

A Walk Through Yayoi Kusama's *Narcissus Garden*: Steps Towards Emancipation

Within a capitalist society, technological advancement functions to alter the ways in which art is both consumed and produced. The conjunction of technology and capitalism facilitates the creation of limitless iterations of art. For example, song lyrics can be found stamped on keychains, paintings emblazoned on fridge magnets, and sculptures are often reimaged as snow globes. These reproductions corrode the authenticity and authority once held by the original piece of art. That being said, some works of art are able to escape the process of mechanical replication. In this essay, I will contend that Yayoi Kusama's *Narcissus Garden* aids our emancipation instead of furthering our regression. To do this, I will first explore the function of *Narcissus Garden* by showing how it is economically and socially situated within the confines of our society. Then, I will substantiate that even in an age of mechanical reproduction, *Narcissus Garden* is able to retain its aura. This is important as it illustrates the work's ability to move individuals towards contemplation and away from distraction. Third, I will show that *Narcissus Garden* is able to evade and escape the historical trappings of aesthetic perception — simply by being a work of art that lacks permanence.

In order to position *Narcissus Garden* within our world, it is critical to explore the introduction of the piece. *Narcissus Garden* has been restaged and recreated a number of times. The original piece was introduced to the world in 1966 as “part of an unofficial performance at the 33rd Venice Biennial” (Lasane 2018, 1). In its first presentation, *Narcissus Garden* consisted of silver plastic spheres strewn across the lawn of the Italian Pavilion. The original presentation of *Narcissus Garden* was an act of defiance on Kusama's part — the work “represented no country” and appeared outside of the sanctioned confines of the “exhibition grounds” (Sullivan 2015, 405). Kusama was part of the piece in 1966, she positioned herself amongst the spheres “barefoot and dressed in a gold kimono” holding placards that identified her as the artist and stated “Your Narcissism for Sale” (Lasane 2018, 1). Kusama followed through with her message by actually selling a number of the spheres at the incredibly low price of “\$2” — in an attempt to comment on the commodification of art (Sullivan 2015, 405). Each iteration of *Narcissus Garden* since the first has been unique. One of the most recent installments of *Narcissus Garden* was at Rockaway! 2018. This version of the piece presented audiences with 1,500 mirrored balls housed inside an “old train garage” with “graffiti-covered walls and rusted beams” (Lasane 2018, 1). It can be seen that *Narcissus Garden* exists to comment on the social and economic structures of the world without becoming entrenched in the institution of capitalism. This is the case as the piece implores viewers to engage with it and to go

beyond the surface level meaning of the piece — the shiny garden is a distraction and self reflection paves the way towards emancipation.

Beyond this, understanding Benjamin's concept of aura allows one to further comprehend the way in which Kusama's *Narcissus Garden* helps to move individuals towards emancipation. According to Benjamin, the concept of aura predates the conception and institution of capitalism. It exists to represent the "here and now of art" (Benjamin 2003, 253). In the simplest sense, aura "is an effect of a work of art being uniquely present in time and space" (Robinson 2013). The notion of aura is intimately linked to the "idea of authenticity" — as a result "a reproduced artwork is never fully present" as authenticity is eroded with each reproduction (Robinson 2013). According to Benjamin, a loss of aura is a gateway to distraction. In Benjamin's eyes, aura laden art inspires viewers to contemplate its mysticism and uniqueness. Reproduced art fails to do this, trapping the audience in a cycle of distraction — the "viewer's thoughts" are substituted with "moving images" and endless replicas which prevent any form of critical investigation from taking place (Robinson 2013). Individuals become incapable of emancipation when looking at mechanically reproduced art because they become passive observers.

Each rendition of *Narcissus Garden* shows that the piece is resistant to mechanical replication due to a myriad of reasons. First, each installation is site-specific. This is important as it causes the context of the piece to change with each shift in location. Second, *Narcissus Garden* demands audience interaction. There is no barrier in regards to the piece of art — admission tends to be free and people are allowed to walk through the exhibit however they see fit. This means that anyone can take part in the process of enjoying *Narcissus Garden*. Third, the ability to participate means that *Narcissus Garden* is constantly changing as individuals touch and move around the reflective spheres. In the first presentation of *Narcissus Garden*, the garden was depleted changed with each ball sold. As a result, no form of mechanical representation — no photograph or movie — can capture the variable nature of *Narcissus Garden*. The reflective balls mean nothing captured without their context — as a result, mechanical reproductions of *Narcissus Garden* are so devoid of the context of the original that they are unable to degrade any of Kusama's installations. *Narcissus Garden* preserves its aura because it is embedded in the "service of ritual" (Benjamin 2003, 257). Beyond the ritualistic demands of *Narcissus Garden*, the aesthetic perception of the piece is also resistant to historical imperatives and educational indoctrination.

