュアリティへの関心が、私たちが生きている世界や社会にどのような影響を及ぼしているのかを明らかにすることである。そのため、本稿ではアセクシュアルの観点を通じて草間彌生の生涯と作品を分析する。

アセクシュアルの視点から芸術を研究することは、表象の問題と密接に関わっている。多国籍的・歴史的の視点を含めることで研究は複雑化し、アセクシュアリティの定義そのものが、文化的背景によって異なることにも気付くことができる。本研究では、様々な文脈におけるアセクシュアリティの意味、この概念が長年にわたってどのように変化してきたか、そしてアセクシュアリティに関する現在の研究がどの立場に位置づけられるのかを考察する。

芸術におけるアセクシュアリティを検討するためには、まず、セクシュアリティの支配的な枠組みの中で、アセクシュアリティがどのような位置づけられてきたかを理解する必要がある。セクシュアリティはしばしば自明視されるため、アセクシュアルの存在は十分に認識されてこなかった。支配的な枠組みを問い直すためには、その前提を可視化することが不可欠である。これにより、芸術におけるアセクシュアルの明示的な表現だけではなく、性的規範に基づく期待を批判する、微妙で多様な表現も捉えることが可能となる。アセクシュアルの観点を通じて草間彌生の生涯と作品を読み解くことは、支配的な枠組みに抗するマイノリティーの言説を可視化する試みである。

本研究の目的は、美術史を中心に、クィア、アセクシュアル、そして歴史に関するアーカイブへ積極的な貢献を目指す。

第1章は、アセクシュアリティとセクシュアリティの歴史を概説する。学術研究、インターネット上の議論、そして日本におけるアセクシュアリティの歴史について、それぞれ異なるセクションで取り上げる。その上、セクシュアリティの概念が欧米でどのように形成され、どのように広まっていったのかについて述べる。

第2章は、アセクシュアリティに関する学術的議論整理し、その本質主義的な定義を越えることを目指す。アセクシュアリティの病理化からの脱却、主要なアイデンティティの枠組み、そしてアセクシュアリティを肯定的に構築する可能性について論じる。

第3章は、草間彌生の伝記や作品における主なテーマを概説する。特に、彼女のセックスへの恐怖や恋愛感情に関する記述を取り上げる。

草間彌生は多面的な芸術家であるため、第4章では彼女の多様な作品を分析する。集積作品、インスタレーション、写真、ハプニング、舞台劇など、ニューヨーク滞在期に制作されていた作品を中心に、当時のアメリカ社会の背景も考慮しながら検討する。

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# Introduction

“How would an attentiveness to asexuality alter the coordinates of lived and theorised sex-worlds?”<sup>1</sup> is the question that Przybylo and Cooper bring forward in their 2014 essay “Asexual Resonances: Tracing a Queerly Asexual Archive”. Considering this question as the starting point, the present thesis aims to explore the implications of such an attentiveness, investigating the life and works of the Japanese contemporary artist Kusama Yayoi through an asexual gaze.

Analysing art from an asexual perspective raises the problem of explicitly identifying and recognising an asexual artistic representation and interacting with it. There are not many clear markers or visual symbols of asexuality: while it is possible to consider the asexual flag, the Ace of Spades/Hearts or the black ring<sup>2</sup>, these symbols are contemporary and culturally based, and therefore not necessarily relevant in the location of asexuality in art and art history in a transnational and historical perspective.

The difficulty of identifying a visual asexual representation arises from a fundamental societal invisibility of asexuality itself. To quote Amelia Jones and Erin Silver’s words, “invisible minorities occupy ambivalent positions within dominant regimes of vision”<sup>3</sup>. While asexuality is sometimes visually reflected in narrative and visual culture, it is frequently portrayed in ways that reinforce its stereotypes<sup>4</sup>, lacking a subversive and radical effect. Locating asexuality in the arts starts from understanding its positionality inside the hegemonic framework of sexuality: such recognition is crucial to dismantle and subvert the dominant framework of sexualnormativity that obscures asexual-spectrum identities and their visibility. Practising an asexual reading in art is not limited to recognising overt manifestations of asexuality but also includes acknowledging subtle and alternative

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<sup>1</sup> Ela, PRZYBYŁO & Danielle, COOPER, “Asexual Resonances: Tracing a Queerly Asexual Archive”, *GLQ: A Journal of Lesbian and Gay Studies*, 20, 3, 2014, p. 311. <https://doi.org/10.1215/10642684-2422683>. 22 June 2026.

<sup>2</sup> These are usually presented as some of the most common and well-known asexual symbols, but they are born in WENA asexual internet communities and there mainly spread. The asexual flag, with white, purple, grey and black stripes, is a symbol of identity, the Ace of Spades can be used to represent aromantic asexuals, while the Ace of Hearts can sometimes stand for non-aromantic asexuals, and finally, the black ring can be worn by asexual people on the right middle finger to indicate their belonging to the asexual spectrum.

<sup>3</sup> Samantha, STICKNEY, “Deconstructing Artistic Narratives of Asexuality: A Critical Exploration of Community Dynamics and Identity Formation in Contemporary Manga”, Concordia University, 2025, p. 13. [https://spectrum.library.concordia.ca/id/eprint/995424/1/Stickney\\_MA\\_S2025.pdf](https://spectrum.library.concordia.ca/id/eprint/995424/1/Stickney_MA_S2025.pdf). 22 June 2026.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibidem*.

expressions that denounce sexualnormative expectations<sup>5</sup>. A reading of Kusama's life and art through an asexual framework, therefore, contributes towards the visibility of an invisibilised counter-hegemonic discourse against the dominant framework.

The first chapter of the present work will discuss the history of both asexuality and sexuality. In the first part, the emergence of asexuality in the academic discourse, as well as in virtual spaces, will be retraced. However, there is a recurring and frequent bias in the sources consulted for this first part, which is that they are produced in and based on Western Europe and North American (from hereafter, WENA) contexts and data. To avoid the risk of perceiving these culturally and geographically specific concepts as universal truths, and with the aim of going towards a more transnational research, in the second part of this chapter Japan's current discourse on asexuality will be investigated. Finally, the third and final part of this chapter will focus on how sexuality as a historical and culturally specific concept has come to be, how it spread beyond WENA "borders", and how it has established itself as the norm.

The second chapter, on the other hand, will focus on the current threads of debate inside the asexual academic discourse, challenging an essentialist and fixed view of asexuality in three different aspects; the first part of the chapter deals with the notion of the de-pathologisation of asexuality and unveils the problems of how it is currently conceptualised. The second part, on the other hand, focuses on the topic of identity, discussing the prevailing identity framework and, once again, revealing the issues it entails. The third and final part explores ways in which asexuality can be constructed positively: among these, Przybylo and Cooper's resonance-based model is presented as the method used in the following analysis.

The two final chapters will be dedicated to the actual study of Kusama Yayoi's figure and works. More specifically, the third chapter will start with a brief summary of the artist's biography, while also contextually overviewing her most recurring topics as they are generally presented by the critic. Two aspects of her life will be discussed more in depth: on the one hand, her fear of sex and phalli, and, on the other, her (sexual and romantic) relationships. An asexual analysis of Kusama's anxiety towards sex aims at subtracting it from the realm of pathology in order to see it in a different and more positive light.

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<sup>5</sup> STICKNEY, "Deconstructing Artistic Narratives...", cit., p. 8.

Kusama was a multifaceted and versatile artist who dedicated herself to different kinds of art. For this reason, different categories of her works have been taken into consideration in the analysis of the fourth and final chapter. Not only her Aggregation and Accumulation pieces and spaces, but also her pictures, her Happenings, and one stage play. All the works considered were created/performed/written during her years in the United States (1957-1973): for a more complete analysis, the geographical context she was inserted in was taken into consideration, as well as what it meant to be socially read as an immigrant Asian woman in the United States.

The objective of this thesis is to bring an active contribution to the creation of a queer, asexual historical archive, with a focus on art history, investigating moments and traces of asexuality in the figure of Kusama Yayoi, with the broader purpose of fighting and resisting the normativity of (hetero)sexuality as a concept propagandised as universal. This work is produced in the hope that it can be one of the many steps further towards the liberation from the normalised belief that everything is by default (hetero)sexual and what is proved to not be, is just a deviation from the (heterosexual) norm.

# Chapter 1: What is (A)sexuality?

## 1.1: The History of Asexuality

An asexual person is someone who does not experience sexual attraction. As explained by the Asexuality Visibility and Education Network (AVEN), “they are not drawn to people sexually and do not desire to act upon attraction to others in a sexual way”<sup>1</sup>. Even though this is not the only definition that has been proposed over time, it is generally considered the most appropriate and commonly shared one, as demonstrated in a study conducted by Van Houdenhove and colleagues<sup>2</sup>. Another crucial factor in asexual identity is self-identification, which means that it is up to the singular individual to decide if they are part of the asexual community or not. Employing such a definition may seem circular (an asexual person is someone who lacks sexual attraction *and* defines themselves as asexual), but it has the double function of both explaining asexuality to people who are not asexual (or non-asexuals), and at the same time giving people the freedom to decide for themselves regarding their membership to the asexual community<sup>3</sup>.

“Asexual” can also have the function of an “umbrella term”, used to represent a wide range of sexual and romantic dispositions that differ from the sexual norm. Asexuality is conceptualised as a spectrum, meaning there is a degree of variation in the level of sexual attraction, going from zero, (simply “asexual”), to rarely or under specific circumstances (gray-asexual), and to only after an emotional bond has formed (demisexual)<sup>4</sup>.

While this can be considered the contemporary definition of asexuality, it is important to remember that asexuality itself stretches further back in time in different iterations of sexual non-practices and non-desires. Even though it may have not been registered under the name of “asexuality”, the concept of someone not experiencing sexual attraction, or not

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<sup>1</sup> Asexual Visibility and Education Network (AVEN), *Overview*, 2001–2026.  
<https://www.asexuality.org/?q=overview.html>. 22 June 2026.

<sup>2</sup> Megan, CARROLL, *What can asexuality offer sociology? Insights from the 2017 Asexual Community Census*, Manuscript submitted for publication, California State University, San Bernardino, California, 2020, pp. 6-7.  
<https://doi.org/10.31235/osf.io/bh7t3>. 22 June 2026.

<sup>3</sup> CJ DeLuzio, CHASIN, "Reconsidering Asexuality and Its Radical Potential", *Feminist Studies*, 39, 2, 2013, p. 405. <https://dx.doi.org/10.1353/fem.2013.0054>. 22 June 2026.

<sup>4</sup> CARROLL, *What can asexuality...*, cit. p. 7.

desiring a sexual intercourse, is not anything new<sup>5</sup>. What is new is the emergence of such practices as subjectivities. Similarly to what happened to homosexuality in the 18<sup>th</sup> century, asexuality has now become socially visible as a “new ‘problem’ to be explained” by the ever-crescent desire to recognise and talk about it, not only in popular culture but also in the academic field. The most relevant example of asexual practices is the “Boston Marriages” of 19<sup>th</sup> century: in this particular kind of relationship, women cohabited not for sex, but for the sake of emotional intimacy and companionship<sup>6</sup>. These “marriages” are explored by Rothblum & Brehony in their book “Boston Marriages: Romantic but Asexual Relationships among Contemporary Lesbians” (1993), who express the potential usefulness of the term “Boston Marriage” to describe intimate relationships that do not involve sex<sup>7</sup>.

The next part of the following subchapter will be dedicated to briefly reconstruct the main history of the process that led to the formation of asexuality as it is now conceptualised. For theoretical clarity, the academic research will be separated from the formation of an asexual community, creating two different sections.

### 1.1.1: Academic Research

From the late 19<sup>th</sup> century to early 20<sup>th</sup> century, there have been mentions of asexuality under the names of “sexual anesthesia” or “frigidity”; extremely prominent is the work of Richard von Krafft-Ebing<sup>8</sup> (whose impact will be better discussed in chapter 1.3). Nevertheless, it is only in the 20<sup>th</sup> century that asexuality started to be seen as an “hypothetical” sexual orientation, derogatively compared to what were considered “normal” sexualities<sup>9</sup>. In 1948, Alfred Kinsey developed his model of sexual orientation: a scale running from zero (exclusively heterosexual) to six (exclusively homosexual). The number three was the equivalent of bisexuality. For those people who had “no socio-sexual contacts or reactions”, he created a separate, undefined category, Group X<sup>10</sup>, to be assigned a true

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<sup>5</sup> Megan, MILKS, and Karli June, CERANKOWSKI, “Why asexuality? Why now?”, in Karli June, CERANKOWSKI & Megan, MILKS (edited by), *Asexualities: Feminist and Queer Perspective*, New York, Routledge, 2014, p. 2. <https://doi.org/10.4324/9781315882673>. 22 June 2026.

<sup>6</sup> Susie, SCOTT & Matt, DAWSON, “Rethinking asexuality: A Symbolic Interactionist account”, *Sexualities*, 18, 1-2, 2015, pp. 4-5. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1363460714531273>. 22 June 2026.

<sup>7</sup> Kristin S., SCHERRER “Coming to an Asexual Identity: Negotiating Identity, Negotiating Desire”, *Sexualities*, 11, 5, 2008, p. 2. [doi:10.1177/1363460708094269](https://doi.org/10.1177/1363460708094269). 22 June 2026.

<sup>8</sup> Ela, PRZYBYŁO, “Ace and aro lesbian art and theory with Agnes Martin and Yayoi Kusama”, *Journal of Lesbian Studies*, 26, 1, 2021, p. 91. <https://doi.org/10.1080/10894160.2021.1958732>. 22 June 2026.

<sup>9</sup> SCOTT & DAWSON, “Rethinking asexuality...”, cit., p. 5.

<sup>10</sup> Angela, CHEN, *Ace: cosa ci rivela l'asessualità sul desiderio, la società, e il significato del sesso*, Milano, Mondadori Libri S.p.A., 2023 (ed. or. *Ace: what asexuality reveals about desire, society, and the meaning of sex*, 2020), p. 33.

sexuality once it emerged<sup>11</sup>. This model of conceptualising sexual orientations was later challenged by Storms's two-dimensional model (Figure 1), that placed homoeroticism and heteroeroticism on two separate axes: any person could have a greater or lesser amount of either, independently of the other<sup>12</sup>. In this conceptualisation, asexuality is understood as one of four mutually exclusive sexual-orientation-related categories, the others being homosexuality, heterosexuality, and bisexuality. Asexual people, by this definition, experience low attraction to both people of the same sex and people of the other sex<sup>13</sup>. It was a pivotal theorisation: following researchers (such as Bogaert and Prause & Graham, later discussed), have constructed asexuality according to this model, as a lack of sexual orientation, but, at the same time, filling the conceptual and pragmatic space of a single and distinct sexual orientation category<sup>14</sup>.

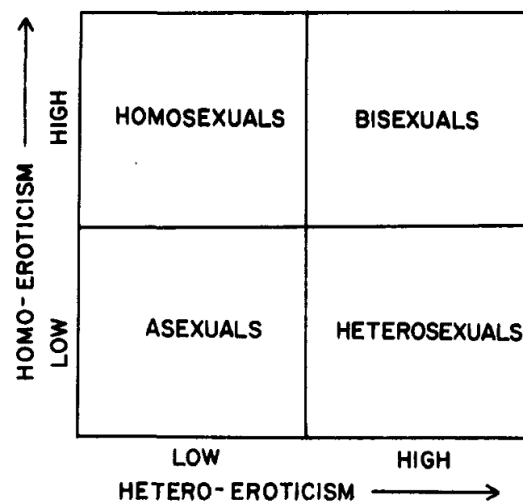


Figure 1: Storms's 1980 Two-Dimensional Model

A different interpretation of asexuality was a relevant part of the feminist discourse in the late 1960s through to the 1980s. Not to be confused with an identity-based approach, some feminists explored an asexual possibility (intended as a *political* orientation): asexuality was examined as a possible mean of resistance of cis women who were expected to have sex with cis men. Examples are the 1972 "The Asexual Manifesto" by Lisa Orlando<sup>15</sup>, as well as

<sup>11</sup> SCOTT & DAWSON, "Rethinking asexuality...", cit., p. 5.

<sup>12</sup> Elizabeth F. EMENS, "Compulsory sexuality", *Stanford Law Review*, 66, 2, 2014, p. 308.

<sup>13</sup> CJ DeLuzio, CHASIN, "Theoretical Issues in the Study of Asexuality", *Archive of Sexual Behaviour*, 40, 2011, p. 714. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10508-011-9757-x>. 22 June 2026.

<sup>14</sup> CJ DeLuzio, CHASIN, "Making Sense in and of the Asexual Community: Navigating Relationships and Identities in a Context of Resistance", *Journal of Community & Applied Social Psychology*, 25, 2015, p. 169. <https://doi.org/10.1002/casp.2203>. 22 June 2026.

<sup>15</sup> PRZYBYŁO, "Ace and aro lesbian art...", cit., p. 92.

the 1977 “The Sexually Oppressed” by Myra T. Johnson, which presented asexuality as a legitimate lifestyle and viable orientation. In the context of the sexual revolution and feminist sex wars, Myra Johnson noted that English words such as “celibate”, “chaste”, and “virgin” suggested that people are *restrained* from sexual relations for various reasons (being them physical or psychological damage, or devotion to religion), while at the same time implying that if it wasn’t for such constraint, sexual relations *would* occur. In her vision, the English language lacked the proper term to describe people who preferred to not engage in sexual activity. As a result, asexual women were excluded completely from the sexual revolution of the 1960s and 1970s and were presented as “unliberated”<sup>16</sup> (more about this and the radical potential of asexuality will be explained in chapter 4.3).

The first paper about asexuality in the sense of what it means today was written by Anthony Bogaert in 2004, “Asexuality: Prevalence and Associated Factors in a National Probability Sample”. There, he defined asexuals as people who had never experienced sexual attraction to either men or women. Basing his findings on a large-scale national probability sample, he concluded that asexuals constituted over 1 percent of the British population. His definition of asexuality as attraction-based is still present within current researchers, who often take inspiration from the lifelong/long-term aspect of this lack of sexual attraction<sup>17</sup>. In his 2006 article, “Towards a Conceptual Understanding of Asexuality”, he interprets asexuality as a useful and unique sexual orientation, touching also its relationship with pathologies, claiming that it should be explored further<sup>18</sup> (the de-pathologisation of asexuality will be further discussed in chapter 2.1).

Building on this work, in their 2007 paper “Asexuality: Classification and Characterization”, Prause & Graham investigated the relationship between the lack of sexual desire and medical diagnosis, using both self-identified asexuals and sexual individuals as samples. Even though their primary focus was discovering the differences and the similarities in levels of sexual desire, inhibition and excitation of the different samples, they also noted some initial descriptions of asexual identities reported by the self-identified asexual individuals<sup>19</sup>.

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<sup>16</sup> Megan, MILKS, “Stunted Growth: Asexual Politics and the Rhetoric of Sexual Liberation”, in Karli June, CERANKOWSKI, & Megan, MILKS, (edited by), *Asexualities: Feminist and Queer Perspective*, New York, Routledge, 2014, p. 100. <https://doi.org/10.4324/9781315882673>. 22 June 2026.

<sup>17</sup> CHASIN, “Reconsidering Asexuality ...”, cit., p. 408.

<sup>18</sup> SCHERRER, “Coming to an Asexual Identity...”, cit., p. 2.

<sup>19</sup> SCHERRER, “Coming to an Asexual Identity...”, cit., pp. 2-3.

The last two works mentioned are part of the psychological and sexological literature on asexuality, in which three possible measures of asexuality have been suggested: the first is behavioural, as a lack of sexual activity, then there is desire, as a lack of sexual attraction towards other, and lastly identity, which means defining oneself as asexual. Out of the three, the most favourable one was considered to be desire: it was in fact claimed as more stable and less likely to change over time, as well as being the closest to the “true” feelings of the individual person<sup>20</sup>. Nevertheless, these first studies were not free from critics, and researchers have found in them methodological problems. Hinderliter claims that the use of measures and tools reflected dominant sexualised approaches and therefore was inadequate for the subject at hand<sup>21</sup>. The result of this body of literature is that it has depicted “the asexual” as an essential type of person, whose lack of sexual desire/attraction was simply a curiosity to be investigated and explained. Furthermore, keeping the realm of the analysis to the level of individual thoughts, decisions and behaviours, the social context was not taken into consideration<sup>22</sup>.

While, at the beginning, the interest of asexual studies was focused on social psychology and the development of physiological explanations of asexuality, starting from 2010s it has expanded to other fields, such as literary studies, cultural studies, legal studies<sup>23</sup>, as well as sociological studies<sup>24</sup>.

From the perspective of sociology, as well as gender and queer studies, one of the major strands is the investigation of an asexual identity, often based on an emphasis on individual thoughts and processes, as well as choices, in reaching what can be defined as a fixed or final identity. An important moment in the creation of an asexual identity seems to be, as described by Carrigan, the development of a sense of the person’s difference (or otherness), as well as making sense of it through private self-reflection. In a similar way, Scherrer discusses that the first step towards an identification of themselves as asexual people is grasping the meaning of the sexual, positioning themselves as a different “type” in comparison to normative cultural representations of romantic relationships<sup>25</sup>.

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<sup>20</sup> SCOTT & DAWSON, “Rethinking asexuality...”, cit., p. 5.

<sup>21</sup> Andrew C., HINDERLITER, “Methodological Issues for Studying Asexuality”, *Archive of Sexual Behaviour*, 38, 2009, p. 621. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10508-009-9502-x>. 22 June 2026.

<sup>22</sup> SCOTT & DAWSON, “Rethinking asexuality...”, cit., p. 4.

<sup>23</sup> MILKS & CERANKOWSKI, “Why asexuality...”, cit., p. 2.

<sup>24</sup> SCOTT & DAWSON, “Rethinking asexuality...”, cit., p. 6.

<sup>25</sup> SCOTT & DAWSON, “Rethinking asexuality...”, cit., pp. 6-7.

Research on asexuality has also given some new perspectives through which one can see the world. One example is the theorisation of the concept of “compulsory sexuality”, described by Gupta as:

the assumption that all people are sexual and to describe the social norms and practices that both marginalize various forms of non sexuality, such as a lack of sexual desire or behavior, and compel people to experience themselves as desiring subjects, take up sexual identities, and engage in sexual activity<sup>26</sup>.

Similarly, Przybylo elaborated sexusociety as a “massive conglomerate of tangentially repeated sexual language, deeds, desires, and thoughts”<sup>27</sup>; while it allows variations within the system, some of them are coded as better, or to be more precise, as more “natural”<sup>28</sup>. Apart from compulsory sexuality<sup>29</sup> and sexusociety<sup>30</sup>, other terms have been proposed, such as sex-normative culture<sup>31</sup> and sexualnormativity<sup>32</sup>, all with similar meaning, in an attempt to identify several aspects of the contemporary sexual landscape<sup>33</sup>. This concept builds on two pillars, the first being Adrienne Rich’s compulsory heterosexuality, defined as the norms compelling women to take part in the institution of heterosexuality, and the second being Gayle Rubin’s identification of sex as a mean of regulation, as well as Warner’s heteronormativity, that is the enforcement of heterosexuality and binary gender roles at the expense of alternative sexualities, which are marginalised. From this, it emerges that compulsory sexuality itself is indeed not a new concept, but it is only with the rise of contemporary asexual identities that it has begun to be used to describe a system of norms and regulations differentiated from compulsory heterosexuality. In fact, it was born to emphasise that in the current society, the definitions of what it means to be human and normal are tied to the sexual, even if not always necessarily to the *heterosexual*<sup>34</sup>.

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<sup>26</sup> Kristina, GUPTA, “Compulsory sexuality: Evaluating an emerging concept”, *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society*, 41, 1, 2015, p. 132. <https://doi.org/10.1086/681774>. 22 June 2026.

<sup>27</sup> Ela, PRZYBYŁO, “Crisis and safety: The asexual in sexusociety”, *Sexualities*, 14, 4, 2011, p. 447. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1363460711406461>. 22 June 2026.

<sup>28</sup> *Ibidem*.

<sup>29</sup> Used by Chasin (“Reconsidering Asexuality and Its Radical Potential”, 2013) and Emens (“Compulsory Sexuality”, 2013).

<sup>30</sup> Used by Przybylo (“Crisis and safety: The asexual in sexusociety”, 2011).

<sup>31</sup> Used by Cerankowski and Milks (“New Orientations: Asexuality and Its Implications for Theory and Practice”, 2010).

<sup>32</sup> Used by Hinderliter (“Lexicon Fail”, 2009).

<sup>33</sup> GUPTA, “Compulsory sexuality...”, cit., p. 134.

<sup>34</sup> GUPTA, “Compulsory sexuality...”, cit., pp. 133-135.

Another interesting result of asexual studies is the necessity to separate romantic and sexual attraction. It has been noted that an understanding of asexuality as a mutually exclusive sexual orientation category, which entailed asexual people to report their sexual orientation as asexual, did not reflect the reality of facts. This can be seen both in Prause and Graham's 2007 above-mentioned study, as well as in Brotto and Yule's 2010 "Physiological and Subjective Sexual Arousal in Self-identified Asexual Women", in which 25% of the sample (people who had previously declared to be asexual) answered a forced choice question with a response other than "asexual": labels like "homoasexual", and "biromantic asexual" were personally added in the free-response box available selecting the "other" choice when asked about their sexual orientation. To overcome this limitation of interpreting asexuality as a mutually exclusive category, efforts have been made in order to be faithful to the vast diversity of romantic orientations inside the asexual community<sup>35</sup>.

### 1.1.2: The Contemporary Asexual Community

The Internet played a fundamental role in the creation of an actual asexual community, providing a tool for connecting with similar people all over the world. As argued by Turkle, as well as by McKenna & Bargh, the Internet has provided highly stigmatised, marginalised groups a virtual space to find similar people and support their identity. By joining a group of similar others, people who are marginalised because of their identity can uncover a private and secret part of themselves, feeling less isolated and receiving emotional and motivational support. It was through the privacy that the Internet was providing that asexual identities slowly started to form<sup>36</sup>.

Because of this, while there are mentions of asexuality in zines since the 1970s<sup>37</sup>, the contemporary emergence of the asexual community can be traced to approximately around the years 2000s. The first mentions of asexuality online were Zoe O' Reilly's 1997 "My life as an amoeba"<sup>38</sup>, and the Yahoo! group "Haven for the Human Amoeba", created in the year 2000<sup>39</sup>. In 2001, the at the time freshman David Jay started the Asexuality Visibility and

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<sup>35</sup> CHASIN, "Theoretical Issues...", cit., pp. 714-715.

<sup>36</sup> SCHERRER, "Coming to an Asexual Identity...", cit., p. 3.

<sup>37</sup> Julie, KIEGEMAN, *How Zines Paved the Way for Asexual Recognition*, in "Them", 2019, <https://www.them.us/story/asexual-zines>. 22 June 2026.

<sup>38</sup> Zoe, O'REILLY, *My life as an amoeba*, in "StarNet Dispatches", 1997. <https://web.archive.org/web/20030210212218/http://dispatches.azstarnet.com/zoe/amoeba.htm>. 22 June 2026.

<sup>39</sup> CHEN, *Ace: cosa ci rivela ...*, cit., p. 35.

Education Network (AVEN)<sup>40</sup>, a web community where members from all over the world can communicate through various forums<sup>41</sup>. In a way, it is where many people realise that there are others, out there, with similar feelings, who have made sense of their experiences in a way that they might not have otherwise considered, or even considered possible<sup>42</sup>. It is also one of the most comprehensive sources on information of asexuality, with different pages of Frequently Asked Questions (FAQs) that people can freely consult<sup>43</sup>. In the attempt of establishing asexuality as a legitimate sexual identity, one of this website main focuses has been divorcing asexuality from the claims of it being a pathology<sup>44</sup>. The role of AVEN is actually a lot more influential and shaping than one could expect. According to Scherrer's 2008 survey, almost half of the participants' definition of their experience of asexuality were consistent with AVEN's "lack of sexual attraction" definition. Evidence is the description of a participant, who, when asked to explain what asexuality meant to her, said, "I follow AVEN's description of asexuality"<sup>45</sup>. Many narratives report how they took on their identity only after encountering the language of asexuality and the asexual community. Because of this, AVEN not only becomes a facilitator to asexual identities, but it also diffuses the idea of legitimising asexuality as a biological and innate characteristic, which is, unlike celibacy, not a choice<sup>46</sup>.

