

Battle of the Brands

Kusama at Tate Modern, *Bazaar Art* (Beijing), April 2012

Julian Stallabrass



The area outside Tate Modern's Yayoi Kusama exhibition has a curious clash of cultures and logos. People sip and snack beneath a wall of photographs of Kusama, from her childhood to her present old-age, and beneath various large polka-dotted balloons. They drink from cups and eat from plastic packages that all carry Tate's famous logo. Ordinary, branded life comes up against the knowingly peculiar products of an art-world eccentric. It cannot be said that the museum's decision to lead off with the wall of portraits risks betraying the artist's intentions in switching attention from her work to her persona, since for much of her career, Kusama made quite sure that she was always photographed alongside her products. She was, in fact, one of the first self-consciously branded artists—doubtless forced along this route at first by the knowledge that in New York as an Asian woman in an art world composed mostly of white males, she would mostly be seen as a body and a surface for various projections, sexual and otherwise. Rather than oppose those who would deny her a subjective interior, she would highlight the surface and the skin, becoming a commodity.

Tate, for its part, has been, since its relaunch in 2000, one of the world's most flagrantly branded museum chains, as well as its most popular. As a museum brand, it is extraordinarily successful: a recent survey put it between Shell and Levi's in terms of recognisability. Brand consistency is felt everywhere, from colour schemes and fonts to the uniforms worn by staff. The logo is found everywhere—from first sight of the place (imprinted on the doors), then on kiosks and shops and shows to, of course, the vast range of branded merchandise. The Tate 'experience' has become as consistent and reliable (and mundane) as that offered by a visit to Starbucks.

The museum cannot brand itself without altering the way in which its contents are seen. Consistent affirmation—that the organisation recommend itself for a set of virtues that the consumer can rely upon—is an essential element of the brand but one that sits oddly with displays of modern and contemporary art. There is a strong temptation for the marketing departments of museums to portray artists and movements as simple images to be sold to the public. Some may lend themselves to such treatment, but there is a strong current to modern and contemporary art that deals with contradiction, negation, discomfort and deep complexity: when that work is framed by the brand, with its cheery comfort, reinterpretation and misrepresentation will take place.

When a strongly branded artist is shown in a strongly branded museum, it might seem that the most natural fit is achieved, in which the exhibition can be seen as a temporary

cross-branding exercise. So Kusama at Tate, or the upcoming Damien Hirst show, could be compared to Disney and McDonald's one-time alliance to clog children's arteries and neurons.

Yet the apparently close fit may contain gaps and disturbances. For one thing, while PR people may have a great deal of influence over the way a museum runs, they cannot curate exhibitions: professionals with art-historical training still do that, and on one level, the Kusama show is a carefully chosen look at episodes from the artist's long career, including the evolution of her painting in Japan before she invented herself as a persona. The show has much to say about the way in which Kusama evolved what became her brand, and about how she and others propagated it so successfully as Pop Art in New York. In this juxtaposition of products and publicity, viewers come across a familiar conjunction: that 1960s bohemia helped lead the way to a remaking of capitalism. It may have seemed anti-business, but it only opposed the slowly fading Fordist model that imposed conformism on workers and consumers alike. It opened the way to commercial practices that valued selling experiences above selling objects, that were fast and fluid, and that prized individual self-expression. If the old regime demanded that you obey orders, the new one commanded that you serve by being yourself.

In this sense, Kusama is an archetypal artist: her obsessive over-production and the sheer oddity of her works display her individuality above all. She marked out the terrain of her oddity with a series of simple, incessantly repeated visual signs (dots and phalluses) that make it her own and defend it from incursion. The well-known biographical features of her life, whether it is her seeing her father having sex with his mistresses, her hallucinations, or her long, voluntary confinement in a mental hospital, are used to assure the viewer of the utterly individual wellsprings of her art.

In revealing all of this, the curators raise at least implicit questions about the cross-marketing operation on offer. For instance, Kusama's tactics in presenting herself as an image and in promoting her work seem highly familiar from the more recent antics of various prominent, market-friendly artists. Her entrapment in the brand, and in the robotic actions necessary to maintain it, along with the viewers' experience of her installations, may be read as easily as the stuff of nightmare as of aspirational dream. The move from what is merely a signature style, evolved in an extraordinarily laborious and repetitive practice of painting, to the creation of visual elements that become logos

for the brand is tellingly tracked. Yet the deepest of these questions is that which allows viewers to see that the rise of these super-individual, heavily marketed persona-artists has a particular historical and geographical origin (Kusama's moment was also Warhol's); while we may still in some ways live in its wake, its hold is temporary and perhaps already weakening.