

Mark and Dot

Jack Tworokov and Yayoi Kusama

Jason Andrew

ON JANUARY 5, 1962, AT A DINNER party hosted by the dealer Beati Perry, the worlds of Jack Tworokov and Yayoi Kusama collided. Others present at the party included the art critic Clement Greenberg and the Colombian painter Fernando Botero. But it was the “fierce Japanese painter” Kusama who made a lasting impression on Tworokov. Their budding friendship, which has never been critically explored, would soon evolve into a mutual exchange of instinctual and strategic impulses. Tworokov, nearly thirty years her senior, would play a pivotal role in Kusama’s career, advocating for her at a time when contemporaries, critics, and elder statesmen of painting viewed her work with indifference.¹

Kusama had arrived in New York City on June 28, 1958. The male-dominated territory of the post-war New York art scene may have presented a familiar challenge to Kusama, for whom Japan had been “too scornful of women,” as she told a journalist in 2018.²

1 Yayoi Kusama and Ralph F. McCarthy, *Infinity Net: The Autobiography of Yayoi Kusama* (London: Tate Publishing, 2013), 157-186.

2 Priscilla Frank, “Japanese Artist Yayoi Kusama Is About To Make 2017 Infinitely Better,” *Huffington Post*, February 9, 2017. Accessed September 18, 2018: www.huffpost.com/entry/yayoi-kusama-retrospective_n_589c8b55e4b0c1284f2af521

She spoke very little English and knew very little about American art, nor about the expanding art scene. According to scholar and biographer Midori Yamamura, “Kusama first mingled with the local Japanese and Japanese-American communities in order to gather information about the New York art world.”³ Once settled, she made herself aware of art openings and began attending them. “She made herself a regular on the scene,” explains Yamamura.⁴

She revered the Abstract Expressionists, with their “dynamic attempt to face the complexity of modern life head-on, and to break through to something new.”⁵ Her first major series of paintings successfully negotiated the frontiers of the movement without submitting entirely to its influence. She would call her new series *Nets*.⁶

3 Midori Yamamura, “Kusama Yayoi’s Early Years in New York: A Critical Biography,” in *Making A Home: Contemporary Artists in New York*, ed. Eric Shiner and Reiko Tomii (New York: Japan Society; New Haven: Yale University Press, 2007), 28.

4 Midori Yamamura, interviewed by the author, June 25, 2018.

5 Kusama and McCarthy, *Infinity Net*, 34.

6 According to the research of Midori Yamamura and furthered by her conversation with Mario Yrissary, New York, August 29, 2008: “Kusama originally designated these paintings as ‘Net’ or ‘netto’ in Japanese.”

Tworokov, meanwhile, was an established artist, already heralded by *Art News* in 1949 as “one of the most masterful artists of his generation.”⁷ A charter member of the Eighth Street Club of first-generation Abstract Expressionist painters, Tworokov was a peer of Willem de Kooning, Franz Kline, and Jackson Pollock.

Kusama was quickly accepted into avant-garde circles, but the development of wider acclaim was, at times, glacially slow. Recalling her early challenges, she wrote, “Action painting of the New York School still held sway, even though Jackson Pollock had been dead for ten years,”⁸ and acknowledged that “transcendence of the times”⁹ was out of reach.

While Tworokov did share some of the period’s assumptions surrounding gender, his character was endowed with a unique sensitivity that distinguished him from his contemporaries, particularly in his encouragement of women artists and gay male artists. These marginalized individuals were often his students, but they also included friends such as Jasper Johns, Robert Rauschenberg, and Dorothea Rockburne, and later Jennifer Bartlett, Chuck Close, and Brice Marden, to name a few. Tworokov advocated for these rising talents regardless of age, sex, or race. He measured them instead against a standard of integrity, intellect, and perseverance. Tworokov, then, was uniquely positioned to take in the fiery and ambitious Kusama.

By the late 1950s, Tworokov had scaled the heights of his Abstract Expressionist period. His gestural paintings were celebrated for their dramatic flame-like strokes, and he and his contemporaries were gaining the

ability to support themselves on the sale of their work.¹⁰ Yet Tworokov had grown weary and eventually critical of a movement that he feared had become academic, noting in a published article:

*But if you grant the possibility that painting can be non-representational and non-geometric, and still be expressive, that is, reflective of experience, insight and awareness, then the birth of such painting is a cultural event and not at all subject to sudden obsolescence.*¹¹

Tworokov was not yet aware of Kusama’s *Net* paintings, which would constitute the very “cultural event” he was defining. By 1959 she was pouring every penny she had into materials and canvas.¹² She would later say, “my commitment to a revolution in art caused the blood to run hot in my veins and even made me forget my hunger.”¹³ The *Net* paintings renounced all notions of composition, turning the Abstract Expressionist stroke backwards upon itself, looping and interlocking the painted mark. She described the process as “inscribing to my heart’s content a toneless net of tiny white arcs, tens of thousands of them.”¹⁴ With no discernible beginning or end, the paintings’ “endlessly repetitive rhythm and the monochrome surface, which cannot be defined by established, conventional structure or methodology, present an

7 Thomas B. Hess, “Reviews and Previews: Jack Tworokov at Charles Egan Gallery,” *Artnews*, 48:7 (November 1949), 44.

8 Kusama and McCarthy, *Infinity Net*, 34.

9 *Ibid.*, 34.