Even so, while widely accepting the definition of asexuality as a lack of sexual attraction, the members of the asexual community derive different meanings from their asexual experiences, and there is no fixed way of "being asexual", as it emerges from forums, zines, blogs, and other forms of self-expression. Gray-asexuals and demisexuals experience sexual attraction only in specific circumstances, but they do still count as members of the asexual community. Some people prefer the phonetic abbreviation "ace", while others do not feel represented by the word. There are some people who experience romantic attraction, usually towards people of a specific gender, identifying as straight, lesbian, gay or biromantic asexuals. Some others do not and consider themselves also part of the aromantic community. Some asexuals experience an undirected sex drive, sometimes also masturbating, while others do not share the same drive. Sometimes asexuality is interpreted

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<sup>40</sup> Asexual Visibility and Education Network (AVEN), 2001–2026. <https://www.asexuality.org/>. 22 June 2026.

<sup>41</sup> Karli June, CHERANKOWSKI, and Megan, MILKS, "New Orientations: Asexuality and Its Implications for Theory and Practice." *Feminist Studies*, 36, 3, 2010, pp. 651. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/27919126>. 22 June 2026.

<sup>42</sup> CHASIN, "Making Sense...", cit., p. 175.

<sup>43</sup> CHERANKOWSKI, and MILKS, "New Orientations ...", cit., p. 652.

<sup>44</sup> MILKS, and CHERANKOWSKI, "Why asexuality?...", cit., p. 1.

<sup>45</sup> SCHERRER, "Coming to an Asexual Identity...", cit., p. 5.

<sup>46</sup> SCHERRER, "Coming to an Asexual Identity...", cit., p. 8.

as a disidentification with sexuality, but this is not always the case. Sometimes it can also be a positive identification with other people on the asexual spectrum and with the asexual subculture<sup>47</sup>.

The asexual community is slowly forging its discourses and its ways of being, while at the same time navigating in a world that is not “built” for them. Many cultural resources (such as expectations, cultural scripts, or even common ways of talking) that non-asexual people use to reference their experiences, do not apply to asexual people, or may apply in different ways. For example, many non-asexual people utilise the expectation of sexual contact as a discerning category to distinguish romance from friendship. If an asexual person is unable to apply such category, then they need to either find a different way to make this distinction or basically change the way they build their relationships so that the distinction is no longer relevant. Therefore, the asexual community has created many unique words and phrases to talk about their identities and relationships. Non-romantic “crushes” can be called “squishes”, and queerplatonic relationships, or QPRs<sup>48</sup>, sometimes are referred as zucchinis. These new discursive “tools”, have the function to *make* asexual people’s unique experiences *make sense*, to render their otherwise non-normative relationships intelligible. As explained by Butler, being unintelligible means being positioned outside humanity, against which human subjects are formed. Generating asexual discourses, the asexual community is trying to find a way to make their existence a concrete possibility, and to live this new possible asexual life<sup>49</sup>. “For those who are still looking to become possible, possibility is a necessity”<sup>50</sup>, was Butler’s statement regarding gender. This sentiment, though, might be applied more broadly. It is through these prolific discussions that asexual people are carving out a possibility for themselves, constructing piece by piece their relationships and identities<sup>51</sup>. At the end of the day, as Zee, an asexual person from Colorado interviewed by Chen, said, “asexuality is just a different way of seeing on what terms we want to be with one another. It’s a way of getting very honest about how humans see each other and the different ways that we place value on relationships”<sup>52</sup>.

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<sup>47</sup> CHASIN, “Reconsidering Asexuality ...”, cit., pp. 406-407.

<sup>48</sup> Queerplatonic relationships are non-romantic relationships in which the other person has a similar role to a “partner”.

<sup>49</sup> CHASIN, “Making Sense...”, cit., pp. 176-177.

<sup>50</sup> CHASIN, “Making Sense...”, cit., pp. 177-178.

<sup>51</sup> CHASIN, “Making Sense...”, cit., p. 178.

<sup>52</sup> CHEN, *Ace: cosa ci rivela ...*, cit., p. 226.

## 1.2: Asexuality in Japan

Much of the current research on asexuality is based on data from WENA countries, in particular from the United States and the United Kingdom, which, like any other country, are shaped by specific historical and cultural understanding of sexuality. This is indeed a limitation and raises questions regarding the applicability of those findings to other societies and countries, where the cultural frameworks could differ<sup>53</sup>. However, such specificity is not always sufficiently highlighted, resulting in an ostensible and misleading claim of universality. It is precisely this perspective that is the starting point of the present section: through a brief analysis of asexuality in contemporary Japan, the aim is to reveal its underrated nuances and to make a contribution towards a more complete and transnational vision of asexuality.

In Japan, research on asexuality is still in its early stages<sup>54</sup>. Since 2020, every two years As Loop, an organization devoted to publicising and researching asexuality and aromanticism in Japan<sup>55</sup>, conducts big survey research on the demographic of the asexual community in the country and publishes the results online<sup>56</sup>, providing data that can be analysed in further studies. There is also research focused on theorising asexuality from different perspectives, such as sociological and psychoanalytical, which, however, is mostly theoretical, since there is an information gap regarding the experiences of asexual people in Japan. In addition to this, asexuality is hardly mentioned in domestic papers, and since sexual desires and behaviours are generally seen as a very private matter, there is a tendency to avoid discussing them in public<sup>57</sup>.

Kobayashi, in his analysis of romantic relationships in contemporary Japan, has noticed what he has defined as a “social pattern of becoming *asexual*”<sup>58</sup>, or “asexualization”<sup>59</sup>,

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<sup>53</sup> STICKNEY, “Deconstructing Artistic Narratives...”, cit., p. 7.

<sup>54</sup> KONOSHITA Chiaki & ISHIMARU Kaiichiro, “Asekushuaru aidentiti kenkyū no genjō to kadai - kokunaigai ni okeru jishshōkenkyū no sukōpingu rebyū - (Current Findings and Remaining Issues in Asexual Identity Research: A Scoping Review of Empirical Studies in Japan and Other Countries), *Ochanomizu joshidaigaku shinrinshō sōdan sentā kiyō* (Bulletin of Centre of Clinical Psychology & Counseling at Ochanomizu University), 24, 2022, p. 6.

<sup>55</sup> As Loop, *Dantaigaiyō* (Group’s overview), <https://asloop.jimdofree.com/団体概要/>. 22 June 2026.

<sup>56</sup> The results for years 2020, 2022 and 2024 are available at <https://asloop.jimdofree.com/aro-ace調査/調査結果/>. 22 June 2026.

<sup>57</sup> Pascale, SCHREURS, “Asexual identification in Japan: processes, threats, and strategies”, Centre for East and South-East Asian Studies, Lund University, 2025, pp. 14-15. <http://lup.lub.lu.se/student-papers/record/9202348>. 22 June 2026.

<sup>58</sup> KOBAYASHI Jun, “Have Japanese People Become Asexual? Love in Japan”, *International Journal of Japanese Sociology*, 26, 2017, p. 13. <https://doi.org/10.1111/ijjs.12067>. 22 June 2026.

<sup>59</sup> KOBAYASHI, “Have Japanese People...”, cit., p. 14.

between young men<sup>60</sup>. In his study, he defines an asexual person as having had “few experiences of or interests in sexual behavior, such as kissing, dating, having sex, and forming romantic relationships with a steady boyfriend or girlfriend”<sup>61</sup>, and states that a population is “asexualised” if a significant part of it is asexual<sup>62</sup>. This study, however, can be seen as problematic in his association between asexuality and a lack of sexual behaviour. Furthermore, linking “asexuality” to the declining birth rate Japan is currently experiencing risks creating the impression that being asexual is actually the cause of the abovementioned decline. In this regard, Miyake and Hiramori suggest a reframing of Kobayashi’s research in the framework of a declining trend in sexual activity, rather than asexuality<sup>63</sup>.

In order to investigate what it means to be asexual in Japan, it is fundamental to remember that the way asexuality is perceived and defined may vary according to the different cultural context as well as multiple factors, such as local cultural discourses of gender and sexuality. Defining it in Japan means, therefore, challenging the universality of its English definition: it seems, in fact, that Japanese asexuality resonates not necessarily with the concept of sexual attraction, but mostly with the realm of romantic feelings (*renai kanjō*, 恋愛感情)<sup>64</sup>.

As explained by Miyake and Hiramori, the term “*asekushuaru*” (アセクシュアル) means a “lack of romantic feelings and sexual desire (close to aromantic asexual)”<sup>65</sup>. There is also another term, unique to Japan, that is “nonsexual”, “*nonsekushuaru*” (ノンセクシュアル) in Japanese: it carries the meaning of “having romantic feelings but lacking sexual desire (close to romantic asexual)”<sup>66</sup>. For terminological clarity, from here onward, if referring to the conceptions of asexual and nonsexual as have arisen in Japan, the terms “*asekushuaru*” and “*nonsekushuaru*” will be used.

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<sup>60</sup> KOBAYASHI, “Have Japanese People...”, cit., p. 20.

<sup>61</sup> KOBAYASHI, “Have Japanese People...”, cit., p. 14.

<sup>62</sup> *Ibidem*.

<sup>63</sup> MIYAKE Daijiro & HIRAMORI Daiki, “Nihon ni okeru aromantikku/asekushuaru supekutoramu no jinkōgakuteki taiyōsei - ‘Aro/Ace chōsa 2020’ no bunseki kekka kara” (Demographic Diversity of the Aro/Ace Spectrum in Japan: Analysis of the “Aro/Ace Survey 2020”), *Jinkōmondai kenkyū* (J. of Population Problems), 77, 2, 2021, p. 217.

<sup>64</sup> Kaisa, LETHONEN, “No Romantic Feelings – Asexuality in Japan: Ren’aikanjou nai? Nihon ni okeru asekushariti”, University of Tampere, Faculty of Social Sciences, 2018, p. 6. <https://trepo.tuni.fi/handle/10024/103135>, 22 June 2026.

<sup>65</sup> MIYAKE & HIRAMORI, “Nihon ni okeru...”, cit., p. 213.

<sup>66</sup> *Ibidem*.

While having evolved distinctively from the mainstream WENA discourses<sup>67</sup>, the ways of talking about asexuality in Japan are constantly negotiated and attentive to the English discourses regarding the topic<sup>68</sup>. Acearobu, a Japanese website with resources on asexuality and aromanticism, shows awareness of the usage of the term “*nonsekushuaru*” only inside the country. For this reason, on its page regarding nonsexuality and its definition, it is suggested not to use it while speaking in English, since it conveys a different meaning from the Japanese “translation”. At the same time, however, it is also highlighted the long history of the term in Japan, appeared in the late 2000s and still used nowadays, and its importance in the history of the Japanese asexual community. The website values freedom of expression, and more than once is repeated how the reader can and should freely decide the label that fits them best, whether it is *nonsekushuaru*, as intended in Japan, asexual, as intended internationally (as lack of sexual attraction), or with a new label created *ad hoc* for themselves<sup>69</sup>. The diffusion of the term “asexual” (as internationally intended) in Japan is also attested by the Japanese LGBT Career Portal JobRainbow<sup>70</sup>, and Schreurs recognises the usage of the term “*aromantikku*” (アロマンティック, “aromantic”), too<sup>71</sup>. There seems to be a will, at least within aromantic and asexual organisations, to adjust the lexicon to the international definitions; As Loop, in its page about terminology, refers primarily to the asexual/aromantic framework, and only briefly mentions that sometimes an aromantic asexual can be called *asekushuaru*, and a romantic asexual can be called *nonsekushuaru*<sup>72</sup>. A similar intention seems to be shared by the NPO Nijiro Gakkō, an organisation that aims to increase awareness of aromanticism and asexuality, who has adopted the international distinction for a better intelligibility<sup>73</sup>.

Nevertheless, there seem to be dissonant opinions regarding the parallel between *asekushuaru* and aromantic asexual, as well as between *nonsekushuaru* and romantic asexual. According to the explanations of the above-mentioned sources, the Japanese terms seem to have a direct correspondence with their English counterparts. However,

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<sup>67</sup> STICKNEY, “Deconstructing Artistic Narratives...”, cit., p. 8.

<sup>68</sup> LETHONEN, “No Romantic Feelings...”, cit., p. 56.

<sup>69</sup> Acearobu, “*Nonsekushuaru (nonsekusharu) to ha nan desuka? Teigi ha?* (Nonsexuality and its definition), 2025. <https://acearobu.com/what-nonsexual/>. 22 June 2026.

<sup>70</sup> JobRainbow henshūbu, *Nonsekushuaru to ha? (seitekikankei no nai renai?)* (What does “nonsexual” mean? (love without sex?)), in “JobRainbow MAGAZINE”, 2025. <https://jobrainbow.jp/magazine/nonsexual>. 22 June 2026.

<sup>71</sup> SCHREURS, “Asexual identification in Japan...”, cit., p. 8.

<sup>72</sup> As Loop, *Yōgo* (Terminology). <https://asloop.jimdofree.com/用語/>. 22 June 2026.

<sup>73</sup> SCHREURS, “Asexual identification in Japan...”, cit., pp. 8-9.

Lethonen noticed that the two cannot be defined as simply reversible categories, since they hold different discursive positions<sup>74</sup>. While AVEN's categorisation includes asexual people with romantic feelings within the asexual spectrum, it seems that, in the Japanese discourse, *asekushuaru* and *nonsekushuaru* are two different categories. While interviewing Japanese asexual people for her research, Lethonen noticed how some of the informants were even confused that she asked them questions about nonsexuality in the first place<sup>75</sup>. Not only this, but many of them were not comfortable or even familiar with the way she intended to mix asexuality and nonsexuality in the same questions<sup>76</sup>. Based on the informants' responses, Lethonen arrived at the conclusion that *nonsekushuaru*, inside the Japanese context, seems to hold a discursive position different from romantic asexual. She noticed how *nonsekushuaru* people were seen and perceived as people that could fall in love and feel romantic attraction, but who did not want to have sex or were not interested in it, regardless of the reason. Nonsexuality, as emerged in Lethonen's thesis, was not necessarily associated with a "lack of sexual attraction", and a spectrum of reasons was considered valid for not wanting to be in a sexual relation<sup>77</sup>. Not only this: the key point of being *asekushuaru*, as described by the informants, seems to be not having romantic feelings, or not understanding them<sup>78</sup>, consequently not necessarily including people who feel romantic attraction within the definition of *asekushuaru*<sup>79</sup>. This shows how the Japanese discourse on asexuality differs from the English one<sup>80</sup>, and how much nuances can be lost in translation. It must be noticed, however, that Lethonen's interviews were held between 2016 and 2017, and that the international usage of the terms may have become more prominent (even if it may have been present from before) in the past few years. Regardless of the reason, it emerges clear that giving a definition of *asekushuaru* is up to the individual person, according to their own experience and sensibility<sup>81</sup>.

"*Asekushuaru*" and "*nonsekushuaru*" are not the only terms that can be used to talk about asexuality: it appears that they can be expressed, respectively, with "*museiaisha*" (無性愛

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<sup>74</sup> LETHONEN, "No Romantic Feelings...", cit., p. 23.

<sup>75</sup> LETHONEN, "No Romantic Feelings...", cit., p. 38.

<sup>76</sup> LETHONEN, "No Romantic Feelings...", cit., p. 52.

<sup>77</sup> LETHONEN, "No Romantic Feelings...", cit., p. 55.

<sup>78</sup> LETHONEN, "No Romantic Feelings...", cit., pp. 46-47.

<sup>79</sup> LETHONEN, "No Romantic Feelings...", cit., p. 26.

<sup>80</sup> LETHONEN, "No Romantic Feelings...", cit., p. 47.

<sup>81</sup> MIYAKE & HIRAMORI, "Nihon ni okeru...", cit., p. 213.

者) and “*hiseiaisha*” (非性愛者)<sup>82</sup>. While the two pairs *asekushuaru-museiaisha* and *nonsekushuaru-hiseiaisha* are presented as direct translations by the Wikipedia page regarding asexuality (with *museiai* as the primary translation for asexuality, and described as lack of sexual attraction, in accordance with the international definition)<sup>83</sup>, the terms may not, once again, exactly overlap. All the people interviewed by Lethonen identified themselves as *asekushuaru* instead of *museiaisha*, some even having negative reactions to the latter. It would seem that the term “*museiaisha*” is often used in web articles, possibly because the kanji used can hint what the term is referring to, making the word more intelligible even for those who have never seen it before<sup>84</sup>.

The reason behind the different meaning of *asekushuaru* and asexual is, as of today, not completely clear. One of the hypotheses is that, when the term “*asekushuaru*” first became widespread in Japan, it came to be understood as not feeling attracted to others, either sexually or romantically. Such theory is presented not only by Acearobu<sup>85</sup>, but also by Vesper, an asexual person of colour living in Japan, that in their blog “Queer As Cat” has a section of posts dedicated to answering some of their followers’ questions regarding Japan and the Japanese language, and shares their experiences as an LGBTQIA+ person living there. According to their experience, in the early 2000s there was not a clear distinction between romantic and sexual love in the Anglosphere, and the term “asexual” had a meaning similar to that of “*asekushuaru*”<sup>86</sup>. It is probably around this period that the word first entered Japan, since in the early days of the AVEN website there was already a Japanese translation of it, indicating some engagement coming from Japanese asexual people<sup>87</sup>. After some time, as the Anglosphere began to distinguish between romantic and sexual orientations, the meaning of the word “asexual” started to shape as it is now commonly known, while in Japan the term “*asekushuaru*” did not undergo the same change. The concept of romantic and sexual attraction was still imported, but instead of distinguishing between the two, the distinction was made between asexual people who do not experience romantic attraction, and those who, instead, do. This may have been the reason why the term “*nonsekushuaru*”

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<sup>82</sup> LETHONEN, “No Romantic Feelings...”, cit., p. 22.

<sup>83</sup> Wikipedia, *Museiai* (Asexuality), 2026. <https://ja.wikipedia.org/wiki/無性愛>. 22 June 2026.

<sup>84</sup> LETHONEN, “No Romantic Feelings...”, cit., p. 23.

<sup>85</sup> Acearobu, “*Nonsekushuaru*...”, cit.

<sup>86</sup> Vesper (queerascats), *on the discrepancy between “asexual” in English & Japanese and confusion regarding demisexuality*, in “Queer As Cat”, 2016. <https://queerascats.tumblr.com/post/160591037409/on-the-discrepancy-between-asexual-in-english>. 22 June 2026.

<sup>87</sup> SCHREURS, “Asexual identification in Japan...”, cit., p. 5.

came to be used<sup>88</sup>. The term “nonsexual” was quite popular in the early asexual community as a synonym of asexual<sup>89</sup> before being abandoned, and it probably was taken from there with a slight shift in meaning<sup>90</sup>.

On the other hand, Miyake and Hiramori report a different theory, expressing how asexuality in Japan centres on the presence or absence of romantic feelings because those romantic feelings are what is perceived as most relevant in Japanese society<sup>91</sup>.

Lethonen, too, refers to society in her explanation of the reasons behind the different meaning of *asekushuaru*. Considering that there seem to be more women who identify as *asekushuaru* than men, as well as the cultural association between women and romantic love, the desire of *asekushuaru* women to separate themselves from romantic feelings appears coherent. From Lethonen’s interviews and Japanese cultural images emerges the strong association between men and sexual drive, in contrast with the cultural image of women not being interested in sex, but, instead, in love and romance by nature. Therefore, if in Japan is prominent the idea that a woman is not interested in sex to begin with, talking about a lack of sexual attraction in women might not be seen as something exceptional or worthy of consideration. While it is true that a similar cultural logic could be found in English-speaking societies, too, the influence of David Jay, founder of AVEN, as an asexual man, might have helped to integrate a male point of view since the beginning<sup>92</sup>.

There is another important factor that should be examined: the influence of the US cultural context and how discussions on sexual minority rights and the LGBTQIA+ movement have shaped the ideas of sexual minorities. Since its foundation, AVEN has had an agenda to promote asexual visibility and spread information regarding asexuality, which made it necessary for the community to participate and define itself through the public discussion. Looking at AVEN’s definition of asexuality through its website, there seem to be an awareness of sexual minority rights’ discourses of North American and Europe, and the members as well are likely to understand arguments and potential counterarguments within

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<sup>88</sup> Vesper (queerascap), *on the discrepancy...*, cit.

<sup>89</sup> Some examples of early posts regarding asexuality can be found at <https://nextstepcake.wordpress.com/2015/07/31/link-dump-early-asexual-sites-via-archive-org/>.

<sup>90</sup> Sennkestra (nextstepcake), *on the discrepancy between “asexual” in English & Japanese and confusion regarding demisexuality*, in “Queer As Cat”, 2017.

<https://queerascap.tumblr.com/post/160599835226/nextstepcake-queerascap-on-the-discrepancy>. 22 June 2026.

<sup>91</sup> MIYAKE & HIRAMORI, “Nihon ni okeru...”, cit., p. 213.

<sup>92</sup> LETHONEN, “No Romantic Feelings...”, cit., p. 77.

the political discourse. This shows in how AVEN highlights how asexual people can still love and wish for close relationships, most likely with a double purpose: on the one hand, the idea of “love” follows the trace of what has been a crucial argument in the political discourse for legalising same-sex marriage, while on the other it functions also as a counterargument, or a precaution against those who could possibly associate asexuality with coldness or even inhumanity. On the contrary, it would seem that in Japan there has not been such a strong uniting community, and discourses regarding asexuality might have been born through individual accounts, not necessarily related to the political discussion on sexual minorities’ rights and a broader LGBTQIA+ movement. Precisely because their conception of asexuality stems from an individual feeling, it might not be seen as necessary to consider the public image, define asexuality in terms coherent with the ongoing political discussion, or aim to change the preexisting system, since there is not a law compelling people to get married or to be in a romantic relationship<sup>93</sup>.

The discussion, however, is still open, and hopefully, as the academic research on asexuality in Japan keeps progressing, the experiences of Japanese asexual, *asekushuaru* and *nonsekushuaru* people will be further analysed.

### 1.3: Marking the “Unmarked” Sexuality

In addressing the issue of identity in the present work, it is taken a constructivist approach: identity is framed as a social construct, a helpful way to categorise and understand the world around us. This entails that traits like gender, meaning what is expected of people that have certain biological markers in a social, cultural and political context, carry with them some additional meaning. Identity is inextricably tied to us and attached to it there are different layers of privilege or prejudice, which make bearing a certain identity more or less difficult, as well as being more or less subjected to discrimination and scrutiny. This condition is defined by Serano as being “marked” or “unmarked”: a “marked” person will be perceived as having “something” not present in the “unmarked” category and therefore subjected to comments and critiques of all kinds. An “unmarked” person escapes all of these, apparently having nothing to justify in their identity. It is important to recognise the unfair experiences “marked people” face because of these “marks” and recognise the involvement of the “unmarked” in this. However, asking or demanding a “marked” person to explain themselves

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<sup>93</sup> LETHONEN, “No Romantic Feelings...”, cit., pp. 77-78.

means pointing the finger to the wrong issue: the oppressing social constructs were not produced by the “marked”, but by “something” else. It is precisely the investigation of this “something” that should be the focal point. Who or what marked them? Why was this marked category created?<sup>94</sup> In the context of this research, “the asexual” is understood as the “marked”, compelled to explain and justify its difference over and over again, while “the sexual” is the unquestioned “unmarked”. The questions we need to ask ourselves are who marked asexuality, and the reason(s) behind this process, as well as how sexuality became “unmarked”.

Before proceeding to explore the historical process of the establishment of sexuality, let us take a step back and understand why the creation of an “unmarked” category is endowed with that much power. The frameworks of reference through which this analysis will be based are Foucault’s theory of discourse and Hall’s representation theory.

Foucault defines discourse as a system that produces both knowledge and meaning and that is materialised through language. A relevant example is the system of sexuality and sexual identity, used to describe and communicate multiple discourses, or structures of knowledge, like sexual orientation, gender, gender identity, as well as their significance in the political, social, cultural and historical context. The cluster of knowledge of sexuality, as well as sexual orientation, gender, and the categories that this system implies, have become accepted as facts, “truths”, not only in the scientific realm, but also collectively in society. Sexuality has become not only dominant, but also unquestioned: it has become material, and it produces real consequences. This is what Hall explains in his theory of language as a representational system, in his 1997 work “Representation: Cultural Representations and Signifying Practices”: language should not be understood as simply spoken or written words, but as a shared cultural code, including symbolism and allegory. This means that discourse produces language, understood as a system of representation, by establishing meaning and inscribing it into words and symbols<sup>95</sup>.

Language is never “just words”: there are many layers underneath it, and it is fundamental to understand where they come from in order to reveal their deception. Because even if the times change, discursive remnants remain persistent in society, culture and institutions of

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<sup>94</sup> Francesca, MÜLLER, “A\_Sexualizing Design: How could [Aromanticism and Asexuality] Change the Practice of Representation in Visual Communication?”, Linnaeus University, 2023, pp. 26-27.

<sup>95</sup> MÜLLER, “A\_Sexualizing Design...”, cit., pp. 33-34.

power, shapeshifting through history. Investigating their power as well as their impact is what Hall describes as the discursive approach to language:

It examines [...] how the knowledge which a particular discourse produces connects with power, regulates conduct, makes up or constructs identities and subjectivities, and defines the way certain things are represented, thought about, practiced and studied<sup>96</sup>.

As described by Foucault, power acts like a net-like organization: it is an entity composed of many complex decentralised power structures connected to each other. To understand the perseverance of certain systems of power, such as sexuality, it becomes essential to understand the relation of power and knowledge, and how they produce apparent “truths”, that are actually not truths at all<sup>97</sup>.

In this analysis three processes, intertwined and intersected with each other, will be considered: the creation of the erotic, the construction of the concept of sexual orientation, and the creation of a normalcy formulated by science. Combined, they led to “sexuality” as it is commonly understood nowadays.

### **1.3.1: The Creation of the Erotic**

While terms like “heterosexuality” and “homosexuality” first appeared in the 1890s, the foundations for their creations are to be found from the 1860s on. Basing his research on the United States, Katz explains how in the 19<sup>th</sup> century several social factors contributed to an eroticisation of consciousness, behaviour, emotion and identity that would have become typical of the 20<sup>th</sup> century WENA middle class. The family unit underwent a change in its nature, from producer to consumer. This entailed also a change in family members’ relation to their own bodies. If, previously, the body was exclusively an instrument of work, now it had started to be integrated in the new economy, and to be perceived as a means of consumption and pleasure. The consumer economy fostered a new pleasure ethic, which dismantled the early Victorian work and procreation ethics<sup>98</sup>, and pushed towards a major

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<sup>96</sup> MÜLLER, “A\_Sexualizing Design...”, cit., p. 37.

<sup>97</sup> MÜLLER, “A\_Sexualizing Design...”, cit., pp. 36-37.

<sup>98</sup> As described by Katz, the early Victorian work ethic valued economic production, while the procreation ethic extolled the values of human reproduction.

transformation of values. The late Victorian economic ethic “hawked the pleasures of consuming, while its sex ethic praised an erotic pleasure principle for men and women”<sup>99</sup>.

In the same years, medical doctors saw a rise in their power and prestige, which led to their prescription of a new healthy sexuality: in the name of science, they defined a new ideal of male-female relationships that included, in both sexes, an essential, necessary, normal eroticism. Before, a sex-enjoying woman would have been judged and named a “nymphomaniac”; now, a woman’s *lack* of sexual pleasure became a mental disturbance, being it “frigidity” or “anesthesia”. By the 1880s there was a new medical model of Normal Love, opposed to the previous Cult of True Love, which fostered procreation and marriage. The new sexual ethic was presented as morally neutral, a simple medical description of health<sup>100</sup>. But, in reality, this new forming sexuality is nothing more than an historical construct, only tied to humanity because of many discourses, instruments and institutions<sup>101</sup>.

