



BLAU INTERNATIONAL  
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“What looks good today may not look good tomorrow” – Michel Majerus

**BETYE SAAR**  
Home alone with a  
national treasure

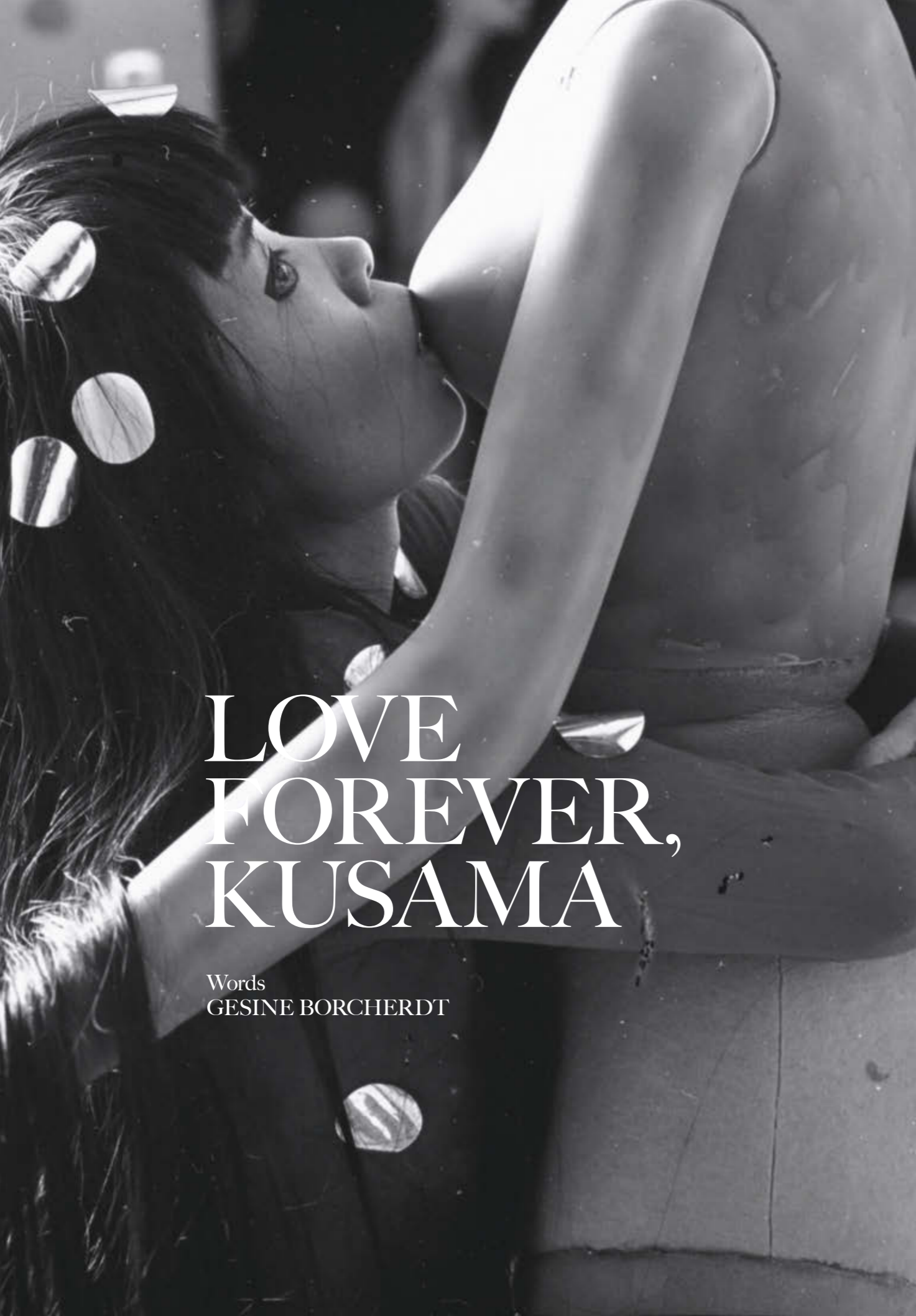
**PETER HANDKE**  
on the Seven Sacraments by  
**NICOLAS POUSSIN**

**CHRISTINA QUARLES**  
Reconfiguring the  
body politics of painting

**JOHN BALDESSARI**  
The world premiere  
of his final works

Summer 2020

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# LOVE FOREVER, KUSAMA

Words  
GESINE BORCHERDT

APÉRO

Playful,  
provocative,  
and poppy,  
newly dug up  
images reveal  
YAYOI  
KUSAMA's  
hippie  
happenings  
in 1970s  
Holland

She stands there with two dildos in her hands, deadly serious, as if she's hesitating about which one to take, and looks straight into the camera. In front of her is a shelf with potency pills, lubricants, and dirty magazines: that's Yayoi Kusama at a sex shop in The Hague. It must have been 1970 or 1971—Harrie Verstappen doesn't remember exactly. The Dutch photographer often photographed Kusama at that time. They had met a few years earlier during her exhibition at Orez Gallery. Orez is "Zero" spelled backward, referring to the artists' movement that proclaimed the starting point of a new art that reached for the moon using mirrors, light, and balloons. It was an art that had been freed from personal expression. Kusama also aimed for the stars. Yet what she does couldn't be more personal. "I convert the energy of life into dots of the universe. And that energy, along with love, flies into the sky." These words open the documentary *Kusama: Infinity*, the release of which almost coincided with the 90th birthday of Kusama, now one of the world's most expensive living women artists. And it is these words that you have to keep in mind while leafing through the new photo book in which Verstappen has noted down his memories of the artist—it's all so very hippie casual that the pictures themselves almost seem to take flight.