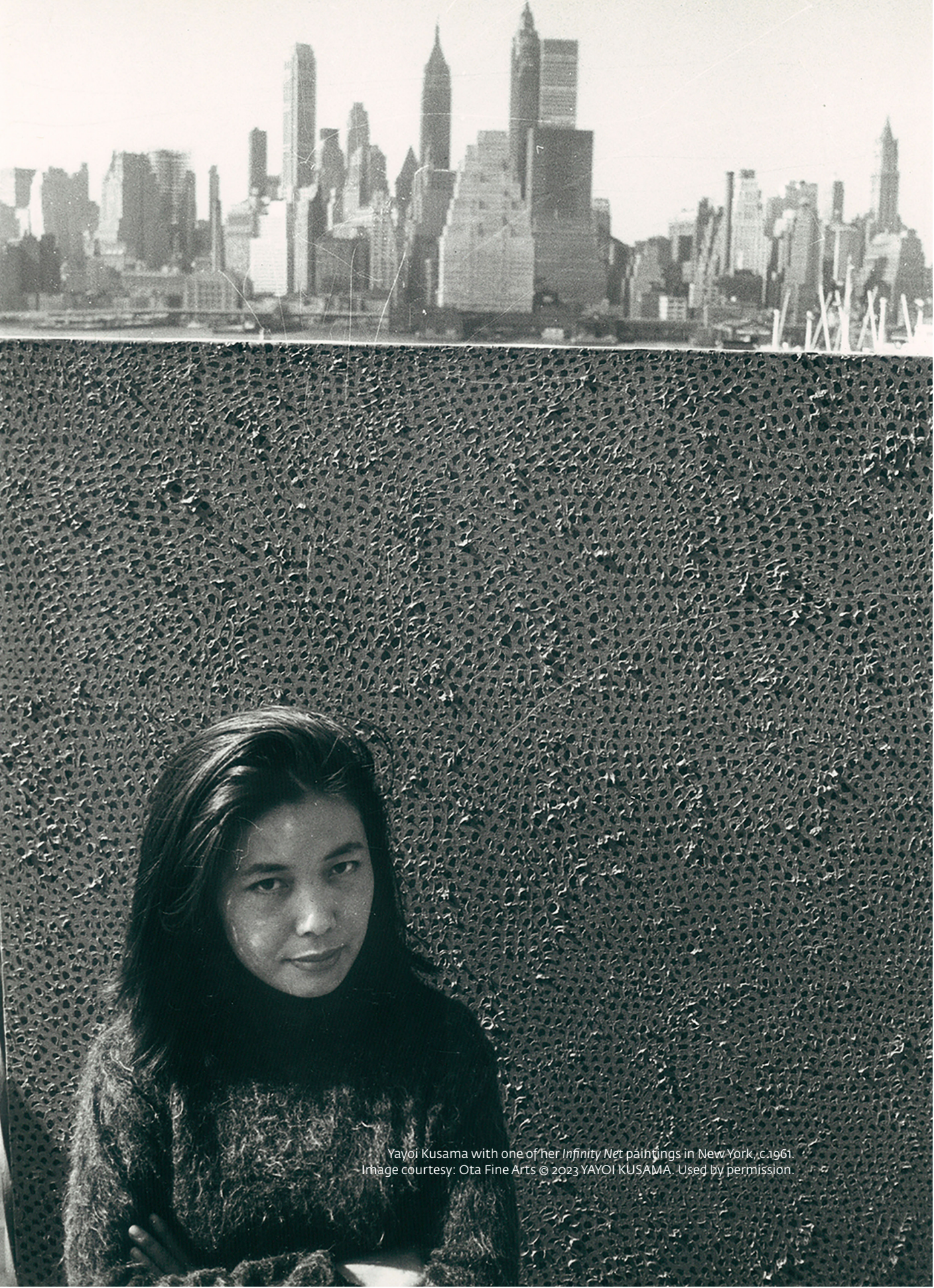
10 Jack Tworokov, journal entry, November 12, 1958: “I finally turned down the offer from Princeton to take a three-year teaching stint at a lovely salary for nine hours teaching a week (\$9000). It depressed me to do it since I also plan to give up all Pratt teaching and risk for the first time to live entirely by painting.” Published in Jack Tworokov, *Extreme of the Middle: Writings of Jack Tworokov*, ed. Mira Schor (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2009), 86-87.

11 Jack Tworokov, “Is There a New Academy,” *Artnews* 58:6 (September 1959), 38.

12 Kusama and McCarthy, *Infinity Net*, 20.

13 *Ibid.*, 18.

14 *Ibid.*, 18.



Yayoi Kusama with one of her *Infinity Net* paintings in New York, c.1961.
Image courtesy: Ota Fine Arts © 2023 YAYOI KUSAMA. Used by permission.



Jack Tworok in his Provincetown studio, 1960.
© 2023 Arnold Newman / Getty Images.

attempt at a new painting based on a different light.”¹⁵

Vulnerable to episodes of severe neurosis, Kusama nonetheless continued painting with a characteristic intensity.¹⁶

When Kusama’s New York solo debut opened at the Brata Gallery on October 9, 1959, Tworokov was likely among the many revelers.¹⁷ The show was a critical success, receiving positive reviews in nearly every art publication. However, even as Donald Judd celebrated Kusama as “an original,”¹⁸ she received lukewarm attention from the older generation of respected artists, such as Earl Kerkam, who was close to de Kooning and Tworokov.¹⁹ Remarking that her show was “nothing but walls,” Kerkam paused to add, “but she certainly knows about space.”²⁰

The following spring, Beatrice “Beati” Perry, the collector and dealer who is credited with introducing Kusama to Tworokov, gave Kusama a solo show at her gallery, Gres Gallery, in Washington, DC.²¹ Opening in April 1960 and lasting just under a month, this show featured the introduction of color to her ongoing series of *Net*

paintings. Perry sold ten paintings, five pastels, and a watercolor to important collectors such as Mr. and Mrs. H. Gates Lloyd, whose collection also included work by Tworokov.²² A *Washington Post* critic who had praised Tworokov’s work a year earlier received Kusama with similar enthusiasm: “Only such an artist as Mark Tobey or Jackson Pollock in our country has gone so far in making each single and minute thread of paint count in an overall composition.”²³ Soon, Kusama’s sculpture *Accumulation No. 1* (1962) as well as Tworokov’s painting *Crossfield I* (1968) would become the cornerstones of Beati’s personal art collection.