A pivotal work was indeed Dr. Krafft-Ebing’s “Psychopathia Sexualis”, first published in Germany in 1886, and translated and published in the US in 1892. Here, the term “heterosexual” was used, unambiguously, in the modern sense: to indicate an erotic feeling for a different sex. “Homosexual”, on the other hand, referred unambiguously to an erotic feeling for the “same sex”. Krafft-Ebing also hypothesised an inborn “sexual instinct” for relations with the “opposite sex”, which had the inherent “purpose” to foster procreation. Even if this kind of erotic drive was still an instinct towards reproduction, the doctor’s focus on attraction (being it opposite-sex or same-sex) was truly revolutionary. He was radical in his reference to biological sex, masculinity and femininity, as well as the pleasure of actors. The new category of heterosexuality became the basis for a shift from a production oriented, procreative imperative to a consumerist pleasure principle, or, in other words, an institutionalised pursuit of happiness<sup>102</sup>.

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<sup>99</sup> Jonathan Ned, KATZ, “The Invention of Heterosexuality”, in Paula S. Rothenberg (edited by), *Race, Class and Gender in the United States: An Integrated Study*, New York, Worth Publishers, 2001, p. 69.

<sup>100</sup> KATZ, “The Invention of ...”, cit., pp. 69-70.

<sup>101</sup> Jacinthe, FLORE, “Mismeasures of Asexual Desire”, in Karli June, CERANKOWSKI & Megan, MILKS (edited by), *Asexualities: Feminist and Queer Perspective*, New York, Routledge, 2014, p. 18.  
<https://doi.org/10.4324/9781315882673>. 22 June 2026.

<sup>102</sup> KATZ, “The Invention of ...”, cit., p. 71.

### 1.3.2: The Construction of the Concept of Sexual Orientation

The term “sexual orientation” is not only part of the daily English vocabulary now but is also deeply rooted as an interpretative framework of identity. And yet, it is an historically recent, culturally specific concept. Its emergence can be traced in the context of post-industrial Europe, in a period of shifting social customs and mores. Contemporary sexologists were working on fighting against the criminalisation of same-sex sexual behaviour and those who engaged in it. In a post-enlightenment influenced environment, there were two opposites pair of ideas to choose from: non-heterosexual orientations as *inborn*, and therefore morally neutral and worthy of protection, or non-heterosexual orientations as *chosen*, and therefore morally deficient and targets of marginalisation. In the end, the former interpretation rose to be the most favourable one. In the late 19th century and mid-20th century, the conceptual landscape was radically transformed by this debate: WENA scholars rushed to produce “heterosexuality” as something parallel to “homosexuality”, deserving to be explained in its own right<sup>103</sup>.

Following this process, in societies of US, British and other European colonial histories, sexual orientation started to become something similar to a “box” that everyone was presumed to have: it could be filled with various different options, but the box itself was part of what it meant to be human. Same-sex orientations were conceptualised as a particular (and possibly deviant) “phenotype”, or a “flavour” of an inclination that everyone had. This way, sexual orientations became morally defensible specifically because they were interpreted as inborn flavours of a universal human characteristic, which drives experiences of attraction, behaviours and relationships. Accordingly, in a context of systemic oppression (like racism, to name one), desexualising a person, in other words, presuming an “emptiness” of that sexual orientation box, becomes a tool to deprive them of their humanity<sup>104</sup>.

All it takes is the translation of this logical process into the asexual discourse, and the paradox becomes evident: if we presuppose that everyone has a sexual orientation, and if no other sexual orientation box-filler makes sense for asexual people, then asexuality itself must be a sexual orientation, even if, in a sense, it is also the lack of it<sup>105</sup>.

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<sup>103</sup> CJ DeLuzio, CHASIN, “Asexuality and the re/construction of sexual orientation”, in Brandy L., SIMULA, J. E., SUMERAU, & Andrea, MILLER (edited by), *Expanding the rainbow: Exploring the relationships of bi+, polyamorous, kinky, ace, intersex, and trans people*, Boston, Brill Sense, 2019, pp. 211-212.

<sup>104</sup> CHASIN, “Asexuality and the re/construction...”, cit., p. 212.

<sup>105</sup> *Ibidem*.

### 1.3.3: The Creation of a Normalcy

“At the heart of scientific research and documentation of human sexuality is the presupposition of a hidden, yet discoverable innate sexual desire”<sup>106</sup>, is the opening line of Flore’s essay “Mismeasures of Asexual Desires”. Scientific studies are pervaded by a need to measure and categorise this discoverable sexuality with scales, paradigms and models pertaining to “functions” of “the sexual instinct”. These studies build not only on the idea that having a sexuality, as well as experiencing sexual desire, is universal, but also on the presupposition of the existence of a healthy sexuality. Consequently, having a sexuality that does not fit into this model of normalcy (an apparent “lack” of sexuality is included, too), means being immediately classified into a psychiatric framework, as disordered and pathological<sup>107</sup>. Even if sometimes science, infused with power, may be difficult to contend, it is important to remember that science is not a direct translation of Nature: following a constructivist approach, it can be understood, instead, as an interpretation of it, which is strictly tied to the positionality and the power of the person behind the discovery<sup>108</sup>.

Krafft-Ebing’s abovementioned “Psychopathia Sexualis” is the prime example of a scientific study that manufactured a master narrative of sexual normalcy, a description (or, in a different wording, a prescription) of what appropriate sexuality *should be*. In this perspective, the identification and categorisation of deviations was done precisely to establish sexual normalcy, both epistemologically and instrumentally (as well as socially and practically). A deviation, as is here built and constructed, is not just a different variety, but a condition incompatible with life, a variation from a normative type of life that ends up having negative connotations<sup>109</sup>.

20<sup>th</sup> century sexology investigated further the physiological process of sexual encounters. Two central figures were the US sexologists William Masters and Virginia Johnson. In their influential work “Human Sexual Response”, they unveiled their model of the “human sexual response cycle” (from now onwards, referred as HSRC). According to the sexologists, the model assured “inclusion and correct placement of specifics of physiologic response within sequential continuum of human response to effective sexual stimulation”<sup>110</sup>. It consists of

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<sup>106</sup> FLORE, “Mismeasures of Asexual...”, cit., p. 17.

<sup>107</sup> *Ibidem*.

<sup>108</sup> MÜLLER, “A\_Sexualizing Design...”, cit., p. 40.

<sup>109</sup> FLORE, “Mismeasures of Asexual...”, cit., p. 26.

<sup>110</sup> FLORE, “Mismeasures of Asexual...”, cit., p. 20.

four phases: excitement, plateau, orgasm, and resolution. The HSRC model has become a yardstick for sexual normalcy, both in sexology and psychiatric science. In their following work, “Human Sexual Inadequacy”, the two sexologists identify in the “fear of inadequacy” the greatest obstruction to “proper” sexual response, implying a *natural* receptivity located in genitalia: if the parts function “as they should”, there would be no disorder at all. Through the promotion of an understanding of sexuality as penetrative heterosexual, and of the progression through the four phases of the HSRC as the proper way to live a “fulfilling” sexual life, sexual desire is rendered rational and invariable<sup>111</sup>.

The normalisation and the regulation of sex and sexual acts, developed in WENA countries, spread in other parts of the world. In Japan, the “science” of sexuality as was being devised by European medical specialists, was brought by the first generation of WENA-trained doctors. The diffusion of these new perspectives can be seen, for example, in Mori Ōgai’s 1909 novel “Vita Sexualis”, one of the first works written in Japanese in which the analysis of the “sexuality” of the protagonist becomes central to the narrative. A key concept to the understanding of sexuality as it arrived in Japan is the pathologisation of non-marital and non-procreative sexual acts, originally based on longstanding religious prejudices in Europe. From the late 19<sup>th</sup> century on, the Japanese state took advantage of this “scientific” justification for the pathologisation of non-procreative sexual acts, including masturbation, prostitution and same-sex sexuality, that were not singled out before. From the end of the Meiji period (1868-1912), this new class of sexual experts defined all expressions of non-marital sexuality as “harmful”<sup>112</sup>.

However, the developing discourse of sexual abstinence for the unmarried was heavily gendered. The social anthropologist Sonia Ryang argues that the Japanese state produced a bifurcation of love and sex, as well as types of women: despite its institutionalisation of the monogamous conjugal couple as the reproduction unit, it also endorsed a wide range of extra-marital sexual options available to men only. “Daughters from good families”, meaning women from middle and upper classes, were expected to have a sexual life exclusively inside the context of marriage, living as “good wives, wise mothers”. They were clearly distinct from poor women or women from the colonies, who were available to men for paid recreational sex. This system was also reinforced by the law, since adultery on the part of

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<sup>111</sup> FLORE, “Mismeasures of Asexual...”, cit., pp. 20-21.

<sup>112</sup> Mark, MCLELLAND, “‘How to Sex’? The Contested Nature of Sexuality in Japan”, University of Wollongong, 2015, p. 5. <https://hdl.handle.net/10779/uow.27776931.v1>. 22 June 2026.

the wife was always considered as a criminal act, whereas adultery on the part of the husband was illegal only if it involved another man's wife. Women were also deliberately kept in the dark on information regarding sexuality, leading to a number of misconceptions on the topic. On the other hand, men, who supposedly had a stronger sex drive, could benefit from a variety of sexual outlets, including licensed prostitution. At the time the prevalent model of male sexuality was the "hydraulic" model, which assumed that if men were prevented from expressing themselves sexually, blockages might ensue, preventing them to perform as workers and soldiers to the best of their conditions<sup>113</sup>.

The situation in Japan started to change under the US occupation, when the Occupation authorities embarked on social reforms aimed at dismantling the previous "household system", as well as improving the rights of women at school, at home and in the workplace. They endorsed the idea of "free love" and the individual choice of the marriage partner (as opposed to chosen by the family): the pursuit of romance, far from being downplayed as selfish, as it happened before, became to represent the rejection of wartime austerity, as well as the embrace of a new "democratic" lifestyle. At the core of this new male-female equality was the idea that women, like men, also had sexual desires and needs: sexuality, therefore, was to be discussed and negotiated between partners. Of great importance was the 1946 new and unexpurgated version of Van de Velde "Ideal Marriage: Its Physiology and Technique", translated under the title "*Kanzen naru kekkon*" ("Perfect marriage"), later re-edited as "*Kanzen naru fūfu*" ("Perfect coupledness"): the book became a bestseller, and its main principles were discussed throughout the press. Van de Velde's text portrayed the male partner as the one with the stronger and more "active" sex drive, who should take the initiative in the sex act, and women, on the other side, as having sexual needs of their own, too (which seemed "startling" to many readers at the time, as noted by the historian of the Occupation era John Dower). Sexual satisfaction, (*sei manzoku*, in the Japanese translation) of both partners was depicted as the key to successful marriage, and a simultaneous orgasm meant that the physical and the spiritual sides of the matrimony were united<sup>114</sup>. This idea was much debated in the *kasutori* press ("pulp literature") and in various other sex guides aimed at explaining to couples how to achieve this goal. The most influential magazine was "*Fūfu seikatsu*" ("Married life"), published from 1949 to 1955, that monthly sold hundreds of copies. Ronald Dore, who researched married life in Tokyo in the

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<sup>113</sup> MCLELLAND, "How to Sex'...", cit. p. 7.

<sup>114</sup> MCLELLAND, "How to Sex'...", cit. pp. 10-11.

early 1950s, noticed how the words “*fūfu seikatsu*”, which translate to “married life”, are commonly heard, and have primarily sexual connotations<sup>115</sup>.

Despite a new emphasis on the pleasures of sex in the popular press, the Japanese government continued to stress the need for “purity education” in its official pronouncements and directives, especially towards young people. The aim of establishing “correct” attitudes towards sexuality, specifically linking sexuality to reproduction within monogamous nuclear family, was reinforcing and building the nation, after the social instability of the early postwar years. This discourse of “purity education” carried on until 1965, when this ideologically laden term was replaced by more descriptive labels such as “sex education”. However, what has not changed is the explicit linkage between sex, marriage and procreation, and issues such as self-pleasure, alternative sexualities and contraception still received little attention in materials developed for school. As noted by the anthropologist Huiyan Fu, this idea is still embraced nowadays<sup>116</sup>.

In Japan, therefore, norms regarding gender and sexuality have changed amidst the social turmoil of the postwar period, leading to the unification of love, companionship, physical contact (sex) and marriage as one universal set. These four elements were merged together in what became politically constructed as the “ideal path of sexuality”, during the rise of the love-based marriage ideology<sup>117</sup>.

All these ideas are grounded in biological determinism, which, as Jeffrey Weeks says, “insists on the fixity of our sexualities, on their resilience in the face of all efforts at modification”<sup>118</sup>. Because of biological determinism, sexuality started to have a purpose outside of pleasure, and to be an unquestionable truth, part of every person’s identity. Such essentialist approaches to sexuality are still very common in sexological science and consequentially position the condition of low or no level of sexual desire in the category of the dysfunctions<sup>119</sup>.

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<sup>115</sup> MCLELLAND, “How to Sex’?...”, cit. pp. 9-10.

<sup>116</sup> MCLELLAND, “How to Sex’?...”, cit. pp. 10-12.

<sup>117</sup> HIGASHIMURA Miyu, “‘Sekushuaru mainoriti’ kara no dasshutsu - renai/shintai sesshoku shijōshugi shakai ni okeru fukashikasareta asekushuariti” (Liberation from the “Sexual Minority” Framework: The Invisibilization of Asexuality within “Romanticist” and “Physical Contactist” Japan), *Jendā/sekushuariti kenkyū reinbōshō* (Gender and Sexuality), 14, 2017, pp. 123.

<sup>118</sup> FLORE, “Mismeasures of Asexual...”, cit., p. 19.

<sup>119</sup> FLORE, “Mismeasures of Asexual...”, cit., pp. 19-20.

With these tangible pieces of evidence, the public accepted these new fabricated “truths”, as they were “applied” by the bourgeoisie through prosecution, medicalisation and so on (the discourse was therefore materialised). It is important to notice that, at the time of its creation, the discourse was centred around normality and abnormality within sexuality: asexuality was not considered as a possibility at all. However, it is precisely because of this omission that asexuality was already “marked” as abnormal, even before its emergence<sup>120</sup>. The mainstream episteme (also from a linguistic point of view) depicts asexual people as having some sort of “gaping hole” in their being, when, in reality, there is no empty spot to fill to begin with<sup>121</sup>. In order to overcome the notion of asexuality as a lack, it becomes then fundamental to challenge discourses enforcing sexual desire as mandatory, as well as emphasising the volatile aspects of human subjectivities<sup>122</sup>.

In our present world, it is society that teaches us what sex is, how to have sex, how much sex we are supposed to have, what we should feel about sex, and what a good sex life is: it provides sexual scripts, as well as rules we are supposed to follow. Sex advice books and sex experts teach us what is the value of sex and what types of sex are good or bad<sup>123</sup>. However, as Angela Chen said:

If sex is completely natural and biological, why does anyone need this industry of sex experts at all? [...] Why do we need *Cosmopolitan* to tell us how to do it, when we far more rarely see guidebooks for how to digest and how to breathe?<sup>124</sup>

While Chen’s discourse is referred to her Us context, it can be noted that in other countries such as Japan, normative discourses do not have a place for asexual experiences in them<sup>125</sup>. “A person will eventually like someone”, “one should actively search romantic love”: such cultural expectations can be stressful for an asexual/*asekushuaru*-identifying individual in Japan<sup>126</sup>. As explained by anthropologist Tokuhiro Yōko, the Japanese one is a *kaikon shakai* (“society based on marriage”), and marriage is normalised to the point that marrying

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<sup>120</sup> MÜLLER, “A\_Sexualizing Design...”, cit., pp. 38-39.

<sup>121</sup> MÜLLER, “A\_Sexualizing Design...”, cit., p. 60.

<sup>122</sup> FLORE, “Mismeasures of Asexual...”, cit., p. 18.

<sup>123</sup> CHEN, *Ace: cosa ci rivela ...*, cit., p. 193.

<sup>124</sup> *Ibidem*.

<sup>125</sup> LETHONEN, “No Romantic Feelings...”, cit., p. 80.

<sup>126</sup> LETHONEN, “No Romantic Feelings...”, cit., p. 45.

and rearing children is considered “*atarimae no koto*” (“a matter of course”)<sup>127</sup>. Schreurs, in her interviews, notices how the pressure to marry and have children was commented when talking about the Japanese society in general: there seems to be “a sense that Japanese society glorifies heterosexual romantic and sexual relationships and that it idealises the idea of marriage and family”<sup>128</sup>. This entails that the social structure has been designed to be ideal for heterosexual partnerships, who garner social, legal and financial benefits<sup>129</sup>.

Normative society is often depicted as an unchanging entity, which individuals must conform to. This can be commonly seen in the Japanese context, where the prevalent concept of *shikata ga nai* (something that cannot be helped) pushes to repress those “difficult” or “problematic” behaviours that go against “traditional” or “normal” ones<sup>130</sup>. Happiness is a contextual concept, and in every culture the way to obtain happiness differs. Research shows that in Japan, happiness is more likely to be associated with feelings of peace and calmness, as well as relying on commitment to social roles, obligations and expectations in order to achieve harmony within society. Happiness means conforming to “live a normal life”, which entails marrying and having children. Living in such a context that demands and expects conformity, many asexual people in Japan feel constrained because they are unable to conform<sup>131</sup>.

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<sup>127</sup> Camil Valerio, RISTÈ, “With(out) Love from Japan: An Analysis of the Asexual Spectrum in Shirono Honami’s I Want to Be the Wall and Isaki Uta’s Is Love the Answer?”, *DIVE-IN – An International Journal on Diversity and Inclusion*, 4, 1, 2024, p. 162. [doi:10.6092/issn.2785-3233/20099](https://doi.org/10.6092/issn.2785-3233/20099). 22 June 2026.

<sup>128</sup> SCHREURS, “Asexual identification in Japan...”, cit., p. 43.

<sup>129</sup> *Ibidem*.

<sup>130</sup> RISTÈ, “With(out) Love from Japan...”, cit., p. 169.

<sup>131</sup> SCHREURS, “Asexual identification in Japan...”, cit., p. 44.

## Chapter 2: Into Asexual Studies

### 2.1: The De-pathologisation of Asexuality: A Matter of Definition?

One of the first topics of debate inside the academic research on asexuality was how to present it as a non-pathological possibility, and how to distinguish it from a malady.

In the field of modern sex therapy, founded after the Second World War<sup>1</sup>, there is a tendency to relegate sexualities different from the heterosexual to the realm of ab/normality. This reflects the repressive mechanism of heteronormativity, which traditionally marginalises non-heterosexual identities. This desire to define asexuality and to find an explanation for it has involved seeing it as a symptom, or even as a psychological malady. In fact, if we take a look at psychological explanations for asexuality, they tend to incorporate it into already established categories of presumed dysfunction, emphasising the aspect of pathology<sup>2</sup>.

In 1970s “desire disorders” were added to the already present sexual dysfunctions, such as premature ejaculation or anorgasmia. Not much later, in 1980, these disorders were incorporated in the American Psychiatric Association’s “Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders” (DSM-III). It is in these years that biomedicine started to pathologise non-sexuality: doctors focused on the physiological bases of sexual dysfunctions, and various drug companies developed drug treatments for sexual disorders. This process has been already extensively criticised by feminist scholars, who accused drug companies to publicise “female sexual dysfunction” as a disorder to then develop pharmaceutical treatments for it. According to feminist critics, what were benign variations in level of interest in sex were unnecessarily pathologised, and the relational, social and political aspects of sexuality were, instead, completely ignored<sup>3</sup>.

Between the various “desire disorders”, the above-mentioned DSM-III included an entry for “Inhibited Sexual Desire”: the title itself already unveils the underlying clinical assumption that desire naturally exists in people, though pathologies may inhibit its expression. After a revision in 1987, the terminology was shifted to “Hypoactive Sexual Desire Disorder” (HSDD), where the assumption of an “inhibition” was replaced with “hypoactive”, a term that

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<sup>1</sup> GUPTA, “Compulsory sexuality...”, cit., p. 137.

<sup>2</sup> SCOTT & DAWSON, “Rethinking asexuality...”, cit., p. 5.

<sup>3</sup> GUPTA, “Compulsory sexuality...”, cit., pp. 137-138.

merely signalled a variation from the norm<sup>4</sup>. The following DSM-IV, its first version published in 1994 and effective until 2013, presented HSDD as “a deficiency or absence of sexual fantasies and desire for sexual activity”<sup>5</sup>. It is important to note that, under the DSM-IV, the “disturbance must cause marked distress or interpersonal difficulty”<sup>6</sup>. With such a definition, however, HSDD can eventually overlap with self-identified asexuality. Over the years, there have been many attempts to trace a clear line between the two.

At the beginning of the asexual movement, the research focused exactly on this, presenting the two as different and separate phenomena, and, in this way, trying to legitimise asexuality as a valid orientation. Anthony Bogaert, for example, distinguished between asexuality (in his understanding, a lack of sexual attraction, or erotic thoughts or fantasies directed at other people), and lifelong HSDD, defined by a lifelong absence of desire for sexual activities of any kind, partnered or not<sup>7</sup>. Similar efforts to emphasise the differences between HSDD and asexuality have been made also by psychologists Prause and Graham in 2007. This body of research, therefore, argued that asexuality *per se* should not be seen as a pathology, but instead as a valid orientation. In real life situations, though, a clear-cut attraction/desire distinction was not only difficult to apply, but misleading, too. As demonstrated by Prause and Graham, as well as Brotto and Yule, asexual people, too, often experienced a low/absent desire for partnered sexual contact (just like HSDD’s definition): therefore, an asexual person *could* be diagnosed with HSDD, if they were made to feel badly about asexuality (for example, if an asexual person is romantically involved with a non-asexual person who opposes asexuality)<sup>8</sup>. A number of asexual people also put together a small taskforce to create a new definition of HSDD that could be more friendly to them<sup>9</sup>. Their efforts have been repaid, because in May 2013, the new DSM-V made some significant changes to the HSDD entry. First, separate low-desire diagnoses for men and women were created; secondly, the “interpersonal difficulty” of the disturbance was removed, and the wording was changed to “clinically significant distress”. But the last and most significant change was the explicit mention of self-identified asexuality as a nonclinical alternative to being diagnosed with a desire disorder<sup>10</sup>.

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<sup>4</sup> EMENS, “Compulsory sexuality”, cit., pp. 309-310.

<sup>5</sup> EMENS, “Compulsory sexuality”, cit., p. 310.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibidem*.

<sup>7</sup> CHASIN, “Reconsidering Asexuality ...”, cit., p. 408.

<sup>8</sup> CHASIN, “Making Sense...”, cit., p. 173.

<sup>9</sup> CERANKOWSKI, and MILKS, “New Orientations ...”, cit., p. 653.

<sup>10</sup> EMENS, “Compulsory sexuality”, cit., pp. 311-312.

On a surface level, asexuality seemed to have found its place as a proper and valid alternative to a clinical disturbance. But if analysed to its roots, the issue of pathologisation still does not find a complete resolution.

Let's take, for example, Brotto and Yule's 2010 "Physiological and Subjective Sexual Arousal in Self-identified Asexual Women". In this study, researchers showed a heterosexual erotic film to self-identified heterosexual, lesbian, bisexual and asexual women, and measured their responses to sexual stimuli. The results showed that physiological responses did not vary between the different groups, and from such inferences concluded that asexuality was not a sexual dysfunction. This kind of approach, however, makes use of medical tools to study asexuality, and eventually perpetuates an understanding of low/no sexual desire as a pathological condition that needs to be explained or repaired. It is also coherent with the idea that sexual desire is universal, and physiological responses are, too. Perpetuating a similar logic means confining asexuality to the dimension of a *lack*, describing it by what is *not* happening: if asexuality is articulated from within sexuality, there is little to no space for articulation beyond the notions of negativity and absence. Despite an apparent opposition to sexuality in the DSM, asexuality can still make sense only from *within* sexuality<sup>11</sup>. The problematic thing is that attraction-based, negative definitions of asexuality are widely used inside the asexual community. As mentioned in chapter 1.1.2, in the asexual community there is a big attachment to AVEN's attraction-based description, as demonstrated by Scherrer<sup>12</sup>: most asexual spaces do not even define asexuality explicitly, instead redirecting people to the AVEN's website<sup>13</sup>. This means that essentialists notions of sexuality and sexual orientation are still employed in order to legitimise asexuality. Rubin describes sexual essentialism as "the idea that sex is a natural force that exists prior to social life and shapes institutions"<sup>14</sup>. And, in a certain sense, this essentialist notion of asexuality may be strategically useful, labelling a lack of desire for sex as something as natural as having it<sup>15</sup>. This tendency can be found not only within asexual people and the community, but also within researchers of asexuality, who are continuing to reiterate attraction-based definitions (inspired by Bogaert and recalled by AVEN), drawing on the long term/not-even-once aspect of such lack of sexual attraction (one could take, for reference, Brotto and Yule's definition

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<sup>11</sup> FLORE, "Mismeasures of Asexual...", cit., pp. 24-25.

<sup>12</sup> SCHERRER, "Coming to an Asexual Identity...", cit., p. 5.

<sup>13</sup> CHASIN, "Reconsidering Asexuality ...", cit., p. 406.

<sup>14</sup> SCHERRER, "Coming to an Asexual Identity...", cit., p. 7.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibidem*.

of asexuality as “lifelong lack of sexual attraction”, or, on the contrary, Cerankowski and Milks’s definition of non-asexuality as a *decrease* in sex drive, emphasising its temporary dimension)<sup>16</sup>.

To recapitulate: academic research has largely defined asexuality as a lifelong lack of sexual attraction, and, doing so, it positioned asexuality in line with essentialist discourses of sexual orientation. It was argued that this was the reason why it should be treated as non-pathological, by distinguishing it from HSDD. At the same time, however, the diagnosis itself or the psychiatric institution that governs it was not challenged<sup>17</sup>: such an acceptance means implying that a certain level of sexual desire is supposed to be normal, expected from the human condition. This is because the notion itself of sexual dysfunction does not recognise the possibility of multiple sexualities and forms of desire, as well as different ways of “performing” sexual acts. The idea of a faulty sexual desire suppresses diversity and ignores context, nuance, as well as sociocultural sensitivity. Not only this, such approaches to sexuality also completely exclude the possibility of *not* experiencing sexual attraction and desire<sup>18</sup>. The underlying contradiction of this conception of asexuality finally comes out into the open: it challenges an essentialist vision of sexuality, while at the same time supporting an equally essentialist vision of asexuality.

Adopting such a definition of asexuality, as lifelong and, in opposition to HSDD, not causing distress, creates a new set of problems. For example, it implicitly divides people who do not experience sexual desire in two categories: the first of asexuals, who have always been asexual and happy without sexual desire, and the second of non-asexual people, who lost their sexual desire and are therefore distressed by it. This presumes not only seeing asexuality as a lifelong phenomenon, but also that only non-asexual people are distressed because of a lack of sexual desire. It results in framing asexuality as non-pathological, not because it challenges psychiatric institutions behind HSDD, but because asexuality is an inborn and unchangeable sexual orientation and should therefore be accepted. However, one should be wary of such essentialist arguments, as they ultimately perpetuate and rely on the very hierarchical social organisation that provoked the need for social change in the first place. Reiterating essentialist arguments about sexual orientation, in fact, means in first

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<sup>16</sup> CHASIN, “Reconsidering Asexuality ...”, cit., p. 408.

<sup>17</sup> CHASIN, “Reconsidering Asexuality ...”, cit., p. 405.