The choice to install *Narcissus Garden* in various locations is a core reason as to why the piece is able to retain its aura. Benjamin establishes that “human perception is organized” and “conditioned” by a combination of both nature and history (Benjamin 2003, 255). This distinction is important as we often hold the misperception that our appraisal of and interaction with artwork is wholly natural. Notions of aesthetic perception are rooted in “conclusions about the organization of perception at the time the art was produced” (Benjamin 2003, 255). The fact that our understanding of art is subjected to historical precedent allows for us to comprehend the notion that we are often educated to view and enjoy art in certain ways. For example, we are habituated to believe that art found in museums is inherently more valuable than caricatures created by street artists. Similarly, we are trained to view art comparatively — in both real and virtual galleries, art is placed into categories. As viewers, we are often convinced that two paintings placed next to each other are intrinsically bound together in some way, shape, or form. Kusama’s *Narcissus Garden* moves us towards emancipation by existing outside of the confines of a museum or art gallery. Kusama’s site-specific installations challenge us by forcing us to consider the piece individually. *Narcissus Garden* exists within its own microcosm, which ensures that we evaluate it by continuing to interact with the piece — instead of comparing it to other art pieces placed around it. Furthermore, the function of *Narcissus Garden* is to engage individuals in the practice of self-reflection — this encourages viewers to question the nature of the art piece and in doing so, makes it possible for individuals to become more aware of the way in which capitalism and technology corrupt other pieces of art. This once again shows that *Narcissus Garden* propels us towards emancipation from the capitalist system by forcing us to critically think about and engage with the piece itself.

Overall, it is more than evident that *Narcissus Garden* is able to hold on to its aura in an era of mechanical reproduction by being wholly unique. The transient nature of the piece ensures that it cannot be technically reproduced with ease. As a result, the ritualistic quality is preserved and the demands of *Narcissus Garden* cannot be ignored or forgone. Kusama’s work, and other work like it, demand critical thought instead of passive submission — which helps us to escape the restraints of capitalism. This is the case as engaging with Kusama’s work shows us the importance of engaging with the capitalistic institutions present around us. Doing so will only help us as individuals to better understand the rise of capitalism, and eventually work towards attempting to subvert the traditions and practices associated with capitalism.

Works Cited

- Benjamin, Walter. 2003. "The Work of Art in the Age of Its Technological Reproducibility." *Selected Writings, Volume 4* (2003):250-83. Translated by Edmund Jephcott. The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press. Accessed May 21, 2019. https://moodle2.sscnet.ucla.edu/pluginfile.php/586364/mod_resource/content/0/Benjamin%20The%20work%20of%20art%20in%20the%20age%20of%20mechanical%20reproduction.pdf
- Jovanovic, Rozalia. 2018. "MoMA PS1's Klaus Biesenbach on the Yayoi Kusama You Haven't Seen." *Galerie. Galerie*. Accessed May 21, 2019. <https://www.galeriemagazine.com/yayoi-kusama-narcissus-garden-rockaway/>.
- Lasane, Andrew. 2018. "Take a Walk Through Yayoi Kusama's 'Narcissus Garden' Inside an Abandoned Factory in the Rockaways." *Colossal*. Accessed May 21, 2019. <https://www.thisiscolossal.com/2018/07/yayoi-kusamas-narcissus-garden-the-rockaways/>.
- Robinson, Andrew. 2013. "Walter Benjamin: Art, Aura and Authenticity." *Ceasefire Magazine*. Accessed May 21, 2019. <https://ceasefiremagazine.co.uk/walter-benjamin-art-aura-authenticity/>.
- Sullivan, Marin R. 2015. "Reflective Acts and Mirrored Images: Yayoi Kusama's Narcissus Garden." *History of Photography* 39, no. 4 (2015): 405–23. Accessed May 21, 2019. <https://doi.org/10.1080/03087298.2015.1093775>.