Tworokov and Kusama’s paintings were in dialogue even before the two artists met. In the fall of 1961, they participated in the *Pittsburgh International Exhibition of Contemporary Painting and Sculpture* at the Carnegie Institute, with Kusama exhibiting *The West* (1960), lent by Gres Gallery, and Tworokov exhibiting *Brake I* (1959–60), lent by Leo Castelli. Two months later, in December, they both showed in the *Annual Exhibition of Contemporary American Painting* at the Whitney Museum in New York. It would be the first time Kusama appeared at the Whitney, exhibiting *Number 3 P.B. (Red)* (1960), and Tworokov’s ninth, exhibiting *Changes on Wednesday I* (1961). For Kusama, these exhibitions represented a substantial achievement—despite the critic John Canaday referring to her as “he” in his review of the Whitney.²⁴ “And so, I was steadily consolidating my position in the avant-garde of New York,” Kusama wrote, “I marveled at my luck.”²⁵

15 Ibid, 26.

16 Ibid, 20.

17 A journal entry of January 8, 1960 indicates Tworokov was “making the rounds of exhibitions, meeting the artists again, going to the bar.” Tworokov Family Papers, New York (unpublished).

18 Donald Judd, “Reviews and Previews: New Names This Month—Yayoi Kusama,” *Artnews* 58:6 (October 1959), 17.

19 Earl Cavis Kerkam (1891–1965) exhibited regularly at the Charles Egan Gallery. Kerkam was considered by Willem de Kooning, Philip Guston, and Mark Rothko to be “one the finest painters to come out of America.” Published in Marika Herskovic, *New York School Abstract Expressionists Artists Choice by Artists* (Franklin Lakes, N.J.: New York School Press, 2000), 198.

20 Earl Kerkam quoted in “Brata,” in *Tenth Street Days: The Co-ops of the 50s*, exh. cat. (New York: Pleiades Gallery and The Association of Artist-Run Galleries, 1977), n.p.

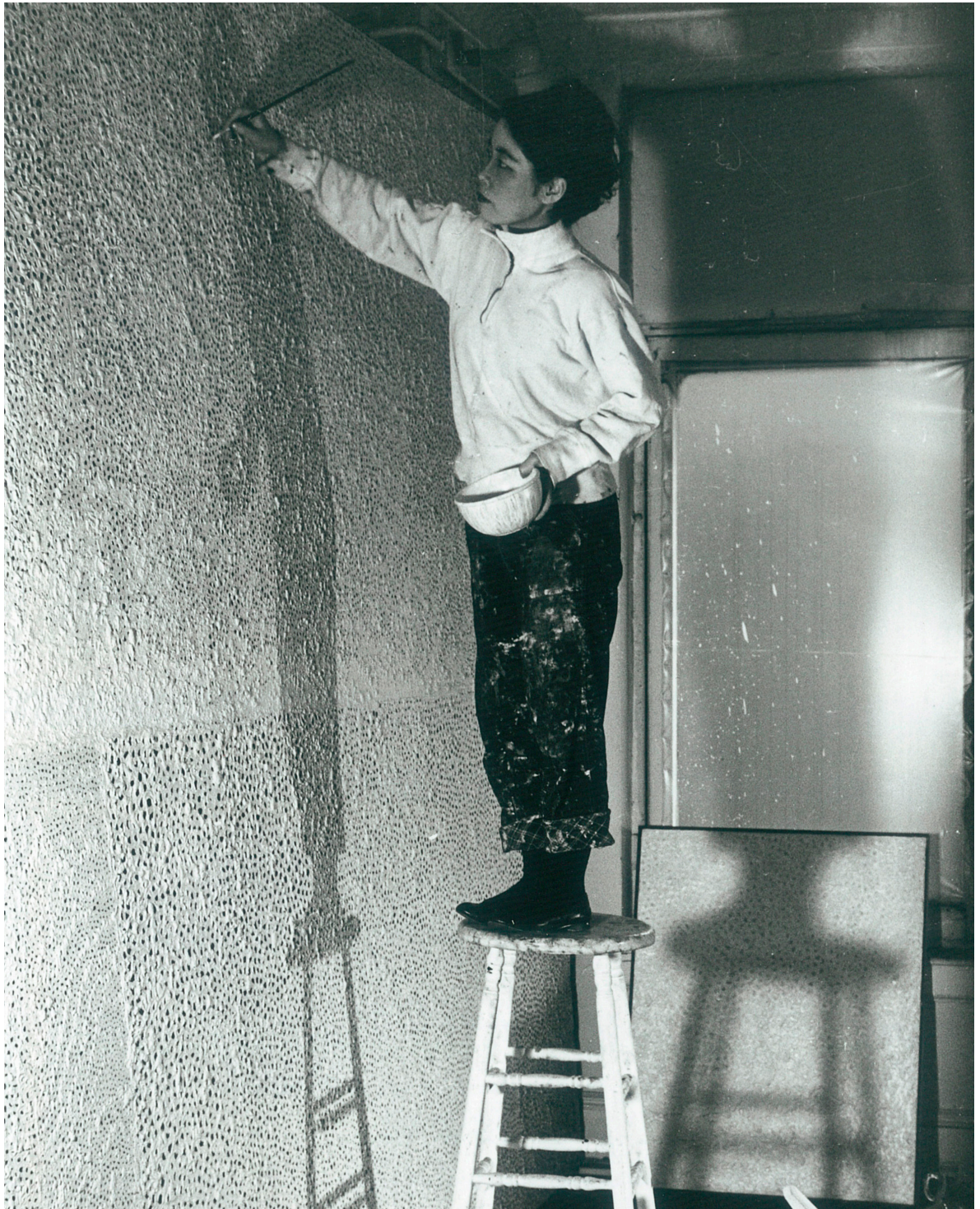
21 Founded by Tania Gres, the gallery’s legacy was formed under the direction of its eventual owner, Beatrice “Beati” Perry. She is credited with giving Fernando Botero, among the many other international artists she promoted, his first solo exhibition in the U.S.