<sup>18</sup> FLORE, “Mismeasures of Asexual...”, cit., pp. 22-23.

line contributing to the naturalisation of heterosexuality and its privileges<sup>19</sup> (more about sexual orientation in chapter 2.2).

Adopting this kind of definition of asexuality is indeed politically safe, and it has been used to obtain both recognition and acceptance for asexuals. It is, in a literal sense, conservative. It is precisely because it is not challenging (of either the psychiatric authority or the essentialist discourse) that it is more easily acceptable: people unfamiliar with asexuality do not, in fact, feel threatened when confronted with such a safe definition, and their ideas on sexuality are not contested either. The problems with it start in the moment when it is not explained in its function, when its adoption goes unremarked<sup>20</sup>. It also ends up establishing an opposition between people who should be accepted as asexual and people who, instead, are “legitimate” subjects of psychiatric intervention for HSDD<sup>21</sup>. People’s experiences are so different one from the other that it is impossible to fit everyone in such a rigid binarism. What about distressed asexuals? What about someone who does not experience sexual desire anymore but is happy about it? The real objective of the asexual movement should be something similar to what Chasin expresses:

If it can be okay for asexual people to not want sex, maybe we can make it okay for anyone to not want sex. This would be a world where being sexual is no longer mandated as a prerequisite of normalcy or intimacy and where nonsexual relationships are recognized and valued. [...] This would be a world where no level of sexual desire is pathological and where the social emphasis is on sexuality being self-affirming in whatever unique form it takes<sup>22</sup>.

Accepting the existence of the HSDD category itself means accepting the ab/normalcy of not having sexual desire, and the possibility of curing such “pathology”. It means accepting the implicit articulation of sexualnormativity that if a person can be made sexual, so it should be done; if it is not possible, their asexuality should be accepted. In other words: being sexual is better than being asexual. Even if awareness of asexuality is spreading, the superiority of being sexual remains unchallenged. This is why asexuality so conceived is profoundly conservative<sup>23</sup>.

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<sup>19</sup> CHASIN, "Reconsidering Asexuality ...", cit., pp. 408-409.

<sup>20</sup> CHASIN, "Reconsidering Asexuality ...", cit., pp. 409-410.

<sup>21</sup> CHASIN, "Reconsidering Asexuality ...", cit., pp. 405-406.

<sup>22</sup> CHASIN, "Reconsidering Asexuality ...", cit., p. 416.

<sup>23</sup> CHASIN, "Reconsidering Asexuality ...", cit., pp. 417-418.

Another outcome of this construction and of sexualnormativity is the ideal of a “real” and more legitimate asexual. It is a person who “gets to be believed and accepted as asexual”<sup>24</sup>. Someone who has always been asexual and has never been abused. Someone who is probably straight or aromantic, and has a typical gender identity. Someone who is happy, outgoing, who does not deal with mental health issues. Someone who has tried to be sexual but without success, and who does not have a hormonal imbalance or some other physical condition. In other words, the “real” asexual is an ideal sexual person, but is simply unable to be sexual, and therefore, should be accepted as asexual. Such a person is (unfortunately) more likely to convince a sceptical audience that asexuality actually exists. A person who has a history of abuse, or someone with a physical or mental disability (who is already often denied a sexuality of their own), do not make the most convincing poster child. And since recognition and acceptance are what the (WENA) asexual community is looking for, the risk of being dismissed as not “really” asexual is something that is avoided as much as possible. The risk goes as far as even undermining the already limited recognition of asexuality that exists in certain contexts. If someone is asexual at one time, and then later time is not anymore, the conclusion that some people will arrive to is that asexuality is not a stable way of being, neither a legitimate one. But at the same time, if a person is straight, but then starts identifying as a lesbian, for example, no one believes that heterosexuality is not stable way of being, because it is presumed to be everyone’s starting point: heteronormativity remains unchallenged, and asexuality still needs to prove the validity of its existence<sup>25</sup>.

Furthermore, such a reliance on biology, as well as the proliferation of positivist and monolithic models of identity, ignore the ways identity is socially constructed and individually negotiated. A shift of focus to individual orientation and preferences, as well as a recognition of the temporal nature of our identity, would be the first step towards a system in which everyone is encouraged to claim their own identity, independently from the trends of the dominant culture<sup>26</sup>.

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<sup>24</sup> CHASIN, “Reconsidering Asexuality ...”, cit., p. 418.

<sup>25</sup> CHASIN, “Reconsidering Asexuality ...”, cit., pp. 418-419.

<sup>26</sup> Erica, CHU, “Radical Identity Politics: Asexuality and Contemporary Articulations of Identity”, in Karli June, CERANKOWSKI, & Megan, MILKS (edited by), *Asexualities: Feminist and Queer Perspective*, New York, Routledge, 2014, pp. 86-87. <https://doi.org/10.4324/9781315882673>. 22 June 2026.

## 2.2: Discussing the Asexual Identity Framework: Self-identification, Sexual Orientation, and the Construction of a Positive Identity

Looking through AVEN's forums, it is not rare to find new community members trying to understand if they are asexual or not. Despite the definition of asexuality as a lack of sexual attraction, people are ultimately left to decide for themselves if they *want* to be asexual or not. The core thought is that no one can tell others what they are or what they are not, and people must decide this for themselves. This is AVEN's philosophy regarding self-identification<sup>27</sup>.

However, when this definition is translated in the academic and research field, its wobbly mechanisms become clearer. Using self-identification as a criterion for classifying people as asexual may create a bias: "are people who experience a lack of sexual attraction, but do not (yet) self-identify as asexual, not asexual people?", ask Van Houdenhove, Enzlin and Gijs<sup>28</sup>. Not only this: in order to self-identify as asexual, it is indeed necessary that one is familiar with the term<sup>29</sup>, which is not always the case. As demonstrated by surveys of random samples that have included asexuality as an option, many respondents were ignorant of asexual terminology<sup>30</sup>. Another poll, conducted by Sky News in 2019 on the British population, showed that 76% of the interviewed were not able to accurately define asexuality<sup>31</sup>. How can one self-identify as asexual if they do not even know the word exists? The existing community itself, therefore, is revealed as inherently limited, since it excludes people who would consider themselves asexuals but are not aware of asexuality as a phenomenon, or, more generally, of its existence<sup>32</sup>.

There is another functional problem, which lies in the definition of asexuals as "people who do not experience sexual attraction". How can someone who has never felt sexual attraction know what it feels like? In this case, knowing whether they feel sexual attraction or if they have ever felt it can be difficult. This problem is further complicated by the fact that many

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<sup>27</sup> CHASIN, "Making Sense...", cit., p. 175.

<sup>28</sup> Ellen, VAN HOUDENHOVE, Paul, ENZLIN, & Luk, GIJS, "A Positive Approach Toward Asexuality: Some First Steps, But Still a Long Way to Go", *Archives of Sexual Behaviour*, 46, 2017, p. 647. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10508-016-0921-1>. 22 June 2026.

<sup>29</sup> *Ibidem*.

<sup>30</sup> CARROLL, *What can asexuality...*, cit. p. 5.

<sup>31</sup> Gwendolyn, SMITH, *Can't define asexuality? You're not alone*, in "LGBTQnation", 2019. <https://www.lgbtqnation.com/2019/02/cant-define-asexuality-youre-not-alone/>. 22 June 2026.

<sup>32</sup> CHASIN, "Theoretical Issues...", cit., p. 717.

asexuals feel nonsexual forms of attraction, which can be misinterpreted for sexual attraction<sup>33</sup>. Angela Chen recalls spending middle school gossiping about crushes on boys, falling in a relationship with a female classmate in high school, then wondering if she was straight since she did not like touching or being touched. She found certain people hot and attractive, and she also had a vulgar sense of humour, full of sex jokes. What she did not know at the time was that for her friends, “hot” meant a physical pull, while for her, “hot”, was simply “an admiration of excellent bone structure”<sup>34</sup>. She did not know she lacked that libido that, instead, motivated her friends’ sexual encounters<sup>35</sup>.

Asexual identity was ultimately built on the grounds of sexuality. Even if asexual studies’ recent interest is developing a deeper understanding of sexuality more generally, it results to be more similar to adding some asexuality-informed bricks to the already constructed sexuality building, without fundamentally changing the overall structure of it<sup>36</sup>. Asexuality as an identity has been interpreted based upon sexual orientation, even if as a negation of it. Ultimately, this results to be highly problematic.

“Contemporary sexual orientation identity politics are framed by neoliberal ideology of decontextualised individualism and ‘personal responsibility’ (for structural problems)”<sup>37</sup>, explains Chasin. This means that people are considered responsible for their own “success” or “failure” (defined on heteronormative standards): the only exception is when there is evidence that something is “beyond” someone’s control. Phenomena like homophobia and heterosexism are therefore framed as wrong because they target innocent victims, who have done nothing to be discriminated for. Translating this discourse into practice, the focus is put on (in this case, same-gender) attraction/desire, interpreted as a passive and involuntary experience, at the expense of LGBTQ+ people’s relationships and experiences. Instead, emphasis is put on how “morally respectable” LGBTQ+ people are, and on choices that focus on assimilation into a heteronormative society (i.e. long-term, monogamous relationships aimed at marriage). This framework was thereafter applied to asexuality, resulting in framing asexuality as valid and worth of protection only if it is articulated as lifelong and unchangeable, and if it offers little challenge to the bigger systems of power<sup>38</sup>.

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<sup>33</sup> HINDERLITER, “Methodological Issues...”, cit., p. 620.

<sup>34</sup> CHEN, *Ace: cosa ci rivela* ..., cit., pp. 23-24.

<sup>35</sup> CHEN, *Ace: cosa ci rivela* ..., cit., p. 24.

<sup>36</sup> CHASIN, “Theoretical Issues...”, cit., p. 719.

<sup>37</sup> CHASIN, “Asexuality and the re/construction...”, cit., p. 213.

<sup>38</sup> *Ibidem*.

However, such a neoliberal framework of identity ends up disconnecting the disembodied “identities” of attraction and desire, and the lived realities of the people who actually “have” them. People’s experiences and interactions do not always occur based on identity and attraction, but rather, more complex factors are involved<sup>39</sup>. Let us take as an example homophobia. Homophobia is triggered against “*perceived* violations of heteronormative masculinity and heteronormative femininity within an institutionally heterosexual erotic market or economy”<sup>40</sup>. This means that an internal experience such as “attraction” does not regulate how people interface with systems of marginalisation and oppression in their daily life, or the violence that they can possibly encounter. But internal experiences do not end in themselves: people generally build their own lives and families around those relationships which are relevant to their sexual orientations. Since sexual orientation generally guides the type (meaning the gender) of who people are more likely to choose to build their life with, sexual attraction becomes socially relevant insofar it is translated in external acts: it is connected to significant (and-state sponsored) relationships, to state-sponsored rights and prohibitions, to structural heterosexism and homophobic violence, as well as to people’s construction of their own social life and families. In other words, in this framework, sexual orientation becomes compulsory precisely because the individual’s attraction and desires (the base of sexual orientation) have associated outcomes that are *socially relevant*. Insert asexuality in the equation, however, and troubles start to surface: the passage from internal (non)attraction *may or may not* be tied to what is socially relevant for asexual people<sup>41</sup>. It is exactly because the asexual population has such diverse experiences and is such an heterogeneous community, that it becomes impossible to interpret asexuality as a single sexual orientation (or lack thereof). Instead, it would make more sense for it to be seen as not a simple lack of sexual attraction, but as a meta-construct, analogue to sexuality, that encompasses constructs of attraction, desire, fantasies, behaviours and self-identity<sup>42</sup>.

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<sup>39</sup> CHASIN, “Asexuality and the re/construction...”, cit., p. 214.

<sup>40</sup> *Ibidem*.

<sup>41</sup> CHASIN, “Asexuality and the re/construction...”, cit., pp. 214-215.

<sup>42</sup> CHASIN, “Theoretical Issues...”, cit., p. 716.

## 2.3: Going Towards a Positive Definition of Asexuality: The Symbolic Interactionist Approach and The Asexual Resonances Method

Some asexual people feel like their whole identity revolves around having a *lack* of sexuality or missing something. This is what Jessica, bi-/panromantic asexual, twenty-one years old white woman, interviewed by Scherrer, describes:

Outside of AVEN or conversations specifically about sexuality, I don't really consciously think of myself as asexual. Like being an atheist or non-Hispanic or a non-driver (all apply), asexuality is something I'm not and never was, rather than something I am. The label is mostly a useful marker. So, my asexual identity is important in certain contexts, and I can't imagine my life if I weren't asexual, but it's not specifically important to me<sup>43</sup>.

Being asexual seems to become some sort of non-identity, a non-issue to deal with. Occupying only a negative space, its importance seems to be dismissed. This is what Kath perceives about her asexuality:

It's not really important because it's—asexuality, it's basically a non-issue from the start so it doesn't really matter. I don't really care, because I think there are so many more important things in life and since sex isn't important to me, I don't think about the lack of it either. I think about what I have to read for next week, or I think about how many pages I have to draft to my supervisor for next month for my thesis, and I think about what types of courses I'm going to take later in the autumn... that's what my life is about right now and so I don't really care about the non-issue that asexuality is<sup>44</sup>.

As long as asexuality is articulated through an essentialist vision of sexuality and sexual orientation, it will necessarily be perceived as a deficiency, instead of a presence of certain characteristics, as other constructed identities are. And, by result, asexuality remains barely intelligible, only complicating the existing methodological approach that studies it<sup>45</sup>, because it simply does not fit. Continuing to spread similar discourses on asexuality entails that more and more people will feel like Jessica and Kath, who only perceive asexuality in negative

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<sup>43</sup> SCHERRER, "Coming to an Asexual Identity...", cit., p. 7.

<sup>44</sup> Susie, SCOTT, Liz, MCDONNELL and Matt, DAWSON, "Stories of Non-Becoming: Non-Issues, Non-Events and Non-Identities in Asexual Lives", *Symbolic Interaction*, 39, 2, 2016, p. 274. <https://dstuntedoi.org/10.1002/symb.215>. 22 June 2026.

<sup>45</sup> FLORE, "Mismeasures of Asexual...", cit., p. 24.

terms: it becomes, therefore, of the greatest importance to start seeing asexuality in a more positive light, stating what it is, instead of what it is not.

Being asexual, just like being sexual or non-asexual, is a positive way of being human, as well as relating to other people<sup>46</sup>. As explained in the previous pages, it appears as lacking only because of compulsory sexuality/sexusociety: *per se*, asexuality has “no empty spot to fill”<sup>47</sup>. Talking about asexuality means noticing the limiting framework we are working with and going towards new ways to describe and perceive attraction and (a)sexuality, to better reflect different asexual experiences<sup>48</sup>. The true focus should be what asexuality brings to the table, which transformations is asking, even begging, to occur.

Through an asexual perspective, we can clearly see how the normative “appropriateness” of relationships is tied not only to (the conventionally assumed) gender, but also to other factors, for example whether people organise their lives around romantic relationships, and, if they do, if these are “properly” sexual. In response to this, the ace community has produced discourses of non-romantic and non-normative relationships, called queerplatonic relationships, which can be equally useful for both asexual and non-asexual people<sup>49</sup>. Through an asexual perspective, we can notice the constrictive grip of amatonormativity on society, defined by Chasin as “the normative privileging of romantic relationships that are supposed to be central to people’s life (i.e., as the basis of nuclear families— presupposing sexuality within marriage or civil partnership) and more intimate and valuable than other kinds of relationships”<sup>50</sup>. An asexual perspective can help pinpointing and unravelling the obligations surrounding sex, and the commodification of sex and consent. Through an ace lens it becomes possible to challenge the authority of sexualnormativity and the expectations that it entails, dismantling it and opening up new, radical possibilities for (re)structuring not only families, but societies overall<sup>51</sup>.

For example, Scott and Dawson suggest a Symbolic Interactionist approach to the study of asexuality, emphasising the relational and negotiated aspects of identity formation, in order to distance asexuality from a monolithic, fixed and essentialist vision of identity<sup>52</sup>. Symbolic

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<sup>46</sup> CHASIN, “Making Sense...”, cit., p. 167.

<sup>47</sup> MÜLLER, “A\_Sexualizing Design...”, cit., p. 60.

<sup>48</sup> CHEN, *Ace: cosa ci rivela ...*, cit., pp. 39-40.

<sup>49</sup> CHASIN, “Asexuality and the re/construction...”, cit., pp. 216-217.

<sup>50</sup> CHASIN, “Asexuality and the re/construction...”, cit., p. 217.

<sup>51</sup> *Ibidem*.

<sup>52</sup> SCOTT & DAWSON, “Rethinking asexuality...”, cit., p. 4.

Interactionism sees identities not as static, but as processual, in a constant process of becoming. The self is interpreted as a social object, its meaning and form emerging through human interactions as a cooperative process. In the long run, expectations and constructed experiences create patterns of interaction. Identity is therefore interpreted as a relational process, where the understanding of the “I” is dependent on the other’s perspective, and on the personal interpretation of such perspective. The individual’s asexuality and their understanding of it is not something they simply “have” and bring to their relationships, but, instead, something that emerges and changes inside that specific relationship, its meaning redefined and negotiated within it. According to this theory, asexual identities should, therefore, be addressed as socially mediated experiences of becoming: the individual identification with a certain labels or categories is seen not as “inborn”, but as one of the various paths their life story could have taken, depending on which interactions and experiences they had<sup>53</sup>.

Another aspect of constructing a positive vision of asexuality is searching for positive images of what asexuality can look like in people. Part of this effort includes also locating asexuality historically, which is one of the bigger frames of this work. To explore Kusama Yayoi’s asexuality, the method used will be “resonances” based, as theorised by Ela Przybylo and Danielle Cooper. They have argued that looking for asexuality through history requires an attunement to “resonances”, or traces of existence. It means distancing ourselves from the assumption that people necessarily have sexual identities and stop looking for unattainable proofs to verify asexual identities<sup>54</sup>. Looking for “resonances” means shifting from asexuality as a self-identified, essentialist identity, to asexuality as a blurrier concept: through a “queerly asexual reading strategy and an attention to the touches, instances, moments, and resonances”<sup>55</sup>, it becomes possible to assemble an asexual archive, encompassing of all those “ephemeral and elusive fragments”<sup>56</sup> that such a method helps uncover. It is only through this shift from identity to traces and instances that asexuality can be more flexibly theorised and creative methods for finding, interpreting as well as assembling a queerly asexual archive can be utilised. The queerly asexual methodology described by Przybylo and Cooper consists of three components: first, going back to history and cultural representation, looking for asexuality and queerness; then, finding and interpreting sources

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<sup>53</sup> SCOTT & DAWSON, “Rethinking asexuality...”, cit., pp. 9-10.

<sup>54</sup> PRZYBYŁO, “Ace and aro lesbian art...”, cit., p. 98.

<sup>55</sup> PRZYBYŁO & COOPER, “Asexual resonances...”, cit., p. 268.

<sup>56</sup> *Ibidem*.

of what can be an asexual “touch”, between asexuality as today’s phenomenon and asexual resonances of other past and present contexts. The last step is constructing and assembling an asexual archive, conceived as multiple and contradictory, open to expansion and revision, instead of physical, static, and complete. This strategy and methodology of reading queerly and asexually is grounded in the idea that whenever sexuality is at the centre of literary, historical and theoretical analysis, so is *asexuality*<sup>57</sup>. The aim is not to decide who could “pass” as asexual according to today’s standards, but examining moments of asexuality, following that “queer historical impulse” described by medievalist Carolyn Dinshaw as a “desire to ‘touch’ between ‘lives, texts and other cultural phenomenon left out of sexual categories back then, and, on the other hand, those left out of current sexual categories now”<sup>58</sup>.

There have been some explorations of asexual tendencies and aesthetics in art history, including Guo’s 2020 master’s thesis “A-Resonances: Visual representations of the asexual experience”, Przybylo & Cooper’s 2014 “Asexual resonances: Tracing a queerly asexual archive”, as well as Przybylo’s 2021 “Ace and aro lesbian art and theory with Agnes Martin and Yayoi Kusama”, which is also the inspiration for the present work. Another work worth mentioning is Stickney’s 2025 master’s thesis “Deconstructing Artistic Narratives of Asexuality: A Critical Exploration of Community Dynamics and Identity Formation in Contemporary Manga”, exploring how artistic narratives in contemporary manga represent asexuality. Yet the possibilities are still countless.

A relevant and interesting example of the application of the “resonances” based method is Guo’s “Andy Warhol is Aro Ace” (Figure 2): the author created a poster with quotes taken from Warhol’s book “The Philosophy of Andy Warhol” that could resonate with asexuals’ and aromantics’ feelings. Andy Warhol’s experiences and quotes were taken and analysed through an asexual perspective, noticing how asexual and aromantic people, during their lives, could go through similar experiences<sup>59</sup>.

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<sup>57</sup> PRZYBYŁO, & COOPER, “Asexual resonances...”, cit., pp. 303-304.

<sup>58</sup> PRZYBYŁO, & COOPER, “Asexual resonances...”, cit., p. 305.

<sup>59</sup> Renrong, GUO, “A-Resonances: Visual representations of the asexual experience”, Emily Carr University of Art and Design, 2020, pp. 18-20. <https://ecuad.arcabc.ca/islandora/object/ecuad:15449>. 22 June 2026.

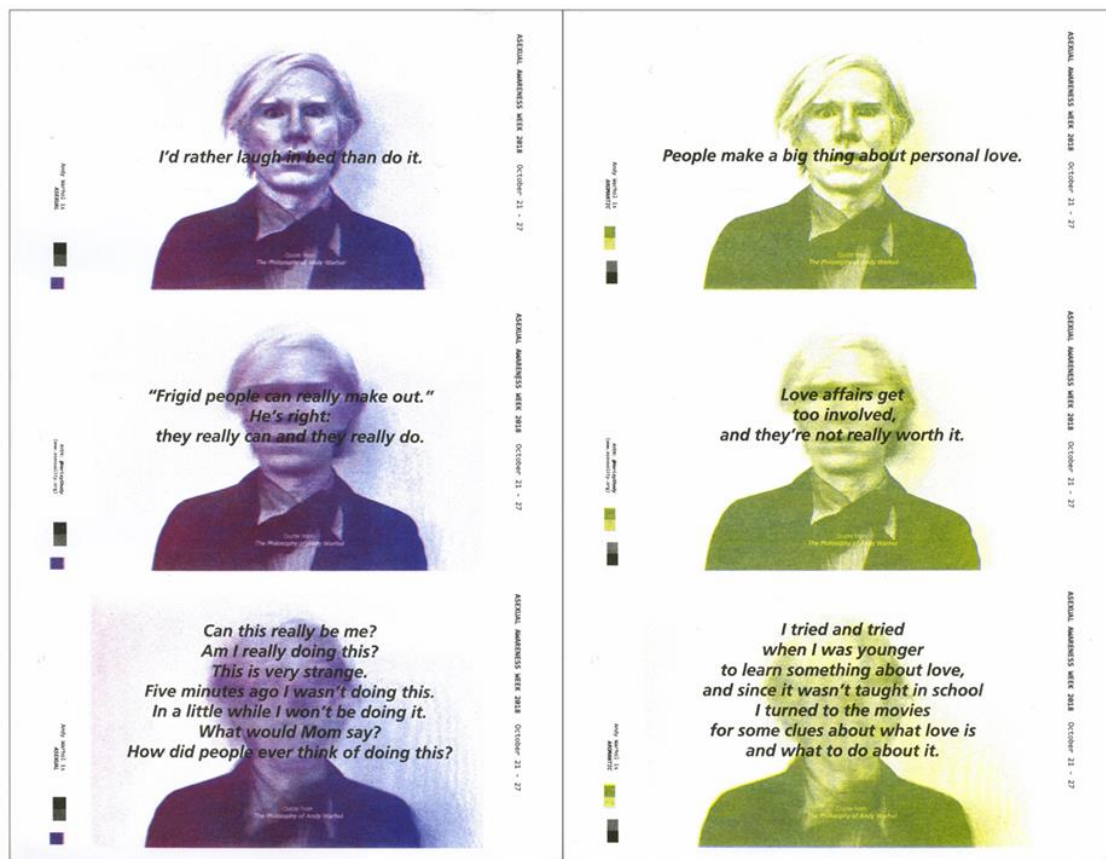


Figure 2: Extract from the poster series "Andy Warhol is Aro Ace", by Renrong Guo

This project is the concrete demonstration of how, through the composition of words, images, as well as other visual elements, it is possible to visually represent asexuality as well as expanding the historical asexual possibilities<sup>60</sup>.

Asexuality exists and has always been there; one just needs to look beyond the fog produced by compulsory sexuality to find it.

<sup>60</sup> GUO, "A-Resonances...", cit., pp. 22-23.

## Chapter 3: Asexual Traces in Kusama Yayoi: Her Life

### 3.1: An Overview of Kusama Yayoi's Life and Recurring Themes

Before proceeding with an analysis of Kusama Yayoi's life through an asexual framework, her life trajectory and her career are summarily investigated. The artist's personal life has been, for years, the foundation for the critics' interpretations of her work: for this reason, it has been decided to give relevance, in terms of length, to this section. The strong connection between her life and her works is also highlighted by the artist herself: in her 1955 essay "Ivan the Fool", she clearly expresses how "everything is connected to my works"<sup>1</sup>, or again, how "daily life is enough to bring vitality to my work"<sup>2</sup>. The ultimate end is not to give a complete report of Kusama's life, but to lay the foundation for a deeper understanding of her works and her main themes, while focusing on the works most relevant to a further asexual analysis.

In approaching her biography, it has been decided to adopt a syncretic approach, presenting her life in chronological order, while at the same time exploring diachronic themes that are encompassed in her art through the years. When possible, the geopolitical context is also investigated, for a more complete perspective. There are three subchapters: the division has been made following her relocations between Japan and the United States.

#### 3.1.1: Early Years in Japan (1929-1957)

Kusama Yayoi was born in Matsumoto, Nagano prefecture, on the 22<sup>nd</sup> March 1929. Her family was an old aristocratic one, now landowners, with six greenhouses and labourers coming to pick up violets and sell them all over Japan<sup>3</sup>. Kusama's childhood was not an easy one: 1937 marked the beginning of the Second Sino-Japanese war, as well as the beginning of the Second World War in Asia. In 1944, following a government decree on women's labour in August, over four million women over the age of 15 were required to start working in the military industry, producing planes, munitions and so on. In November,

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<sup>1</sup> Yayoi, KUSAMA, "Ivan lo scemo", 1955, in Doryun, CHONG & Mika, YOSHITAKE (edited by), *Yayoi Kusama 1945-oggi*, tr. Isabella Polli, Milano, 24 Ore Cultura, 2024, p. 318.

<sup>2</sup> KUSAMA, "Ivan lo...", cit., p. 317.

<sup>3</sup> Yayoi, KUSAMA, *Infinity net: La mia autobiografia*, tr. Gala Maria Follaco, Milano, Johan & Levi, 2013, p. 41.

Kusama was called to work in a parachute factory where she got infected with pneumonia, caused by the terrible work conditions<sup>4</sup>.

Auditory and visual hallucinations started to appear in her high school years: she saw a halo around objects, and sometimes, she also happened to hear plants or animals talk<sup>5</sup>. The only way to elude those strange and inexplicable phenomena was to recreate them on paper, in order to decode and interpret them<sup>6</sup>. She drew every day, trying to stop the images that flowed through her eyes<sup>7</sup>. The idea of repetitiveness and circularity is present in her art since the earlier times: she wanted to push out of her mind the images she saw, to free her spirit in the universe. She recalls:

In that period, I made paintings with small ink dots on a white paper, similar to cells, infinite circular lines drawn with an endless motion. The dark days of the war, my sad childhood and the thousands of white pebbles next to my house, which I used to stare at, all of this added to my desire to express myself led me to my actual painting style<sup>8</sup>.