Most people today know Kusama for her oversized polka-dotted pumpkins, strewn around the world's most important museums and private collections, and for her mirrored rooms in which you can lose yourself entirely, like you're on an acid trip. Visitors easily queue three hours for her "infinity rooms"; the epic line at her last exhibition, at New York's David Zwirner Gallery, was like what you would expect at a Madonna concert. But Kusama had a long and rocky road to get where she is today.

As a child, Kusama already knew that she wanted to be an artist, processing her fears in surreal drawings. In 1958, she fled the restrictive society of Japan—where she would have been expected to marry and become a housewife—and went to New York. The metropolis's art world was conservative in another way: women were practically given no solo exhibitions, especially not if they were from Japan. But Kusama was persistent. In 1963, she made it into a show at Green Gallery, alongside Donald Judd, Andy Warhol, and Claes Oldenburg, showing an armchair covered in soft silver fabric penises that is now at the MoMA. Oldenburg promptly copied her idea and soon became famous for his "soft sculptures." Kusama was horrified. Shortly afterward, she exhibited a boat full of silver penises, surrounded by serially printed photo wallpaper that showed the boat from above—it was her first environment, a room completely soaked in art you could immerse yourself in, as though you were in zero gravity. Warhol praised the show—and was celebrated a little later for his identically designed environments, which were all covered in a portrait of a cow. When Kusama presented her first mirror room in 1966 (as a metaphor for the boundlessness of art and love), Lucas Samaras stole her idea for an exhibition at Pace Gallery. Enough was enough. Kusama fell into depression, jumped out of a window, and survived—and left New York, at least for a while, to go to the Netherlands.

The photos taken of her there reveal an artist who is both liberated and obsessive, sweeping people along on her mission—but an artist who never smiles. The book covers many happenings in which Kusama bedazzled bare bodies with colorful dots: faces, butts, and penises become works of art that stand for the profound connection between people and the cosmos. She also sprinkled dots on pieces of toast and fried eggs, at least in one picture Verstappen took of her at her lodgings. As a super-subject, Kusama drove photographers crazy with her iron will and urge to express herself. Only with Verstappen did she have a relaxed relationship. He is sure she was in love with him, but she wasn't his type. Constantly bumping up against men's egos like this, it is no wonder, perhaps, that a few years later Kusama would sign herself into a psychiatric hospital in Japan, where she still lives today. When you look at her

in these photos—wearing shiny black monkey-fur coats and red tights; putting polka dots on cars, pavements, and mannequins; wielding spray cans, brushes, or paper—you see a woman whose imagination knows no bounds. Whether alone or among people, Kusama always appears focused, like she’s on a one-woman mission to Mars. Even amid the wildest happenings, she maintains an overview—a mistress of ceremonies. One eyewitness, as another text in the book reveals, said that she was like “a lost star in her own show.” This applies to basically every moment of her life.

## The fact that Kusama still made penises a recurring motif shows just how much courage she possesses. She transforms her trauma into art, turns fear into love

**T**he book was published by the Zero Foundation in Düsseldorf, and the photos come from its archive. Some of them are familiar, others—like the ones shown on these pages—have never been published before. All are stunning, but Verstappen’s anecdotes are what make the book so revelatory. This one, for example: after being kicked off the stage at a hippie concert where she wanted to paint naked people (apparently the management found the idea sketchy), Kusama crawled under the dashboard of Verstappen’s 1958 Chevrolet Bel Air and started popping heaps of pills—probably sedatives, Verstappen says, because Kusama didn’t like uppers or alcohol. Or the insight that she hated Yoko Ono and wondered whether, in response, she should marry Mick Jagger. And the scene with the dildos in the sex shop? “Maybe she wanted to seduce me,” Verstappen suggests. “In any case, it didn’t work. I find it strange that these are definitely the sexiest and most provocative photos of Yayoi that I’ve ever seen ... but nobody ever mentions them.” Maybe that’s because Verstappen has the wrong end of the stick. Because Kusama didn’t like sex. Penises fill her with anxiety, which is rooted in her childhood, growing up with a father who could not be faithful. The fact that she still made them a recurring motif shows just how much courage this woman possesses. She transforms her trauma into art, turns fear into love. The book is entitled *Kusama: Love Forever*, and the pictures show exactly that: an artist who does what she loves, what she believes in—and who, at least to some extent, has made our world a better place.