22 From archive of Midori Yamamura, “Gres Gallery: Sales of Kusama Painting To Date, May 21, 1960.”

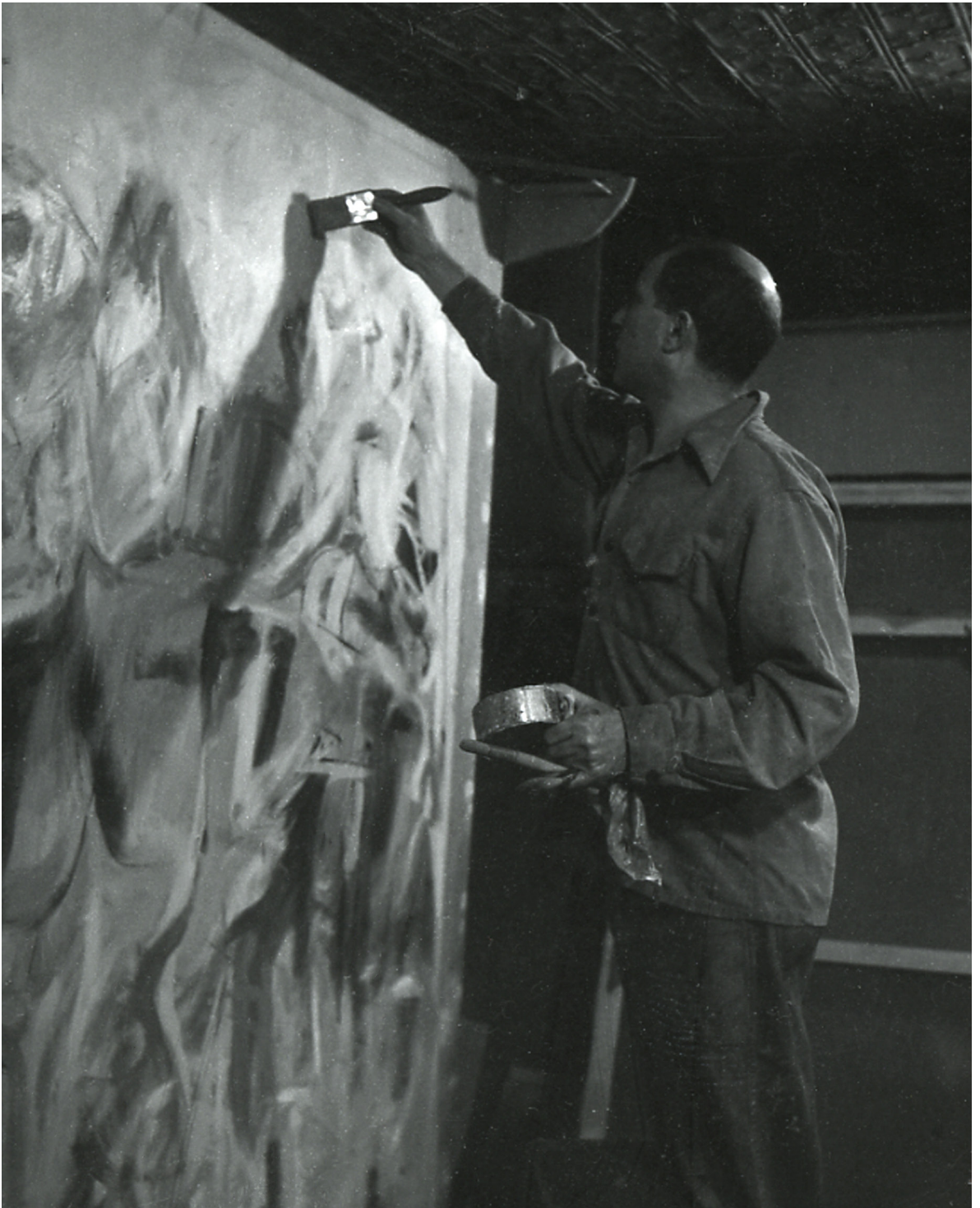
23 Ahlander, Leslie Judd. “Two Oriental Shows Outstanding,” *The Washington Post*, May 1, 1960, E7.

24 John Canaday. “Whitney Again: The Annual Shows Regulars Along With Twenty-Two Newcomers,” *The New York Times*, December 17, 1961, X21.

25 Ibid, 34.



Yayoi Kusama in her New York studio, c.1961. Image courtesy: Ota Fine Arts © 2023 YAYOI KUSAMA. Used by permission.



Jack Tworok in his New York studio with the painting "*Daybreak*," c.1953.
Photo: © 2023 Jean Herman, courtesy Tworok Family Archives, New York

Both Kusama and Tworkov recorded the fateful Beati Perry dinner, where they were officially introduced, in their diaries. Kusama recalled visiting the Green Gallery the day before, spending the next day at the Art Students League, then going to the “Perry House” at 7:30 p.m.²⁶ Tworkov recalled the dinner party in his journal, naming the host, her husband, and other friends, as well as the art critic Clement Greenberg, “a Colombian painter [Fernando] Botero, and that fierce little Japanese painter Yayoi Kusama.”²⁷ Evidently, Kusama brought with her a copy of *Asahi Journal* which had a reproduction of one of Tworkov’s paintings on its cover.