Painting was a fever born in desperation: she could not imagine another way for her to go on living in the world. She was living between the real world and the unknown, between life and death: in those times she became ill and a subjugated to the act of creation<sup>9</sup>. Later in time, she would define the focus of her mental ailments as “depersonalisation”, which she describes as a “curtain that completely encloses her”, and her soul seeming to escape her body<sup>10</sup>.

Since these first years, Kusama had developed a deep interest in the organic and cosmic life, or, as Mika Yoshitake calls it, the “biocosmic”: like a small hole in a peach reveals an insect’s presence, Kusama referred to nature to reveal her world, hidden between mysticism and symbolism<sup>11</sup>.

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<sup>4</sup> Alex A. JONES, “Cronologia visiva. La vita e i tempi di Yayoi Kusama”, in Doryun, CHONG & Mika, YOSHITAKE (edited by), *Yayoi Kusama 1945-oggi*, tr. Isabella Polli, Milano, 24 Ore Cultura, 2024, pp. 206-209.

<sup>5</sup> KUSAMA, *Infinity net...*, cit., p. 42.

<sup>6</sup> Yayoi, KUSAMA, “Le fatiche e le peregrinazioni della mia anima (estratto)”, 1975, in Doryun, CHONG & Mika, YOSHITAKE (edited by), *Yayoi Kusama 1945-oggi*, tr. Isabella Polli, Milano, 24 Ore Cultura, 2024, p. 370.

<sup>7</sup> KUSAMA, *Infinity net...*, cit., p. 44.

<sup>8</sup> Yayoi, KUSAMA, “Estratti dalle riflessioni del Dopoguerra”, ca. 1960, in Doryun, CHONG & Mika, YOSHITAKE (edited by), *Yayoi Kusama 1945-oggi*, tr. Isabella Polli, Milano, 24 Ore Cultura, 2024, p. 328.

<sup>9</sup> KUSAMA, *Infinity net...*, cit., pp. 45-46.

<sup>10</sup> KUSAMA, *Infinity net...*, cit., p. 58.

<sup>11</sup> Mika, YOSHITAKE, “La trasmutazione di un’anima. L’eterno ritorno di Yayoi Kusama”, in Doryun, CHONG & Mika, YOSHITAKE (edited by), *Yayoi Kusama 1945-oggi*, tr. Isabella Polli, Milano, 24 Ore Cultura, 2024, p. 16.

Her domestic household, too, could not bring her the relief she desperately longed for. The profligacy of her father, as well as his tendency to frequent houses of prostitution and *geisha* quarters and to seduce the housemaids of their house, were for her further reasons for suffering. Because of the father's attitude, her mother was constantly angry, and that brought the house into a constant state of turmoil. Every time her father left for a tryst with some mistress, Kusama was ordered by her mother to follow him and report back. If she ever lost track of him, she was sent out again, after her mother had vented out all her rage on her. Kusama describes the relationship with her mother as a complex one. She strongly opposed her desire to be a painter, firstly because Kusama was a woman, but also because she thought of actors and painters as disreputable. In her autobiography, the artist recalls how her mother even kicked her palette across the room, and how they sometimes grappled physically, too<sup>12</sup>.

In 1948 Kusama entered a four-year course of study at the Kyoto Municipal School of Arts and Crafts, desiring to escape such domestic environment. She started studying *nihonga*, or Japanese-style painting but, not satisfied, she skipped classes to paint in her room. After a few years, she started holding her first solo exhibitions, the first in March 1952 in the First Community Centre in Matsumoto. Nevertheless, she started nurturing bigger ambitions: encouraged also by her psychiatrist, doctor Nishimaru Shihō, who advised her to get away from her mother, she started dreaming of going to the United States<sup>13</sup>.

However, going to the United States required various documents: between the many, a sponsor's letter guaranteeing the entering person's livelihood. Since Kusama did not have any connection there, she decided to write a letter to Georgia O'Keeffe, whose book of paintings she had bought in a second-hand bookshop in Matsumoto. In the letter, she also included some of her water paintings<sup>14</sup>. The correspondence with O'Keeffe led to an agreement for a solo exhibition in Seattle, and in 1956, Kusama started preparing to leave Japan.

### **3.1.2: In the United States (1957-1973)**

On 18<sup>th</sup> November 1957, Kusama left for the United States with sixty silk *kimono* and two thousands of her paintings and drawings, planning to sell these to survive. In December she

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<sup>12</sup> KUSAMA, *Infinity net...*, cit., pp. 47-48.

<sup>13</sup> KUSAMA, *Infinity net...*, cit., pp. 49-52.

<sup>14</sup> KUSAMA, *Infinity net...*, cit., p. 14.

exhibited 26 of her works at the Dusanne Gallery, in Seattle, her first solo show in the United States. Following her desires, she soon moved to New York. There, she lived in extreme conditions: because of the Vietnam War (1955-1975), food prices were in constant rise, and she ended up spending all the money she had. Her bed became an old door that someone had left on the streets, with just one blanket to cover her. In those stressful conditions, she soon mired in neurosis. Without a proper shelter and enough food, she could do nothing else but staying up and paint<sup>15</sup>.

On a jet-black canvas, so big that she needed a stepladder to paint the top, she painted a white net of tens of thousands of tiny arcs. Her working style was obsessive, often ending up getting lost in her own creations. Each day she woke up before sunrise, and worked until late at night, stopping only briefly for meals, sometimes skipping them for a few days. She often suffered episodes of severe neurosis, in which the nets expanded beyond the canvas, engulfing her completely. Feeling flickering flames in her bones, she continued to paint, relentless, even if multiple times she ended up at the hospital after panic attacks. Soon enough, her studio was filled with nothing but nets<sup>16</sup>.

These creations met the public in October 1959, with Kusama's first solo exhibition in New York, "Obsessional Monochrome", held at the Brata Gallery. The show consisted of various white-on-black infinity nets, without a centre or a composition. The continuous repetition of such small dots disoriented the viewer, whose spirit was drawn into a vertigo of nothingness. Critic Lucy Lippard later reported how the initial impression was of a "no-show" but, under a more accurate scrutiny, a mesh of circular patterns was finally revealed<sup>17</sup>. It was something completely new, during times in which the dominant art style was the Action Painting, which was defined by emotive and intense marks. On the contrary, Kusama's sign was almost invisible to the eye, and going closer to the painting meant getting lost in the just revealed never-ending net<sup>18</sup>(see Figure 3).

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<sup>15</sup> KUSAMA, *Infinity net...*, cit., pp. 13-16.

<sup>16</sup> KUSAMA, *Infinity net...*, cit., p. 18.

<sup>17</sup> Lynn, ZELEVANSKY, "Driving Image: Yayoi Kusama in New York", in Lynn, ZELEVANSKY, Laura, HOPTMAN, Akira, TATEHATA, Alexandra, MUNROE, *Love forever: Yayoi Kusama, 1958-1968*, Los Angeles, Los Angeles County Museum of Art, 1999, p. 12.

<sup>18</sup> Doryun, CHONG & Mika, YOSHITAKE (edited by), *Yayoi Kusama 1945-oggi*, tr. Isabella Polli, Milano, 24 Ore Cultura, 2024, p. 40.

The exhibition was a critical success, praised extensively by respected critics. The artist and critic Donald Judd became Kusama's first friend in the New York art world, and the first person to buy one of the pieces in the exhibition<sup>19</sup>.



*Figure 3: Kusama Yayoi in front of her 10 meters Infinity Net at the Stephen Radich Gallery, New York, 1961*

The positive reception of her Infinity Nets was not limited to New York and the supporters of the emerging minimalist movement, but it was also extended to European avant-garde circles<sup>20</sup>, and Kusama received many letters from Germany, France, and all over Europe<sup>21</sup>. The European avant-gardes aimed at dismantling the previous visual language as well as the symbolic function of the art, in part due to the traumatic experience of the Second World War (especially in countries in which art was subdued to the regime). Some groups (such as the Zero Group in Germany and the Dutch Nul in the Netherlands) thought that, in order to create something completely new, the artistic practice had to embrace the “nothingness”: in this sense, Kusama's apparently void reticular paintings sparked their interest<sup>22</sup>.

Kusama's vision of infinity springs from the observation of nature: it can be found in the water's ripples, in the shadows cast by the sunlight through the leaves or in a reptile's skin. In her career, this kind of infinity is not just a formality, but something that can evoke emotions and a sense of belonging in the universe<sup>23</sup>. The dots, just like the stars or the planets in the universe, are like traces of existence in this world, immersed in a connection that forms the “net” of reality<sup>24</sup>.

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<sup>19</sup> KUSAMA, *Infinity net...*, cit., pp. 20-21.

<sup>20</sup> CHONG & YOSHITAKE (edited by), *Yayoi Kusama...*, cit., p. 41.

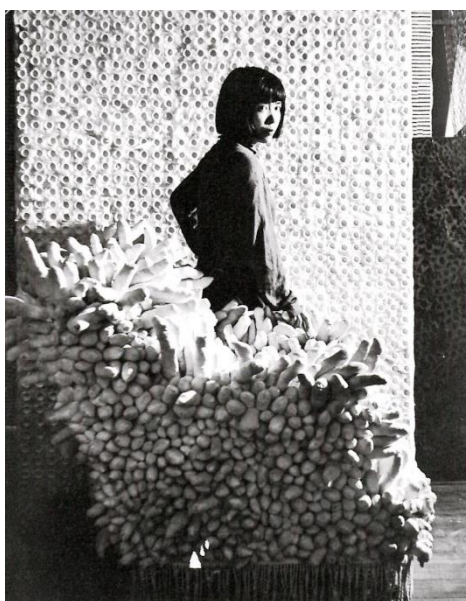
<sup>21</sup> KUSAMA, *Infinity net...*, cit., p. 23.

<sup>22</sup> CHONG & YOSHITAKE (edited by), *Yayoi Kusama...*, cit., p. 41.

<sup>23</sup> YOSHITAKE, “La trasmigrazione...”, cit., pp. 17-18.

<sup>24</sup> CHONG & YOSHITAKE (edited by), *Yayoi Kusama...*, cit., p. 42.

Having consolidated her position in the American avant-garde, Kusama entered a period of artistic experimentation, in which she moved from one art to another, in a quest to express this consuming notion of infinity<sup>25</sup>. 1961 marks the entrance into her artistic world of soft sculptures<sup>26</sup>, using mundane household furniture and kitchen implements as the support for her creations<sup>27</sup>. Her soft sculptures were first exhibited in October 1962, in a group show at the Green Gallery in New York<sup>28</sup>. There, Kusama presents Accumulation No.1 and Accumulation No.2, respectively an old armchair and a sofa with stuffed protrusions sewn from canvas<sup>29</sup> (see Figure 4).



*Figure 4: Kusama with Accumulation No.1 and egg-carton relief in her studio, New York c. 1963-64. Photograph by Hal Reiff*

The term “accumulation” evokes the imagery of collecting, multiplying. In Kusama’s artistic language, it indicates a proper strategy, a spell, as she defines it:

I work non-stop between fifty and sixty hours. [...] I am always at the centre of the obsession against the accumulation and the repetition that press inside me, and I get lost in this bewitching spell that imprisons me<sup>30</sup>.

<sup>25</sup> ZELEVANSKY, “Driving Image...”, cit., p. 16.

<sup>26</sup> KUSAMA, *Infinity net...*, cit., p. 23.

<sup>27</sup> ZELEVANSKY, “Driving Image...”, cit., p. 16.

<sup>28</sup> KUSAMA, *Infinity net...*, cit., p. 29.

<sup>29</sup> ZELEVANSKY, “Driving Image...”, cit., p. 16.

<sup>30</sup> Yayoi, KUSAMA, “Sotto l’incantesimo dell’accumulazione”, 1961, in Doryun, CHONG & Mika, YOSHITAKE (edited by), *Yayoi Kusama 1945-oggi*, tr. Isabella Polli, Milano, 24 Ore Cultura, 2024, p. 329.

More than the singular piece, what is important is the aggregation of many, which creates something similar to a world. Seeing Kusama's accumulation as a merely obsessive-compulsive tendency may be reductive: it could be instead interpreted as an expansion logic that directed her creative vision, as defined by Diedrich Diedrichsen, expanding from a selection of drawings in her studio to a more global corpus of works<sup>31</sup>.

My aggregation sculptures are the logical development of everything I have done since I was a child. They stem from a deep, compelling compulsion to visibly materialise the repetitive image that I have inside. When this image gains freedom, it expands beyond the limits of time and space<sup>32</sup>.

Starting from 1961, the impulse of repetition overflows from canvas to three-dimensional sculptures. In *Accumulation No.1*, the armchair, now covered with multiple stuffed protrusions, is no longer a seat, but part of the accumulation, while the soft sculptures engulf it and become bigger than the sum of its parts. The resulting object unleashes complex organic, erotic and unusual associations<sup>33</sup>.

In December 1963, Kusama presented her first installation, "Aggregation: One Thousand Boats Show", at the Gertrude Stein Gallery in New York (see Figure 5). White, stuffed phalluses completely covered a 10-meter boat; all around it, on the ceiling and the walls, she hung 999 black-and-white posters of it. Entering the room, the boats would start spinning around the viewer, leaving them seasick and hallucinated<sup>34</sup>.

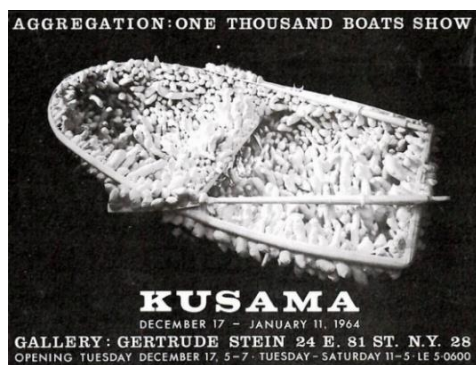


Figure 5: Poster for Kusama's solo exhibition, *Aggregation: One Thousand Boats Show*, Gertrude Stein Gallery, New York, 1963

<sup>31</sup> CHONG & YOSHITAKE (edited by), *Yayoi Kusama...*, cit., p. 68.

<sup>32</sup> "Miss Yayoi Kusama: intervista preparata per la WABC Radio da Gordon Brown, giornalista di 'Art Voices'", in Doryun, CHONG & Mika, YOSHITAKE (edited by), *Yayoi Kusama 1945-oggi*, tr. Isabella Polli, Milano, 24 Ore Cultura, 2024, p. 332.

<sup>33</sup> CHONG & YOSHITAKE (edited by), *Yayoi Kusama...*, cit., p. 68.

<sup>34</sup> KUSAMA, *Infinity net...*, cit., p. 30.

The reason why the first soft sculptures were shaped like penises was, according to her words, because she had “a fear of sex”. Her ultimate goal, reproducing thousands and thousands of phalli, was to turn the horror into something familiar, and “conquering the fear”. She refers to this process as some sort of self-therapy, or “Psychosomatic Art”<sup>35</sup> (this topic will be further analysed in 3.2). Kusama felt a similar fear of pasta, too. More specifically, the source of her horror was machine-produced food, embodied by macaroni. Like this, her complexes and fears become the subjects of her art<sup>36</sup>: “the thought of continually eating something like macaroni, spat out by machinery, fills me with fear and revulsion”<sup>37</sup>, she says. So, she makes sculptures using as many macaroni as she can. “I make them and make them and then keep on making them, until I bury myself in the process. I call this ‘obliteration’”<sup>38</sup>.

These fears of sex and food were the centre of her 1964 solo exhibition, “Driving Image Show”, at the Castellane Gallery of New York<sup>39</sup>. The room was filled with sofas, chairs, stepladders, a 10-person dinner table, all fully covered by white soft sculptures. Tailoring these many phalluses was indeed a tedious work, and Kusama’s intense work sessions brought her to nervous breakdowns and to be admitted to the hospital multiple times<sup>40</sup>. The exhibition was, nonetheless, enthusiastically reviewed, and brought in Europe, too. Kusama’s food-and-sex images created a gradual storm in the New York art scene of the 1960s, and her work started to become increasingly three-dimensional and spatial. Soon, she started making use of mirrors and plastic<sup>41</sup>.

With “Aggregation: One Thousand Boats Show” and “Driving Image Show”, Kusama started evolving her artworks as environments. The term “environment” was actually coined by Happenings initiator Allan Kaprow in 1966, when he published a book entitled “Assemblages, Environments, and Happenings”, the three artistic formats he developed during the 1950s. Kusama’s art evolution (from drawing to painting, to painting to sculpture, to sculpture to environments) was both motivated by her personal obsessions, as well as a consequence

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<sup>35</sup> KUSAMA, *Infinity net...*, cit., pp. 30-31.

<sup>36</sup> KUSAMA, *Infinity net...*, cit., p. 33.

<sup>37</sup> *Ibidem*.

<sup>38</sup> *Ibidem*.

<sup>39</sup> *Ibidem*.

<sup>40</sup> CHONG & YOSHITAKE (edited by), *Yayoi Kusama...*, cit., p. 69.

<sup>41</sup> KUSAMA, *Infinity net...*, cit., p. 35.

of her receptiveness of the new directions of the avant-garde art. Step by step, Kusama was expanding the territory of her art<sup>42</sup>.

Her new trend bloomed fully with her 1965 installation “Infinity Mirror Room - Phalli’s Field”, at Castellane Gallery (Figure 6). The room’s walls were covered with mirrors, and from the floor sprouted thousands of white phalluses covered with red polka dots. People could walk through this apparently infinite meadow, becoming one with the sculpture and the environment surrounding them<sup>43</sup>.

Wandering into this infinite wonderland, where a grandiose aggregation of human sexual symbols had been transformed into a humorous, polka-dotted field, viewers found themselves spellbound by the imagination as it exorcised sexual sickness in the naked light of day<sup>44</sup>.



*Figure 6: Infinity Mirror Room - Phalli's Field, an artwork using soft sculptures, presented at Kusama's solo exhibition Floor Show, Richard Castellane Gallery, New York, 1965*

The discovery that mirrors could virtually multiply her image was a pivotal moment in Kusama's works. The pictures she had taken inside her “Phalli’s Field” document the artist's triumph, when she is finally physically engulfed and trapped inside her artificially infinite mirror world<sup>45</sup>.

In 1966, Kusama participated to the XXXIII Venice Biennale with her environmental piece Narcissus Garden, in which one thousand five hundred plastic mirror balls covered a section

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<sup>42</sup> YOSHIMOTO, *Into performance...*, cit., pp. 60-61.

<sup>43</sup> *Ibidem*.

<sup>44</sup> *Ibidem*.

<sup>45</sup> CHONG & YOSHITAKE (edited by), *Yayoi Kusama...*, cit., p. 69.

of green lawn. During the event, she started selling her balls for 1200 lire each. This initiative was indeed welcomed by the audience, while, on the contrary, the authorities made her stop<sup>46</sup>. Her piece commented on the role of the artist within the art world, and declared her support for the democratisation of art. In her vision, buying an art piece should have been as affordable as buying food at the supermarket or socks at the store<sup>47</sup>. In addition to this, this piece was coherent with Kusama's philosophy that everything can be designed using a singular and uniform unit. The dot's unity refers to the potentiality of an infinite net and, similarly to what happens in people's lives, two, three or more dots together can become a movement<sup>48</sup>.

In 1967, ten years after her arrival in the United States, Kusama's name was starting to be recognised. Her artistic repertoire was further expanded with her Happenings<sup>49</sup>. Even though the term was directly borrowed from Allan Kaprow, her usage of it was more casual, as it had been popularised in the New York popular culture to broadly refer to any performance that encompassed some unexpected aspects. Kusama's Happenings generally revolved around interacting with the audience and shocking passersby, and did not follow elaborate scripts, unlike Kaprow's Happenings<sup>50</sup>. Behind her Happenings, too, there was her deep fear of and horror for sex. Inciting men and women to take off their clothes and covering them with polka dots was her way to win over her fears and express herself<sup>51</sup>. Kusama's Happenings were strongly supported by the hippie movement, which was, in those years, taking shape in Greenwich Village. It consisted of groups of young people, rebelling against US mechanised and increasingly computerised culture, and who wished to find again their alienated humanity. Starting from 1967 they were becoming increasingly powerful as a movement, and their ideal of "returning to nature" was directly connected to their life and sexual tendencies. They reclaimed their humanity by participating in the wildest, most primitive kinds of sex, as well as by their involvement in what was considered "abnormal" sex, such as homosexuality, lesbianism, sadism and masochism. The movement's centrality of the human being was consistent with Kusama's themes, and

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<sup>46</sup> KUSAMA, *Infinity net...*, cit., pp. 39-40.

<sup>47</sup> Yayoi, KUSAMA, "Garden of Narcissus", 1966, in Doryun, CHONG & Mika, YOSHITAKE (edited by), *Yayoi Kusama 1945-oggi*, tr. Isabella Polli, Milano, 24 Ore Cultura, 2024, p. 334.

<sup>48</sup> YOSHITAKE, "La trasmutazione...", cit., p. 21.

<sup>49</sup> KUSAMA, *Infinity net...*, cit., p. 63.

<sup>50</sup> Midori, YOSHIMOTO, *Into performance: Japanese women artists in New York*, New Brunswick, NJ, Rutgers University Press, 2005, p. 69.

<sup>51</sup> KUSAMA, *Infinity net...*, cit., pp. 68-69.

the hippie culture, homosexual love and orgies became inextricably tied to her Happenings. Using homosexual boys and a lot of girls, too, she created performance after performance, each time painting polka dots on their naked bodies in Self Obliteration Happenings and Body Festivals. Polka dots were the trademark of Kusama Happenings: such pattern on the human body caused the person's self to be obliterated, returning them to their natural state<sup>52</sup> (see Figure 7).



*Figure 7: Homosexual Orgy, happening at Kusama's studio, New York, 1968*

In 1968, the number of her Body Paint Happenings increased. They were now becoming something more than simple artistic performances: those events started to reflect the political climate of those times, including pacifist messages and criticism towards the political establishment. Between July and November, she held, in different locations, a new series of Happenings called "Anatomic Explosion"<sup>53</sup>. The wordplay between "atomic" and "anatomic" was indeed a strong one, especially for a person, like Kusama, who had experienced firsthand the US atomic bombing in Japan<sup>54</sup>. In July she brought her "Anatomic Explosion" to Wall Street, in front of George Washington's statue: it was an anti-tax happening, with professional dancers completely nude and painted with polka dots, dancing around the statue<sup>55</sup> (see Figures 8 and 9).

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<sup>52</sup> KUSAMA, *Infinity net...*, cit., pp. 63-69.

<sup>53</sup> KUSAMA, *Infinity net...*, cit., p. 74.

<sup>54</sup> CHONG & YOSHITAKE (edited by), *Yayoi Kusama...*, cit., p. 129.

<sup>55</sup> KUSAMA, *Infinity net...*, cit., p. 75.

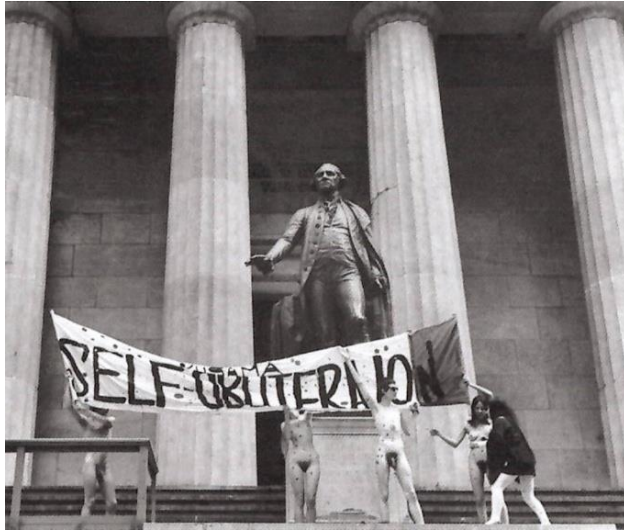


Figure 8: *Anatomic Explosion, Wall Street, New York, 14th July 1968*



Figure 9: *Anatomic Explosion Happening at Wall Street, New York, 1968*

In these events, the small dots she applied to naked bodies visually represented the interconnection between the protesters: painting those dots (which could be assimilated to holes) was a radical enactment of death and of the obliteration of bodies caused by the US invasions in Vietnam and Cambodia. Kusama's self-obliteration changed this destruction into a form of connectivity between individuals<sup>56</sup>.

When we obliterate nature and our bodies with polka dots, we become one with our environment – one with infinity – and we obliterate ourselves in love<sup>57</sup>.

This is her most political act, rooted in her memories of how destructive war can be. Kusama's Self-obliteration can also be seen as a process of collective healing, to radically connect marginalised people (especially hippies, gays, people of colour), and see themselves as equals<sup>58</sup>.

For the first time in 13 years, in 1970 Kusama returned in Japan, wanting to create in her own country the same "nude revolution" that was so popular in the United States. However, the artistic climate in Japan in those years was indeed not as welcoming as the US one. In Japan her protests were presented as outrageous scandals, and her whole image was based entirely on what Kusama calls "misunderstandings and prejudices"<sup>59</sup>. "Queen of

<sup>56</sup> YOSHITAKE, "La trasmigrazione...", cit., p. 21.

<sup>57</sup> *Ibidem*.

<sup>58</sup> YOSHITAKE, "La trasmigrazione...", cit., pp. 21-23.

<sup>59</sup> KUSAMA, *Infinity net...*, cit., p. 80.

Naked Happenings”, “a national disgrace”: these were the epithets mass media used to describe her. In her autobiography, she expresses her frustration at not having been able to communicate her message to the Japanese public<sup>60</sup>. This, however, does not mean that Japan rejected the avant-garde as a whole: it was, nevertheless, a matter of timing. Recent research, in fact, reconsidered the role of the avant-garde in the country in the 1950s and 1960s. In the 1970s this flame was dying out: apparently, it was the new prosperity of the nation that weakened the most progressive and experimental tendencies. This was the society Kusama found when she permanently came back in 1973: far from being poor and suffering, unsure of its place in the world, it was now intolerant of provocations against its norms and its newly reached equilibrium. It is no surprise that Kusama’s nude happenings were immediately repressed<sup>61</sup>.

### 3.1.3: Back to Japan (1973-Today)

After sixteen years living in New York, Kusama Yayoi had managed to build a name for herself in the avant-garde landscape. Her happenings, in particular, helped her expand her art towards new borders and, through press and mass media, her message produced even more resonance<sup>62</sup>.

In 1973 Kusama was forced to stay in Japan because of her illness: the doctors could not find the cause of her worsening hallucinations, and she was soon admitted to a hospital in Shinjuku<sup>63</sup>. Like this, a new chapter of her life had begun, as she built a new routine for herself: from 10 in the morning she went to her atelier right in front of the hospital to work on her art (at the end of 1970s and the beginning of 1980s she had started to implement new techniques, working with collages, prints and lithographs, in order to expand her artistic world), until 6 or 7 in the evening. Then it was time for her to devote herself to literature: with it, too, she had an obsessive relation. In 1978, she published her debut novel, “Manhattan Suicide Addict”<sup>64</sup>, in which the themes of death and suicide become central. The philosopher Asada Akira offers an interesting view on the topic, reading Kusama’s lifelong psychological battle as an integral part of her radical artistic practice: “transforming her life into art, Kusama

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<sup>60</sup> KUSAMA, *Infinity net...*, cit., pp. 80-90.

<sup>61</sup> Doryun, CHONG, “Il giardino di Narciso. Come Yayoi Kusama è diventata un’icona culturale globale e cosa possono insegnarci lei e la sua arte sul modo in cui esistiamo nel mondo oggi”, in Doryun, CHONG & Mika, YOSHITAKE (edited by), *Yayoi Kusama 1945-oggi*, tr. Isabella Polli, Milano, 24 Ore Cultura, 2024, p. 268.

<sup>62</sup> KUSAMA, *Infinity net...*, cit., p. 117.

<sup>63</sup> KUSAMA, *Infinity net...*, cit., p. 118.

<sup>64</sup> KUSAMA, *Infinity net...*, cit., pp. 126-127.

wins over death”<sup>65</sup>. Suicide becomes, then, not a symptom of mental disorder, but a desire for radical connectivity through death, which becomes the highest form of self-obliteration<sup>66</sup>.

Despite the harsh criticism in the 1970s, in the 1980s Japan’s perception of Kusama radically changed<sup>67</sup>. She started to participate again in exhibitions, gradually reestablishing her position in Japanese art circles, up to the point of being sent, in 1993, to Venice International Art Biennale as Japan’s sole official representative. Borggreen finds the roots of this change in two factors, the first being a re-examination of Kusama’s art (by both the critics and Kusama herself), with a deeper focus on her mental condition. While this can be influenced by the fact that she was now seeking a more intensive medical treatment, what is interesting is that this new re-interpretation was not limited to her newer art, produced from her diagnosis onwards, but extended also retrospectively, examining early parts of her *oeuvre* through a pathological framework. The second factor is explained by Borggreen as Japan’s interest from the mid-1980s onwards in primitivist art and art made by children and mentally ill people. These two complementary forces contributed to the beginning of the affirmation of Kusama’s art seen through a pathological framework, as well as a rediscovery in her own country of her art<sup>68</sup>.

In the following two decades, Kusama returned to the international scene, with a series of solo exhibitions at important centres and cities of Europe and the United States. At the same time, she also took part in hybrid creative projects with various creative sectors and with the business world. In the years 1999 and 2000 she collaborated with the stylist Issey Miyake; in 2001 she was asked by Coca-Cola to cover their vending machines with her iconic white-on-red polka dots, and, in 2009, the same decorative pattern appeared on the Japanese company KDDI’s new mobile phone model. The list of companies (including brands such as Lancôme, Audi, and Ferragamo) that wished to acquire Kusama’s iconic polka dots on their products was ever-expanding. The collaboration with the biggest exposure was, perhaps, the 2012 collection “Infinitely Kusama”, created by the at the time Luis Vuitton’s artistic director Mark Jacobs<sup>69</sup>.

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<sup>65</sup> YOSHITAKE, “La trasmutazione...”, cit., p. 20.

<sup>66</sup> CHONG & YOSHITAKE (edited by), *Yayoi Kusama...*, cit., p. 119.

<sup>67</sup> KUSAMA, *Infinity net...*, cit., p. 131.

<sup>68</sup> Gunhild, BORGGREEN, “The myth of the mad artist: Works and writings by Kusama Yayoi”, *The Copenhagen Journal of Asian Studies*, vol. 15, 2001, pp. 34-38. <https://doi.org/10.22439/cjas.v15i1.2126>. 22 June 2026.

<sup>69</sup> CHONG, “Il giardino di Narciso...”, cit., p. 272.

The last chapter of Kusama's artistic creations is characterised by a profound sense of hope and vitality. Her black-and-white series "Love Forever" (2005-2007) sees the rhythmic repetition of geometric shapes, flower motifs and people's profiles (see Figure 10). The artist also started experimenting with more complex or prosaic titles, highlighting the narrative dimension of the works<sup>70</sup>.

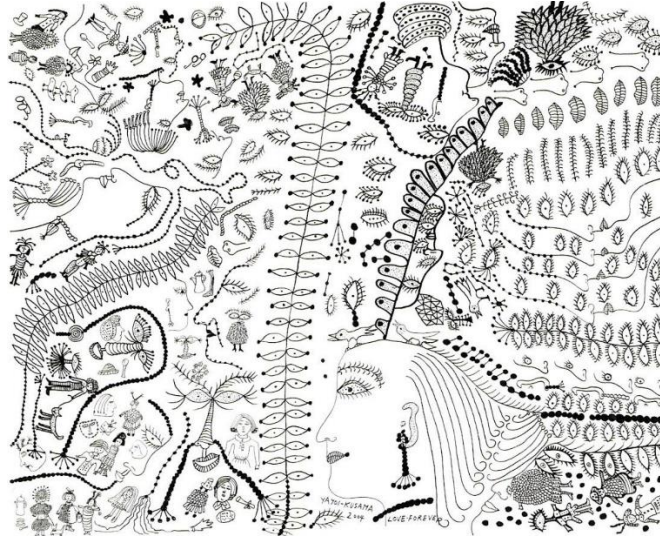


Figure 10: LOVE FOREVER (TAOW), 2004

These themes are further developed in her following series, "My Eternal Soul" (2009-present), which, in 2022, consisted of around 900 paintings (see Figure 11). Merging a brutal vitality with a painful delicacy, the series encompasses all the themes dear to the artist, infinity, accumulation, biocosmic, radical connectivity. Kusama works on all four sides of the canvas, and the figures have different orientations<sup>71</sup>.

<sup>70</sup> YOSHITAKE, "La trasmigrazione...", cit., pp. 32-33.

<sup>71</sup> YOSHITAKE, "La trasmigrazione...", cit., pp. 32-34.



Figure 11: *I WANT TO GIVE YOU BILLIONS OF SPARKLES OF MY LOVE, 2017*

Since 1988, the main themes of her work have been the celebration of life and the therapeutic power of art. Since the end of the 1970s, when she was struggling with depression and her doctor encouraged her to paint more, she has started to see her artistic role as a “transformative suffering” for her and for others and, in 1999, she stated, “I create art for the healing of all mankind”. Kusama’s wish to extend her message seems to translate into a bigger use of representative images in her paintings: in “My Eternal Soul”, she expands her abstract lexicon made of dots and nets, in order to include globally recognisable objects and primary shapes, portals, empty spaces, suns, faces, eyes, and amoeba-like forms<sup>72</sup>.

Kusama’s ultimate goal in life has been to leave some sort of mark of existence through her creativity, as well as being a mirror for the countless souls that have walked on the planet with her<sup>73</sup>.

### 3.2: The Fear of Phalli and the Artist’s Pathologisation

When approaching Kusama’s repetition of phalli, it is often interpreted (by both Kusama and critics of her art) as a result of her fear of sex<sup>74</sup>, seen as a symptom of mental illness<sup>75</sup> or trauma<sup>76</sup>.

<sup>72</sup> CHONG & YOSHITAKE (edited by), *Yayoi Kusama...*, cit., p. 180.

<sup>73</sup> CHONG, “Il giardino di Narciso...”, cit., p. 274.

<sup>74</sup> Jo, APPLIN, *Yayoi Kusama: Infinity mirror room — Phalli’s field*, London, Afterall Books, 2012, p. 7.

<sup>75</sup> YOSHIMOTO, *Into performance...*, cit., p. 47.

<sup>76</sup> KUSAMA, *Infinity net...*, cit., p. 32.

In her autobiography, Kusama explains how sex horrifies her, and how she considers it something disgusting. Creating phalli was a way to exorcise her fear, some sort of self-therapy, or “Psychosomatic Art”, and a way to become more familiar with the fear itself. She identifies the reason behind this complex relationship with sex in the education she had received growing up: her parents had always inculcated in her the idea that sex was something that had to be kept hidden, a reason for shame and guilt. Romantic love was not an option either; all her family talked about were “arranged marriages” and “good families”. A gesture that nowadays is mostly considered harmless, such as simply *talking* to boys, was completely out of question<sup>77</sup>. However, men in her family were indeed treated differently. Her father was never without a mistress; he even ran away with one *geisha* to Tokyo, when Kusama was still young, only to return home when he developed lung trouble, so that he could be nursed by Kusama’s mother. Her grandfather, too, was not that different: for them, chasing after women was like a competition. And while men could practice unconditional free sex, all women could do was to sit in the shadows and bear it<sup>78</sup>. Another traumatic event for her was witnessing a sex act when she was a toddler, causing her deep fear and anxiety. All these factors combined led Kusama to perceive sexual intercourse as violence: this violence was physically symbolised by the male sex organ<sup>79</sup>. As she explains:

I am terrified by just the thought of something long and ugly like a phallus entering me, and that is why I make so many of them<sup>80</sup>.

Following her words, many critics suggest a vision of her art as a form of therapy, which allows her to control the inner turmoil originating from her illness. For example, in art critic Tanigawa Atsushi’s words, Kusama’s (unconscious<sup>81</sup>) artistic therapy was her way of objectifying her symptoms. Independent art curator Alexandra Munroe, too, mentions the idea of therapy, explaining how such a method was instinctive for Kusama, and that this art-therapy was a way to explore and expose the “primal source” of her psyche<sup>82</sup>.

Moreover, mental instability is not only presented as the source of Kusama’s creativity, but also as having influenced both her style and her aesthetic approach<sup>83</sup>. Zelevansky presents

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<sup>77</sup> KUSAMA, *Infinity net...*, cit., pp. 30-32.

<sup>78</sup> KUSAMA, *Infinity net...*, cit., p. 71.

<sup>79</sup> KUSAMA, *Infinity net...*, cit., p. 32.

<sup>80</sup> KUSAMA, *Infinity net...*, cit., p. 33.

<sup>81</sup> The term “unconscious” is here used because it refers to a period prior to Kusama’s diagnosis.

<sup>82</sup> BORGGREEN, “The myth of...”, cit., p. 13.

<sup>83</sup> *Ibidem*.

her work as deeply affected by her mental illness, as she fought with hallucinations since she was 10. This includes the creation of works such as her Infinity Nets, as well as her obsessive “accumulation” working style. The definition of “art-medicine” is, therefore, both because art allows her to gain control over her anxieties, and because the activity itself of creating art is healing<sup>84</sup>.

Some critics, however, have been sceptical of interpretations of Kusama’s works that are *too focused* on her so called “madness”. As explained by Borggreen, they may lead to constructing Kusama as a “suffering victim”, who has no control over her artistic production but is instead controlled by her childhood traumas or mental illness<sup>85</sup>. Yoshimoto, too, emphasises the limitations of a similar framework, which may lead to oversimplify interpretations of her work and to neglect other factors that contributed to the creation of her art<sup>86</sup>. Even in instances in which readers are warned against such interpretations, the fear of phalli and sex is always seen as part of the “illness”. Yoshimoto explicitly lists it as a part of the symptoms of her mental illness, alongside “obsessive-compulsive, hysteric, and narcissistic tendencies, hallucinations”<sup>87</sup>. Quoting Kusama herself:

My phobia of men and my obsessive fear of men became increasingly severe, resulting in my extreme fear of anything phallic. It reached the point where I was assaulted by countless phallic visions<sup>88</sup>.

Yoshimoto continues explaining how some psychoanalysts attribute one of the causes of this to the Electra complex, term that describes a girl who favours her love towards her father while unconsciously opposing her mother. The absence of Kusama’s father, however, led to an unfulfillment of this love, and a consequent hatred of male sexuality and a fear of the phallic form, which took shape in her (contradictory) obsession with those forms<sup>89</sup>.

To put this concept in other words, this fear is seen as a “repression”, a “problem to be solved”<sup>90</sup>, a reading justified and supported by compulsory (hetero)sexuality. The narrative of pathologisation and medicalisation is not new to the asexual discourse, as seen in previous chapters. It is not uncommon for an asexual person to encounter prejudices of not

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<sup>84</sup> ZELEVANSKY, “Driving Image...”, cit., pp. 14-15.

<sup>85</sup> BORGGREEN, “The myth of...”, cit., p. 15.

<sup>86</sup> YOSHIMOTO, *Into performance...*, cit., p. 45.

<sup>87</sup> YOSHIMOTO, *Into performance...*, cit., p. 47.

<sup>88</sup> *Ibidem*.

<sup>89</sup> YOSHIMOTO, *Into performance...*, cit., pp. 47-48.

<sup>90</sup> PRZYBYŁO, “Ace and aro lesbian art...”, cit., p. 106.

having fully developed their sexuality, or to be interrogated about past trauma and sexual abuse<sup>91</sup>. However, additional problems start to arise when people are actual victims of past trauma and sexual abuse. As explained by Cerankowski, for a long time the asexual community has propagated the distinction between abuse and asexuality because, in a context of sexual normativity, admitting that abuse is the cause of asexuality would mean admitting that it is a problem that can be fixed or cured. This, however, resulted in the dismissal of experiences of people who have been sexual abused or that have a trauma history. This connects to the idea of the “real asexual”, or, as Chen calls it, “gold-star ace” (explained in chapter 2.1), the living proof that there is no reason behind asexuality, that it is as “natural” as being sexual<sup>92</sup>. It becomes, therefore, of the uttermost importance to start embracing and recognising a wider spectrum of asexual existences: a person can be asexual if their sexual trauma caused their asexuality, because it is okay to have forms of desire or attraction that differ from the “norm”<sup>93</sup>.

Framing Kusama’s fear of phalli as part of her illness means, therefore, being complicit in spreading notions of compulsory sexuality and sexual essentialism: only rejecting them, Kusama’s strong aversion to sex can be differently understood as “sex-repulsion”, felt by a sub-category of asexual people who feel towards sex a feeling of disgust. Whether or not it was caused by her childhood experiences, it is not a relevant matter, as it does not cancel her asexual sex-repulsed tendencies<sup>94</sup>.

At this point, a clarification might be needed: applying an asexual framework to Kusama’s experience does not mean dismissing her own interpretation of it. Starting from the theoretical point of a negotiated vision of identity, it entails that Kusama made sense of her own experience through the tools she had at hand, and the validity of an asexual possibility, as intended in modern terms (being asexuality a very recent phenomenon, as demonstrated in chapter 1), had not yet emerged. The two interpretations, therefore, do (and should) coexist without contradicting themselves.

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<sup>91</sup> CERANKOWSKI, and MILKS, “New Orientations ...”, cit., p. 661.

<sup>92</sup> CHEN, *Ace: cosa ci rivela* ..., cit., p. 129.

<sup>93</sup> CHEN, *Ace: cosa ci rivela* ..., cit., pp. 134-135.

<sup>94</sup> PRZYBYŁO, “Ace and aro lesbian art...”, cit., p. 106.

### 3.3: Kusama's Experience with Sexual Relationships

Kusama's repulsion towards sex conditioned different aspects of her life, including how she felt about marriage and (romantic) relationships, seemingly distancing herself from a sexual (hetero)normative paradigm.

For example, there are multiple instances in her autobiography in which Kusama expresses her disinterest towards marriage; she recalls her mother encouraging her to marry a wealthy man (just like she did with her sister) and being very insistent about it. But Kusama had no interest in it whatsoever, desiring only to paint, and ending up turning down each candidate, no matter how rich or eligible they were<sup>95</sup>. In another section, while commenting on the "outdated morality" of Japanese women, she says:

Instead of waiting for marriage, being bound by what others thought of you and by an outdated morality, I believed, it was better to pack your bags and become who you really wanted, even if it meant begging for food or sleeping in the open air. Just like I did<sup>96</sup>.

She makes another interesting statement while recalling her first period in New York, when she had started creating her first nets. She says that, instead of being there, stuck in her studio, painting like her life depended on it, she "wanted to have fun, night after night, with one boy after another, all with different faces and skin colours, black, white, yellow, brown, the way that some of my friends did"<sup>97</sup>. It is, however, unclear how much this desire originates from an insurgent response against the prohibitory environment she had just escaped (her household), an attempt to emulate her (heteronormative?) friends, or a genuine interest of hers. What is clear, nevertheless, is that, even if people gave her their bedroom eyes, asking her to sleep with her (she says this referring particularly to her hippie friends and collaborators), she "never had sex with anyone"<sup>98</sup>.

Kusama recalls having had one meaningful relationship in her life, with the artist Joseph Cornell. The two met through her art dealer friend: Joseph Cornell was, in fact, an eccentric and reclusive artist, who only softened up at the vision of a beautiful young woman. Bringing Kusama alongside her, her friend hoped to convince him to sell her some of his otherwise unobtainable works. Since the moment Cornell met Kusama, he took a fancy to her: only a

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<sup>95</sup> KUSAMA, *Infinity net...*, cit., p. 48.

<sup>96</sup> KUSAMA, *Infinity net...*, cit., p. 88.

<sup>97</sup> KUSAMA, *Infinity net...*, cit., p. 19.

<sup>98</sup> KUSAMA, *Infinity net...*, cit., p. 69.

day after their first meeting, wanting to establish a relationship between the two of them, he started writing her an incredible amount of love poems, to the point that her mailbox overflowed with them. He also called her multiple times a day, keeping her on the phone for even five or six hours<sup>99</sup>. But, even if this habit of his of constantly calling her got to the point of damaging her reputation among art dealers (being her line always busy) and it was so restricting that it had become intolerable, “there was something powerfully appealing about him. And his art was simply fantastic”<sup>100</sup>. Kusama’s feelings for Cornell, developed over the course of the years, are indeed complex: on the one hand, she deeply wished to break off the relationship with him, since he was becoming a hindrance to her work as he insatiably took tremendous amounts of her time; on the other, she was incredibly fascinated by his artistic world, so beautiful that, just looking at it, it sent shivers down your spine, as she describes it. This was the reason why she could not bring herself to leave him, even though she wished to<sup>101</sup>.

Cornell, for his part, was not the easiest person to deal with, mostly due to his circumstances. He had what Kusama calls an incurable mother complex, which led him to immediately run to her mother the moment she called him, a situation that frequently happened while he and Kusama were together. His mother, in fact, harboured a passionate hatred for every woman who got close to her son, and Kusama was no exception. Cornell and Kusama often visited each other’s houses and, since he lived with his mother, it was inevitable for Kusama to see her, too. One time, when Kusama and Cornell were sitting on the lawn, kissing, his mother came up behind them and poured a bucket full of water over them, leaving them drenched from head to toe. Cornell’s immediate reaction was to “cling to his mother’s skirt and plead with her”, as Kusama describes it, begging her to forgive him for having a lover. But for Kusama, who was sitting next to him, soaked to the skin, he did not spare one word of apology. Another time, after Kusama had used the shower, his mother removed all the towels she had touched and boiled them in a big cauldron. Having lunch at his house, that day, meant for Kusama eating with the constant terror of his mother throwing boiling water on the food she was picking. In front of her mother, Cornell was always cringing and repenting. Even when drenched with water, he could only care about her mother scolding him, and whenever she told him to make her some tea, regardless of what he was doing, he would

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<sup>99</sup> KUSAMA, *Infinity net...*, cit., pp. 97-100.

<sup>100</sup> KUSAMA, *Infinity net...*, cit., p. 100.

<sup>101</sup> KUSAMA, *Infinity net...*, cit., pp. 102-103.

jump to his feet, off to the kitchen, without sparing Kusama a second glance. This relationship between a man of nearly sixty and his over eighty years old mother was, for Kusama, indeed bizarre. Even if Kusama confronted him about how this whole situation was hard for her to take, he begged to be forgiven, because as much as he loved Kusama, his mother was still everything to him<sup>102</sup>.

It was impossible for Cornell to have other lovers outside Kusama. As he had explained to her one day, all the women he had even been interested in had run away from him; Kusama was the only exception. She justifies it by saying that the average schoolgirl could not even begin to understand the mysterious world Cornell had created, the same one that, on the contrary, was irresistible for her, and that kept her tied to him as a person<sup>103</sup>.

Kusama describes their love as “platonic”, a pure and sacred kind of love. They never once had sex together. She remembers that once, sitting on the sofa in Cornell’s arms, he lifted her in his lap and put his hands around her neck, as if playing with a kitten, and began to squeeze. He was hurting her, and she could not stop trembling, thinking that he could have killed her. Suddenly, he let her go and rushed to the bathroom. Having he stayed there for a long time, Kusama started to worry that something had happened, maybe he had a heart attack, so she went to the bathroom to check on him and softly opened the door: she found him down on his knees, half naked and praying fervently to God to forgive him. Cornell was a devout Christian and had a tremendous sex complex, too. Ever since his childhood, his mother had constantly and harshly repeated to him that “women are filthy” and he should never touch them. Kusama attributes the reason behind his sexual impotence to his mother’s negative influence<sup>104</sup>.

When Cornell came back home after a prostate surgery, he seemed to have lost all his physical stamina. Even if he was not much over sixty-five years old, his appearance suggested he was about twenty years older. Probably feeling his life was coming to an end, he kept saying he wanted to make a “Yayoi Nude” box to wrap up his life, and constantly begged Kusama to send him some photos to use. But, at the time, she was too busy with

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<sup>102</sup> KUSAMA, *Infinity net*..., cit., pp. 100-101.

<sup>103</sup> KUSAMA, *Infinity net*..., cit., pp. 103-104.

<sup>104</sup> KUSAMA, *Infinity net*..., cit., p. 107.

her work, and he died before she could shoot some new ones (as she was not satisfied with the pictures she already had)<sup>105</sup>.

Observing how Kusama explains and frames their interactions, it seems that this relationship, at least for Kusama's part (being hers the only perspective here taken into consideration), is based not on the grounds of sexual attraction, but on something different. What kept her tied to Cornell was not him as a person (who she admittedly found rather annoying in his behaviours), but rather his artistic world, to the point that it seems legitimate to wonder if she was more interested in his art than in him personally. If seen from this perspective, what fuelled her special connection with Joseph Cornell was, again, her deep love for art (and his in particular).

Moreover, if read with a modern lens and through the instruments given by asexual studies, this kind of platonic relationship could be broadly assimilated to a QPR, or queerplatonic relationship (briefly mentioned in chapter 1.1.2). It is a concept originated in asexual and aromantic communities to define a non-sexual relationship that is, nonetheless, no less important than a sexual one. There is no fixed rule on what a similar kind of partnership entails: it may seem romantic to the people involved, but it may also not; some people's feelings about their queerplatonic partner are different from what they may feel towards a friend or a romantic partner; for others, a queerplatonic partnership is less about feelings and more about acknowledgement of each other's importance in a way that is rare for relationships that distance themselves from the normative sexual and romantic paradigm. The *queer* part of the term refers to the idea of *queering* and expanding the social border. The definition of QPR is, in other words, an attempt to give more variety to the possible roles that people can occupy in our lives<sup>106</sup>.

It is through an establishment of Kusama and Cornell's relationship as a platonic and non-sexual one, and through the framework of a queerplatonic partnership, that it emerges how Kusama distances herself from a normative model of sexual relationship, offering against it a valid alternative. Her stance regarding this normative model seems to be overall coherent with other statements found in her autobiography.

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<sup>105</sup> KUSAMA, *Infinity net...*, cit., pp. 107-108.

<sup>106</sup> CHEN, *Ace: cosa ci rivela ...*, cit., pp. 152-153.

In this chapter, a brief review of Kusama's life and main themes has been given. Furthermore, the artist's behaviour towards sex and romance has been presented. Her fear of phalli has been oftentimes interpreted as an illness which she tried to cope with through her art. Such framework, however, seems to be complicit in spreading notions of a "natural" sexuality, as well as in pathologising asexuality. Seeing Kusama's experience through an asexual lens opens multiple possibilities: one is the identification of her relationship with Cornell as an *ante litteram* queerplatonic partnership. Asexual resonances can also be found in her strong refusal to participate in the heteronormative paradigm of marriage. In the following chapter, these possibilities are further examined, this time addressing her artistic practices, since they are strictly connected to her as a person, as will be explained later.

## Chapter 4: Asexual Traces in Kusama Yayoi: Her Works

In the previous chapter it has been highlighted how deeply connected Kusama Yayoi's art and life are, or, to put it in Zelevansky's words, how "there is no consistently discernible boundary between her self and her art"<sup>1</sup>. In this chapter, this perspective is further explored. In particular, at the foundation of an asexual interpretation of her pieces, there's the shared vision that Kusama is very sensitive of her surroundings, as well as aware of how much her art and her life intertwine<sup>2</sup>. As demonstrated by her previously quoted writings, she herself highlights this connection in multiple instances. This conception, however, has also broader implications. As she explains in another essay:

Painting should be approached through reality, instead of simply intellectually or conceptually representing it. If one does not do so, it becomes impossible expressing today's human nature through paintings<sup>3</sup>.

Reality and the environment in which she was inserted in are therefore some sort of *conditio sine qua non*, without which the creation of her art would have not occurred. Various critics have highlighted this aspect of Kusama, showing how receptive she is to her environment, as well as her ability to understand in which direction art movements would have gone. This assumption is at the core of this analysis. In this thesis, I will discuss some of the works Kusama has produced during her stay in New York, from 1957 to 1973. The relation with the US environment of those years had numerous implications, and other studies have emphasised the relationship between Kusama and the New York art world, as well as the artist's contributions to the avant-garde scene. However, while looking for asexual resonances, another aspect becomes central and fundamental: the hypersexualisation that Kusama had to navigate through, as one of the consequences of being perceived as an Asian woman in a white (and male) dominated context.

The hypersexualisation of Asian women in the United States can be located at the "intersection of compulsory sexuality, racism, and sexism"<sup>4</sup>, and there is a long history of

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<sup>1</sup> ZELEVANSKY, "Driving Image...", cit., p. 12.

<sup>2</sup> ZELEVANSKY, "Driving Image...", cit., p. 24.

<sup>3</sup> Yayoi, KUSAMA, "L'appello del pittore: aprite gli occhi all'arte (estratto)", 1952, in Doryun, CHONG & Mika, YOSHITAKE (edited by), *Yayoi Kusama 1945-oggi*, tr. Isabella Polli, Milano, 24 Ore Cultura, 2024, p. 315.

<sup>4</sup> PRZYBYŁO, "Ace and aro lesbian art...", cit., p. 104.

framing Asian women as sexually available to white men<sup>5</sup>. As argued by Celine Parreñas Shimizu, “any Asian/American woman who must understand her identity and her possibilities must engage hypersexuality in representation”<sup>6</sup>. Kusama was no exception: in reviews of her works, even the positive one, she had been referred to as “a young Japanese” in 1961, “little Kusama” in 1964, and “a diminutive Japanese girl with long black hair, pretty enough to decorate any environment” in 1965<sup>7</sup>. This follows the description of what is called the “Exotic Asian Woman”, otherwise known as “China Doll” or “Madame Butterfly”. The construct of the “Asian Woman”, both visually and literally, presents women from Japan, China and Southeast Asia as a *unicum*, with dark long hair, delicate and fair skinned bodies that have come to signify sexual availability and an eagerness to please men, an exciting “difference” in comparison to WENA white women<sup>8</sup>. The image of the “Madame Butterfly” is still pervasive today as it was at the time and is grounded in biological determinism as well as in the social/racial hierarchies of the mid and late 19<sup>th</sup> century. Used interchangeably with the concept of the “China Doll”, it positions Asian women in the same place as dolls: they have a displaced humanity, do not think for themselves, and are perceived as mere passive objects to play with. Rendering Asian women as dolls, the white and male conqueror locates himself as the controller of the playroom, the subject of the dolls’ attentions and care<sup>9</sup>.

This discourse regarding Asian women is located in a much broader discourse on the fetishisation and commodification of female sexuality per se, embedded in a colonialist past. According to Iskander Mydin, the precursor of these constructions are the photographic exhibitions of native subjects, from various cultures, used to visually justify and reify 19<sup>th</sup> century theories such as biological determinism. According to this “ism”, physical attributes were indicative of a set of standardised moral, mental and psychological qualities<sup>10</sup>. The subjects were subtracted from their own humanity and fetishised, “transformed from living identities to allegorical, metaphorical and aesthetic ideas”<sup>11</sup>. World Trade exhibitions, a form of ethnic display with commercial and anthropological intents, lasted from 1851 until 1939:

<sup>5</sup> PRZYBYŁO, “Ace and aro lesbian art...”, cit., pp. 104-105.

<sup>6</sup> Celine Parreñas, SHIMIZU, *The Hypersexuality of Race: Performing Asian/American Women on Screen and Scene*, Durham, Duke University Press, 2007, p. 16. <https://doi.org/10.2307/j.ctv11319vx>. 22 June 2026.

<sup>7</sup> ZELEVANSKY, “Driving Image...”, cit., pp. 23-24.

<sup>8</sup> Sandra, LYNE, “Consuming Madame Chrysanthème: Loti’s ‘dolls’ to Shanghai Baby”, *Intersections: Gender, History and Culture in the Asian Context*, 8, 2002, pp. 2-3. [10.25911/1Q9R-7E36](https://doi.org/10.25911/1Q9R-7E36). 22 June 2026.