For Kusama, this “chance” meeting with Tworkov was keenly anticipated. “Though wildly spontaneous,” Midori Yamamura explains, “Kusama was calculating and strategic, and it is likely that she knew in advance that Tworkov would attend the dinner. It seems like she really prepared to meet him. I do think that this is Kusama’s first personal encounter with Tworkov and their friendship grew very quickly after—there is no gradual speed in Kusama’s life. To me it is as though Kusama knew [who Tworkov was] and came prepared to impress herself on him by bringing along the *Asahi Journal* to show him and to draw his attention.”²⁸

Kusama’s calendar-diaries from around the time of Beati’s dinner party also reveal a growing interest in Jasper Johns and Leo

26 Kusama’s Calendar-Diaries (1960-63) were shared by Midori Yamamura and copied from the originals in the personal archives housed at Kusama Yayoi Studio in Tokyo. Kusama’s Calendar-Diaries (1960-63): January 1962 / January 4th: Green Gallery; January 5th: Art Students League; 7:30pm Perry House.

27 In addition, the party included Vivi Rankine, Calvert Coggeshall and his wife Susanna Wilson, Kenneth Noland, and Dorothy Dehner. Jack Tworkov, journal entry, January 5, 1962, Tworkov Family Archive, New York (unpublished).

28 Midori Yamamura, interviewed by the author, April 8, 2018.

Castelli. Tworkov had a close friendship with both, and Kusama sought this connection. Kusama and Tworkov likely crossed paths again later that month at an opening for Louise Nevelson at Martha Jackson Gallery²⁹ and again on February 17 at a closing party for James Rosenquist’s first solo show at the Green Gallery.³⁰ Kusama’s infatuation with Richard Bellamy rarely allowed her to miss an opening there.³¹

On April 13, Kusama invited Tworkov to her studio. Tworkov accepted her invitation, visiting from noon to 2 p.m., according to Kusama’s calendar-diaries.³² Tworkov recalled the visit:

Friday, April 13, 1962

*Lunch with Yayoi Kusama at her studio. Seaweed soup. Fish tempura. Meat in a sweet soy sauce. Tea. I was surprised at the lunch, since I came to visit and I was going to ask her for lunch! She gave me a magazine that reproduced Friday in color.*³³

*I never met a feminine creature that gave off as much physical energy and intensity as this one. Incredibly ambitious and hard working. What wouldn't I give for even a small part of such drive.*³⁴

29 “Nevelson: Terra Cottas, 1938-1948,” Martha Jackson Gallery, New York, January 24-February 17, 1962.

30 “James Rosenquist,” Green Gallery, New York, January 30-February 17, 1962. Tworkov’s journal confirms he attended “Gorky Show at Janis, Rosenquist at Green, [Alexander] Liberman at [Betty] Parsons.” Jack Tworkov, journal entry dated February 17, 1962, Tworkov Family Archive, New York (unpublished).

31 Kusama’s obsession with the Green Gallery and its director, Richard Bellamy, in particular, is well apparent in Judith E. Stein’s *Eye of the Sixties: Richard Bellamy and the Transformation of Modern Art* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux 2016).

32 Kusama’s Calendar-Diaries (1960-63): April 1962 / April 13th: 12-2pm: Tworkov Came.

33 The publication was *Bijutsu Techo* or *BT Magazine* and featured a special issue on the Tokyo Biennale, which featured Tworkov’s painting *Friday* (1960).

34 Tworkov, *Extreme of the Middle*, 136.

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60年代の戦略と外交—渡辺誠毅／特別読物 レジスタンスの
ころ—ポーポアール回想録「働さざかり」より—朝吹登水子訳



Asahi Journal: New Report / Commentary / Criticism, 3:33 (August 13, 1961). Cover features Tworokov's painting Friday (1960), Courtesy Tworokov Family Archives, New York.

Nov. 25, 1962

Nov. 23, 1962

Mr. Jack Tworkov
234 East 23rd St.
New York, New York

Dear Mr. Tworkov,

I haven't see you long time, although I have thought about you and your family, and hope things are well with you.

I trust your European show has been fruitful and hope you to have continued success in future. What hs your commen& about your European trip?

In order to continue my work in New York, I am trying to get some grant from the George A. and Eliza Gardner Howard Foundation and three references are necessary *in* applying this grant. Would you be good enough to give me a brief comment on my works? I appreciate very much for your assistance on this matter. Though I realize that you are busy and I am not certainly in a position to ask you this sort of favor, I do not have many friends who are in a position to give me recommendation and have any weight to give me any preference.in getting the Grant.

Currently, I have a one-man show at one of galleries in Belgium, and I will have my work shown at Green Gallery in New York City. Please keep me inform any interesting works you are doing.

Very sincerely,

Yayoi Kusama

Yayoi Kusama

Encl.

Letter to Tworkov from Kusama, November 23, 1962. The date in the upper left in Tworkov's handwriting is the date he responded: November 25, 1962. The Tworkov Papers, Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institute, Washington, DC.

[ca. Dec. 1962]

To the George A. and Eliza Gardner Howard Foundation:
It gives me great pleasure to support the application of Miss Yayoi Kasama for a grant from your foundation. Miss Kusama's work made a deep impression on me for its originality and energetic experimentation. She has won for herself a prominent position among the younger artists now ^{gaining} winning public attention. She has an extraordinary exhibition record for her age. She has exhibited widely in New York and has won the attention of artists, gallery directors and interested laymen in spite of the intense competition that exists here. In a letter to me she indicates that the grant would help her to continue working in New York. I believe the purposes of the foundation would be well served in considering Miss Kusama's application favorably.