<sup>9</sup> LYNE, “Consuming Madame Chrysanthème...”, cit., pp. 7-8.

<sup>10</sup> LYNE, “Consuming Madame Chrysanthème...”, cit., pp. 3-5.

<sup>11</sup> LYNE, “Consuming Madame Chrysanthème...”, cit., p. 5.

WENA exhibited what they considered primitive, exotic or child-like races as if they were curiosities, endorsing the advanced technological status of their own cultures<sup>12</sup>.

The problems with the concept of the “Exotic Asian Woman” are numerous: apart from the reification and the hypersexualisation of the subjects, there are more hidden and subtle nuances that are not always noted. The simple presentation of those “marks of difference”, in fact, could potentially become problematic. As reported by Ben-Ami in his study of stereotypical images of Japan in WENA media, what is problematic is not the celebration of the difference per se, since this concept itself is neutral. However, “the implicit assumption that these differences reflect the innate characteristics of different peoples”<sup>13</sup> is no less than a contemporary inscription of biological determinism. He claims that such celebration of difference has been discussed in terms of “culture” since Ruth Benedict, instead of “race”: while apparently different, upon closer analysis, it becomes evident that, even though the external shell has changed, the internal substance and conception has been left untouched<sup>14</sup>.

Accepting as a given that “every artwork is mediated by the social conditions under which it is made”<sup>15</sup>, the US context that Kusama had to confront with, will in these aspects be taken into consideration.

The following sections explore and analyse different types of works produced by Kusama. While Kusama’s period in New York has been very productive, the works chosen are the ones most relevant to an asexual analysis, and in which the asexual resonances appear stronger. However, the aim is to offer a reading key for observing and interpreting more of her works, allowing the resonances to reverberate through her production.

## **4.1: A World of Phalli: Three-dimensional Sculptures and Spaces**

### **4.1.1: Accumulation Sculptures**

In 1961, Kusama began to create her Accumulation and Compulsion pieces, using objects found in the streets and covering them with a dense field of lumpy protuberances, small

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<sup>12</sup> *Ibidem*.

<sup>13</sup> LYNE, “Consuming Madame Chrysanthème...”, cit., p. 6.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibidem*.

<sup>15</sup> ZELEVANSKY, “Driving Image...”, cit., p. 13.

cloth sacks filled with cotton batting. There were no limits to the objects that she could use: an armchair, a sofa, a ladder, even baby carriages and shoes. However, the choice of the object was not random. Typically, she chose objects that resonated with her private life (often from women's domestic sphere, close to her personal experience as a woman)<sup>16</sup>. Similarly to what she did with her Infinity Nets, she worked manically on these pieces, obliterating herself in her creation<sup>17</sup>, an exhaustive condition that she described as like "being carried on a conveyor belt without ending to my death"<sup>18</sup>. Kusama grouped her Accumulation sculptures into categories, such as Sex-Obsession, Food-Obsession, and Compulsion Furniture. Jo Applin defines these sculptures as "harbingers of a consumerist fantasy turned nightmare"<sup>19</sup>, a demonstration of how the objects we consume, in turn consume us<sup>20</sup>. Zelevansky, however, goes beyond seeing these works as comments on mass culture, proposing a more individual reading of them, according to which Kusama was engaging the world of objects as she perceived it, in a distorted and parodic manner. With her Accumulations, Kusama reportedly explores and makes more visible her underlying psychological issues. Zelevansky interprets Kusama's phalli through the Freudian-based theory of the fetish. The fetish is described as an object used in a ritualistic way to ward off anxiety: the repetitive and intensive work that the artist does while creating her art can be seen, in this perspective, as the fetish that assuage the anxieties induced by Kusama's hallucinations<sup>21</sup>. As the critic explains, "the fetishistic reiteration of phallic forms in her sculpture simultaneously reifies and combats her fears of sexuality"<sup>22</sup>. This underlying concept is similar to that behind the artist's Infinity Nets, with the difference that, in her phallic Accumulations, the phallic protrusions represent the actual penis, in this sense differing from the Freudian's interpretation of the fetish, in which the object endowed with meaning is a mere symbol, hiding the actual source of anxiety. However, Kusama does not simply reenact her visions or express her fears: she exposes the mechanism of fetishism in a wholly conscious way while at the same time exhibiting fetishistic practices. Referring to "Traveling Life" (Figure 12), or to her Accumulation of shoes filled with protuberances (Figure 13), according to Zelevansky, Kusama highlights the cliché of male fetishism and fantasy,

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<sup>16</sup> YOSHIMOTO, *Into performance...*, cit., p. 57.

<sup>17</sup> Mignon, NIXON, "Posing the Phallus", *October*, 92, 2000, p. 112. JSTOR, <https://doi.org/10.2307/779235>. 22 June 2026.

<sup>18</sup> NIXON, "Posing the Phallus", cit., p. 113.

<sup>19</sup> APPLIN, *Yayoi Kusama...*, cit., p. 10.

<sup>20</sup> *Ibidem*.

<sup>21</sup> ZELEVANSKY, "Driving Image...", cit., pp. 17-18.

<sup>22</sup> ZELEVANSKY, "Driving Image...", cit., p. 18.

represented by high-heeled shoes<sup>23</sup>. Kusama's contemporary critic Gordon Brown interprets "Traveling Life" as a symbolic representation of womanhood menaced by men<sup>24</sup>. It could also be seen as Kusama's reaction to a male dominated New York art world: surrounded, threatened, almost overtaken by men while she attempted to fight her way to its top<sup>25</sup>.



Figure 12: *Traveling Life*, Sewn stuffed fabric, women's shoes, wooden stepladder, The National Museum of Modern Art, Kyoto, 1964



Figure 13: *Untitled Accumulation*, Sewn stuffed fabric, ten pairs of women's shoes, paint, Anzai Art Office Inc., 1963

Nixon, on the other hand, proposes an interpretation of the phallus as part-object: a parody of the phallus, that, made literal, might be turned into an explicitly counter-patriarchal object<sup>26</sup>. The strategy was to "critique phallocentrism by compounding it"<sup>27</sup>, to parody the phallic symbol by reiterating it compulsively, with the effect that the phallus ends up being lost: the phallus as a singular and distinct entity vanishes in its proliferation and its image is dispersed in the multiplicity of its repetitions<sup>28</sup>.

Several critics have applied feminist interpretations to Kusama's phallic Accumulations, seeing her works as a display of a consistent and conscious criticism to a male-dominated art world, and, more generally, society. Another one of these critics, other than the above-

<sup>23</sup> *Ibidem*.

<sup>24</sup> YOSHIMOTO, *Into performance...*, cit., p. 58.

<sup>25</sup> ZELEVANSKY, "Driving Image...", cit., p. 25.

<sup>26</sup> NIXON, "Posing the Phallus", cit., p. 98.

<sup>27</sup> NIXON, "Posing the Phallus", cit., p. 113.

<sup>28</sup> NIXON, "Posing the Phallus", cit., pp. 113-114.

mentioned ones, is Alexandra Munroe: in her vision, that recalls the interpretation of Kusama as a “mad” (here intended in the double sense of both “crazy” and “angry”) artist, Kusama’s repetition of the phallus shape is an expression of anger, outrage against social values and gender stereotypes. Correspondingly, the art critic Colette Cattopadhyay, too, inserts Kusama in a feminist framework, identifying her mental illness as a protest against patriarchal dominance<sup>29</sup>.

Kusama takes a step further with her Compulsion Furniture: by 1965, she had started adding more colour into her sculptures using dotted and striped fabrics. Around this time, she started working with store mannequins, too, covering them with stuffed phalli (as well as polka dots or macaroni), and placing them in colourful mock domestic environments, reportedly linking sexuality and rampant gluttony. While it was left unmentioned by the critics of the period, the contemporary feminist critic notices how these works explore and satirise the construction of feminine identities<sup>30</sup>. As Zelevansky comments:

Filled with such paraphernalia as vanities, clothing, and hairbrushes, installations like *Yayoi Kusama: Driving Image Show* recall nothing so much as off-kilter dollhouses for life size Barbies [...]. These environments are like blown-up, skewed versions of the domestic tableaux frequently created by little girls<sup>31</sup>.

The environments created by Kusama using her Accumulation and Compulsion pieces mirror those doll-made children’s constructions, training grounds for adult life, in which girls can engage with female role models prevalent in their culture at large<sup>32</sup>. At the same time, the traditional realm of domesticity is taken and turned inside out: is it precisely her violent attack that is interpreted as a powerful mark of resistance, a dismantling of the accepted codes of behaviour and concepts of privacy and interiority<sup>33</sup>. It is the possession and the control over thousands of penises that represents, according to Munroe, the freedom from the subjugation and the dependency, as well as the will to dominate back<sup>34</sup>.

It is precisely this feminist reading of Kusama that becomes the starting point of an asexual one. In fact, the idea of dropping out of phallocentric sex (and society, as well) is a theme

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<sup>29</sup> BORGREEN, “The myth of the mad artist...”, cit., p. 14.

<sup>30</sup> ZELEVANSKY, “Driving Image...”, cit., p. 19.

<sup>31</sup> *Ibidem*.

<sup>32</sup> *Ibidem*.

<sup>33</sup> APPLIN, *Yayoi Kusama...*, cit., p. 40.

<sup>34</sup> YOSHIMOTO, *Into performance...*, cit., p. 58.

common to both feminism and asexuality. The connection of these two perspectives is also suggested by Cerankowski and Milks, who bring forward a possible theorisation of asexuality as feminist<sup>35</sup>. They are indeed not the only ones sharing such a vision: the same concept of sexusociety/compulsory sexuality is based on Adrienne Rich's lesbian theory (as mentioned in chapter 1.1.1). When explaining the functioning of sexusociety, Przybyło explains how it is a conglomerate of repeated sexual language, or, in her words, an "obsessive repetition of sexual deeds, desires, thoughts"<sup>36</sup>. Following this definition, Kusama's phallic Accumulation pieces, could, therefore, be interpreted as a visual representation of that same sexusociety: constantly repeated sexual deeds, symbolised by the manically reiterated phalli, deeply permeating society, and therefore covering even the more mundane, everyday objects (armchairs, ladders, sofas, even clothes). The same work presented before, "Traveling Life", could, in this sense, be seen as representing the asexual struggle of having to navigate through a sexual world, with the asexual person attempting to pave their way towards the top, which could be internal or external acceptance, or even political recognition. This image also recalls the concept expressed by Chasin, when she said that asexual people are trying to find ways to make sense as asexual subjects<sup>37</sup>, in this case metaphorically represented by climbing a ladder.

According to Przybyło, "sexusociety is everywhere, it is within us, *it is us*"<sup>38</sup> (italic is mine). The idea of sexusociety being inside every person could be visually expressed by Kusama's "Phallic Girl" (Figure 14): a mannequin (an anonymous person, potentially everyone), from which stem thousands of phallic protuberances, representing the "dispersed, scattered, incoherent, but nonetheless organised"<sup>39</sup> discourses reiterating the sexual imperative. The theme of the body is also connected to the Butlerian body, of a "doer" that does not just stand for the individual body, as expressed by the anthropologist Mary Douglas, but is a stand-in symbol for the body politic, or, in other words, a symbol of society<sup>40</sup>.

In the same way, covering clothes with phalli (see Figure 15), could be seen as a representation of the performative aspect of sexuality. Clothes, made to be worn, are used by people to cover themselves. In the same way, an asexual person may feel pressured to

<sup>35</sup> CERANKOWSKI, and MILKS, "New Orientations ...", cit., p. 658.

<sup>36</sup> PRZYBYŁO, "Crisis and safety...", cit., p. 448.

<sup>37</sup> CHASIN, "Making Sense...", cit., p. 177.

<sup>38</sup> PRZYBYŁO, "Crisis and safety...", cit., p. 446.

<sup>39</sup> *Ibidem*.

<sup>40</sup> PRZYBYŁO, "Crisis and safety...", cit., p. 447.

be sexual, to “establish themselves as sexual subjects”<sup>41</sup>, as expressed by Gupta, in order to be “normal” (the performativity of sexuality will be discussed more in depth in chapter 4.2).

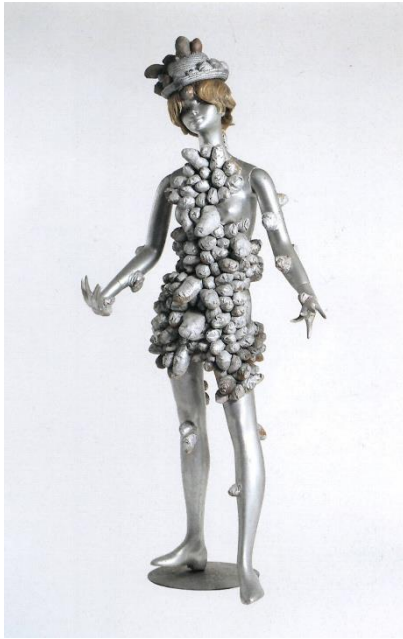


Figure 14: *Phallic Girl*, Sewn stuffed fabric on mannequin, paint, wig. MOMA Contemporary Collection Co. Ltd., 1967



Figure 15: *Suit*, Sewn stuffed fabric, jacket, skirt, clotheshanger, paint, Collection of Richard Castellane; courtesy D'Amelio Terras Gallery, New York, 1962

An asexual reading of Kusama's Accumulation and Compulsion pieces, therefore, may consider those works as representations and expressions of sexusociety/compulsory sexuality, delineated in different nuances according to the individual piece. The hypersexualisation that Kusama underwent in her New York years can be seen as a contributing factor towards the choice of the phalli as a theme for her creations, too.

#### 4.1.2: Installations: “Aggregation: One Thousand Boats Show” and “Infinity Mirror Room – Phalli’s Field”

The installation “Aggregation: One Thousand Boats Show” is an expansion, according to the critics, of Kusama's preoccupation with the idea of infinity. She produced a poster of a boat covered with phallic protrusions on a dark background and papered the walls with 999 copies of it. A narrow hallway led to a larger room where the boat was spotlighted, creating a situation in which the viewers were inundated with the image of the boat before seeing the object itself. The sculpture, known and anticipated before it was seen, was the original amid all the reproductions surrounding it<sup>42</sup>. The critic Jill Johnston connects this infinite expansion

<sup>41</sup> GUPTA, “Compulsory sexuality...”, cit., p. 142.

<sup>42</sup> ZELEVANSKY, “Driving Image...”, cit., p. 25.

of the image to the same feeling of indefinite reiteration that Kusama portrays in the assemblage itself. The combination of both the real image (already an accumulation per se) and the accumulation of photographs creates a “double-accumulative” art of powerful and repetitive insistence<sup>43</sup>.

Both Johnston and Oldenburg point out that what is central to Kusama’s art, the topic of it, was not the object, but the thing that was *on* the object, meaning the phallic form, as well as its repetition<sup>44</sup>. Similarly to what can be said regarding the Accumulation pieces, an asexual interpretation of this environment starts from the reiteration of sexual symbols, which surround us in our everyday life. The journalist Rachel Hills calls it “the sex myth” in her same-titled book. It is an extension of compulsory sexuality, which includes the idea that sex is everywhere, and that we are saturated in it, from song lyrics to television shows and commercials<sup>45</sup>. Similarly to what happens in the installation, images of sex (of the “right” sex) are presented to us before we experiment the real thing, leading us to already have a pre-conception of it. In a sense, because of this repetitiveness and reiteration of sexuality, people encounter the idea of sexuality before sexuality itself.

“Aggregation: One Thousand Boats Show”, through an asexual lens, could not only be seen as conveying a meaning similar to Kusama’s Accumulations, but it could also add one further layer to it: sex is not only reiterated, but it is also commodified. In the installation, the “real thing”, meaning the boat, is reposed multiple times through a printed picture of it, losing its unicity and becoming a commercial good. Sex, too, has become a commodified good, something that sells and attracts people in a post-industrial, consumer-oriented capitalist system<sup>46</sup>.

Another work that deals with the themes of phalli and infinity is Kusama’s “Infinity Mirror Room – Phalli’s Field”. However, these two topics are taken a step further, also due to the use of mirrors. As pointed out by Alexandra Munroe, Kusama produces for the viewers “a series of dizzying, hallucinatory encounters”<sup>47</sup>. Kusama’s explanation for this field of phalli is put in her fear of sex (explained in chapter 3.2), and in her desire to suppress the fear by reproducing precisely the things that terrify her. “Infinity Mirror Room - Phalli’s Field”, offers,

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<sup>43</sup> YOSHIMOTO, *Into performance...*, cit., p. 56.

<sup>44</sup> YOSHIMOTO, *Into performance...*, cit., p. 57.

<sup>45</sup> CHEN, *Ace: cosa ci rivela ...*, cit., p. 56.

<sup>46</sup> GUPTA, “Compulsory sexuality...”, cit., p. 138.

<sup>47</sup> APPLIN, *Yayoi Kusama...*, cit., p. 2.

in this sense, a “three-dimensional version” of her Infinity Nets, where the hallucinatory aspect is rendered literal and material by the painted dots. The process of Kusama’s self-obliteration can be linked to what the surrealist writer Roger Chillois describes as “psychological and physiological process of mimetic blurring with one’s environment”<sup>48</sup>, in his 1935 essay “Mimicry and Legendary Psychasthenia”<sup>49</sup>.

Kusama’s psychological description of her works has influenced the critic’s interpretation of her pieces (including this installation) since the 1960s, with the result that by mid-decade, almost all its critical readings followed this interpretation. In recent years, however, critics have started to reconsider Kusama’s works as something more than the output of a mentally ill subject, addressing the wider cultural and psychological context, in which both the art object and the viewer are located<sup>50</sup>. Applin, for example, suggested a reading of the installation as inserted in the cultural and artistic milieu in which she was working, such as Zero and Nul Groups in Europe, with which she had contacts, as well as connected to the renegotiation of the representation of the body and to deflating the power of the phallic form through the subversive notion of play. On this topic, D. W. Winnicott wrote the article “Playing: A Theoretical Statement” in 1967. In his vision, imaginative play is essential to the young infant to communicate without words, as well as foundational to the psychological development of adult subjects<sup>51</sup>. It takes place in a “potential space”, which is “a cultural and psychological environment in which the young infant learns how to act and how to be in the world”<sup>52</sup>. The objects used to play in this space can be considered “transitional objects”, through which the child learns how to mediate their relationship with the world. The “potential space” is a safe environment in which the infant can play with the boundaries of the self and learn how to mediate and understand their position as a subject. Winnicott’s analysis of the notion of play, defined as “a basic form of living”, provides, according to Applin, a productive framework through which interpreting “Infinity Mirror Room – Phalli’s Field”<sup>53</sup>, which, in his words, is:

a “potential space” of creative play, providing all subjects – not just children – an arena in which to encounter the world and its objects, where the usual boundaries between what

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<sup>48</sup> APPLIN, *Yayoi Kusama...*, cit., p. 5.

<sup>49</sup> APPLIN, *Yayoi Kusama...*, cit., pp. 5-7.

<sup>50</sup> APPLIN, *Yayoi Kusama...*, cit., p. 20.

<sup>51</sup> APPLIN, *Yayoi Kusama...*, cit., p. 29.

<sup>52</sup> *Ibidem*.

<sup>53</sup> APPLIN, *Yayoi Kusama...*, cit., pp. 29-30.

is real and what is not (those reflections, those repetitions) are momentarily relaxed in a freeing manner<sup>54</sup>.

Kusama, through her installation, offers other ways of thinking and encountering not only the work of art, but also the world in which both the objects and the subjects (meaning, the visitors that enter the Mirror Room) live. Interpreting Kusama's environment simply through its psychological charge is, in Applin's vision, limiting, as such space is not just the articulation of the artist's inner world, but, more broadly, an engagement with the world, and with the relations occurring within it<sup>55</sup>. This interpretation offers a vision of Kusama's art as having an inclusive as well as dialogical intent. This concept is also expressed by Tatehata Akira, director of Tokyo's Yayoi Kusama Museum, who interprets Kusama's notion of "obsession" as something that can lay the foundations for dialogue and mutual communication. He goes as far as saying that the fundamental intent of Kusama's artistic practice lies in her aesthetic desire for communication<sup>56</sup>.

In the discombobulating scenario that is "Infinity Mirror Room – Phalli's Field", the subject is placed under scrutiny by the surrounding mirrored walls, and those phallic forms are not "outside" or adjacent to the work of art but become even more invasive. There is no distance between the subject and the object: the subject enters what Rosenberg defines as an "arena" and is given the space and the means to take part in it. According to this interpretation, Kusama demands for collective participation, for a dialogue not only with the object but also within the subject themselves<sup>57</sup>.

Psychological and physical frictions abound in the rifts between human beings and the enigmatic, civilised jungle they inhabit. I am deeply interested in trying to understand the relationship between people, society and nature; and my work is forged from accumulations of these frictions<sup>58</sup>.

Kusama's words, combined with Applin's interpretation of "Infinity Mirror Room – Phalli's Field" as a "potential space" ask us to put ourselves and our singularity inside the phalli's

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<sup>54</sup> APPLIN, *Yayoi Kusama...*, cit., p. 30.

<sup>55</sup> APPLIN, *Yayoi Kusama...*, cit., p. 15.

<sup>56</sup> Doryun, CHONG, Mami, KATAOKA, Frances, MORRIS, Suhanya, RAFFEL, Isabella, TAM, Akira, TATEHATA, Gong, YAN, & Mika, YOSHITAKE, "Tavola Rotonda. Le mostre di Yayoi Kusama", in Doryun, CHONG & Mika, YOSHITAKE, (edited by), *Yayoi Kusama 1945-oggi*, tr. Isabella Polli, Milano, 24 Ore Cultura, 2024, p. 306.

<sup>57</sup> APPLIN, *Yayoi Kusama...*, cit., pp. 78-79.

<sup>58</sup> "Miss Yayoi Kusama...", cit., p. 332.

field, and to play, experiment with new modes of being and living<sup>59</sup>. Considering the subject as an asexual one, the “potential space” can become a way of interacting with the sexual world, represented by the field of phalli, as well as experiencing it in a safe environment. It can be a place in which the asexual subjectivity can connect with the sexual in a dialogical way, and, more broadly, understanding how to deal with compulsory sexuality in a protected space.

If watched through an asexual perspective, therefore, Kusama’s “Aggregation: One Thousand Boats Show” and “Infinity Mirror Room – Phalli’s Field” can become the starting point for a reflection on how (compulsory) sexuality impacts our lives and our subjectivities.

## **4.2: Playing with the Sexual and Performing the Self: Photographs and “Walking Piece”**

Kusama made use of photography as a medium in her transition from environments to performance. Even though, around mid-1960s, she started using photographs for promotional purposes, Yoshimoto argues that her self-presentation was too elaborate and constructed to have a mere commercial purpose. In fact, Kusama looked for and hired renowned photographers of the time, in order to document performances in her studio and in galleries. She also frequently asked to be photographed alongside her works, and art historian Tomii Reiko claims that this activity should be considered as part of her “total art”. Kusama seems to have always been conscious of how to present herself<sup>60</sup>, as well as aware of how her gender might influence the reception of her works<sup>61</sup>.

One relevant example is her 1966 performance work “Walking Piece” (Figure 16): Kusama wore a pale pink kimono and, carrying a small and decorate parasol, she documented herself walking around Manhattan<sup>62</sup>. Mimicking an actress in a movie, the artist posed with various emotional expressions: ambition, anxiety, melancholy, sorrow and fear. These pictures, taken by the Japanese photographer Hosoe Eikoh, highlighted her Asian identity and her “otherness” in the US society. Conscious of being seen as an outsider, Kusama, as explained by Yoshimoto, made advantage of this situation and made herself stand out even more to attract attention. A similar awareness and desire seem to be present also during the

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<sup>59</sup> APPLIN, *Yayoi Kusama...*, cit., p. 80.

<sup>60</sup> YOSHIMOTO, *Into performance...*, cit., pp. 62-64.

<sup>61</sup> APPLIN, *Yayoi Kusama...*, cit., p. 37.

<sup>62</sup> APPLIN, *Yayoi Kusama...*, cit., p. 67.

Venice Biennale of the same year, where she emphasised her “otherness” as a Japanese woman, wearing a gold kimono, a flower-patterned *obi* (sash), as well as long straight hair<sup>63</sup>.



Figure 16: *Walking Piece*, 1966. Photographs by Hosoe Eikoh

During the years Kusama spent in New York, she frequently commissioned pictures depicting her artworks, often including herself as well<sup>64</sup>. Her depiction behind “Aggregation: One Thousand Boats Show” (Figure 17) was the first picture in which she presented herself as a nude, resembling more a model than the typical artist<sup>65</sup>. The photograph was taken by Rudy Burckhardt, who reports that she told him exactly how to compose the picture. For this reason, it cannot be simply defined as self-portraiture, since there is also a component of performance for the camera<sup>66</sup>. Kusama is posing with her back to the viewer, and, while the boat is in the foreground in comparison to her, the oars of the boat are angled towards her, directing in this way the viewer’s attention to the artist. Her tilted posture, too, is not a random choice: it is a reminder of the typical posture in which a Japanese woman was usually represented. Japanese artists, in fact, seemingly preferred the back position of a model, with

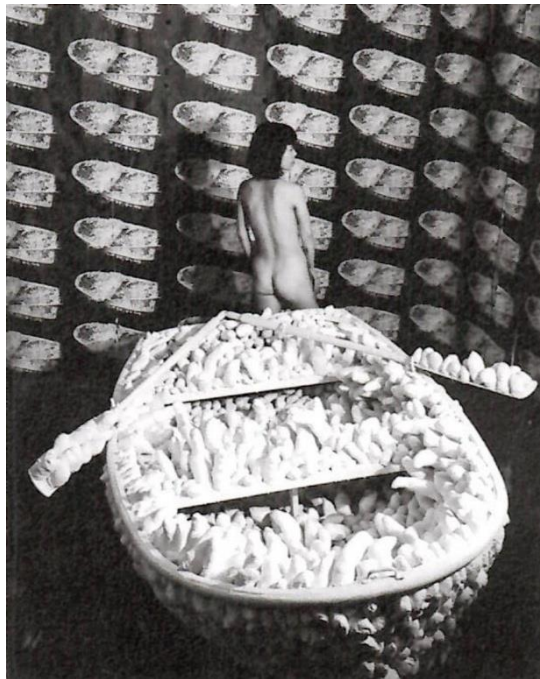
<sup>63</sup> YOSHIMOTO, *Into performance...*, cit., pp. 69-70.

<sup>64</sup> ZELEVANSKY, “Driving Image...”, cit., p. 20.

<sup>65</sup> YOSHIMOTO, *Into performance...*, cit., pp. 63-64.

<sup>66</sup> ZELEVANSKY, “Driving Image...”, cit., p. 20.

the head turned forward, in the conviction that it would have had a more seducing and hidden erotic effect on the viewer<sup>67</sup>.



*Figure 17: Kusama posing in "Aggregation: One Thousand Boats Show", Gertrude Stein Gallery, New York, 1963.  
Photograph by Rudolph Burckhardt*

Kusama also played with the theme of sexualisation in some of her pictures. For example, in a picture taken by Hal Reiff in the mid-1960s (Figure 18), Kusama presents herself in a pose generally associated with old-fashioned pinups, that entices with the promise of available sex. Her body covered only with polka dots, she lies on her stomach atop "Accumulation No. 2", with her knee bent and her feet, in high heels, crossed. She looks at the viewer, resting her face in her hand. Her long hair, flowing down her back, along with her black eyeliner, seems to recall the seductress Cleopatra, at the time recently played in Hollywood by Elizabeth Taylor<sup>68</sup>. In another photograph taken by Hosoe in 1965 inside "Infinity Mirror Room – Phalli's Field", she emphasises the sexual aspect of her presence within a field of "groping protuberances" (Figure 19). She lies on her arched back, head tilted back and looking at the camera, and legs outstretched in what is considered the classic sex-

<sup>67</sup> YOSHIMOTO, *Into performance...*, cit., p. 64.