BROWN UNIVERSITY ^[postmarked Dec. 10, 1962]
GRADUATE SCHOOL
PROVIDENCE, RHODE ISLAND

WE HAVE RECEIVED YOUR LETTER OF RECOMMENDATION FOR
Miss Yayoi Kusama
IN SUPPORT OF AN APPLICATION FOR A HOWARD FOUNDATION GRANT, AND APPRECIATE YOUR COURTESY IN SENDING THIS LETTER TO US.

Thank you very much
R. B. LINDSAY, DEAN

Draft of Tworok's recommendation for Kusama's application to the Howard Foundation Grant with postmark acceptance receipt by Brown University, December, 1962. The Tworok Papers, Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institute, Washington, DC.

Kusama's career was clearly moving beyond the early days when dinner for her, as she wrote once, "might be a handful of small, shriveled chestnuts given to me by a friend."³⁵ The studio visit and lunch did much to establish their friendship. Kusama subsequently received an invitation to dine with the Tworkovs at their home on West 23rd Street two days later.

"My father's ability to see Kusama as a serious artist and recognize that her work demanded his attention must have been extremely important and meaningful to her," Hermine Ford, Tworkov's eldest daughter, explains. "It could not have been that easy for her, despite her successes. Especially going up against the guys in Tworkov's gang."³⁶

Moreover, the two shared a common struggle over identity. Because both were foreign-born (Tworkov often referred to himself as "a ghetto-Jew born in Poland"), the only time they felt that they belonged was when they were in their studios making art. Their respective practices defined their identity against the prevailing atmosphere of American nationalism, which included the McCarthyism of the 1950s and, in the 1960s, the war in Vietnam.

Later that year, on November 23, 1962, Tworkov received a letter from Kusama:

I haven't seen you long time, although I have thought about you and your family, and hope things are well with you.

I trust your European show has been fruitful and hope you to have continued success in future. What is your comment about your European trip? ³⁷

35 Kusama and McCarthy, *Infinity Net*, 18.

36 Hermine Ford, interviewed by the author, April 6, 2018.

37 In the late spring of 1962, Tworkov went to Europe for a rare six-week-long trip. It was his first trip to Europe after World War II.

In order to continue my work in New York, I am trying to get some grant from the George A. and Eliza Gardner Howard Foundation and three references are necessary in applying this grant. Would you be good enough to give me a brief comment on my works? I appreciate very much for your assistance on this matter. Though I realize that you are busy and I am not certainly in a position to ask you this sort of favor, I do not have many friends who are in a position to give me recommendation and have any weight to give me any preference in getting the Grant.

Currently, I have a one-man show at one of the galleries in Belgium,³⁸ and I will have my work shown at Green Gallery³⁹ in New York City. Please keep me inform any interesting works you are doing.

*Very sincerely,
Yayoi Kusama⁴⁰*

Having just returned to New York from Provincetown on November 20, Tworkov wasted no time replying to Kusama's request. He responded to her letter on November 25 and submitted his recommendation to the Howard Foundation, a draft of which reads:

It gives me great pleasure to support the application of Miss Yayoi Kusama for a grant from your foundation. Miss Kusama's work made a deep impression on me for its originality and energetic experimentation.

38 Research into the name of the Belgium gallery was not available at the time of this writing. As confirmed by Midori Yamamura, although Kusama sent work to the gallery, the exhibition never took place.

39 September 1962: Group exhibition, Green Gallery, New York. Kusama showed her first sculptures, *Accumulation No. 1* (1962), an armchair covered with stuffed phallic protuberances and painted white, and *Accumulation No. 2* (1962), an eight-foot couch similarly covered. Other artists included were Robert Morris, Claes Oldenburg, James Rosenquist, George Segal, Richard Smith, and Andy Warhol. Founded by Richard Bellamy in 1961, the Green Gallery was the cradle of Pop Art activity in New York.

40 Original is located in the Jack Tworkov Papers, Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institute, Washington, DC.

She has won for herself a prominent position among the younger artists now gaining public attention.

She has an extraordinary exhibition record for her age. She has exhibited widely in New York and has won the attention of artists, gallery directors and interested laymen in spite of the intense competition that exists here. In a letter to me she indicated that the grant would help her to continue working in New York. I believe the purpose of the foundation would be well served in considering Miss Kusama's application favorably.⁴¹

Tworkov's letter could not have come at a more crucial time. Increasingly anxious about her future, Kusama suffered a nervous breakdown on November 19, was hospitalized on November 24, and released in early December. On December 18, having regained her strength, she telephoned Tworokov to thank him for his support.⁴²

Around the summer of 1964, their friendship expanded to Provincetown, Massachusetts, where Tworokov had purchased a home on the West End in 1958. Kusama visited Tworokov there while regularly exhibiting at the Chrysler Museum, which had originally been established in Provincetown.⁴³ Her *Body Festival* opened at the Chrysler on September 1-2, 1967.⁴⁴

As the Sixties progressed, the artists' friendship continued to evolve, as they shared a resistance to the escalating American war in Vietnam. Still feeling out

of place in New York, Kusama ultimately abandoned the city for Japan in 1973.

One of the final letters from Kusama to Tworokov, who was now Chair of the Art Department at Yale University, was received on February 15, 1968:

Dear Jack,

Since I met you at Provincetown how are you? I am sure you are very busy with your important position. Yesterday I spoke with your wife because I wanted to talk with you. I am now sending a letter. Mr. Kuchta⁴⁵ of the Chrysler Museum visited me and he talked with me about you. Mr. Kuchta suggested Yale as a place for me to have one of my happenings and show my film which won an award at an international film festival in Belgium.⁴⁶ I showed this film to Adolph Gottlieb who was very impressed with it. He is arranging to show my film at the Whitney Museum in March. The Museum of Modern Art in New York City is also interested. Many people are saying it is the best movie of this year. It is a color film called "Self-Obliteration." In another letter I will send you material on this film.