<sup>68</sup> ZELEVANSKY, "Driving Image...", cit., p. 20.

kitten pose. She might be thought, explains Applin, to “burlesque” the phallus, to assert control over the room’s phallic visual regime<sup>69</sup>.

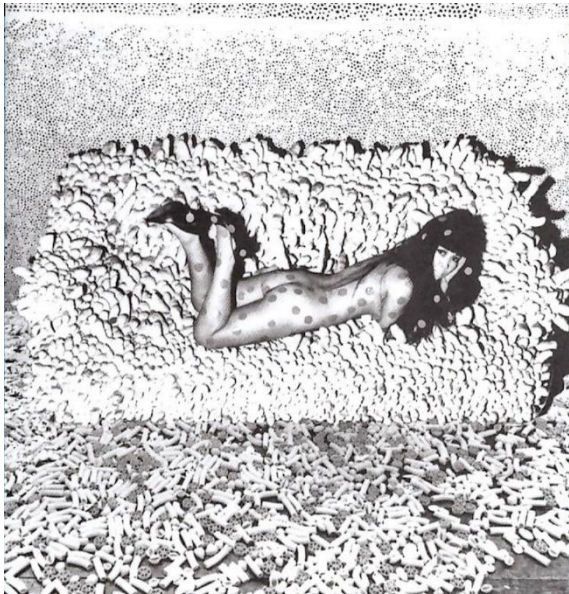


Figure 18: Collage with photograph by Hal Reiff of Kusama reclining on *Accumulation No. 2*, 1966



Figure 19: Kusama lying on a soft sculpture section of her artwork, *Infinity Mirror Room - Phalli's Field*, 1965. Photograph by Eikoh Hosoe

According to Yoshimoto, Kusama’s daring postures revealed her gradually gained confidence inside the New York context, as well as her assimilation of how women in WENA countries posed in pinup photographs. Asserting control over the creative process and the construction of the pictures, Kusama subverted the fact that it was usually the male photographer that imposed the posture he wanted on the model<sup>70</sup>.

Kusama was known to be always searching for a way to achieve recognition, and probably those pictures, at the time, were mostly understood as a strategy to gain publicity. Intentionally sexually provocative, Kusama’s nudity, however, was reserved for the camera that captured her photographs. The artist remains in control of the picture, being available to vision but not to touch, promising, but at the same time not delivering<sup>71</sup>. Her enactment of the stereotypical representation of femininity is a “masquerade”, a performance of femininity that, as pointed out by feminist film theorist Mary Anne Doane, “holds it at a distance”<sup>72</sup>. She

<sup>69</sup> APPLIN, *Yayoi Kusama...*, cit., p. 14.

<sup>70</sup> YOSHIMOTO, *Into performance...*, cit., p. 63.

<sup>71</sup> ZELEVANSKY, “Driving Image...”, cit., pp. 20-22.

<sup>72</sup> ZELEVANSKY, “Driving Image...”, cit., p. 23.

explains that the power of the masquerade, for women, lies precisely in the possibility to manufacture a distance from the image itself, “to generate a problematic within which the image is manipulable, producible, and readable by [men]”<sup>73</sup>. Kusama, according to Zelevansky, becomes, through these pictures, a femme fatale, Freud’s narcissistic woman, very beautiful but at the same time very selfish, who causes great dissatisfaction in her lover. Kusama, having grasped the concept of the masquerade hiding behind the models of the pinup and the femme fatale, uses these modes of depiction to her favour, acquiring power in one of the few forms that was available to her. Aware of the gender and cultural biases imposed upon her, she presented herself as she was expected to be seen<sup>74</sup>.

The concept of performativity of sexuality can be found not only in the feminist discourse, but also in the asexual one. Asexual people, too, may feel the need to perform a certain (sexual) role, to fulfil the (often racial, but not exclusively) expectation regarding themselves. Vesper, Black ace blogger who lives in Japan (mentioned in chapter 1.2), explains how they absorbed the idea that Black people should be extremely sexual, with the result that they do not always feel comfortable with their asexuality. Since there is this bias of what a Black person “should be”, distancing themselves from this stereotype can be hard<sup>75</sup>. At the same time, also the opposite stereotype can be harming: Sebastian, a Chinese Canadian model, genderqueer and socialised as female, had trouble escaping the stereotype of the “well-behaved Asian woman”, with little desire and thought of her own. For this reason, accepting their asexual identity felt like confirming racist stereotypes, and therefore doing a “disservice” to Asian people<sup>76</sup>. While asexual people’s experiences vary deeply, and being an asexual person of colour does not necessarily mean being uncomfortable with asexuality, it may be a contributing factor to a feeling of discomfort, as well as a pressure to perform sexuality to connect with others and, sometimes, gain access to formative friendships and respect<sup>77</sup>.

Kusama’s manipulation of cultural and sexual stereotypes helps unveiling sexuality as a tool of domination, used, as explained by Chen, “by men against women, by white people against people of colour, by the abled against the disabled, or [...] by the powerful against the less powerful”<sup>78</sup>. Dominant images can be easily internalised by people from minority groups and

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<sup>73</sup> *Ibidem*.

<sup>74</sup> *Ibidem*.

<sup>75</sup> CHEN, *Ace: cosa ci rivela* ..., cit., p. 106.

<sup>76</sup> CHEN, *Ace: cosa ci rivela* ..., cit., p. 98.

<sup>77</sup> CHEN, *Ace: cosa ci rivela* ..., cit., p. 59.

<sup>78</sup> CHEN, *Ace: cosa ci rivela* ..., cit., p. 96.

proliferate in many ways<sup>79</sup>: being Asian in a white dominated context brought on Kusama a different layer of awareness, leading to the internalisation of what it means to be Asian in the United States, which is a product of the white gaze<sup>80</sup>. Given Kusama's aversion to sex, she might have felt necessary to partially indulge the hypersexual stereotype surrounding her and play with it.

Through an asexual gaze, Kusama's photographs remind once again of the concept of compulsory sexuality, and reveal the underlying connection between race, gender, and sexuality, as well as how much biases and stereotypes can impact the life of (asexual) individuals.

### 4.3: Free Love and Sexual Revolution: Kusama's Happenings

With her Happenings, Kusama had become a "priestess of sexual liberation"<sup>81</sup>. At the core of Kusama's conception of her Happenings and her sexual revolution, there was the idea that suppressing sex had negative consequences on people, even pushing them to war. Through her nude performances, Kusama's intent was to free people from the iron heel of abstinence<sup>82</sup>. As she wrote in the press release of her Happening Homosexual Wedding:

Love can now be free, but for it to be completely free it must be liberated from all sexual frustrations imposed by society. [...] Once sexual frustration has been removed, there will be no more overemphasis on sex and the artist will be free to channel his creative energy into true art<sup>83</sup>.

She believed, as she explains in her autobiography, that free sex was "about confirming the existence of others and forming a connection through the most human of behaviours"<sup>84</sup>: it was, in her view, a tool that could annihilate power distinction and bring everyone, regardless

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<sup>79</sup> CHEN, *Ace: cosa ci rivela* ..., cit., p. 106.

<sup>80</sup> CHEN, *Ace: cosa ci rivela* ..., cit., p. 99.

<sup>81</sup> YOSHIMOTO, *Into performance*..., cit., p. 75.

<sup>82</sup> KUSAMA, *Infinity net*..., cit., p. 83.

<sup>83</sup> Yayoi, KUSAMA, Press release of the happening "Homosexual Wedding", 1968.

<sup>84</sup> KUSAMA, *Infinity net*..., cit., p. 92.

of their skin colour, on the same level. If people made love with one another, they would not need to fight wars<sup>85</sup>. For herself, however, Kusama had cut out a specific part in her project:

My role was to nudge all these people towards a sexual revolution by supplying a space and opportunity for them to enjoy free sex. In enabling these encounters, I acted rather as a producer and director<sup>86</sup>.

As the artist recalls, during her “Kusama Happenings” she incited man and women to strip off their clothes and having their naked body painted. However, she herself was never a participant, limiting herself to be the creator and the choreographer of the act. Some journalists began to call her the “Queen of Hippies”, and to assume that she would have slept with anybody and everybody<sup>87</sup>. Kusama, however, explicitly says that she was not interested in lesbianism, or “in any kind of sex”<sup>88</sup>. She made it clear within the hippy community too, and they started calling her “Sister”, because to them she was like a nun, but neither male nor female. She describes herself as “a person with no sex”<sup>89</sup>.

Sexual revolution and the liberation of sexuality often mean, especially in a feminist perspective, being free to have as much sex as one want. But, according to Jo, ace policy worker in Australia, this is generally interpreted as “a lot of sex” and not “no sex”, because otherwise women (or people, if referring to Kusama’s Happenings) are oppressed, maybe even repressed, not being true to their authentic selves or not grown up yet. In this way, feminist politics can be performed through a conspicuous consumption of sex<sup>90</sup>.

This interpretation is a result of the feminist sex wars of the 1980s and 1990s. During that time, there were two contrasting ideas on what was considered “progressive sex”: on the one hand, radical antiporn feminists, who promoted an overall “sex-negative” stance, abstinence from sex with man but were positive towards lesbian sex, while on the other side pro-sex feminists, a countermovement that inverted antiporn feminism’s hierarchy of sex and advanced a sexual liberation defined by transgression. As pointed out by Elisa Glick, both positions, while being politically opposed, followed the same logic of liberating sexuality through what they considered “appropriate practices”. Sexual freedom was defined against

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<sup>85</sup> *Ibidem*.

<sup>86</sup> KUSAMA, *Infinity net...*, cit., p. 83.

<sup>87</sup> KUSAMA, *Infinity net...*, cit., pp. 68-69.

<sup>88</sup> KUSAMA, *Infinity net...*, cit., p. 68.

<sup>89</sup> *Ibidem*.

<sup>90</sup> CHEN, *Ace: cosa ci rivela ...*, cit., p. 77.

a category of “repressive norms”, for the first group being patriarchal dominance, for the second group being compulsory virginity and chasteness. It appears clear that, in today’s feminist debate, pro-sex feminism won, and sex-positivity holds a central standing within contemporary queer/feminist discourse. However, problems arise when, within this framework, the liberated is constructed against the repressed, the transgressive against the conservative: in other words, the empowered against the disempowered. Sexual practices have become politicised, revaluating desires and identities that have been marginalised and pathologised. This new ideology creates a new binary, in which what is not “transgressive” is conservative, and therefore not liberated. Asexuality reveals the ways in which “(repressive) sex-negativity” has been weaponised, and how “(transgressive) sex-positivity” has been distorted and made compulsory, and it demands a remodelling of the present queer/feminist sexual politics<sup>91</sup>.

A true sexual liberation means having many choices, all equally available and accepted. Each road can lead to happiness if it is right for the person<sup>92</sup>. Asexuality is not inherently politically progressive. However, the goals of the asexual movement (at least, in their formulation in WENA countries) are progressive: one, for example, is the rejection of sexual and romantic normalcy, a true sexual and romantic freedom for everyone, not just asexual people<sup>93</sup>. There is no universal or fixed version of liberated sexuality, understood as a sexuality free from social shaming. It can look like promiscuity just as much as celibacy. Being sexually conservative does not necessarily mean being sexually repressed and, at the same time, being sexually conservative does not dim its political radicalism<sup>94</sup>.

There are claims that asexuality is not “radical enough” in its transgression of eroticism’s cultural limits. For many LGBTQ people, not being sexually active, or, alternatively, not voicing sexual attraction, ends up being associated with entering into the closet, equal to assimilating into normative society, or trying to pass as straight. Asexuality risks, sometimes, being interpreted as a cover for homosexuality or others LGBTQ identities<sup>95</sup>. Through a

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<sup>91</sup> MILKS, “Stunted Growth...”, cit., pp. 100-103.

<sup>92</sup> CHEN, *Ace: cosa ci rivela* ..., cit., p. 135.

<sup>93</sup> CHEN, *Ace: cosa ci rivela* ..., cit., p. 234.

<sup>94</sup> CHEN, *Ace: cosa ci rivela* ..., cit., pp. 83-84.

<sup>95</sup> CHU, “Radical Identity Politics...”, cit., pp. 80-83.

comparison with vehicles in motion, where “conservative” narrative models are the standard path, Erica Chu explains how:

a focus on the validity of asexuality among other forms of sexual and gender variance reveals that the celebration should not be in *how differently directed* and *how far away you are* from the railroad tracks and highways, but that *you are driving your own vehicle*<sup>96</sup>.

A radical identity politics is, therefore, one that seeks to redefine the roles of the state and social institution, in order that all narratives are equally supported. A true radical movement must identify itself not as a collection of atypically erotic identities, but as a collective of *chosen* identities<sup>97</sup>.

The fact that Kusama herself did not want to actively participate in her naked Happenings renders an idea of sexual liberation that is very similar to the one brought forward by the asexual movement. Through her words, she promoted free love and freedom from repression, but, with her behaviour, she shows how having “no sex” is fine too, as much as it is participating in orgies. On the surface, Kusama’s words and her definition of sexual revolution appear to be more in line with the “sex-positive” discourses mentioned before. Nevertheless, it must be remembered that, during the years of her Happenings, there was no articulation of asexuality as it is debated and conceptualised now. Kusama, therefore, made sense of her experience and articulated her beliefs through the frameworks available to her, as well as her personal experiences. Looking for asexual resonances, however, entails going beyond her words, and noticing also her refusal to participate in the Happenings she directed, as well as to engage in sexual activities with other people. Free love, for Kusama herself, meant that it was okay also not having sex at all.

At a first look, drawing a parallelism between Kusama’s sexual revolution and an asexual conception of sex liberation may seem stretched. However, looking closely, it becomes

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<sup>96</sup> CHU, “Radical Identity Politics...”, cit., p. 84.

<sup>97</sup> CHU, “Radical Identity Politics...”, cit., p. 85.

evident how, through her abstention from sexual activities, Kusama could have left a small opening for an asexual alternative, too.

#### 4.4: Stage Play: “Tokyo Lee”

Kusama started writing while travelling back and forth from Europe between 1970 and 1971. One of her first works is “Tokyo Lee”, a stage play with Tokyo Lee, a Japanese artist living in New York, as the protagonist<sup>98</sup>. Kusama, in her script for the play, defines it as “a dramatic collage in eleven parts”<sup>99</sup>, as well as “a magical, farcical, purificational musical”<sup>100</sup> and “a circus for our times”<sup>101</sup>. The script is not available to the public, and only an excerpt was published for the first time in 2023 in “Yayoi Kusama 1945 – Now”, the book accompanying the homonymous retrospective at the M+ Museum in Hong Kong. It has not gained much attention, but it has caused some controversy over her description of the sole Black character, Noa, as a “WILD-looking, hairy, coal-black savage”<sup>102</sup>. It is not the first time she had been accused of fetishise and racialise Black people, causing concern among the public debate<sup>103</sup>. Following the controversy, Kusama publicly apologised in an exclusive statement to the US newspaper “San Francisco Chronicle”, expressing her regret for using hurtful and offensive language towards Black people in her writings<sup>104</sup>.

“Tokyo Lee” is “suggested by incidents in the life + times of Yayoi Kusama”<sup>105</sup>, and heavily characterised by a semi-autobiographical component. This is not only explicitly said in a note at the beginning of the script, but it can also be evinced by the similarities between the lives of Kusama Yayoi and Tokyo Lee. Tokyo Lee has an artistic style similar (if not identical) to Kusama’s, and the works and themes of the two artists (Aggregations, Infinity Nets, use of the polka dots, self-obliteration) coincide. Lee, as a character, is strongly

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<sup>98</sup> JONES, “Cronologia visiva...”, cit., p. 226.

<sup>99</sup> Yayoi, KUSAMA, “Tokyo Lee (estratto)”, ca. 1971, in CHONG, Doryun & YOSHITAKE, Mika (edited by), *Yayoi Kusama 1945-oggi*, tr. Isabella Polli, Milano, 24 Ore Cultura, 2024, p. 342.

<sup>100</sup> *Ibidem*.

<sup>101</sup> *Ibidem*.

<sup>102</sup> KUSAMA, “Tokyo Lee (estratto)”, cit., p. 344.

<sup>103</sup> Soleil, HO, *SFMOMA is set to have a blockbuster show. But what about the artist’s racist writings?*, in “San Francisco Chronicle”, 2023. <https://www.sfchronicle.com/opinion/article/yayoi-kusama-museum-sf-18409040.php>. 22 June 2026.

<sup>104</sup> Candace, MCDUFFIE, *Japanese Pop Artist Yayoi Kusama Apologizes for Horribly Racist Remarks Despite Still Being Racist*, in “The Root”, 2023. <https://www.theroot.com/japanese-pop-artist-yayoi-kusama-apologizes-for-horribl-1850945415>. 22 June 2026.

<sup>105</sup> KUSAMA, “Tokyo Lee (estratto)”, cit., p. 342.

based on Kusama, to the point that it is not always clear when the fictional component ends and Kusama's real thoughts and experiences start.

Among the various themes the play faces, this section will focus on the complex relationship between Tokyo Lee and love. However, it must be taken into consideration that this analysis is based on an excerpt of the unavailable full work, limiting the study only on a few scenes and parts. In addition to that, while the manuscript is originally typewritten in English, the text analysed is an Italian translation. The additional layer given by the translation could, therefore, influence the conclusions.

The first part of the first act narrates Lee's childhood. In the notes to this part, there is a scene between Lee and her mother, where the former asks the latter the reason why she thinks that her pictures with flowers-genitals are filthy. The mother explains how Lee must never talk about sex, but she herself cannot further explain the reason, because, since it is filthy, she cannot talk about it<sup>106</sup>.

The fourth part of the first act, which is called "The first search for love (1964-65)", opens with a scene in Lee's room, where, after cutting her wrists, she calls Doctor Salmon, who heals her. He asks her if she has ever met a man she could love. Lee recalls that HACHI explicitly told her that he loved her, but she cannot reciprocate his feelings. However, she had once met a man, CHUNEN, that seemed nice and kind. He was a man who she was not afraid of, but, unfortunately, he was married. Doctor Salmon suggests that she writes him anyway. When the doctor leaves, Lee asks CHUNEN to come to her place, where she confesses her love for him and gets rejected (CHUNEN is married and, even though he likes Lee, he must remain loyal). CHUNEN exits the stage and HACHI enters immediately after, reprimanding Lee for choosing such a stupid and platonic love, and months later, since Lee is not intentioned to let CHUNEN go, he scolds her for living in a world of fantasy, telling her that she and CHUNEN will never have a sexual intercourse with each other, even if he replied to her letters. Finally, CHUNEN writes her a letter, accepting Lee's visit to his

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<sup>106</sup> KUSAMA, "Tokyo Lee (estratto)", cit., p. 352.

house. Lee, ecstatic, sings about her love for such a kind and gentle man, someone so different from any other man she has ever met<sup>107</sup>.

Two kinds of loves seem to present in front of Lee: one is the sexual love, represented by HACHI, described in the beginning of the play as a strong man, an art critic that falls in love with Kusama's energy and wants to unveil her "Asian secrets"<sup>108</sup>, while the other is platonic love, represented by CHUNEN, the kind and gentle man that Lee apparently falls in love with. When confronted with these two choices, Lee is oriented towards a platonic kind of relationship, rather than the sexual one. In addition to that, another important thing to notice is how Lee develops "feelings" for CHUNEN. To retrace the scene, it can be seen how the thoughts regarding CHUNEN as a potential partner seem to sprout after Doctor Salmon asks if Lee has met someone she could love. Only after that question, Lee thinks deeply about the men she has met, and pinpoints CHUNEN not as someone she loves, but as someone she *could* love: he is nice, kind, and does not scare her. It seems, therefore, that Lee chooses CHUNEN not because some kind of feeling pushed her, but because she was explicitly asked to choose someone, and CHUNEN was, between the many, the best candidate.

Tokyo Lee, in her approach to love and romantic feelings, could be seen and interpreted as asexual, or better, *asekushuaru*, since it seems that romantic feelings here play a big part in the recognition of Lee as part of the asexual spectrum. It is unclear if, when she says that she cannot reciprocate HACHI's feelings, she is talking about the feelings for HACHI precisely or about romantic feelings more generally intended. However, an attunement to asexual resonances pushes us to notice how compulsory sexuality (in this case, acting through the voice of Doctor Salmon) forces Lee towards a romantic (maybe even sexual) path.

In the last part of the play there are some information regarding Lee's works. On the part regarding her Aggregation sculptures, they are described as "ordinary objects covered with protuberances"<sup>109</sup>, and she wonders if they sprout from inside the objects or if they

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<sup>107</sup> KUSAMA, "Tokyo Lee (estratto)", cit., pp. 361-362.

<sup>108</sup> KUSAMA, "Tokyo Lee (estratto)", cit., p. 344.

<sup>109</sup> KUSAMA, "Tokyo Lee (estratto)", cit., p. 366.

accumulate externally. Talking about the phallus, it is written that Lee makes fun of the male principle, but at the same time realises that everyone (female included) thinks about it<sup>110</sup>.

it is not necessarily bad – it can be good – ruler of everything under its watch; but laughs due to the fact that everyone is obsessed with cocks

when sex becomes obsessive, it consumes time, and time can be used for better things

learn how to relax through – maybe even enjoy – what scares her, creating phalli and covering everything; put outside her “inside”<sup>111</sup>.

Here, sex is described as something that apparently not really interest Lee. However, this disinterest is framed as something negative, that needs to be cured and fixed.

Tokyo Lee, looking at the play through an asexual perspective, can be seen as compelled by sexualnormativity to find healing through love, in hope that repeatedly recreating phalli can help her enjoy what she fears. The formulation of asexuality that emerges from the play is that it is a pathology, something that needs to be corrected, under the name of “overcoming a fear”.

In this chapter an asexual lens has been used to analyse various works of Kusama Yayoi. In particular, it has emerged that compulsory sexuality could be seen as a *fil rouge* that connect multiple pieces: they can be seen as different manifestation of the pervasiveness of sexusociety, how an asexual subject can relate to it, and the consequences that it can have on such a subjectivity. On the other hand, as far as her Happenings are concerned, it has been highlighted the similarities between the sexual revolution promoted by the (WENA) asexual movement and the image of sexual revolution that Kusama portrayed not only through her words, but also through her actions and behaviour.

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<sup>110</sup> KUSAMA, “Tokyo Lee (estratto)”, cit., pp. 361-362.

<sup>111</sup> KUSAMA, “Tokyo Lee (estratto)”, cit., p. 362.

## Conclusions

Through this analysis, it has been shown how Kusama Yayoi's life and art can resonate with asexual themes and asexual people's stories. Asexual resonances have been identified through a direct comparison with asexual theory and asexual experiences.

After an overview, it has emerged that in the academic discourse on asexuality there are still notions of essentialism derived from the 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup>-century sexological theory that need to be overcome in order to reach a definition of asexuality that is positive instead of negative, as well as truly radical. The problem with an excessive focus on WENA sources has also been highlighted, and a comparison with Japan has shown that a transnational approach can help towards the construction of a more complete notion of asexuality, not limited by cultural and geographical borders.

An asexual gaze at the life of Kusama Yayoi has uncovered how the bias of an inborn sexuality has influenced the interpretation of her fear of sex. In fact, the critics always include it in the list of "symptoms" derived from her mental illness. The pathologisation of asexual people, especially of asexual people that are victims of abuse and trauma, is still nowadays, inside the asexual debate, a thorny topic, one that deeply engages with the notions of "naturalness" of (a)sexuality. Kusama's rejection of and fear towards sex became an illness and a problem because she was made to feel bad about it, because of compulsory sexuality, and it aggravated in New York (as can be seen in her production) because of a society that hypersexualised her. Furthermore, paying close attention to Kusama's behaviour in relation to romantic and sexual relationships, it has emerged how she refused the heteronormative paradigm, for example, refusing to get married (even seeing the topic in a negative way), as well as engaging in what she defines a "platonic relationship" with Joseph Cornell, which was asexual in its nature.

In the fourth chapter, some of the artworks and performances by Kusama Yayoi that were produced during her stay in New York have been reviewed through an asexual gaze and using mainly the framework of compulsory sexuality. Her *Phallic Accumulation and Compulsion* pieces can be seen as a visual depiction of sexsociety and its pervasiveness; the same could be said about her installation "*Aggregation: One Thousand Boats Show*", which can also be interpreted as addressing the consumerism of sex and sexuality. Kusama's environment "*Infinity Mirror Room – Phalli's Field*" could be more deeply

interpreted, seeing it as a “potential space” in which the asexual person can simulate sexsociety and interact with it in a safe and protected way through “transitional objects”. It has also been shown how Kusama engaged with her representation and how she performed her sexuality, something that many asexuals, especially those who are more exposed to hypersexualisation, do as well. Asexual experiences also seem to resonate with the exclusion of Kusama herself from sexual activities during her Happenings (and apparently during the course of her life, too), showing an image of sexual revolution very similar to what is promoted by the (WENA) asexual community. Finally, “Tokyo Lee” can be read as the representation of an asexual person pushed to find love by compulsory sexuality, and who ends up choosing a platonic (and safer) love over a sexual (and scarier) one.

In the present work, asexuality is not seen as a label to be applied to people retrospectively. Asexuality is interpreted, instead, as a “recurring motive, theory, and practice”<sup>1</sup> in Kusama’s works and life, “as characterized by the asexual moments that come to the surface and might be read *asexually* from the vantage point of the present day”<sup>2</sup>. In the academic discourse, there is still much need to further develop and expand this concept in order to recognise, as expressed by Cerankowski, “the fullness of nonsexual events and intimacies that revalue asexuality not as mere absence but as an expression of different desires and pleasures”<sup>3</sup>. It is crucial to look for ways to extend academic theory towards plurality.

Asexuality remains one of the most misunderstood and underrepresented sexual orientations<sup>4</sup>, and it is extremely hard to find an asexual reading or interpretation of art pieces. While there are studies regarding asexual characters and representation of asexual people in media, if we broaden the scope to look at artistic creations more broadly, the road is still, for the most part, unpaved. Asexuality in the arts can be a depiction of resistance towards the sexualnormative taboo, and further research is needed to develop what can become specific signifiers associated with asexuality that could become a methodology, enabling works that positively affirm asexuality<sup>5</sup>. It is my profound wish that this thesis can provide one possible answer to the search for alternative manifestations of asexuality through art.

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<sup>1</sup> PRZYBYŁO & COOPER, “Asexual resonances...”, cit., p. 312.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibidem*.

<sup>3</sup> STICKNEY, “Deconstructing Artistic Narratives...”, cit., pp. 54-55.

<sup>4</sup> STICKNEY, “Deconstructing Artistic Narratives...”, cit., p. 55.

<sup>5</sup> STICKNEY, “Deconstructing Artistic Narratives...”, cit., p. 56.

Asexuality does not have to be confined to the realm of “lack”, but it can and must be understood as a methodology of observation with huge potential. More efforts could be spent in the search for asexual resonances not only in art but also in history: one example could be developing Guo’s “Andy Warhol is Aro Ace”, further investigating the implications of an association between Andy Warhol and asexuality/aromanticism. Through this method, more historical figures and events could be reinterpreted and seen in a different light. Asexuality can offer new perspectives through which to re-examine even the most basic notions: for example, Emens has utilised an asexual framework to look at the US legal system, arriving at the conclusion that it is “arguably a sexual law, predicated on the assumption that sex is important”<sup>6</sup>. In her article “Compulsory Sexuality”, asexuality is used to uncover the ways in which the US law privileges sexuality and, on the other hand, burdens (and occasionally benefits, too) asexual people<sup>7</sup>. Moreover, more studies can also be done regarding the intersection of asexuality with gender and race, something still understudied in asexuality research<sup>8</sup>. It is possible to incorporate an asexual perspective within different disciplinary fields, and hopefully more research will be done investigating the theoretical and methodological implications that asexuality offers, in order to help deconstruct the dominant but limited heteronormative frameworks.

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<sup>6</sup> EMENS, “Compulsory sexuality”, cit., p. 304.

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