Is there a possibility of showing this film in your art department? If I could I would [be] very grateful since your department at Yale is one of the best and most important in the country. I am very proud of my friends [sic] is chairman of this department. I am sure you will be able to help me.

Do you remember Hart Perry, Jr., the son of Mrs. Beatrice Perry? He is now in the Columbia University film department. He is very interested in my happenings and is making a documentary film about my happenings.

Three weeks from now I am having a fashion show at the New School in their auditorium [sic] which seats five hundred. They invited me and are giving me a complete fellowship

41 Ibid.

42 Kusama's Calendar-Diaries (1960-63): December 1962 / Tuesday, December 18th: Called Tworokov.

43 From 1958 to 1971, the Chrysler Museum of Art was a smaller museum consisting solely of Chrysler's personal collection and housed in the historic Center Methodist Church in Provincetown, MA.

44 Kusama's exhibitions at the Chrysler Museum of Art included *New Eyes*, (April 1965); *New Collection*, (Summer 1966); she also staged a *Body Festival* (September 1-2, 1967).

45 Ronald Andrew Kuchta (1935-2020) was the curator at Chrysler Museum, Provincetown, MA, 1961-1968.

46 The 1968 *Fourth International Experimental Film Competition* at Knokke-le-Zoute, Belgium.



Yayoi Kusama, *Accumulation No. 1*, 1962, Sewn stuffed fabric, paint, and chair fringe, 37 x 39 x 43 in (94 x 99.1 x 109.2 cm) Collection of the Museum of Modern Art, New York. Gift of William B. Jaffe and Evelyn A. J. Hall (by exchange), 1182.2012. This work was formerly owned by Beatrice "Beati" Perry.

for the expenses of this show. They are preparing all the publicity now so I am very busy now.

Please write to tell me of the possibility and time of doing a showing of my film and happening at your university. My happening is a combination of cinema, beautiful dancing, and fashion show with a background of my own rock band (five musicians working for me here at my studio). My manager is Eric Reilly who will handle all of this business.

Yours truly,

Yayoi Kusama⁴⁷

⁴⁷ Original is located in the Jack Tworokov Papers, Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institute, Washington, DC.

Tworokov again wasted no time in replying. It is certain that his return letter sent on February 21 imparted that he would do everything he could to help.⁴⁸ He must have felt great satisfaction following the many aspects of Kusama's rising career as it moved beyond painting and into performance. "I was becoming an artist not just limited to fine art," she wrote, "but one who was able to express herself in a wider spectrum of activities."⁴⁹

Tworokov envied this freedom:

One thing I'd love to do [...] is go away for

⁴⁸ There are no copies of Tworokov's return letters to Kusama. Regarding this letter specifically, there is no mention of any activity associated with Yale University in Kusama's biography and chronology.

⁴⁹ Kusama, 99.



Jack Tworkov, *Crossfield I (SSP-68 #4)*, 1968, Oil on canvas, 80 x 70 in. (203.2 x 177.8 cm)
Private collection, New York. © 2023 Estate of Jack Tworkov / Licensed by Artists Rights Society (ARS), NY. This work was formally owned by Beatrice "Beati" Perry.

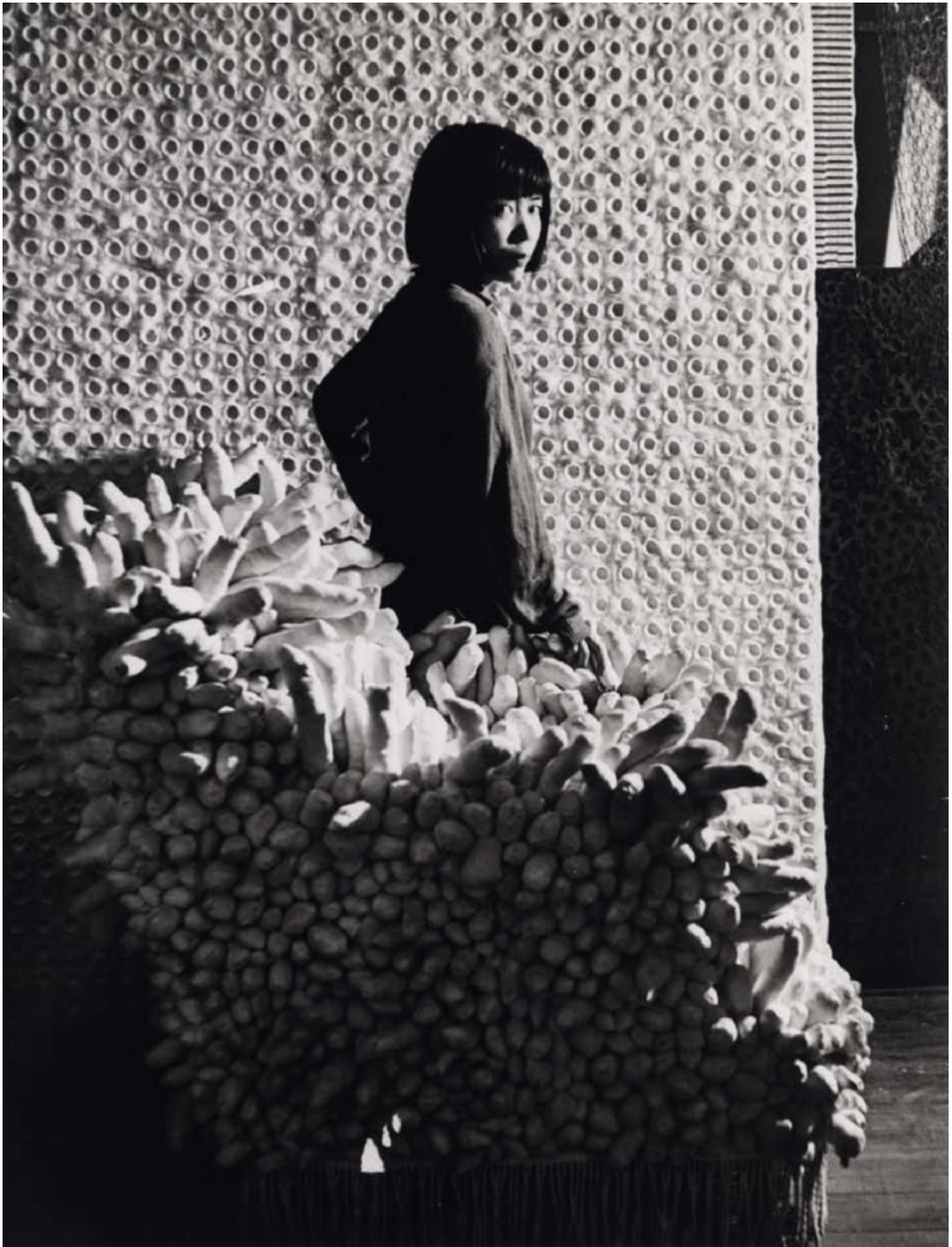
*a year and live alone in an entirely new environment, especially where I know nobody and where nobody knows me. Why this instance on anonymity? To gain as much freedom as possible. The greatest handicap to freedom is the unconscious trying to meet the expectations of others.*⁵⁰

Kusama maintained her connection with Tworkov even after she abandoned New York for Japan in 1973. A copy of her original manuscript, *The Struggle and Wanderings of My Soul*, her earliest known autobiographical writings, was only recently discovered among Tworkov's personal papers. Kusama mailed it to him shortly after it was completed in 1975.

⁵⁰ Jack Tworkov, letter to Janice Biala, Provincetown, August 8, 1977. Published in Tworkov, *Extreme of the Middle*, 341.

While their careers took vastly differing paths—Tworkov had the mark and Kusama had the dot—their philosophical and gestural strategies ran in parallel, sharing a skepticism of prevailing aesthetic orthodoxies. “Tworkov sought a kind of objectivity of painterly practice as he began to tire of the subjectivity of Abstract Expressionism,” Mira Schor explained, “especially as that subjectivity became a pose.”⁵¹ His brushstroke became more and more analytic and abbreviated as he strove to paint himself out of his pictures, first through the repeated mark and later through the introduction of geometry, which slammed the brakes on any lingering

⁵¹ Mira Schor, email to the author, April 18, 2018.



Yayoi Kusama with *Accumulation No. 1*, 1962, in her New York studio, c. 1963-64. Photo: Hal Reiff.



Jack Tworkov in the apartment of Morton Feldman with Robert Rauschenberg's *Black Painting*, 1952-53, c. 1953. Photo: Robert Rauschenberg, courtesy Tworkov Family Archives, New York

threads of emotional inauthenticity. Locked into this technique, Tworokv shielded himself from his insecurities and doubts. “Can you accept a painting just for its marks, not reading into it more than the eye can see?” he wrote.⁵²

Similarly, Kusama discovered a way to use first repetition and then the multiplicity of the dot, creating a form that ecstatically expresses both emotion and neutrality. As if in response to the gradual compression of Tworokv’s mark, Kusama’s dot expanded into a performance that spread beyond the individual to engulf the environment. Dots eventually became the medium for emotional outbursts that channeled Kusama’s anxieties. “I had been spellbound by the polka dots,” she says in her autobiography.⁵³ In contrast, Tworokv layered his anxieties in the painted mark and its implied geometry “perhaps to erect a thick glass wall through which I saw myself, but mercifully could not hear myself though I saw my mouth moving and often in anguish.”⁵⁴

Hang a painting by Kusama alongside a work by Tworokv and their common urge toward a single repetitive gesture—what Tworokv called “characteristic rhythms”⁵⁵ and what Kusama called “repetitive rhythm”⁵⁶—is plainly manifest. Whether mark or dot, both artists shared a logic

“based on a voluntary ordering of chance,” as Tworokv described the making of his work.⁵⁷ Tworokv and Kusama both spoke romantically about their process, with the latter stating, “the creative philosophy of art is ultimately born in solitary meditation and rises from the quietude of a reposed soul to glitter and flutter in the splendor of five colors.”⁵⁸ For Tworokv, the creative edge “is the residue reflected in the painting of the artist’s pleasure in the making of it, especially the pleasure, the joy the artist experiences in the stages when the painting uncovers itself to the eyes.”⁵⁹

Art remained the very pulse of life for both artists, and both of them had nearly identical ways of describing this. For Kusama:

What saved me was making my way—blindly and gropingly [sic] at first—down the path to art.⁶⁰ [...] no matter how I may have suffered for my art, I will have no regrets. This is the way I have lived my life, and it is the way I shall go on living.⁶¹

And for Tworokv:

I’m not ashamed to confess that I’ve seen my work primarily, not merely as a “way of life” but as a way to save my life [...] only in the studio does my life take form. This is what I mean when I say “art saves my life.”⁶² A

52 Tworokv, *Extreme of the Middle*, 257.

53 Original photocopy mailed to Jack Tworokv: Kusama, *The Struggle and Wanderings of My Soul*, 1975, 3. Tworokv Family Archives, New York.

54 Tworokv, *Extreme of the Middle*, 393.

55 Tworokv, *Extreme of the Middle*, 105.

56 Kusama, 26.

57 Tworokv, *Extreme of the Middle*, 105.

58 Kusama, *The Struggle and Wanderings of My Soul*, 5.

59 Jack Tworokv, letter to Andrew Forge, June 30, 1981. Published in Tworokv, *Extreme of the Middle*, 422.

60 Kusama, 93.

61 Kusama, 230.

62 Tworokv, *Extreme of the Middle*, 406.